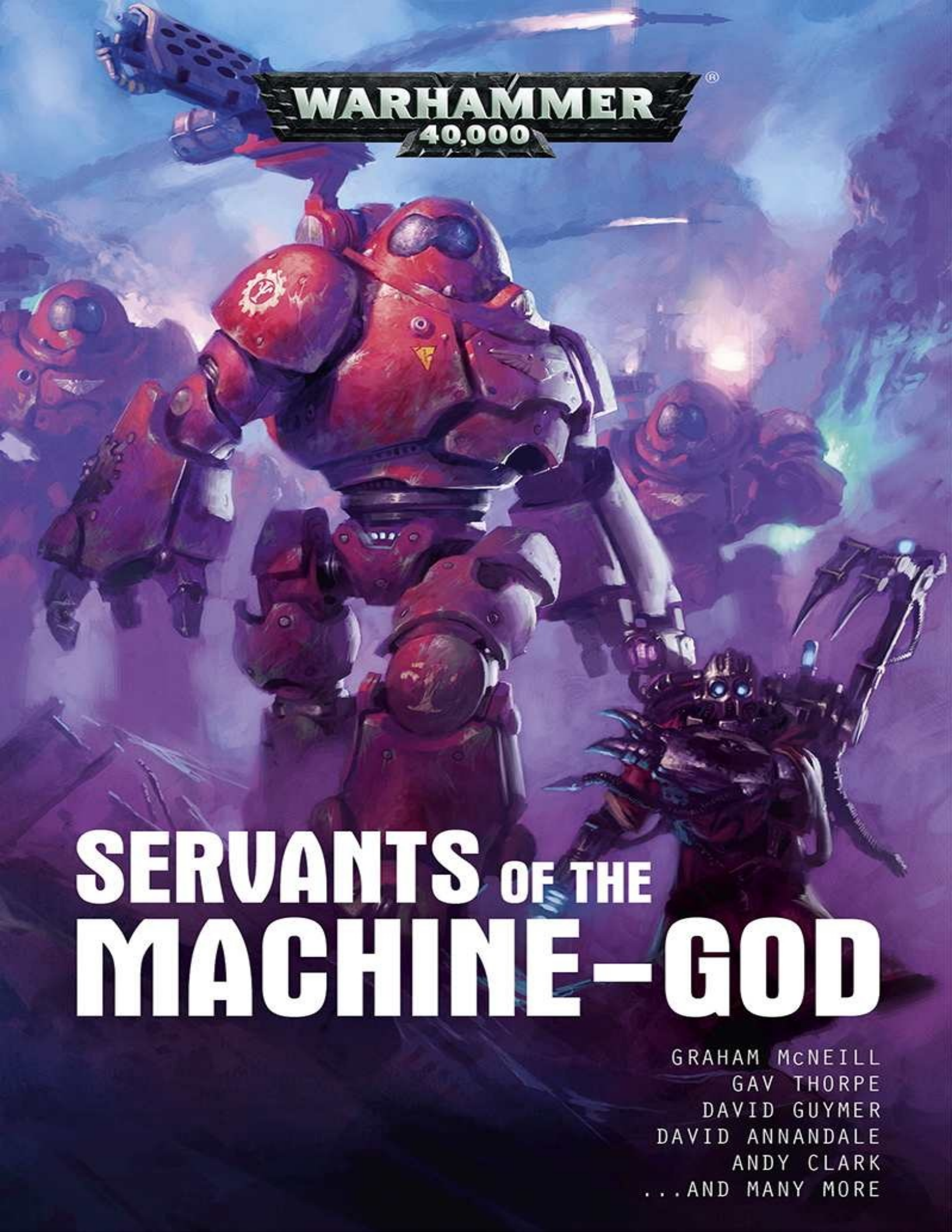

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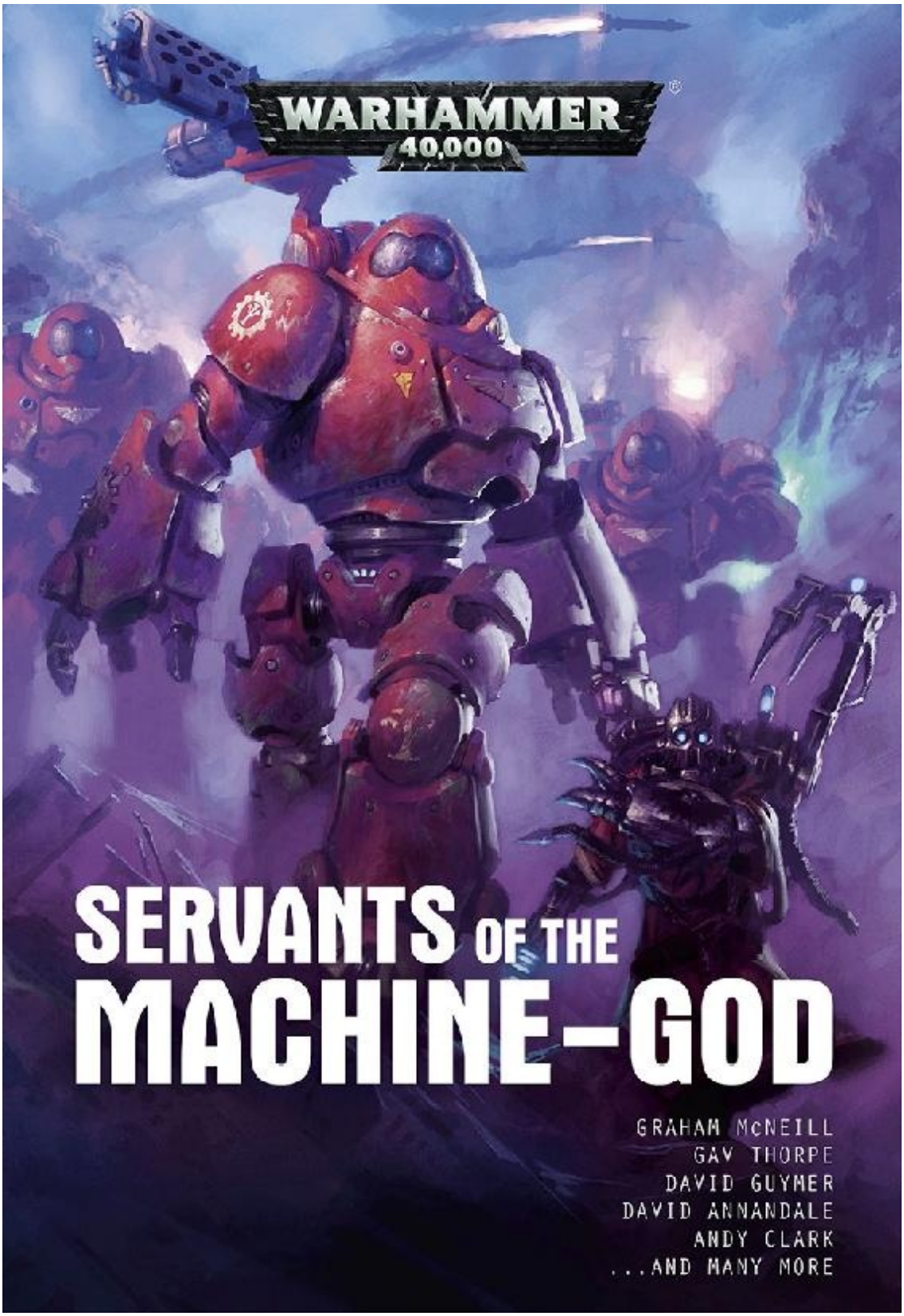
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SERVANTS OF THE MACHINE-GOD

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...AND MANY MORE

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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of His inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that He may never truly die.

Yet even in His deathless state, the Emperor continues His eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in His name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

DEFIANT

ANDY CLARK

Jennika Tan Draconis marched her Knight, *Fire Defiant*, along a rubble-strewn street. A lance of House Draconis Knights followed in tight formation. The flickering runes on her strategic overlay showed more Adrastapolian war engines striding down parallel roadways, guarding the flanks of her advance. In the wake of each lance came a Sacristan Crawler; the heavy vehicles crunched over debris and wreckage on their armoured balloon tyres.

Towering saints looked down upon the Knights as they passed, their sombre features wrought in marble, their hollow eyes doleful. Each statue stood taller than a Warlord Titan. They lined the primary roadways of Pyrodiah's capital hive, Castigorum, in their hundreds. The cowled stone giants flanked every gothic hab-block and reliquary-manufactorum, palpable reminders that Imperial judgement was omnipresent.

Jennika found herself stiffening beneath their regard on several occasions, her jaw clenching. She wondered if it was because of Donatos, and the aftermath of all that had transpired there.

'Status check, sires and ladies,' she voxed on her lance's closed channel.

'Hale and ready, my lady,' replied Sire Dyros and Lady Elayn Dar Draconis, almost in unison.

'Bellicose, my lady,' said Sire Jaekeb Dar Draconis with relish.

'Rein in that draconsfire, Sire Jaekeb,' said Jennika. 'This is a live warzone, not a tilting field. You are one of my lance, now act like it.'

'Yes, my lady,' replied the young Knight, sounding unrepentant.

'Necrons should not be underestimated, Jaekeb,' said Sire Dyros. 'They're implacable, undying, and everything we've seen of them during this war suggests powers and weapons we cannot begin to comprehend.'

'With respect, sire, they didn't appear undying at Piety's Mount,' said Jaekeb.

‘They emerged from their tunnels and we crushed them underfoot like rock-roaches.’

‘Piety’s Mount was a skirmish, Jaekeb,’ said Jennika. ‘The Sacristans believe those necrons had just awakened. They were disorientated, unsupported. You weren’t at Furia Fields, or the defence of Daebyn’s Shrine.’

‘No, my lady. I was not,’ replied Jaekeb.

Jennika heard his resentment, but chose to ignore it. She understood his burning need for glory. She had felt it once herself. But a ruthless war like this wasn’t the time or place for a warrior who had just Become to begin weaving his tapestry.

The war for Pyrodiah had been raging for months before they even arrived, and had only escalated after the drop keeps of Adrastapol rained down. Jennika’s Knights had succeeded in stemming the tide of android aliens that spilled up from below, and had rescued the planet’s defenders from annihilation. Yet despite their success, the fighting had been fierce and casualties were steep among the Pyrodiahn defence force and the Knights themselves.

As First Knight of Adrastapol, she had ensured the fiercest fighting fell to her more veteran warriors, rather than those recently Become. Logically, she knew this was in order to secure victory. Yet in her more introspective moments, she questioned whether it was also because she recognised elements of her younger brother Danial, as he had been on Donatos, in each of them.

Before the crown.

Before their father fell.

Scowling, Jennika expanded the vox to address her entire force, which comprised four lances – all the Knights that had been operating with her when the message was received that Governor Beatifica needed rescuing. With necron anti-aircraft weaponry rumbling up from the depths all over the city, aerial extraction was no longer an option. If Jennika’s Knights could not complete this mission, nobody would.

‘First Knight to all lances,’ said Jennika. ‘Maintain shield discipline and keep a weather eye on your auspexes. Stay alert for any sign of tectonic activity. Remember, this enemy can emerge from underground, or even from thin air, and their weapons will flay you and your steeds down to sparking metal and red flesh.’

‘Thank you, Lady Jennika,’ came Sire Olphrec’s blunt reply from the head of the westernmost lance. ‘Dracon knows we’ve all fought the necrons recently enough, eh? Needn’t coddle us, my lady.’

Jennika’s eyes narrowed. Olphrec had stayed just on the right side of propriety

since the campaign began, but his every utterance seemed expertly calculated to test her authority.

'A complacent pilot is a chink in his steed's armour,' said Jennika, the sharpness of her own tone irritating her. 'Just keep your eyes open and your weapons ready.'

Maintain calm and dignity in all things, whispered a voice from her throne. *That, or settle the matter on the duelling field,* said another, fiercer ghost. *Olphrec dishonours himself,* came a third voice, a dry old echo. *He is beneath you.* Yet Jennika noted that even amongst the ghosts of her throne, some voices murmured quietly together beyond the range of her thoughts, and she couldn't help but wonder if they sympathised with him. House Draconis had become more progressive under High King Danial's rule, but Jennika's appointment to First Knight was still unique for her gender.

There were those who did not approve.

Before Olphrec could engage in further barbs, a rune lit in Jennika's peripheral vision. It signified a priority vox-hail from Deathwatch Captain Azkarael. She answered it with a blink-click, opening a hardened channel.

'First Knight,' said Azkarael.

'Captain Azkarael,' replied Jennika.

'Status?' asked the Dark Angel.

'We are less than half a mile from the governor's compound,' said Jennika. 'No direct resistance thus far, though strategic auspex suggests that the Mordian Iron Guard are being hammered from coordinates eight-one-four through five-five-one.'

'Make haste,' said Azkarael, and Jennika heard the thump and thunder of boltgun fire in the background. *'We will penetrate the inner tomb complex within the next ten minutes. We will then plant and prime the purgator warheads. The governor must be clear of the primary engagement area before they detonate. Segmentum command require her to be fully debriefed in order to determine why this war had become such a debacle before your arrival. Beatifica has much to answer for.'*

'I am aware, captain. You already informed me that the entire hive will collapse into the resultant pit,' said Jennika. 'We are Knights of Adrastapol, oath-sworn to see our duty done. Rest assured, it will be done.'

'Just so,' said Azkarael. *'Brother Shorrgath will transmit a three-minute alert prior to final detonation.'*

'Understood,' said Jennika. 'Good hunting, captain.'

'Emperor go with you,' replied Azkarael before breaking the vox-link.

Jennika's eyes darted skywards as a pair of necron fighter craft screamed overhead, spiralling in a lethal dogfight with a trio of Imperial Thunderbolts. As she watched, one of the Imperial craft took a direct hit, green fire leaping from the necrons' guns to tear away its tail assembly. The fighter hit a marble saint, decapitating the statue in a ball of flame. The remaining craft swept on, vanishing between crumbling hab-stacks. Jennika shook her head grimly and increased power to her steed's motive actuators.

'This war has already cost too much,' she murmured. 'We won't lose the governor as well.'

Governor Beatifica ruled from a structure that was half cathedrum, half fortress, stood proud upon a hill at the city's heart. The open square around the fortress was thick with penitent-poles, the cadavers of the unfaithful hanging from them like rotted fruit.

Through the macabre forest strode rank upon rank of necrons, advancing in eerie lockstep as they fired glowing green energies at the fortress' walls. Weaponised pyramids and gun-barges hovered above the necron foot-troops, annihilating chunks of the gothic battlements with every blast. The fortress' batteries fired back, stitching the invaders with shells and sowing volleys of explosions amongst their lines.

Jennika's lance emerged into the square from the shadow cast by a pair of marble saints holding scythes and scrying orbs. Lances Olphrec, Kathaine and Godfyr walked from the adjoining streets with ground-shaking steps. Runes lit Jennika's strategic overlay, her warriors indicating readiness and requesting permission to let fly.

'Lady Kathaine, halt and commence suppressing fire,' ordered Jennika. 'My lance, we push on to the gate. Olphrec, Godfyr, you have the flanks. Concentrate on their war engines, but don't allow their infantry to mass against you. You've witnessed what those gauss flayers can do in large numbers.'

'We all saw what happened to Sire Tylen when his lance was left over-extended,' said Olphrec. Jennika gritted her teeth, rising above the old Knight's implication. Runes of assent flashed back from the rest of her force, though she noted that they came slower from Olphrec's lance.

Jennika fed power to her steed, swinging her ion shield up with practised ease and aiming her battle cannon with twitches of her haptic gauntlets. She felt her mother's claw-ring tight around one finger, becoming conscious of it as she

always did when she entered battle. As ever, Jennika swore to her mother's memory that she would not dishonour her this day.

'The necrons haven't spotted us yet,' said Sire Jaekeb.

'Don't be foolish, lad,' said Sire Dyros. 'How could they miss thirteen giants charging at them from behind? The xenos scum will turn their fury on us the moment we're in optimal range. They won't bother with us until then.'

'Let us exploit their arrogance,' said Jennika. 'All lances, unshroud and unleash.'

She clenched and punched one haptic gauntlet. Her steed responded, its rapid-fire battle cannon spitting a pair of shells at the foe. The first clipped a necron gun-barge, overloading its shielding in a shower of sparks. The second slammed into it a second later, detonating the macabre engine and flattening the necrons around it.

'Fine shot, my lady!' cried Sire Dyros, adding his Warden's fire to hers. Even as the necrons tried to stagger, burning, to their feet, Dyros' avenger gatling cannon sent shells ripping through their ranks. His shooting dismembered metal bodies and caused a wall of xenos to vanish in crackling clouds of green lightning.

Fresh fire blossomed amidst the necron lines as Lady Kathaine's Knights launched another salvo. Rockets streaked in on tails of flame, causing one of the war pyramids to shudder and drop from the sky as explosions wracked its metal flanks. Detonations marched through the necron lines as the Knights unleashed their fury. Dozens of alien warriors and more than half of their war machines were annihilated in the opening bombardment.

'By His will, witness the ironclad goliaths of the Emperor as they stride to battle!' came a rapturous female voice, blaring through Jennika's vox and causing her to almost miss her stride.

'Vox discipline,' she barked. 'Who in Throne's name is this?'

'The shriven!' cried the woman. *'The chaste! The repentant and the prepared!'*

'Who is this lunatic?' spat Lady Elayn over the zealous tirade.

'No idea,' replied Jennika. 'Sacristans, isolate and cloak that channel. I can hardly hear my own throne.'

The voice vanished a heartbeat later as the Sacristans followed her orders. As it did, Jennika saw the enemy were turning to address them.

'Shields,' she barked, before a maelstrom of lurid green energies lashed the Knights. *Fire Defiant* juddered around her as its ion shield flared again and again. Warning runes flashed across her controls as stray shots bypassed her ion barrier to scour away strips of adamantium and plasteel. The merest touch of the

necrons' weaponry could flay layers of metal from a Knight's hull before flensing the vital systems beneath, and Jennika winced as she saw damage reports scroll across her lance manifolds.

'Draconis!' roared Sire Olphrec. His Knight Gallant, *Imperator Incendus*, charged through the firestorm. The Knights of his lance followed, Errants and Gallants scattering penitent-

poles with every stride. Thermal cannons thundered and another necron pyramid listed sideways with glowing holes bored through its hull. As Jennika watched, the machine's metallic skin tried to flow in to patch the catastrophic wounds. Olphrec smashed it into the ground with a clubbing blow of his thunderstrike gauntlet and the pyramid detonated, driving Olphrec's steed back, green lightning leaping out to turn nearby necrons to glowing particles.

The rest of the lance drove home their attack, punching a hole in the necron lines. At the same time, Godfyr's lance tore into the xenos' right flank and began to roll it up with ferocious vigour. Jennika saw her moment.

'My lance, on to the gate,' she ordered, stomping *Fire Defiant* through the necrons before her. Android bodies crunched beneath her Knight's footfalls, twitching their last before fading eerily from sight. Dyros and Elayn followed close on her heels, while Jaekeb brought up the rear, firing his Errant's thermal cannon.

'Die, you xenos filth!' he bellowed. 'For Adrastapol and the Golden Throne!'

'Discipline, Sire Jaekeb,' said Jennika. 'Get back in formation before you expose us to enfilading fire.'

'Hah. Give 'em the draconsfire, lad!' came Olphrec's voice.

'Sire Olphrec, attend to your own lance and remember the damned code chivalric, sir,' said Jennika icily. A rune flashed back from Olphrec by way of reply. Too dismissive by half, she thought. Too disrespectful. Words would be had.

Firing her guns into the necrons that still swarmed the roadway, Jennika pressed on towards the fortress' gates. The xenos firestorm was slackening, and even as she watched, the surviving enemy began to fade like a mirage.

'They're… retreating?' said Lady Elayn.

'A close enough approximation, if unsettling,' said Jennika. She halted *Fire Defiant* before the gilded gates of the governor's fortress. Necron fire had abraded whatever inscriptions and carvings the gates had once borne, but they still made for a tall and imposing bulwark.

'This is Jennika Tan Draconis, First Knight of House Draconis and ranking

Crusade Commander of Adrastapol,' she voxed, sending her voice winging out across the primary Imperial command channels. 'I am oathed with the evacuation of Governor Juliandros Beatifica as a matter of the utmost urgency, upon the direct orders of Imperial segmentum command. Besieging forces are eliminated, and I would request the governor present herself immediately that we may escort her to safety.'

Burbling servitor voices responded to Jennika's summons, chattering confirmation signals to her throne mechanicum while choral music swelled through her vox-pickups. With a boom of disengaged locking bolts, the gates swung ponderously inwards. Beyond was revealed a grand processional that led away into the fortress, flanked by brass witch-scourging cages and huge gothic braziers. Lined up along the processional, Jennika saw ranks of Crusaders clad in flak-tabards and hooded helms, shields and blades held ready.

The holy warriors escorted a convoy of three bizarre armoured transports. Resting on super-heavy track units that were each as large as a Sacristan Crawler, the vehicles resembled elaborately decorated reliquaries. Their armoured flanks were thick with bone, skulls, gilt and layers of purity seals. Jutting from the prow of each was a huge cage of banded iron. Jennika's eyes widened as she realised that within the strange prows were screaming, thrashing people. Several dozen within each cage were lashed to iron poles, their bruised and bleeding features showing the evidence of recent and violent treatment. Even as she watched, flame units lit with a deafening hiss, sending jets of fire leaping amongst the bound prisoners. Their screams rose to frantic shrieks as their flesh and ragged robes caught alight. Jennika recognised with a surge of nausea that those robes bore the sigils of the governor's own household.

'What in the name of–' she began, before her audio-intakes resounded with the same strident voice that the Sacristans had blocked minutes earlier.

'Lady Jennika, your arrival is as the Emperor wills. Praise be. My retinue and I welcome you with an offering of penitence and punishment.'

Magnifying her vid-feed, Jennika's gaze landed on a robed figure stood before an auto-shrine atop the lead transport. Tall and gaunt, with intense eyes burning above a vox-grille vocal augmetic, the woman bore an aquila tattoo across her shaved scalp. She was flanked by a pair of cowled figures who toted long-barrelled flamers, and a cluster of hunched servitors hovered behind her, bearing censers and holy pennants.

Jennika switched to her Knight's vox-emitter. 'Madam governor?' she asked.

'Thus has the almighty Emperor appointed me, that I might correct the sins of

my people,' said the woman, voice blaring from her augmetic with steely fervour. *'You have come at the hour of the final judgement, Lady Jennika. The city burns. Let us go forth now without pride or fear, and if death be the Emperor's will, then let us welcome it.'*

'Well,' voxed Sire Dyros over a private channel. 'This should make matters interesting…'

As the governor's procession flowed down from the gates of her fortress, Jennika organised her Knights into a mobile defensive perimeter. Sire Godfyr's lance took rearguard, following the transports and marching Crusaders across the square. Olphrec and Kathaine's lances took the flanks, while Jennika led her warriors to the front of the procession, studiously trying to ignore the burning, twitching figures borne along by the governor's transports. Greasy smoke boiled from the burning bodies, raising a telltale column above their position.

'If the enemy wasn't aware that we were coming before, they certainly are now,' commented Lady Kathaine.

'We're hardly unobtrusive, my lady,' said Jennika. 'Just keep your eyes open for trouble.'

As she fed power to *Fire Defiant*'s actuators, Jennika switched back to the governor's vox-channel and muttered the third benediction of encrypting in case the enemy should be trying to listen in.

'Madam governor, we are to escort your column to beachhead seven on the western outskirts of the city. We will follow the primary western processional through the Kolchan District until we reach the Mordian piquet. The Aeronautica have a bulk lander waiting there to bear you to safety, and thence to your debriefing with segmentum command. Please follow our lead, and I swear upon my honour we will see you evacuated before the bombs detonate.'

'Do as you will, Lady Jennika,' replied Beatifica, her tone strangely knowing.

'I… Madam governor, would it not be safer for you to ride *within* your transport?' asked Jennika. 'We are likely to encounter stiff enemy resistance before reaching the Mordian beachhead. It will be easier to protect you if you take proper shelter.'

She saw the governor begin to shake, and her thoughts leapt to some malignant weapon or influence of the enemy. After a moment, Jennika realised that Beatifica was *laughing*.

'Your devotion to the Throne does you credit, First Knight,' said the governor. *'But you have not been listening. We stand now in the eye of the Emperor's*

judgement. The blade of death hangs over us all, held in His almighty hand. For the sins of my people, this world has been found wanting. For their lack of faith shall we all be judged, and only those who are truly worthy shall be found righteous.'

Jennika felt weariness tug at her as she listened to the governor preach.

'Madam governor, your people are already dying for you,' she said, striving to keep her tone respectful. 'Thousands of Mordian Iron Guard have marched to their deaths in diversionary attacks, so we might have a clear run to extract you. More are falling in battle this second to evacuate the citizenry you swore to protect.'

'Sinners!' said the governor, cold and matter-of-fact. *'All sinners. Them, you, even I, all of us are ridden with sin. Only the Emperor can redeem us, Lady Jennika, and He is not forgiving.'*

Jennika held back her anger at the fanatic's contempt for her subjects.

'Just have your drivers follow my orders, madam governor,' she said. 'I have sworn an oath. I will see it fulfilled.'

Jennika cut the vox-link on Beatifica's renewed mirth. She shook her head, feeling something akin to despair. What was the sense of it all? So many lives lost on Pyrodiah. On Donatos. On every world she'd ever fought on. And for what? For the sake of callous maniacs and despots like Beatifica?

'What's the use of chivalry and honour when its sacrifice is frittered away by the likes of her?' she said.

We fight for the Emperor, Lady Jennika, whispered a voice from her throne. It sounded like old Baron Hoxley, as pious an incumbent as her throne had ever known. *Everything we do serves Him in the end.*

'Yes, but what she does, she does in the Emperor's name also,' muttered Jennika. Half her attention was on the strategic overlay, the conversations of her comrades, the statues and buildings flowing past as her Knight strode along the processional. The rest she turned inwards, letting her ghosts speak.

The Emperor is not responsible for the ways in which we practise our faith, whispered Hoxley's voice. *That burden falls to each one of us. In this instance, it is no wonder that her world has suffered so, or that her masters wish to speak with her so urgently…*

'There must be more than that,' Jennika said, surprised by the edge of desperation she heard in her voice. She was suddenly glad to be wrapped in the ironclad sanctum of her steed. 'I am here on the orders of my brother, the High King. Do I, then, lay these deaths and tragedies at his feet instead?'

It is your duty to serve the High King of Adrastapol, hissed another voice. *You serve your brother as you served your father before him, my lady. But it is a weak flicker of the draconsfire indeed that blames their liege for the deaths of those under their command.*

'I have spent my life serving my brother,' said Jennika. 'Ever since our mother… Ever since he lost his mother, I have been one to him, then his protector, his counsellor, now his First Knight. And he has always needed me, always been grateful, but…' She cut herself off.

We all have duties, my lady, sighed a third voice, female and ancient. *And duty should be enough for any Knight*.

'What if it isn't any more?' asked Jennika. Her words fell flat within her empty cockpit. Her ghosts lapsed into silence. Her heart thumped with the shock of her own words. Her thoughts whirled.

'My lady,' came the voice of Sire Dyros, breaking the deafening silence. 'The necrons!'

Jennika snapped her attention back to her controls, drinking in the data from her strategic manifold. She felt ice fill her chest as she saw the concentration of enemy forces closing in on their position. This was no time for a crisis of faith. There was only time to fight, fulfil her oaths, and attempt to survive.

The primary western processional was thick with necrons. Even from half a mile away, Jennika could see a xenos structure that had erupted from the roadway. Glowing portals rippled in it like quicksilver, and more and more alien androids spilled from them to join the blockade. Numerous hovering war engines accompanied the mass of xenos infantry, while spectral figures flitted and writhed around their flanks.

'Jennika Tan Draconis to beachhead seven command,' voxed Jennika. 'Beachhead seven command, do you receive? Heavy enemy presence is blocking our route to your position. Engagement will prove costly, potentially untenable. Please advise.'

She repeated her hail, but heard only static. Jennika cursed.

'My lady, orbital augury suggests the beachhead is beset,' voxed Lady Kathaine. 'Our best bet is to reroute through coordinates five-six-six and aim for beachhead five. Reports suggest they're still receiving evacuees.'

'No,' said Jennika. 'I will not lead death to hapless evacuees for the sake of a self-destructive zealot.'

'None may judge me but the Emperor Himself,' cried Governor Beatifica, and

Jennika's gut twisted at the madness she heard in the woman's voice. *'Forward now in this glorious hour! Forward unto judgement!'*

To Jennika's disbelief, the governor's convoy accelerated, their blackened prows trailing ashes as they lurched around her Knights and made for the necron lines. The Crusaders ran with them, raising a mighty cheer.

'Governor, stop! Halt now or we will fire upon your convoy!' the First Knight boomed through her steed's vox-emitter.

'We can't afford to get mired in a pitched battle now,' said Sire Dyros. 'We must reroute around this blockade before the three-minute warning comes through or we'll all perish.'

'We can punch through the enemy,' exclaimed Jaekeb eagerly. 'A glorious charge to carry the governor to safety. They are no match for Knights!'

'Damn it, Lady Jennika. Orders!' barked Sire Olphrec. 'Are we to just watch that ridiculous woman rush to her death? We need to push up and support her or we'll all be damned as honourless cowards.'

For the briefest of instants, Jennika froze. All the anger, the frustration and despair that had been brewing inside her threatened to choke her. She saw the governor rushing to her own demise; all she could think of was her father's Knight, crippled but defiant, vanishing into a curtain of falling rain and tumbling rubble as he made his own, selfish exit rather than face the betrayal of his oldest comrade.

'My lance, forward,' barked Sire Olphrec. 'Leave it to the old men of House Draconis to preserve our honour!'

The Knights of Lance Olphrec accelerated into a pounding run, straight towards the necrons. Jennika was shocked from her paralysis as Sire Jaekeb broke ranks and followed.

'Jaekeb!' she snapped.

'Duty and honour, my lady,' he replied, before cutting his vox-link. His defiance made fury flare, and in an instant the draconsfire burned away her shock and dismay.

Necron ranging shots were falling amongst the governor's procession. Clouds of emerald energy crackled skywards as explosions turned Crusaders to ash. Bolts of fire battered the transports, causing them to rock on their tracks and flames to billow from their innards. More shots hammered the advancing Knights, splashing from their shields.

As she saw the situation spiralling towards catastrophe, revelation hit Jennika like a thunderbolt. She wasn't here to fight for Governor Beatifica, or her brother

– much as she loved him – or even the Emperor on high. She had spent her life fighting for those she cherished and served, those to whom she felt duty bound. But now she knew she was here for herself – for the only woman ever to become First Knight of Adrastapol, for the warrior she was, who sought victory over every enemy fool enough to stand before her.

With a thought, she triggered a mass-inload of auspex data, the strengths of her forces and of the enemy, the orbital auguries and their telltale strategic signs. Her neural jacks shimmered with heat and she gritted her teeth through the overload as she processed information at a ferocious rate, and formulated a plan.

'Lady Kathaine, your lance, all fire on the necron architecture,' she ordered. 'Eliminate those portals then turn your guns on the enemy war engines.'

'At once, my lady,' voxed Kathaine. Her Knights opened fire, and explosions blossomed across the necron structure.

'Sire Godfyr, close up behind the governor. All Sacristan Crawlers move in behind Godfyr's Knights. Fire to cripple the transports, and dissuade the Crusaders if you must. Sacristans, arm yourselves, and take the governor onto one of your Crawlers by whatever means. She is going to live to face segmentum command whether she wishes to or not.'

Assent runes flashed back, and Knights and Sacristans leapt to obey.

'What of us, my lady?' asked Lady Elayn.

'We're going to support Olphrec's charge, and break through the xenos lines,' said Jennika fiercely. 'Knights, shields up, fire at will, break these alien ghouls in half. *In Excelsium Furore!*'

'Let the draconsfire burn!' cried Elayn and Dyros, pushing their steeds into a run behind *Fire Defiant*.

Jennika drove *Fire Defiant* hard, hearing her steed's fury in the thrum of its power plant and the revving of its reaper chainsword. Her footfalls left craters in the roadway as she pelted towards the necrons, and as her shields flashed with impacts she gave vent to a furious war cry of her own. Her battle cannon spat fire, its shells slamming through a necron gun-barge and blowing it apart. Then she was upon them without mercy.

Jennika swept her chainsword down to bite into the road surface, before wrenching it sideways with a snarl. The blade struck ferrocrete and metal as it hurled up a bow wave of rubble and chewed through the necrons, sending limbs and shredded torsos spinning away. She attacked again at point-blank range, and flickering android components fountained from the resultant fireball.

To her right, she saw Olphrec and his Knights smashing and tearing at the necrons with furious abandon. One of the lance was down, an Errant lying upon its back with its legs abraded to glowing stumps. Her teeth ground together in disgust at the sight of mechanical insects swarming over it, sparks spitting from their mandibles as they ravaged the steed.

Bands of Crusaders clashed with the necron infantry, outnumbered but fighting with zealous fury. Their blades hacked into android bodies. Their shields came apart under flurries of green fire, their robes and bodies disintegrating moments later. Jennika's disgust grew as she watched a blade-limbed necron flay the flesh from a fallen warrior and drape itself in blood-wet skins, before greedily guzzling down the meat and organs.

A firestorm screamed overhead, Lady Kathaine's lance launching another volley against the necron structure. Explosions tore through it, portals flickering and imploding, circuits flaring and dying.

'Hah!' cried Kathaine. 'You're no match for us, you xenos filth!'

In response, three of the necron war pyramids crackled with lightning. As one, bolts of energy leapt from their pinnacles like uncoiling whips and slammed into Kathaine's Knight Warden. The steed convulsed, before explosions burst from every joint and seam. Kathaine didn't even have the chance to cry out before her steed crashed down amid her lancemates.

Wrath seized Jennika and she drove her steed onwards, deeper into the fight.

'Lance Godfyr, close up and drive through the phalanx before you,' she barked. 'Lance Olphrec, you risk being overwhelmed – beware the weapon barges on your right flank. My lance, rune-marking a necron command barque now – close volleys if you please.' As Jennika fought, she realised that she relished the challenge of focusing her warriors' efforts and drawing upon every reserve of tactical and strategic skill she possessed to prevent them from being overrun.

Suddenly, Jennika registered the outraged screams of the governor over the vox-net. A glance at her rear vid-feed showed the governor's transport was a smoking wreck, its hull crawling with necron insects. There was no sign of her fanatics with flamer units, barring perhaps the heaving mounds riddled with metal bugs atop the transport's hull. Yet Beatifica herself was being bundled unceremoniously into a Crawler by a band of armed Sacristans, Godfyr's Knights standing sentinel over them with guns blazing. Out of the corner of her eye, Jennika saw a necron gun-barge line its huge cannon up on the Sacristans and their vital prisoner; with a clench of her fist, she sent shells looping down to blast the barge apart.

‘Another fine shot, my lady,’ voxed Sire Dyros. ‘We will deny that lunatic her martyrdom.’

‘We might all be martyrs yet, Dyros,’ replied Jennika, spraying stubber fire into the massing foe. ‘We can’t afford to stay here and finish this. We have to break through! All lances, Sacristan Keyloch’s Crawler is now our first and only priority. The governor is aboard and we will get her to safety if it costs every one of our lives! She’ll answer for her crimes. Lance Kathaine, move up and escort the Crawlers – avenge your fallen. Godfyr, Olphrec, force a corridor through the foe and hold it. We’ll smash a hole and once the Crawlers are through, bunch around them and make for the beachhead.’

‘Knights of Adrastapol, do not flee the foe,’ roared Olphrec as he waded into the necrons. ‘We’ll make your damned breach, my lady, but I shall not have you order us to cowardice!’

‘Sire Olphrec, you *will* obey the commands of the First Knight of Adrastapol or your honour will be forfeit,’ said Jennika. ‘You have been insolent to the very brink of insubordination, and I shall allow it no longer.’

Energy whips lashed her shields, staggering *Fire Defiant*. She steadied her steed with a growl and blasted her attacker to wreckage.

‘My lady, what if the beachhead is overrun?’ voxed Sire Godfyr as his Knights blasted a path through the xenos. They were taking ferocious punishment, but the necrons clearly had not anticipated such a bellicose attack. They reeled under the Knights’ massive firepower and crushing blows.

‘We will escort the governor all the way back to Pyrodiah Defence headquarters on foot if we must, Godfyr,’ replied Jennika. ‘That route is still the most direct way out of this city.’

Alert runes lit her peripheral vision.

‘Deathwatch Brother Shorrgath to First Knight Jennika Tan Draconis,’ came a deep voice over her vox. *‘Three minutes to detonation.’*

‘We’re running out of time,’ she breathed. A concussive blast rocked Jennika in her throne, and she wheeled her steed to see another necron war pyramid trying to seal the gap her Knights had opened.

‘Draconsfire!’ bellowed Sire Jaekeb, charging the pyramid head on. His steed was limping, many of its armour plates flayed down to sparking metal and wires, his reaper chainsword dangling uselessly at his side. Still he fired his thermal cannon and gouged a glowing crater in the xenos war engine.

‘Jaekeb, move aside,’ shouted Jennika. ‘Your steed is in tatters. Pull back to safety!’

Jaekeb echoed Olphrec's words angrily. 'Knights of Adrastapol do not flee the foe.' The next instant, the war pyramid's guns blasted one of the Errant's legs off at the hip. Jennika saw Jaekeb's steed topple onto its face; his yell of fear cut off at the moment of impact. His life signs still showed on the manifold, but faintly.

Taking careful aim, she fired twinned shells into the wound Jaekeb had torn in the pyramid's flank. Explosions flared within the war engine. Smoke billowed forth, and the pyramid vanished in a storm of unnatural energies.

'Sacristans, pilot retrieval,' ordered Jennika, and one of the vehicles swerved towards Jaekeb's fallen Knight. A glance showed her that her warriors were holding the enemy back, protecting the Crawlers with their shields and armour, though it was costing them dear. Another Knight of Olphrec's lance had been slain, and two of Godfyr's were sorely damaged.

'My lady, the lad can't be saved,' voxed Sire Dyros, runes flashing up on her vision to highlight the horde of necron foot-troops closing with Jaekeb's steed.

'He's right, my lady. For all our sakes, we must leave him,' urged Olphrec.

'The moment Jaekeb is rescued, we retreat,' she said, feeding power to her Knight's actuators. *Fire Defiant* surged forwards, Jennika aiming each swinging step like a battering ram to shatter the necron lines. Fire splashed against her steed from every direction, but she pushed on regardless. She fired swift volleys, placing them with expert precision to blast the necrons away from Jaekeb's steed. Reaching the fallen Knight, she braced *Fire Defiant*'s feet and sprayed shots into the enemy. A wraith-like construct turned towards her, seeking to drive its metal tendrils into her cockpit, but she annihilated it with a precise swipe of her reaper chainsword. Necron aircraft screamed overhead and fired their energy rays straight at her, but Jennika raised her shield in time to intercept the blasts, smoothly redressing her aim and blasting apart another gun-barge in the same motion.

Even as she aimed and fired, hacked and slashed, Jennika watched the runes on her strategic overlay, a fragment of her consciousness processing that the Sacristans had reached Jaekeb's steed and were extracting the fallen warrior.

'We have him, my lady,' came a voice laced with binharic. 'You must withdraw – your steed is suffering considerable damage.'

'Go,' ordered Jennika. 'I shall follow and provide cover.'

The Crawler ploughed forward, guns blazing, and Jennika followed, trampling over a field of fallen foes as she blasted a path to freedom.

A private hail came from Olphrec's Knight. Jennika opened the channel with a blink-click.

‘My lady, I–’

‘Now is not the time, Sire Olphrec,’ she said. ‘Your thoughts on my gender or my suitability for this role are of no interest to me, but if you ever undermine my authority again, I will meet you on the duelling field and we will fight to the death. And you will lose. Do I make myself inescapably clear?’

Another assent rune.

She nodded. It was enough.

At last, the Crawlers broke free of the battle, rocking on their suspension as they powered away. One small part of Jennika’s psyche processed the data-exload that showed Sire Jaekeb was still alive, if badly wounded. There was no time to think further on it as the necrons redoubled their attack. Her shields flashed, and fresh damage readouts blared at her. *Fire Defiant* couldn’t take much more.

‘All Knights, full retreat,’ she ordered. ‘The bombs will detonate in less than a minute!’

As one, the surviving Knights accelerated away along the processional towards the outskirts of the city. They angled their ion shields rearwards, protecting their more vulnerable back armour and power plants, and concentrated on speed.

Necron fire chased them, but with many of their war engines destroyed and most of their remaining forces on foot, the xenos could not sustain their pursuit. A wing of their strange fighter craft attacked from above, killing beams leaping from their guns. Yet by the grace of the Emperor, no more steeds fell. Buildings and statues whistled past as *Fire Defiant* pounded along the roadway as the rearmost Imperial Knight of the formation, the last to stop firing and turn away from the foe.

A sudden tectonic spike lit Jennika’s sensors, and she felt a tremor race beneath her steed’s feet. Through her rear vid-feed, she saw billowing clouds of red-and-green flame rising from the heart of the city, more leaping skywards with every passing heartbeat. Then the structures at her back were slumping, imploding, falling away into a yawning pit that raced outwards by the second. She spared a prayer for the safety of Captain Azkarael and his warriors, and for all the refugees and Imperial Guardsmen still desperately fleeing the collapsing city.

She ran on towards the beachhead, towards safety and victory. Not for those who had fallen. Not for the madwoman she had been sent to save, or those who had sworn her to the task. Jennika ran onwards for herself, and in that moment, she knew with absolute certainty that she would prevail.

The war for Pyrodiah was effectively brought to a close by the daring efforts of Kill Team Azkarael and their expertly placed explosive charges. With the destruction of the necrons' core tomb complex, and the 'death' of their heretical Master Program, the xenos threat was reduced to a scattering of lost and wayward elements. Still dangerous, but no longer operating to any coherent plan, these marauding forces were extinguished by the Pyrodiahn Defence Forces over the following weeks.

The Knights of Adrastapol were lauded by segmentum command for their part in the conflict. Though Governor Beatifica initially expressed outrage at her detainment during the evacuation, her voice bore little weight with the subsequent martial tribunal, whose disgust at her spectacular mishandling of Pyrodiah's defence soon earned her the martyrdom she had sought all along. Albeit, in rather more squalid conditions than she had expected.

Jennika Tan Draconis earned the acclaim of her warriors for her part in commanding the Pyrodiahn campaign and her heroism in leading their last, desperate break-out from the capital city. No voice was louder in support than the respected veteran Sire Olphrec Dar Draconis, who ever after was a staunch supporter of Adrastapol's First Knight.

Some even say that the war for Pyrodiah was where Lady Tan Draconis' legend truly began…

– Extracted from the writing of Sendraghorst,
Sage Strategic of Adrastapol, vol XVIII '*Echoes of Pyrodiah*'

BECOMING

ANDY CLARK

The Squires' Square rang with the clash of blades. A courtyard edged by a colonnaded walkway, the square nestled at the heart of the Draconspire. On a clear day like this one, the broad space was typically thronged with squires, aspirants practising the skills they would need to become Knights. It was empty now, as tradition dictated for the day before a Becoming, save for the two young warriors who duelled at its centre. One was tall and strongly built, and wore a confident smile. The other was shorter, slight even with the bulk of his half-armoured bodyglove. His eyes were a deep, jade green and his face was set in a frown of concentration. Both of the duellists had their hair shaved short in the style of squires. Both were in their eighteenth year, and sweating from long hours of swordplay.

The practice blades met again, a thrust parried then answered with a swift lateral cut that was deflected in turn. Though blunt, the blades would still leave a welt that neither combatant was keen to receive.

'Do you concede, Danial Tan Draconis?' asked the taller of the two, mockingly formal. 'My swordplay is clearly superior.'

'I think not, Luk Tan Chimaeros,' said Danial, equally mannered. 'Though if you're tired, I'm ready to accept your surrender now.'

Luk shook his head. He rolled his shoulders and spat on the flagstones, before launching a sudden attack. Danial parried Luk's blow, replying with a series of cuts and thrusts straight out of *Malleon's Treatise on Swordplay*. Danial's form and footwork were perfect despite his fatigue, and his opponent was driven across the square. Just as he was about to back into an obsidian column, Luk spun aside. Danial's blade struck stone with a dull clang. As his opponent reeled, Luk sprang onto the attack.

'You fight like a textbook, Da,' panted Luk as their blades clashed and rang. 'I

can predict you. You should learn to think more flexibly. Use your opponent's strengths against them, as House Chimaeros teaches.'

'House Draconis has won a great many wars without need of such trickery,' said Danial. 'We rely upon skill, courage and determination, as any noble Knight should. And when the moment is right,' Danial punctuated his sentence with a sudden flurry of blows that almost knocked Luk's blade from his hands, 'we let the draconsfire burn!'

Luk backed away with his guard up.

'House Draconis has won a great many wars because you have Sire Markos fighting in your ranks,' he said. 'That old ogre could probably kill a man with his scowl alone.'

'He is one of the greatest Knights on Adrastapol, that's true,' said Danial. 'Did you know that on Terrathos he walked clean through a firestorm? He was so keen to slay the foe that he refused to wait for the flames to die out.'

'I heard that he killed a dozen xenos war engines during the war on Dortun's Landing,' said Luk. 'He fought unsupported, and slew them all at close quarters with his thunderstrike gauntlet.'

'Sire Daeved told me it was Markos who beheaded the Separatist Tyrant of Farhaj,' said Danial. 'Even after father ordered him to show mercy. Apparently, Markos said that the man was beyond even the Emperor's forgiveness.'

'He's such a tough old dog,' said Luk. 'Markos probably just enjoys killing heretics too much to hold back.'

'It's *Sire* Markos, Luk,' came a gruff shout from a nearby doorway. 'Throne's sakes, lad, you Become tomorrow. Don't tell me you've still not learned the most basic tenets of the Code Chivalric.'

The two squires lowered their blades and eyes respectfully as Sire Markos Dar Draconis, Herald of High King Tolwyn Tan Draconis, marched towards them. Markos was a big man, weathered by years of war. His eyes glinted like chips of blue ice, and if there had ever been anything soft or gentle to him it had been sharpened to a hard point long ago. Markos stopped in front of them, arms behind his back, and looked them over coolly.

'What are you doing?' he asked.

'Bladework, sire,' replied Danial, still looking at the ground. Markos intimidated Danial with his aura of permanently displeased authority.

'You face the Becoming ritual in less than twenty hours,' said Markos. 'You need sleep. Food. Prayer to purify your minds and bodies before you face the ghosts of your throne. Instead, you bludgeon each other with practice swords.'

‘We tried to rest, sire,’ said Luk. ‘When I gave up on sleep, I found Da in the Grand Library. Neither of us could stay in our chambers. So we thought to tire ourselves by the blade.’

Markos sighed and nodded.

‘I was the same before my Becoming, truth to tell. Of course, that was near on thirty years ago, right in the middle of the Ork Wars. Sleep was a little harder to come by.’

The two squires shared a glance. The tale of Markos’ Becoming was legend amongst all five Noble Houses of Adrastapol. How he had marched straight from the Chamber of Ghosts into battle, and slain the ork leader in personal combat. How he had become a hero.

Markos saw the look and understood.

‘You want to hear the story, then?’ he asked, beckoning them out of the courtyard to sit in cushioned, iron instructors’ thrones at its edge. ‘Since you clearly aren’t about to retire, this might be my last chance to teach you two something useful before you face the test.’

‘If you wish to tell it, sire,’ said Danial. ‘We’d be honoured to hear it.’

‘That you would,’ replied Markos. ‘All right then, lads, here it is. The story of my Becoming, and of how I slew a xenos lord and saved the life of the man who would become High King. Listen well, squires, and see what you can learn…’

Markos opened his eyes and gasped. He sat in darkness, with the terrible cold pinch of the neural jacks intruding at the base of his skull. His throat was bone-dry, and his whole body felt hollow, as though he were just now waking from the grip of some terrible fever. In his mind’s eye he still saw the whirling images that his throne’s ghosts had shown him, war and carnage stretching back over millennia.

‘Lorrence?’ he croaked, fumbling for the arm of the squire in the throne next to his. ‘Lorrence, are you…?’ He touched cold digits, stiff with rigor mortis, and snatched his hand back. Lorrence Dar Draconis had not survived his Becoming. His throne had found him wanting, and rejected him.

It had been only the two of them in the Chamber of Ghosts. Tradition dictated that all Knights of Adrastapol should Become within the seat of the High King, their House Sacristans hauling the thrones mechanicum to the appointed place aboard their ornate Crawlers. With ork invaders rampaging across the planet, this had been impossible. The two aspirants of House Draconis had faced their Becoming alone.

Markos heard voices outside the chamber. He hoped they were outside the chamber, at least. Alone in the dark with the corpse of his friend, it was all too easy to believe them the voices of ghosts.

‘Sire Tolwyn, Gatekeeper, I know that they’re your friends but they have just Become.’

‘I know that, Gerraint, but we need every steed in the field and every Knight in panoply. This isn’t the time for half-measures. Besides, Sire Lorrence is the best blade House Draconis has seen in a century.’

Markos squinted as a rectangle of light split the darkness. He heard locking bolts disengage, and then the door swung wide. Daylight spilled in, piercing the fug of stale incense that hung in the air. Several figures stood silhouetted against the harsh brightness.

‘First, we must ascertain whether the aspirants have survived, Gatekeeper Tolwyn Tan Draconis.’ Markos recognised the grating machine-voice of High Sacristan Polluxis. The priest shuffled into the chamber and emitted a binharic blurt. Electrosconces flared, illuminating Sires Tolwyn Tan Draconis, Ronauld Dar Draconis and the dark-haired Gerraint Tan Chimaeros.

‘Oh no…’ gasped Sire Tolwyn, rushing to Lorrence’s throne. The failed aspirant was stiff as wood, his skin grey and yawning in a hideous scream. Bloody tears lined his cheeks, and his dead eyes stared sightlessly.

‘Lorrence,’ sighed Sire Gerraint, his deep voice sombre.

‘Lorrence Dar Draconis was found wanting,’ intoned Polluxis. ‘But another yet lives. Congratulations, Sire Markos Dar Draconis. You have Become.’

Turning to their living comrade, Sires Gerraint and Ronauld helped Markos to uncouple his neural jacks and rise unsteadily from his throne. Gerraint pressed a nutrient pack upon him, and Markos sucked thirstily at its spout.

‘Well done, Sire Markos,’ said Sire Ronauld. ‘You’re a Knight now.’

‘This throne mechanicum is yours, Sire Markos,’ said Polluxis. ‘You are bonded to it, and it to you. My acolytes will perform the necessary rituals of consecration at once, then transfer it to the mounting chamber.’

‘Come on,’ urged Sire Gerraint, holding Markos’ arm to steady him. ‘You’ll want real food, sleep. There are ceremonies and rituals to be organised–’

‘No,’ said Sire Tolwyn, rising from beside Lorrence’s throne. ‘There is no time for that, and now our numbers are even fewer. Sire Markos, you are needed in battle immediately.’

‘Tolwyn,’ said Gerraint, his voice firm. ‘I understand your urgency, but…’

‘I can do it,’ said Markos. His words came out weak and croaking. He coughed

and repeated himself. ‘I can do it. I can fight. Just give me a steed and I will march to war.’

The other Knights looked at one another. Sire Gerraint scowled with displeasure. Sire Tolwyn looked defiant, fiery and determined. Sire Ronauld shrugged as though it were all no matter to him.

‘Very well,’ said Tolwyn. ‘We’ll find you a steed.’

Barely an hour later, Markos sat on his throne mechanicum again. This time, though, he was jacked into the cockpit of a Knight. A towering giant of plasteel and adamantium, the steed was an Errant-pattern named *Dracon’s Wrath,* and its machine-spirit rumbled a wary greeting to its new master. One arm ended in an enormous chainsword, the other in an intimidating thermal cannon. Markos’ sensorium expanded with a vertiginous rush, his external pict-feed and auspex arrays engaging so that he saw both his cockpit instruments and his Knight’s physical surroundings as an overlapping image. His view was panoramic, a sweep that was far beyond the capabilities of simple human eyes. At the same time, reams of data scrolled across his retinal display and his vox-emitters awoke, feeding the open channel directly into his ears. To those not augmetically and psychologically prepared, such a barrage of sensory input would cause catastrophic mental trauma, even death. For Markos, it was like ascending to sudden godhood. He shook with adrenaline as the sensation of power swept through him.

Markos’ steed was one of twelve ironclad giants looming in repair armatures in the Draconspire’s cavernous armorium. The arched chamber was made to accommodate many dozens of steeds, but the majority of the House Draconis Knights were already in the field. This band of warriors had been charged by their lords with garrisoning the Draconspire, leading the fortress militia in its defence should the orks break through.

‘Knights,’ said Sire Tolwyn across an open vox-channel, ‘the Draconspire faces a terrible threat, one that, as Gatekeeper of my father’s Exalted Court, I cannot ignore. The orks of Warlord Skarjaw approach in great number and we cannot wait behind these walls lest the enemy bring them tumbling down.’

‘What has happened?’ asked Sire Daeved from the throne of his Gallant, *Pyrefang*. ‘Last I heard it, the High King had pushed the greenskins all the way to the Coast of Claws. House Minotos were pinning the enemy from the east, Pegasson from the west, while Draconis and Chimaeros drove the xenos into the sea. They had Warlord Skarjaw betwixt hammer and anvil.’

Markos recognised the name. Skarjaw – the ork leader who had brought such misery to Adrastapol these last years, a veritable bogeyman to the House Draconis squires.

'And so they did,' replied Tolwyn gravely. 'But two hours ago we received a vox missive from Marchionesse Elyssa Tan Pegasson. The greenskins broke their lines. House Pegasson disengaged and retreated successfully, but were unable to prevent a sizeable xenos force from gaining the Drakebite Pass.'

'That will bring them straight over the mountains, onto the grasslands of the Valatane,' said Lady Bellah Dar Draconis. 'That will bring them…'

'Here,' said Tolwyn. 'My friends, if we allow the orks to gain the grass ocean they will spread out and bring their hordes to bear. The Draconspire has formidable defences, and our House militia are many and brave, but the greenskins number in the hundreds of thousands. We cannot allow them to besiege us.'

'Agreed,' said Sire Hugorn Dar Chimaeros. 'But what, then, do you suggest? Twelve Knights cannot hold out against such numbers, Gatekeeper. We'll be overrun.'

'Not if we catch them before they reach the lower passes,' said Tolwyn, and Markos could almost picture him thumping his fist into his open palm. 'The terrain is difficult and unfamiliar to the invaders, and the orks are anarchic and ill-disciplined. If we move quickly, we can bottle them up then bring the cliffs down on them. Those not killed will be trapped behind a mass of rock. They will fall to infighting and destroy one another.'

There was silence as the Knights digested Tolwyn's plan.

'It's risky,' said Sire Gerraint. 'And dangerous. But I believe this is our best chance. With luck, it will turn the greenskins' strength in numbers against them, and prevent them from ever reaching the Draconspire. I pledge my blade to this.'

'And I,' said Sire Ronauld. The other Knights chorused their assent, and, swept up in the moment, Markos joined them.

'Very well then,' said Tolwyn, engaging his motive impellers and walking his Knight Paladin, *Fyreheart*, out of its armature. 'We depart at once. Knights of Adrastapol, *In Excelsium Furore!* Let us march to glory!'

The Knights marched out of the Draconspire's towering gates and into the grass ocean of the Valatane, a tribe of iron giants going off to war. The fortress rose behind them like a mountain hewn from granite and obsidian, every wall and

rampart lined with throngs of House militia. Those brave men would protect the keep until their noble masters returned.

Markos walked the Valatane in the middle of the Knightly lance, mastering the war machine's speed and gait, its attitudinal controls and power levels. He checked and rechecked his auspex feeds, ammo counts, damage manifold and strategic overlay.

'Markos,' voxed Tolwyn on a private channel. 'I never had a chance to congratulate you on your Becoming. Well done.'

'Thank you, sire,' said Markos. 'But there's no need. War is upon us. It leaves little time for pleasantries.'

'True,' said Tolwyn. 'But remember that this is no small thing you have done, Markos. It's not just some warrior rite of passage. The ghosts of your throne have accepted you as one of their own. You will hear them speak to you as time goes on, my friend. You will have to contend with their memories, thoughts and feelings.'

'They're not true ghosts though?' asked Markos. 'Just echoes. Impressions of those who came before.'

'On that, the Sacristans remain enigmatic,' said Tolwyn. 'All I can tell you is that the whispers sound real enough to me. Embrace the wisdom of your throne, but beware it also. Becoming is a dangerous business, and it does not end when you leave the Chamber of Ghosts. Normally you would have had months to finish bonding with your throne before you met open battle, but needs must. Just be careful you don't lose yourself, Sire Markos.'

'I won't,' replied Markos, trying to ignore the chill that ran down his spine. Sire Lorrence had lost himself. Now all that remained of him was the thin trail of smoke rising from his pyre, high in the reaches of the Draconspire. Markos looked upon that thin black line, stark against the sky, and vowed that he wouldn't be next.

The Knights marched across the Valatane for the best part of a day, passing jousting fields and serf-farms, the trails of the huge predators known as ghurgols and lonely copses of olidarne trees. All the while, the Adrapotine Mountains loomed larger on the horizon until they swelled from a hazy grey band into vast stone pinnacles.

From his forge-temple within the Draconspire, High Sacristan Polluxis voxed hourly updates upon the orks' movements. The news was not good. Augury suggested that the greenskins were moving faster than expected. By the time the

Knights reached the lower passes, Polluxis was warning of the greenskin vanguard already flowing down from the mouth of the Drakebite to meet them.

'We've no time,' voxed Tolwyn. 'We must push up through their frontrunners and secure the mouth of the pass.'

The Knights marched through the lower valleys with their weapons unshrouded and ion shields lit. The terrain was rocky and rough. Thin rills tumbled down over jagged rocks, and spare underbrush clung to whatever cracks offered a chance at life.

Markos heard the orks before he saw them. Guttural war cries and the revving of crude engines echoed along the valley.

'The enemy are close,' he voxed, then almost stumbled as unfamiliar sensations and images flickered through his mind. They were coming from his throne, fragments of battles fought against the orks.

Other worlds.

Other lives.

He pushed the sensations away, fighting down a tide of whispers that threatened to lull him into a fugue state.

Now was not the time.

Suddenly there were shots stippling his ion shield. Markos blinked. His auspex swarmed with enemy contact runes, and gunfire was whistling around him.

'Markos,' voxed Tolwyn. 'I say again, enemy contact fore. Advance upon them and fire at will. You're falling behind.'

Markos swore as he saw the rest of the Knights already a quarter of a mile ahead up the valley. Between him and them was a mass of orks. Riding upon crude tracked bikes or in buzzing single-seater flying machines, dozens of greenskins were racing straight at him with their guns blazing.

He cursed again before clenching his haptic gauntlets. His steed growled in readiness.

Punching one gauntlet forward, Markos commanded his Knight to fire its thermal cannon. The weapon blasted a glowing crater in the pass, obliterating a swathe of ork vehicles. Markos laughed in sudden elation and triggered his steed's heavy stubber, swatting crude greenskin ornithopters from the air.

Feeding power to his motive impellers, Markos guided *Dracon's Wrath* up the valley. He caught up to the rear of the lance a mile from the Drakebite Pass, trampling ramshackle ork vehicles and blasting mobs of roaring infantry.

Enemy resistance grew as the Knights neared their destination, the trickle of xenos becoming a flood. Masses of roaring foot-troops swept towards them,

firing wild hails of bullets. Most ork weapons had little hope of damaging a Knight, but here and there a crude rocket corkscrewed out of the press to explode ferociously against an ion shield or hull.

'Don't let them close,' warned Sire Daeved. 'In great enough numbers these beasts can pull down even a Knight, and their leaders have weapons that rip through armour and cables.'

The Knights slowed, concentrating fire into the onrushing horde. Amongst the sea of greenskins came lumbering scrap-metal walkers and smoke-belching tanks that added their firepower to the fusillade. It was nothing compared to the devastation the Knights unleashed, however.

Gatling cannons roared. Stubber fire crisscrossed in sawing lines. Thermal blasts reduced swathes of greenskins to ash, even as hurtling rockets engulfed hundreds more in flame. Step by step the Knights drove the orks back, shattering their morale with a concentrated barrage that echoed along the pass.

Cocooned within his cockpit, Markos felt his fears wither like parchment in the heat of the draconsfire. With every shot he fired, every mob of foes or rumbling war machine he obliterated, his confidence surged. He was destruction and death. He was a Knight, and he laughed in exhilaration as he killed.

The bellows of the enemy rang in his sensorium. Their stink penetrated even the sealed environs of his Knight, though Emperor only knew how. The violence and savagery of the orks was a primal force, revealed in terrible clarity by the acuity of his Knight's sensorium. But they were small, crude things when compared to the war gods they faced. Markos felt the heady rush of invincibility, and embraced it.

Markos targeted and fired, targeted and fired, sending howling greenskins fleeing in terror. He had an aptitude for this. He was already the master of his steed, and with a little concentration he could begin to sift ghostly voices from amidst his throne's background murmur.

Bewareoverconfidenceyoung Knight you mustwatchyour flanksdo not allowthemto surround you as I did that wasmy end watchyourammunition countersyou must…

The roar of engines filled the sky as a squadron of greenskin aircraft hurtled over their retreating comrades, jockeying for position and trying to ram one another into the walls of the pass. A ferocious storm of rockets and shells battered the Knights' ion shields. Markos cried out in shock as the helm of Sire Ronauld's steed exploded, burning Ronauld to ash and throwing his Knight onto its back. Markos knew a moment of vertiginous fear, cringing back from the hail

of shots exploding against his shield. Panic threatened, but with a snarl he pushed the feelings down, mastering himself.

The Knights retaliated, Icarus fire sending three of the ork planes spiralling away to explode amongst the lower valleys.

'They'll return,' voxed Tolwyn. 'I'm reading another wave of xenos in the pass. We strike now.'

'Wait, Tolwyn,' said Gerraint. 'What is that on the auspex? It's huge…'

Markos felt his heartbeat quicken as a moment of ominous silence filled the vox.

'Skarjaw…' breathed Tolwyn.

Markos followed the designator rune that had blinked up on his retinal display. Emerging from the darkness of the pass was an immense beast of war. As tall at the shoulder as a Knight's carapace, the huge monster lumbered along on four muscular legs that ended in clawed hooves. Its bloated bulk was covered in scales as thick as tank armour, and its foam-flecked jaws were filled with enormous tusks. On its back was an armoured howdah like a small castle, thronging with orks. A huge cannon jutted from it, and enthroned atop the howdah was an ork of remarkable size and ugliness – Warlord Skarjaw, the greenskin despot who had launched the invasion of Adrastapol and cost this world millions of lives.

Behind the monster came two more like it, also fitted with swaying howdahs. Fresh waves of orks charged into battle around their trampling feet.

'Crusaders, Wardens,' said Tolwyn. 'Bring the pass down, now.'

'By your command, Gatekeeper,' replied Lady Bellah, her voice icy calm.

'The orks are too close,' said Gerraint, echoing Markos' panicked thoughts.

'I know,' replied Tolwyn, accelerating his steed into a charge. 'We've got to hold them until the avalanche begins. With me!'

Markos poured power into his steed's actuators and broke into a loping run. Sires Gerraint, Hectour, Daeved and Archivauld followed suit, while Lady Bellah coordinated the fire of the Wardens and Crusaders.

So few against the horde. It was the stuff of tales and tapestries, but it was nothing like Markos had imagined. Tales didn't tell of the disorienting din, the confusion of smoke and flame, and the pounding jolt of the Knights' footfalls or the gut-wrenching terror of staring straight at your own death. Tales, it seemed, rarely matched reality.

A storm of firepower whipped overhead, missiles and shells tearing at the walls of the pass to blast loose huge boulders and spread cracks across the rock faces.

Down below, the orks levelled their own firestorm. Sire Daeved swore as Skarjaw's howdah fired its cannon. The shell punched through Daeved's shield and tore off his steed's chainsword in a shower of sparks. Another of the howdah guns put a round into Sire Gerraint's leg, reducing his steed to a limp. The ork planes swept overhead, ploughing furrows of gunfire through their own forces in their eagerness to destroy the Knights.

Then Markos was into the melee, and everything was madness. He trampled a mob of orks, kicking their claw-fisted leader a hundred yards as he remembered Daeved's warning. He bored a crater in the nearest monster with his fusion blaster. Shots rang from his Knight's hull, striking from every side. A sea of brutish faces surrounded him, roaring in mindless ferocity.

A rocket exploded against Markos' generator housing, and he swore vehemently as he was forced to shut down a leaking plasma feed. He stomped through a swarming mass of greenskins, fighting to dislodge the axe-wielding xenos that were trying to scale his Knight's shins, while deflecting a barrage of energy blasts with his shield.

A Knight doesnotfightalone lookto your lancemates young Knight…

Markos snatched a glance at the wider battle, just in time to see Skarjaw's monstrous steed gore Sire Archivauld's Knight Paladin. The war engine was hurled from its feet by the monster's bullish charge, before being crushed and trampled beneath its hooves. Archivauld's Knight shuddered with secondary detonations, and Skarjaw bellowed in triumph, his bestial features underlit by the fires of the burning Knight.

Markos was moving before he realised it, angling his shield to absorb the worst of the enemy fire as he accelerated towards Skarjaw. Sire Tolwyn got there first, shouting a challenge through his steed's vox-amplifiers. Skarjaw roared in reply, directing a hail of shots into *Fyreheart*. The howdah cannon boomed but Tolwyn swatted the shot aside with his shield, then stepped deftly around the monster's lunging tusks to ram his reaper chainsword into its neck. Sparks flew. Adamantium cutting teeth met iron-hard scales and ripped right through. Blood sprayed Tolwyn's steed as he drove his blade deep into the monster, churning through flesh, muscle and bone.

Markos fired his thermal cannon, burning through the monster's hide. Still the creature stayed on its feet, maddened by pain. It barged forward, impaling itself further on Tolwyn's blade but crunching its tusks into his steed's chest. Tolwyn cried out in pain. His steed staggered. If the Knight fell, he would meet the same fate as Archivauld.

Markos wouldn't reach the fight in time. Yelling incoherently, he opened fire.

A column of searing energies decapitated Skarjaw's monstrous beast, burning away its flesh and bone. Tolwyn's blade came free, glowing with heat wash, and the headless monster staggered. Warlord Skarjaw was still howling in fury when his steed slumped sideways. Its massive weight crushed the howdah into the ground, cooking off its cannon ammo in a devastating fireball. Gore and flesh rained down, all that remained of Skarjaw and the monster he rode.

As Markos' ears stopped ringing, he heard another sound swelling through the clangour of battle. It was the thunderous rumble of falling stone.

'The pass is coming down,' voxed Lady Bellah. 'Sires, pull back now or be buried.'

With the orks in confusion and the rock walls collapsing, the surviving Knights fled, angling their shields behind them to catch the enemy's last desperate shots.

Dust billowed as the fury of the mountains pounded down upon the orks and trapped them, cutting them off from the Draconspire once and for all.

Sire Markos sat back, smirking at the squires' rapt expressions.

'And that,' he said, 'is the story.'

'So you saved my father from being crushed by a rampaging monster,' said Danial. 'My thanks, Sire Markos. Without your heroism that day I wouldn't even be here.'

'Well,' said Markos. 'You're welcome, I'm sure. But as I say, that's the *story*.'

Luk frowned.

'What do you mean, sire?'

The Herald leaned forward, and his voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

'If you repeat this to anyone, you'll wish you'd had it as easy as the Tyrant of Farhaj. Understood?'

They nodded.

'By the time we got back to the Draconspire, my tale was already set in stone. The tapestry was woven, as they say. Half a dozen witnesses swore they saw me kill the monster. Me, a Knight that had just Become, saving the firstborn son of House Draconis. An inspirational tale of heroism to broadcast far and wide. And so they did, and I'd like to think it helped us win the war that much faster. Throne, perhaps it even put some steel in the spines of those Pegasson dogs. Later, when the war was done and the taletellers had embellished some more, it turned out to be a great tool for inspiring young squires. So I let it lie. But it's not the truth.'

Danial frowned.

'Then what…?'

'In that last moment when I fired, my throne overwhelmed me. I couldn't even aim my shot, let alone fire it.'

'So who killed the beast?' asked Luk. 'My father told me that you ripped a tooth from the ork's jaw to keep as a trophy!'

'I've no idea,' said Markos. 'Could have been that the ghosts fired my weapon for me. Could have been one of my comrades did the deed. For all I know the orks did it themselves. Half the time their guns don't work, and the other half they can't aim straight. It doesn't matter. My point is that I, and by extension your father, were either very lucky that day or very blessed. There's a lesson in it for you both. Becoming isn't just a rite, and nor is it easy. Show weakness, prove unworthy and you'll end up like poor Lorrence. But even then you can't just rely on skill alone. Our steeds are vast, powerful machines and the ghosts of our thrones help us to be wise, but by itself that isn't enough either. What I'm saying, lads, is that even once you've Become, even if you rise to be the greatest warrior of your age, you still need the Emperor's favour. Every day. Without the good luck He sends, even the mightiest of us will fall. Do you understand?'

Danial and Luk nodded solemnly.

'Good. Then you'll understand, too, why it's time you got off your arses and to your prayers. Consecrate your minds and souls, then get a good meal and a few hours' sleep. You'll need it. When next I see you, you'll have Become.'

Danial and Luk thanked Markos, rising from their thrones and hurrying away. As he stepped through the arched doorway, Danial glanced back. His eyes widened as he saw Sire Markos reach into the neck of his tunic, fishing out something that hung on a leather thong around his neck and looking at it with a wry smile.

It was a long, cracked ork tooth.

KNIGHTS OF THE IMPERIUM

GRAHAM MCNEILL

He must be humble of heart, strong of arm,
Be savage in war, loyal to hearth,
And follow deeds of Glory.
He must keep honour with all,
Banish cowardice from his doings,
And bring his House no shame.
He must serve the Emperor,
And defend the Imperium.
Thus should a Knight rule himself.

– The Chivalric Duty, Aquitainus
Malory Cadmus, M31

TELLURUS

Making children cry was a sacred duty to Raym Bartaum. He regarded the scale of their tearful sobs and the volume of their snot as a measure of how well he was doing his job. The sound of a nine-year-old in tears as he struggled to reload an autogun with frostbitten fingers was music to his ears.

It was the sound of them learning not to make the mistake that had seen them brought before him ever again.

'Give me the child, and I will mould the man,' had been his favourite riposte when do-gooding nobles evinced squeamishness at his methods.

Leave the inspirational crap to Kaytein. Raym had become a drill abbot to scare a thousand tonnes of hell out of each and every *progena* that came through Scholam Vikara.

And scaring them was easy.

The Imperium was a frightening place, after all.

Frightening for trained Guardsmen, let alone young children sent to a grim, granite-faced scholam with their parents freshly dead or so far away they might as well be.

And once he'd shown them just how bad everything else in the galaxy was, he taught them to be even worse. He taught them to be stronger than the things that wanted them dead. He taught them how to fight.

Yes, scaring progena was easy, but nothing he'd ever shown or told them of bloodthirsty xenoforms, traitors or warp-
spawned monsters had scared them quite as much as the sight of his terror was doing right now.

Raym Bartaum was terrified because he knew what was coming.

He had a cybernetic arm and adamantium plates replacing half his pitted skull to remind him just how bad things were going to get.

The scholam yard was the size of a good-sized regimental assembly ground, which, come rain, sun or snow it was, six days out of seven. A mix of heavy supply trucks, groundcars and a couple of stripped-down Chimeras used for training gunned their engines by the opened Proximus Gate. Slow, lumbering things, none had speed enough to outpace the approaching enemy.

Thudding explosions sounded from beyond the scholam walls, bouncing echoes making it impossible to tell from where in the city the sound originated. Raym heard the rattle of small-arms fire, the heavier thud of artillery and the unmistakable sound of dying soldiers.

Twelve years had passed since Raym had set foot on a real battlefield, fifteen since he'd heard the screeching howls of this particular foe.

But there were some sounds you never forgot; some sounds that could still bring a decorated veteran out in cold sweat and make him want to eat the barrel of his bolt pistol.

Children were spilling from the cloisters of the scholam, barely dressed and fumbling with their rifle slings. The youngest was barely six, the oldest approaching his maturity.

And every single one of them was going to die here.

They flinched at the crash of artillery fire from deeper in the city and stared in horror at the distant smudges of black smoke rising in the distance.

Raym's fellow drill abbots herded their charges towards the waiting vehicles. Military-grade voices shouted at the youngsters: parade-ground trained, audible even over the scholam's bells and the ululating sirens blaring from the city walls of Vikara.

The progena were chased by profanity Raym had last heard in a Catachan brothel and switches to beat the backs of those moving too slowly. His own class were already following at his heels. Just like the first day they had come to him, most were blubbering in fear. Others were too terrified to even cry.

They were a good bunch now; the softest clay beaten and then built into what he'd hoped would be the finest warriors, statesmen, generals or inquisitors of the Imperium. They'd hated him at first; oh, how they'd hated him.

Two of them had even tried to kill him.

But they'd learned to respect him. And as they grew and saw who they had become, they understood just what he'd made of them and were grateful.

Raym looked up as a squadron of aircraft roared overhead. Too fast to see what kind. Lightnings most likely. Dogfighters, which meant the enemy was almost here.

‘Hurry it up, damn you!’ he shouted, hoping his angry tone would mask his fear. He hauled down the tailgate of the first truck. Something exploded beyond the walls of the scholam. A greenish fireball painted the sky.

Children scrambled aboard, the older ones helping the youngest. Raym was gratified to see the disciplined control in their faces. Fear as well, but no panic.

‘Are they coming to rescue us?’ asked Morlay, a promising young lad with pinched cheeks and the potential to be a quality leader of men.

‘Rescue us?’ snapped Raym, turning his fear into an authoritative bark. ‘Don’t be soft, lad. Why would Lord Ohden send troops to save our sorry arses when he’s a war to fight? Every Guardsman with a gun will be heading to the walls.’

‘No one’s coming?’ said a sandy-haired girl named Lorza.

Tough and uncompromising, if she hadn’t made the cut for interrogator training, Raym would have been outraged. Right now she looked like a frightened ten-year-old.

‘Why would they? We’re no priority at all. Just a bunch of half-trained orphans and cripples. We’re hungry mouths, dead weight,’ said Raym, raising his voice so others could hear. ‘So if they won’t come for us, we’re going to have to do this ourselves, right? We’re going to have to uphold the grand traditions of Scholam Vikara at the end of a lasgun and on the edge of a combat blade.’

Some of the younger ones cheered, but the older ones saw through his bravado.

The last of the progena were aboard, and Raym slammed the tailgate shut. He dropped the locking bolt into place and slapped his hand on the vehicle’s side.

‘All aboard!’

The far wall of the scholam buckled as something enormous slammed into it. Heavy blocks tumbled to the parade ground and cracks split the masonry from the foundations upwards.

‘Go!’ he shouted, and the truck belched a filthy cloud of engine smoke. Its tyres spun on gravel as Raym heard the frenzied scrape of hundreds of razor-sharp talons on stone.

They came over the wall in a chittering, screeching tide of hissing killers. Blade-limbed and sheathed in chitinous plates of glistening organic armour. Bulbous heads that were all questing tongues, needle-toothed jaws and dead, black eyes.

Hormagaunts, remembered Raym. That’s what we called them.

He heard barked orders, but they were dulled and slow, like something from a nightmare. Gunfire flayed the ruined wall, bursting scores of the creatures like pus-filled blisters.

It wouldn’t be enough: they were coming over in their hundreds, maybe even thousands. Then the wall buckled and collapsed as something even worse came through.

Raym had no name for it. A hulking colossus with a segmented carapace, bent low where its ram-like skull had demolished the wall. Taller than five strong men, its thorax limbs were fused horrors of drooling bio-weaponry. Caustic slime slathered its elephantine legs as it bludgeoned a way inside. Its chest spasmed with intercostal muscle contraction and hundreds of chitinous barbs spat like bullets from between its ribs. Three trucks were shredded like they’d been hosed with assault cannon fire.

Young bodies fell to the parade ground, ripped up and screaming. A Chimera exploded as a gout of corrosive bio-acid punched through its armour. A few pitiful figures tumbled from the wreckage, the flesh sloughing from their bones.

Packs of swarming alien creatures raced across the parade ground, leaping and bounding, trampling one another as their overriding biological imperative to tear and kill made them mad with a devouring, all-consuming hunger.

The colossus finally tore through the ruined wall. A pair of hooked blade limbs at least six feet long unsheathed from creamy folds of flesh at its shoulders. With its blunt, bladed snout still lowered, the behemoth charged in the midst of the pack beasts.

Raym drew his bolt pistol. He wasn’t a drill abbot now, he was a soldier of the Imperial Guard.

‘For Vikara!’ he shouted and fired his bolt pistol empty.

Ten shots, each one a kill. Not enough to make even the slightest difference, but when had that ever mattered to one of the Emperor’s finest?

And then the front line of the swarm vanished in a deafening blizzard of explosions. Sawing blasts of fire cut through the packs of shrieking monsters as they died by the score. Raym ducked back at the overwhelming noise, feeling the percussive thunder of high-calibre shells passing so close.

He crouched as something huge loomed over him, towering and monstrous, a giant of adamantium and fury. With a booming cannon and a roaring chainblade for arms, it was clad in armour the colour of a winter’s sky. Blue and cold, chevroned with streaks of black and amber. A bright gonfalon streamed from its left shoulder. A rearing horse with a fluted horn at its forehead.

The giant planted its splay-clawed feet, bellowing defiance as its enormous cannon poured a relentless torrent of shells into the screaming swarm. Carapace-mounted assault weaponry sawed through the horde, cutting down what little the

rapid-firing explosive ordnance left alive.

The charging colossus bellowed and bared a vast, fang-filled mouth, recognising an opponent worthy of its attention.

The armoured giant loosed an answering blast of a skirling horn and brought its long chainblade to bear. Hot vapours bled from the roaring friction of its tearing teeth. The monster spat green fire, but the giant shrugged it off with an unseen energy shield.

They came together in a crashing thunder that shook the parade ground with its fury. The giant swung its enormous blade and the beast crashed to its knees as most of its torso simply ceased to exist.

A noxious cloud of atomised alien flesh sprayed from the embedded blade's teeth as the beast fell forward. Its limbs thrashed, still trying to raise its gutted carcass, still driven to kill by its monstrous overmind.

It bellowed in pain and hideous appetite.

The armoured giant crushed its vast skull with a final thunderous stomp. Its stubber cannons raked the ruined wall as more of the alien packs gathered for an assault. The giant's horn skirled a blast that Raym recognised, the order to retreat under cover.

Raym took a moment to salute the giant before climbing onto the back of his truck as it pulled away. The Proximus Gate passed overhead as the driver gunned the engine. He lost sight of the giant as they turned a corner. The white of its horned-horse banner was spattered with alien blood.

Raym dropped over the tailgate and leaned against it.

'What in the name of Ohden's balls was that?' said Lorza, breathless with fear and wonder.

'I've never seen anything like it,' said Morlay.

Raym took a moment to catch his breath.

'That, my lad,' said Raym, 'was a Knight.'

ROLAND

It never becomes any less painful. Communion with the other half of my soul should be easy, but a union of flesh and steel is no trifling matter. I feel the connection burn through the cold metal of the throne mechanicum. Its umbilicals thread their way into my skull and spine. It feels like every vein and cell is filling with ice water.

My throne sits within the Chamber of Echoes, a circular hall of dark stone and soaring iron girders. It is a place well named. A swelling tide of voices rises from the depths of Golem Keep's Sanctuary and the dark ocean of the past.

The voices are many. My ancestors and companions. My judges and battle brothers. I recognise my father's voice, stern and uncompromising, and beyond that I hear the sonorous tenor of my grandfather. Also stern and uncompromising.

In that, at least, the men of House Cadmus speak as one.

The presences of the armour's previous occupants settle upon me like a well-worn hauberk; comforting in its steely protection, familiar in its fit. And as always, the void within me is filled with a sense of completeness.

Bonded with my throne mechanicum I am becoming whole.

I always tell Cordelia that *she* completes me, that she is the other half of my soul, and sometimes I even believe it myself. In turn, she has the good grace to allow my ego to think she believes me. She knows, as all consorts know, that a warrior of House Cadmus is only truly complete when he sits enshrined within the iron behemoth of his Knight armour.

Twenty-six warriors are enthroned alongside me in the Chamber of Echoes, a fraction of our former strength, but I lose sight of them as my throne rolls backwards and slots home in the guide rails of a vertical transit tunnel.

Darkness enfolds me and my awareness of the physical world begins to recede.

Connections within my brain are rerouting to ease the neural interface with the senses of the great machine below.

The throne mechanicum drops, mag-lev rails hurtling it towards my waiting Knight.

I feel the movement, the rush of air, the smell of grease and lubricant, but it is distant to me. I can taste the dangerous friction of hot metal and the actinic flavour of crackling electricity, but it is flat and colourless.

My heart rate soars with excitement as seconds pass.

Then, from darkness into light.

The Vault Transcendent.

I have only a fraction of a second, too quick for even my enhanced cognition to snatch more than a fleeting impression of its enormous dimensions.

Carved into the rock of Golem Keep before the Imperium's painful birth, the Vault Transcendent is a stone-wrought cavern of biting winds and cold light.

Here, my armour awaits.

The twenty-seven surviving Knight machines of House Cadmus stand unmoving, facing one another in two rows. Each is a bipedal giant, thirty feet tall with enormous chainblades and lethal cannons slung from their shoulder mounts.

Heavy plates of olive-green and jaundice-yellow encase the ancient mechanisms of their bodies, and proud banners of red, gold and black waft slowly in the icy wind. A half-winged aquila ripples upon one field, a mutant's split skull on the other.

The throne mechanicum rams down into my Lancer armour, the carapace sealing behind me with a clang of metal and the racketing hiss of locking bolts. Entoptic light swells around me, and I gasp with connection pain once more as the Knight's aural sensors and the receptors of the throne mesh.

And what had been dull and distant now becomes gloriously sharp and vibrant.

Three hundred of Assembler Thexton's hooded Sacristans kneel at our feet, binary plainsong drifting from vox-implants and their retinues of servitors. I sense the tension and hope in the Martian-trained artificers. We are bound for Vondrak at the behest of the Mechanicus, but if Thexton thinks I am returning House Cadmus to the aegis of the Red Planet, he is to be sorely disappointed.

I will not make the same mistake Godfrey made.

I have removed the Cog from our heraldry, which once again bears the aquila of Terra.

And while I am the master of House Cadmus, it always will.

Directly across the Vault, the golden eyes of Sir Malcolm's armour flare with

connection. I raise my arms. Not the limbs of flesh and blood – they remain unmoving on my throne – but the limbs of my armour. My weapon arms, one a thermal lance, the other a battle cannon with an underslung relic blade, lift in salute.

Sir Malcolm repeats the gesture, albeit with the begrudged, teeth-gritted restraint of a rival-in-waiting.

Next to Malcolm, Sir Roderick and Sir Anthonis raise their weapons. Beside me, Sir William does the same. These are my senior Knights, my preceptors. My most trusted warriors.

Brothers for whom I would gladly lay down my life.

Hunting horns blare as the rest of the Knights slam the barrels of their cannons across the heraldic plates at their shoulders.

I turn, my senses and awareness now fully integrated with the armour. No longer am I a mortal being of flesh and bone and blood. I am a towering immortal, a beast-slaying hero from the epic lays collected in the towering stacks of Aegidius' dusty librarius at the heart of Golem Keep.

My Knights follow as I march from the Vault Transcendent, towards the great archway engraved with the names of every warrior who has worn the green and gold down the endless millennia from antiquity to this day.

The fall of Gryphonne IV to Leviathan's unstoppable swarms has seen the names of seventy-six Knights of House Cadmus etched into the marble. Grievous losses, heartbreaking losses. The kind of losses that might end a lesser house.

House Cadmus is not a lesser house.

Mourning banners still hang in Golem Keep's echoing halls, but sorrow's fist is already unclenching. The last Cull was a cathartic release of grief in an ocean of savage blood.

Many of the dead still ride with me, data ghosts haunting the circuits of my armour. Now more than ever, I feel the deep burden of responsibility at the sight of their names.

My brother Knights will feel the same.

The urge to bring honour to their legacy is hardwired into every fibre of our being. It has been thus ever since my Rite of Becoming.

Though Cordelia and the others advise against treating with the Mechanicus so soon after our emancipation, I see opportunity where others see only risk. *This* is why I am the master of House Cadmus. And this latest call to arms will see the newly dead avenged.

I march beneath the archway, out onto the elliptical platforms cantilevered from the sheer flanks of a mountainous plateau. A mile above me squats the sprawling, brooding immensity of Golem Keep. Its windowless towers and crumbling ebon palaces are grim silhouettes in the clouds, a crag of nightmares in the hearts of Raisa's barbarous inhabitants.

A white-gold sun hangs low on the horizon, bathing the endless forests in a vaporous haze. Beneath their evergreen canopy, a degenerate race of abhuman savages eke out a wretched life in the dark. We could wipe them out with ease, but it is more amusing to allow them the semblance of existence.

Each year we slaughter thousands of them in a yearly Cull to decide who will lead House Cadmus. This year, and for the thirty-one preceding years, none have surpassed my kill-tally.

My Knights form up around me, a shield wall and marching formation all in one. They flex fibre-bundle muscles and stretch aural sensors, restless and eager for the coming fight.

Simmering in the evening heat of the setting sun, ten trans-orbital landers wait to carry us to the bulk cruisers idling in orbit. Much of our war-load is already aboard. All that remains are the Knights.

Malcolm takes position at my side. He thought he had me beaten this year, but he will have to prise my cold, dead hands from the reins of command.

I am Baron Roland, Commander of House Cadmus.

And an old enemy awaits us on Vondrak.

The Great Devourer.

Not the beasts of Leviathan, that would be too much to hope for and the universe does not play out its revenge tragedies so swiftly. No, this is a swarm that has been given a name from an ancient Terran myth cycle, the name of a many-headed beast that could only be defeated by the mightiest of heroes.

Its name is Hive Fleet Hydra.

NEMONIX

A shaven-headed flesh-thrall of the dataproctor had named this shadowed vault in a minor forge-temple as the location for their meeting. Located in the outskirts of Vondrak Ultima's radial manufactory districts, the temple was closer to the battlefront than Archmagos Kyrano would have liked, but the message was unequivocal.

No sooner had it been delivered than Kyrano registered the detonation of a synaptic fuse within the thrall's brain, forever burning any memory of the message from its mind. The thrall was baseline human, with the waxy features of something grown in a vat. Scrubbed of all but the most basic DNA signatures and conception markers, it looked human, but possessed none of humanity's vitalism. It offered no name, and a basic bio-scan revealed cognitive architecture engineered to develop a perpetual form of anterograde amnesia.

Needless precautions, thought Kyrano, but entirely in keeping with the dark rumours concerning the dataproctor cults.

The deserted forge-temple was well chosen. Every senior adept had long since fled to Vondrak Prime, leaving only an expendable skeleton staff to oversee the last data transfers from its vault.

As soon as he had offered his petition, Kyrano would join his fellow adepts. And once this business with the Binary Apostle was concluded, he would take a fast ship to Tolkhan, where the forge-synod had re-established itself in the wake of Gryphonne IV's destruction.

The dusty archive towers to either side thrummed with the passage of information, the whirr of magnetic plates and binharic choral chants. Wall-mounted atomisers in the form of cog-toothed skulls kept the air pungent with cooling incense.

The dataproctor's message had warned him to come alone, but Kyrano was an

archmagos of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and a priest of his standing was seldom alone.

A low-ranked tech-priest named Uzuki was the temple's sole remaining adept, and he had welcomed Kyrano to his humble shrine as though the Omnissiah Himself had manifested before him. He'd followed Kyrano to the data vault like a faithful cyber-mastiff, assembling its six lexmechanics like some kind of honour guard.

The lexmechanics Kyrano would mind-wipe, and Uzuki's silence could be bought with an empty promise of advancement within the Cult Mechanicus.

Assuming there was any need. The appointed time for the meeting had passed three minutes ago.

Where is he? canted Kyrano, impatiently tapping his fingertips against the matt-black surface of an archive tower. Haptic implants brought up a sheaf of glowing entoptic status panels. Even a cursory glance told Kyrano there were still thousands of zettabytes left to transfer.

'Adept Kyrano?' said Uzuki with a flesh-voice that betrayed his fear and lowly status all in one.

Yes, Uzuki, what is it? replied Kyrano.

The tech-priest cocked his head to the side, and Kyrano's shoulders slumped as he recalled that Uzuki's aural inputs were not modified for ritual levels of lingua-technis encryption. He took a moment to realign his oesophageal implants. It had been thirteen years and seven months since he had conversed with another adept in flesh-voice.

'You have a question?' he said, his voice rendered unfamiliar by lack of use.

'Ah, well, yes I do, archmagos,' said Uzuki.

'Then ask it,' said Kyrano when Uzuki didn't go on.

'Why are we still here?'

'You have pressing business elsewhere?'

Uzuki gave him a look that said he clearly *did* have business elsewhere. His head bobbed up and down, fear making his flesh-voice quaver.

'Well, yes,' said Uzuki. 'There's the matter of a, um, that is, a… tyranid host en route. Shouldn't we be beating a hasty retreat to Vondrak Prime?'

'Not until the data transfer is complete,' said Kyrano.

'Of course, archmagos,' said Uzuki. 'The data transfer will take at least another ten hours to complete, but, well, you see… I, well, I took the initiative, so to speak, to reroute some automation protocols from the noosphere and splice them to the lexmechanics' cortexes. There is no need for you or I to remain.'

Despite himself, Kyrano was impressed, but the infuriating lack of precision in Uzuki's language offended him to the extent that he briefly considered mind-wiping him along with the lexmechanics. Bad form to take such drastic action against a fellow adept of the Cult Mechanicus, but he felt sure no one who had ever met Uzuki would condemn him.

'We evacuate when I decide we are done, Adept Uzuki,' said Kyrano. 'If this damned adept ever turns up.'

'He's already here,' a voice said from the darkness. 'And I told you to come alone.'

Despite his extreme deviations from the baseline human template, Kyrano still jumped at the sudden, unexpected sound.

'An archmagos does not easily travel alone,' he said.

'There's truth in that,' allowed the disembodied voice. 'Very well. One mind, eight minds? It makes no difference.'

A figure ghosted from between two of the archive towers, and Kyrano's ocular implants whirred as they struggled to focus.

'Adept Nemonix?' said Kyrano.

'You were expecting someone else?'

'No, but I am linked to every system of this temple, and I registered no entry,' said Kyrano. 'In fact, your presence is not registering at all. On any level. Why is that?'

The figure kept to the shadows, but Kyrano had the discomfiting feeling that even were he standing in the full glare of a sodium lamp, there would be just as little to see.

'Being a ghost in the machine has its advantages,' said the dataproctor, as though being invisible to the multifarious auspexes built into every facet of a forge-temple's structure was a minor thing. 'Not least of which is the freedom to travel without footprints of any kind.'

Kyrano ached to know more but restrained his natural instinct for questions. He let the subject drop for now. More important matters had brought him to this place.

'I have need of your order's services,' he said.

'I know,' said Nemonix.

'What is it you think you know?'

'More than you would like, archmagos,' said Nemonix. 'Enough to see your every achievement stripped from you by the forge-synod, I can assure you of that. But shall we forego threats, reveals and counter-reveals, the preening and

the outrage? The unveiling of dark secrets between brother cults of the Mechanicus benefits no one. Agreed?'

Kyrano nodded.

'Very good,' continued the dataproctor, stepping into the light. 'Then let's crank to the hub of the cog.'

Kyrano flinched as Nemonix flickered like a negative exposure on a pict-plate, a ghost image that faded a heartbeat later, as though he were an adept-shaped hole in the world.

'How are you doing that?' demanded Kyrano.

'If I didn't tell you on Graia or Triplex Phall, what makes you think I'll tell you now?'

Kyrano consulted his data-coils and shook his head.

'You and I have never met, Adept Nemonix.'

'On the contrary,' said Nemonix, with a soft sound Kyrano interpreted as laughter. 'Our paths have crossed six times previous to this, archmagos.'

'You are mistaken.'

'No, you've just forgotten, as you will again.'

Now it was Kyrano's turn to laugh.

'Impossible. The Mechanicus never deletes anything.'

'I do,' said Nemonix, exhaling a whisper of binary cant, his words a threat and an explanation in one. 'The tech-priest beside you, what is his name?'

'He is…'

Kyrano's words trailed off as he realised he had no memory of the tech-priest's identity. A noospheric aura surrounded the man, but contained only the dull machine-spirits of his basic augmetics.

No name or designation, no history and no remnants of the man he had once been. At a stroke, the entirety of the tech-priest's life had been erased from every nook and cranny of the noosphere.

As far as the Mechanicus was concerned, he had ceased to exist.

Kyrano forced down his anger, as he began to suspect he had many times before. For the first time in his life, Kyrano wished he had retained a measure of his biological identity.

'Now, to business,' said Nemonix, lacing his hands behind his back as though wiping all trace of a member of the Cult Mechanicus from existence was an everyday occurrence for him.

Kyrano had a horrid suspicion it might well be.

'Gryphonne Four's loss has allowed House Cadmus to slip their leash,' said

Nemonix, careful to emphasise just where his superiors believed the blame for that disaster lay. ‘Baron Roland of Raisa has selfishly taken advantage of your weakened standing within the forge-synod to reject the beneficence of the Mechanicus in favour of Terra. Your position within the synod is already greatly weakened by the loss of so vital a forge world. To let a knightly house just slip away would likely see you removed from the synod, perhaps even stripped of your title and holdings.’

‘You know a great deal,’ said Kyrano, struggling to hide his surprise.

Judging from the tone of Nemonix’s next words, he presumed he had failed utterly.

‘Don’t look so shocked, archmagos. To someone like me, your floodstream is as porous as a macrogrit sieve. You may as well have announced your intentions over an open vox-caster link.’

The dataproctor waved an admonishing finger. ‘If I were you, I’d think twice about using unratified STC fragments for neural firewalls. And I’d *especially* advise against using proprietary interpolation codes to fill in the gaps.’

Nemonix waved away Kyrano’s open-mouthed shock.

‘No matter, but to return to the matter at hand, in and of itself, House Cadmus severing its ties with Mars is irrelevant. It is irrelevant, but also inevitable that other houses will hear of it. And if House Cadmus is able to cast off the Mechanicus with impunity, others may follow their example. Then where will it end? This poor ravaged house could be the domino that tips other Knight houses allied to the Mechanicus into thinking they can survive without the patronage of Mars.’

‘Then you understand what I require of you?’ said Kyrano.

‘To show Baron Roland the error of his ways and bring House Cadmus back under Martian control.’

‘Just so,’ said Kyrano.

‘And if that should prove impossible? How far are you willing to take this?’

Kyrano straightened and said, ‘If Roland will not submit to Mars, you are to ensure that House Cadmus serves as an example to the other Knight houses of how bloodily catastrophic taking a similar course of action would be.’

The dataproctor nodded, and just for a second his hazed outline became clear as he exloaded a string of impossibly subtle cant. A wash of static cascaded through Kyrano’s ocular implants.

He blinked it away and looked around the empty data vault.

A tech-priest he didn’t know and six lexmechanics stood with him in the midst

of banks of whirring archive towers. Glowing status screens crackled with ripples of distortion, telling Kyrano that every single archive was completely empty of data.

'The data transfer is complete,' Kyrano told the nameless tech-priest, wondering why he was using his flesh-voice instead of binharic cant.

He looked around the deserted archive space one last time, but they were alone. No sign of a representative from the dataproctors. Kyrano shook his head, irritated at having been forced to waste his valuable time for nothing.

Angry at such a gross breach of protocol, Archmagos Kyrano turned on his heel and left the empty vault.

VONDRAK

First to emerge from the Cadmus translifters was a tall, slender woman with strong features and auburn hair bound up in an elaborate headpiece of gold, silver and dripping mother-of-pearl. Clad in a long, green dress with a gold pelisse over one shoulder, Lady Cordelia of House Cadmus stepped onto the vapour-wreathed platform and marched towards the official-looking men assembled on an elevated reviewing stand.

'They look surprised,' she said into the sub-vocal vox-bead disguised as a ruby choker at her throat.

'These are Vondrak Prime's senior military commanders,' answered Roland in her ear. 'They were likely expecting a Knight.'

'I hope I shan't prove a disappointment,' said Cordelia, marching towards the reviewing stand with a stride as sure as any colonel of the Guard.

'Never that,' chuckled Roland. 'Right, what do we have?'

Cordelia's right eye was a subtle ocular implant that relayed what she saw back to Roland's Knight armour.

'Our old friend, Archmagos Kyrano,' said Cordelia.

'Makes sense. The petition requesting our assistance came from him,' said Roland. 'He'll be anxious to remind us how much we need the help of Mars. Who else?'

Cordelia inclined her head towards a beautifully handsome man with caramel-coloured skin and a mane of glossy dark hair bound in a long scalp-lock. Encased in silver lamellar plate and a long cloak of scarlet, his exposed shoulder bore two crossed duelling blades and his lapels a crown between two star-shaped roundels.

'Harun Rukanah,' said Cordelia. 'Colonel of the Mubarizan Sipahi. Service record inloading now. Looks solid. More good decisions than bad. I think we can

count on him.'

A short, compact man with sallow skin and a shorn scalp stood awkwardly beside the Mubarizan colonel. He wore faded khakis with a split-winged insignia on the left breast, one wing white and one crimson. Beneath the khakis, Cordelia saw a well-worn bodyglove.

'We don't have a visual of him, but I'm betting that's Aktis Bardolf of House Hawkshroud.'

'Looks like a Knight pilot, right enough,' said Roland. 'And the Space Marine?'

Cordelia regarded the towering warrior in matt-black plate with a pearl-white trim and ivory eagle across his vast plastron.

'We don't know him,' she said, 'but he's from the Sable Swords Chapter. From the iconography and embellishments to his armour, I'd say a captain.'

Lady Cordelia approached the reviewing stand and gave a short bow to the men assembled above her. She made no attempt to climb the steps at the stand and gave them just enough time to realise that they were to come to her.

Followed by their escorting soldiers, they formed up in front of Cordelia like junior officers approaching a lord general. Before any of them could speak, Cordelia held up her right hand.

Baron Roland marched from the darkened interior of the first translifter's hold. The platform shook with the booming footfalls of the thirty-foot giant. Malcolm marched at his side, and Roderick and Anthonis took longer steps to take position on either flank.

A host of mechanised giants marched onto the platform, the sunlight gleaming from the jade-and-topaz plates of their vast battle armour. Vasey and Garratt came next, together with the younger Knights they had trained.

The consorts of the Knights followed, each of the Cadmus women in their brightest finery and most prized jewellery. The consorts of House Cadmus never bore arms, but without their strength, the Knights could not function. They too bore items of value: folded flags, honour trophies and rolls of honour their husbands had won.

Cassia's nose was in a book as usual, Aikaterina had her newborn son held tight to her breast, while Aeliana played a Raisan war song on a steel-framed viola that was amplified through Roderick's hunting horn.

A phalanx of Assembler Thexton's Sacristans flowed onto the platform after them, red-robed and proudly bearing icons of the Cult Mechanicus. Heavy gonfalons of Cadmus unfurled from long banner poles carried by bulk servitors. Cordelia didn't miss the irritation in Archmagos Kyrano's body language at the

sight of the Imperial aquila where once the Cog of the Mechanicus had sat.

The Knights marched across the platform in perfect lockstep, and Cordelia saw her suspicion that the sallow-skinned man was a Knight confirmed in his obvious appreciation of their power.

Cordelia smiled as she saw the momentary alarm in the faces of the gathered officials as it looked as though the striding Knights were going to roll right over them.

At the last possible moment, the Knights slammed to a halt.

Roland's Knight took a step forward as the Knights behind him held their reaper blades high in salute. Hunting horns skirled, repeating the triple blast that sounded the charge.

The horns fell silent.

'Gentlemen,' said Cordelia, in flawless High Gothic, 'House Cadmus brings its swords to defend Vondrak.'

When a Knight wears his armour, he is at one with the world and a brother to all warriors. He judges no man except by his deeds and fights with honour as his watchword. Out of his armour, every consort will agree that their husbands are easily irritated and foul-tempered.

So being stuck in the heart of a forge-temple with a host of the Martian priesthood that once considered themselves our masters is wearing at every Knight's reserve of patience like a sculptor's rasp.

The insect-buzz drone of binary from drifting servo-skulls and the acrid smoke from the censers the silent priests bear only serves to heighten the tension. Anthonis swats at a skull that drifts too close. It darts out of reach with a blurt of hurt binharic ire.

Archmagos Kyrano looks up at me. 'Confirmation: you have reviewed the tactical inloads pertaining to this mission?'

The steel half-mask of his face is underlit by the glow from the hololithic table around which we are gathered. The impression is undeniably sinister. I wonder if he realises how he appears to ordinary men, or if he even cares. The Mechanicus are a breed apart, distant from the concerns of a flesh they no longer remember.

I move around the rotating holographic orb representing the contested battlefronts spread across the surface of Vondrak. The image is too zoomed out to be of any use, so I push the tech-priest manning the controls out of my way.

'What are you doing, Baron Roland?' says Kyrano. 'You are not Cult Mechanicus certified.'

‘True, but I’m not an idiot and I’ve sat around enough of these damn things to know how they work. Yes, we have read the inloads, but when a man is asking me to risk the lives of my Knights, I need him to say it to my face.’

I lean forward and manipulate the various levers, dials and resistance meters of the table, ignoring the burble of outraged binary that fills the chamber from the observing tech-priests.

The image on the hololith descends through various strategic layers until finally the image of a semi-ruined city swims into focus.

‘Tell me about Vikara,’ I say.

Kyrano sweeps his hands through the spectral city and haptic implants cause a host of information tags to appear throughout the rotating image.

‘Vikara fell to the xenos three months ago and is now largely in ruins,’ says Kyrano. ‘The *minoris omniphagea* swarms have yet to turn its way, and the bulk of its infrastructure is still intact.’

The gently rippling image of what was once an Imperial city confirms this, but the biological encroachments of xeno-organisms are all too obvious. Noxious stranglevines split plascrete columns and slabs, spore chimneys rip through the bedrock to spew corrosive clouds into the air and acid blooms stain every wall.

Within a month at best, Vikara will cease to exist.

‘It is a distribution hub,’ continues Kyrano. ‘A transit station for munitions and war-materiel bound for neighbouring sector war efforts directed against Hive Fleet Leviathan.’

‘Was,’ puts in Malcolm. ‘It *was* a distribution hub.’

‘Vikara may yet be reclaimed.’

Malcolm shakes his head. ‘Not a chance. It’s an organic hellhole now. The only way you’ll get it back is if you travel arse about face through the warp and reach here a year ago.’

I hide a smile as Kyrano struggles to maintain equilibrium. It is a curious thing that the emotion tech-priests find hardest to cast off is anger. Perhaps they are more human than we give them credit for.

‘The nature of Vikara’s purpose has only superficial bearing on the proposed mission,’ I say. ‘Where is the forge-temple?’

Kyrano forces his gaze from an unrepentant Malcolm and sweeps his hands through the city, bringing up a golden cog icon over a building that, miraculously, appears to be free of any obvious biomorphic infestation.

‘Your objective lies here in the eastern district. A forge-
temple of minor importance in all respects but one. Sealed in the temple’s data

vaults are the last remaining memory engrams of one of the Binary Apostles.'

Reverent cant gusts from the tech-priests. More than one makes the symbol of the Cog Mechanicus across his chest. Kyrano waits, as though expecting a similar response from us.

When none comes, he says, 'Informational: the Binary Apostles were the original techno-savants who departed Old Earth for the Red Planet, the founders of the Mechanicus. Mythical figures, no one truly knows who they were or how they achieved their miracles. Some say they dreamed them as they slept in the caves beneath Olympus Mons, others that they were drawn to a great chasm by–'

'We don't give a ship rat's fart who they were,' snaps Malcolm, always the most bluntly forthright of my Knights. It is not his place to speak like this, but Malcolm has always strained the limits of rank. Now more than ever.

I let it go, because he will say what I should not.

'Do you think we don't see what this is?' says Malcolm, jabbing an accusing finger at Kyrano.

'It is exactly what it appears to be, Sir Malcolm – a rescue mission.'

'It's a bloody suicide mission,' barks Malcolm. 'For some dusty piece of scrap metal! And the temple's probably a digestion pool by now. It's madness, Roland, pure bloody madness. The Mechanicus would rather see Cadmus destroyed than forsake the Cog.'

Roderick nods in agreement, while Anthonis and William pointedly study the scrolling mission parameters on the hololith. Garratt and Vasey are keen to ride, but they are young and have yet to face the tyranid swarms.

If they had, I doubt they would be so eager.

'It will be highly dangerous,' agrees Kyrano. 'But I can say with a high degree of certainty that the temple remains intact.'

'How?' I ask.

'Because nothing, human or xenos, has gone in or out of the temple since the city fell.'

'It's shielded?'

'Yes, by a form of energy barrier we have never seen before. This particular Apostle's area of specialisation was said to be in shield technologies – early voids, the ion technology of your Knights, Geller fields, refractors, brane displacers and the like. It has long been rumoured that his or her spirit still resides in the temple's Manifold as a data ghost. It is my belief that some immutable nature of the Apostle's essence is keeping the temple safe.'

'The Apostle is still alive?' I ask, understanding something of how such a thing

might be possible.

'I believe so, though not as you or I might understand it. Nothing so coherent as to be considered conscious, perhaps, but a binharic meme endlessly circling within a Manifold engine that came from Mars itself. Too precious to be allowed to fade, too degraded to be anything other than insane.'

'And this is what you want us to risk our lives to save?'

'Yes.'

I rise from the control panel and straighten my uniform jacket as I return to my Knights. 'So, just to be clear, you want us to ride to Vikara, a city already fallen to the swarms. Then you want us to find a forge-temple haunted by the ghost of an insane Apostle. Assuming we can get in, you want us to somehow return the temple's Manifold engine to Vondrak Prime? Is that a fair assessment?'

Kyrano nods, either not hearing my caustic tone or choosing to ignore it.

'Knights offer the most statistically significant odds of success from all the forces at my disposal.'

I hold a hand up before Malcolm snaps at *that* choice bait.

'We are not *at your disposal*, archmagos,' I say, tapping a finger against Kyrano's chest. 'I did not bring Cadmus to Vondrak to yoke ourselves to the whims of the Martian priesthood once again.'

Kyrano meets my gaze, ocular implants to human eyes.

'Then why did you come?' he asks. 'The war-summons was not specific to Cadmus, and Hawkshroud had already broadcast their intent to fight.'

'Hawkshroud?' scoffs Malcolm. 'Those ragamuffins? They'd come running if you told them you were fighting sleep.'

'Hawkshroud are an honourable house, Malcolm,' I say. 'Their esteem and willingness to fight are laudable.'

Malcolm purses his lips and nods, aware he has crossed a line. In the presence of the Mechanicus, the Knight houses must present a united front.

I return my attention to Kyrano.

'We came to show that even though we no longer bear the Cog, we still hold the Mechanicus in high esteem. We are all servants of the Emperor, are we not?'

A beat, then, 'Of course, Baron Roland. Then you will ride?'

'Yes,' I say. 'House Cadmus will ride.'

WEAKNESSES

The chamber at the heart of the forge-temple was little more than a cell, but its occupant had voluntarily sealed himself away from the world. Its walls were smooth cream and fashioned from a polymer compound impermeable to vox-theft. Its walls boasted no inload or exload ports nor a single connection to the temple's Manifold or noosphere.

Just as the early pictographers required light-tight chambers to do their work, so too did dataproctors require data-tight chambers.

This one was less secure than Nemonix would have preferred, but Vondrak was hardly a high-functioning forge world, and he had taken the liberty of scrambling nearby systems to provide a data-fog within which he could operate invisibly.

He sat cross-legged on the floor, flicking through the personnel files of House Cadmus. Image after image of Knights scrolled past, together with every aspect of their lives. Some was banal and easily accessible – service records, deployments, family histories, all easily available to someone who knew how to look – but other elements – behavioural profiles, biological samples, gene-markers – were elements few of the Knights would be aware even existed, let alone were being perused by an outsider.

'Do you really think you're going to find something in there?' said a voice that was eerily familiar and yet almost unrecognisable.

'I do,' he replied. 'Cadmus are no different to anyone else. The weakness is in the people.'

'A typically Martian viewpoint,' said the voice.

'You're thinking the same thing,' replied Nemonix, as a shimmering hologram robed as a mid-ranking adept of Mars came into view. Nemonix glanced up at the hologram, which was being projected from thousands of micro-transmitters woven into the fabric of his own robes.

‘Well, of course, I am,’ said the adept. ‘I’m you. How could I think anything else?’

‘You’re not me,’ Nemonix reminded the hologram. ‘You’re a simulation of a me that no longer exists.’

The holographic Nemonix waved away the distinction. ‘Just because you’ve systematically stripped yourself of everything that made you me and turned you into you, doesn’t mean I can’t have thoughts of my own.’

Nemonix laughed. ‘Do you know how ridiculous that sounds? You are nothing more than a copy of what I used to be, and a poor one at that.’

‘Yet you keep me around,’ said the hologram. ‘Why is that?’

‘Because it gratifies me every day to see how far I have come since I made the engram transfer,’ said Nemonix.

‘That’s not it,’ said the hologram.

Nemonix turned back to the isolated data-slate with a sigh.

‘You are engineered with a self-sustaining form of anterograde amnesia, and every time I switch you on we have this same discussion,’ he said. ‘We bicker, you claim some deep insight as to why I created you and keep you around. I ignore you and we concentrate on the task at hand. So, can we take it as read that this latest discussion ended the same way and move on?’

The hologram folded its arms, and Nemonix sighed.

‘Here,’ he said, holding out the data-slate.

‘You could just upgrade my cognitive architecture to encompass noospheric functionality,’ said the hologram. ‘It would save you having to hold things out for me to read.’

‘Not a chance,’ said Nemonix. ‘You’re kept isolated for a reason. I can’t be leaving data trails behind me, and you’d leave one even a greenskin could follow.’

The hologram shrugged – as it always did – and perused the slate. Nemonix cycled through each of the Knights of Cadmus, letting the earlier incarnation of himself digest each one.

The last Knight to be displayed was Anthonis of Cadmus.

‘This one has potential,’ said Nemonix. ‘Destroying the foot of a Warlord Titan before it could crush a Cadian colonel. I think he could be our way in.’

The hologram shook his head. ‘No, this one’s too clinical, too cold. There isn’t enough humanity in him to exploit.’

‘Someone who takes on a Warlord in Knight armour has to have a planetary-sized ego,’ said Nemonix.

‘It wasn’t ego that drove him into that fight, it was necessity. Anthonis knew that without Colonel Pask the fight was lost. To him, there simply wasn’t any other choice.’

‘Then what about Roland? Usually the alpha has the biggest ego to exploit.’

‘No, if it’s Roland that brings down Cadmus, the whole house goes with him, and from what I read here, the Mechanicus want these Knights back in the fold.’

‘Then what would you suggest?’

‘I’d suggest we don’t go looking for strength to turn, but weakness to exploit,’ said the hologram. ‘Components within a machine that don’t function are replaced, but human beings are much more sentimental. They’ll put up with a broken cog in the machine, not realising that one little cog is what will bring them down.’

‘So who is the broken cog in House Cadmus?’

‘Flick back six pages.’

Nemonix did so and nodded.

‘Yes, this one,’ said the hologram, and Nemonix remembered that hunger, the thrill of the hunt that had largely been cut away with every augmentation that protected him from leaving any trace of his passing.

This was why he kept his old self around: to feel the things he could no longer experience and leech from it vicariously.

‘For the past ten years, he’s been chasing Roland’s coat-tails in the Cull,’ continued the hologram. ‘He’s hungry to lead, but Roland won’t let go of the reins. This one’s ripe to pluck. Give him what he wants and he’ll paint the Cog back onto every Knight’s armour himself.’

Nemonix studied Sir Malcolm’s behavioural profile and nodded in agreement. ‘How will we get to him?’

‘Through the weakness of every man of flesh and blood,’ said the hologram with a smile. ‘His woman.’

Nemonix scrolled down.

‘Her name is Cassia,’ he said.

On the eve of bloodshed, Cadmus feasted.

No matter the world, no matter the supply situation, the Knights and their consorts gathered at the hearth to revel in one another’s company with as much food and drink as could be sourced.

An old tradition, going back to before the fall of the High Lord, and which Cordelia had revived upon the ascension of Roland to command of House

Cadmus.

In Golem Keep, those feasts took place in Swinford Hall, the monolithic wing of the mountain fortress raised by Roland's distant ancestors. The feast chamber itself was a fantastical rotunda of slender steel, monolithic sculptures and stained glass that jutted from the plateau over the endless forests. No seats were permitted in the hall, so no man or woman could garner favour by their proximity to the master of the house. The quarters Lord Ohden's steward had assigned Cadmus were adequate, decided Cordelia, but they weren't Swinford Hall. The warriors drank a local fermented concoction and talked too loudly as servitors seconded from the Sacristan camp by the city walls brought platter after platter of roasted meats and steaming root crops. Every Knight except Anthonis, who ate sparingly and only ever drank water, would ride out tomorrow with a sour belly and a hangover, but even that was traditional.

Tomorrow would see the majority of these men sally forth on what might be their last ride. The intent of the feast was clear: the man beside you might soon be dead, so partake of his company while you can.

Roland was holding court with Roderick and William, re-enacting the last Cull by the looks of her husband's hand movements. Yes, that was a reaper blade cut, that a battle cannon shot, that a pounding stomp.

Sir Malcolm was included in Roland's circle, but clearly wished he wasn't. Cordelia made a note to remind Roland to be more gracious in victory.

She passed through the gathered Knights and their consorts with the practised ease of a ruling matriarch. Here and there she paused to congratulate a Knight on his improved kill tally in the Cull, or a consort for a flattering dress or well-chosen piece of jewellery.

The Knights offered sincere compliments as their wives passed messages only another consort would understand. None of the Knights read the subtext in the consorts' words, but that was the way of things. The men had their wars, the women had duties that were no less important.

Satisfied all was as it should be, she made her way through the crowd to where Aeliana, Cassia and Aikaterina were seated on padded benches at the chamber's hearth.

Cassia looked up from her book and smiled. Aeliana scribbled notations across sheets of music of her own composition, and Aikaterina rocked her baby gently in her arms.

'He's asleep?' asked Cordelia, taking a seat.

Aikaterina nodded, and Cordelia saw dark smudges of tiredness under her eyes.

‘Thank the Emperor,’ said Cassia, without looking up from her book. ‘It’s next to impossible to write with him screaming all the time.’

‘He’s quite musical sometimes,’ grinned Aeliana. ‘I might use some of his tones in the crescendo.’

‘I don’t know why you bother with that journal,’ said Aeliana. ‘It’s not like you let anyone read it.’

‘It wouldn’t be a private journal if anyone else read it.’

‘What’s the point of writing it if no one gets to read it?’

Cassia shrugged. ‘It helps,’ she said at last.

‘Helps with what?’ asked Aeliana.

At first she thought Cassia wasn’t going to answer, but the younger girl finally closed her book and snapped a locking hasp in place.

Cassia looked Aeliana straight in the eye and said, ‘I write in it because when Malcolm is killed in battle, I want to be able to remember every moment we shared before he died.’

Cordelia was saddened to hear *when* as opposed to *if*, but supposed that was the fear of every woman who sent her husband or son off to war in these dark times.

‘You study maps and plans of the Knights’ missions to know what Roderick is riding into, that’s your way of coping,’ said Cassia. ‘This is mine.’

‘Then you go right ahead and fill that book with everything you can,’ said Cordelia. ‘And don’t let anyone tell you differently.’

She saw Cassia’s eyes drift over her shoulder and turned to see Sir Malcolm marching over to the hearth, his face taut with disappointment.

Cassia stood as Sir Malcolm halted and bowed respectfully to the other consorts.

‘Malcolm?’ said Cassia. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘We’re leaving,’ said Malcolm.

‘So soon?’ said Cordelia. ‘The feast’s barely begun.’

‘Right now,’ snapped Malcolm.

Cordelia stood from the bench and faced Malcolm and said, ‘Whatever has upset you, Sir Malcolm, there’s no excuse for rudeness.’

Cordelia saw Malcolm’s natural brusqueness fight against his respect for his lord’s consort. He was a handsome man, in an angular, feral way, with eyes like chips of dark flint and close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Forgive me, Lady Cordelia, but I have just been informed by your husband that I am not to ride out with the rest of the house tomorrow. Instead, I am to remain in Vondrak Prime with Sir Garratt and seven others.’

‘But why?’

‘Baron Roland feels that, with the presence of Hawkshroud’s Knights, it is unnecessary to ride out with our full complement of warriors. He feels it would be prudent to attach some of our Knights to Colonel Rukanah’s order of battle, to “defend the city and those we hold most dear to our hearts”.’

Cordelia heard the bitterness in Malcolm’s voice, wishing Roland had spoken to her about this decision before slapping Malcolm in the face.

‘My husband does you great honour, Sir Malcolm,’ she said, seeing a way to turn Roland’s misstep into a boon. ‘He trusts you to keep the dream of House Cadmus alive.’

‘What are you talking about?’

Cordelia turned to face Aikaterina and her baby boy. Cassia and her book of memories. Aeliana and her fresh concertos.

‘I know how dangerous this mission is,’ said Cordelia. ‘I know there are Knights in this hall who will not come back to us. Maybe none of them. Maybe I will be a widow. Maybe Aikaterina’s son will grow up without a father’s guidance. My husband understands that he may never return, and the only way he can shoulder that burden is if he leaves his very best Knight to watch over us.’

‘Vondrak Prime is well defended,’ said Malcolm, but Cordelia saw the uncertainty in his eyes. ‘There are thousands of soldiers here who–’

‘Would you trust anyone but one of our own to protect us? To protect Cassia?’ interrupted Cordelia. ‘It is the women of Cadmus that keep this house strong, who birth and raise its heirs, who bind the noble lines together. It is *our* strength that allows the house to endure when you menfolk ride to war. When you come back to us broken from too long a connection with your armour, who do you think puts you back together?’

Sir Malcolm knew he was beaten, but took his defeat with good grace, something he would never do on the field of battle.

‘You are, of course, correct, my lady,’ he said, his normally brusque demeanour actually cracking into a smile.

‘You would have made a formidable Knight had you been born a man,’ he said, before turning and rejoining his brother Knights.

‘He says that like it’s a compliment,’ said Aeliana as soon as Malcolm was out of earshot. ‘Didn’t he hear *anything* you said?’

‘He’s a Cadmus male,’ said Cordelia, sitting back down. ‘When do they ever pay attention to the words of women wiser than them?’

The consorts smiled at the oft-repeated mantra. The baby at Aikaterina's shoulder wriggled and began to cry, loud and strident, like the hunting horn of a Knight. Aikaterina opened the top of her dress and attempted to suckle the child, but he refused to latch on to his mother's breast.

'The little prince still wary of the teat?' said Cordelia.

'The Maia Sisterhood scold me and tell me I'm a bad mother,' replied Aikaterina, close to tears. 'The texts Maia Agnodice gave me say he should be drinking more and sleeping longer.'

'This from a woman who's never borne a child,' said Cordelia, shaking her head and taking a seat next to Aikaterina. 'I think she forgets that babies don't read her texts. Here, let me hold him.'

Aikaterina gratefully handed her son to Cordelia, and she cooed softly to the infant. The moment she looked into the child's eyes, she knew what was wrong.

'It's just a little translation sickness,' she said. 'It'll pass in a day or so.'

'You're sure?'

Cordelia nodded, gently running a fingertip down the child's forehead and nose. His eyes followed her finger, taking longer each time to reopen. 'It's hard enough for us to travel to another world through the immaterium – how terrifying must it be for a child? Braxton suffered terribly from it.'

The child's cries began to subside, and Aikaterina smiled gratefully to her.

'That settles it, you're staying with us,' said Aikaterina. 'He won't stop crying for me, no matter what I do.'

'He's a Cadmus male,' repeated Cordelia. 'Since when do they ever pay attention to the words of women wiser than them?'

They laughed, but each of them knew the truth of it.

Their husbands were great men, warriors of honour, courage and nobility, but they were incomplete. They fooled themselves into thinking they were only whole when joined with their Knights, but that was a lie. A lie that had been told too often to be contradicted and repeated so often it had achieved a form of truth.

A *necessary* lie, but a lie nonetheless.

Roland was drunk. Not so drunk that Cordelia's words wouldn't register, but enough to make it an effort to keep him focused on what she needed him to hear. The feast had finally wound down as the prayer bells for Nocturns echoed from the Mubarizan billets beyond the palace.

As usual, Anthonis was the first Knight to withdraw. Since the death of Persis, he had distanced himself from his brothers. Thus far Cordelia had managed to

deflect Roland's demands that she find Anthonis a new consort. As though that would suddenly catapult him from mourning.

The rest of the Knights followed soon after, led to their chambers by their consorts, who all gave Cordelia knowing glances that told her every one of them would be standing proud on the muster fields at roll call in the morning.

As master of the house, Roland was duty bound to be the last to leave, but by that point Cordelia had ordered the servitors to water his drink so much that she doubted there was even one part per hundred of alcohol in his last five flagons.

Cordelia reclined in an iron-framed bed as Roland stumbled around the room, removing his boots with all the grace of a wounded grox. At last he managed to pull them off and slumped into the bed. He let loose a colossal fart and looked over at her, as though expecting a round of applause. After an evening of beer, meat and vegetables, the aroma was only slightly less appalling than the corpses dragged up from the forest after the Cull.

'Sorry, Cor,' he said. 'That local stuff Ohden sent has gone right through me.'

'You and the sheets,' said Cordelia.

'Sorry,' he repeated, reaching for her. 'How about I make it up to you?'

'Later,' she said, lacing her fingers through his.

Roland blinked and sat up next to her. He recognised her tone and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms. He reached over to pour two goblets of water from a ewer next to the bed.

'What's on your mind, Cor?' he asked, handing one to her.

'Did you ever hear the fable where a meso-scorpius asks a swamp-scutter to carry it across a river?'

'No,' said Roland. 'My father wasn't one for bedtime tales.'

'It's an old story, but the short version is that despite promising it wouldn't, the scorpius stings the scutter as it swims across the river and they drown. Just before they die, the scutter asks why the scorpius stung it and killed them both. The scorpius shrugs and says that's just its nature.'

'Is there a point to you telling me this?'

'Isn't there always?'

'Then would you mind getting to it?' said Roland, draining his water and pouring another. 'Hangovers and the throne mechanicum don't go well together.'

'I will,' said Cordelia, taking a sip of water. 'I just find that when I want a man to clearly grasp what I'm about to say, I find it's better to start with something simple.'

'Ha, bloody, ha. Get on with it.'

‘Coming to Vondrak was a mistake,’ said Cordelia. ‘I think the Mechanicus want House Cadmus destroyed.’

‘Destroyed? What kind of sense does that make?’

‘Clearly I should have started with a simpler fable,’ sighed Cordelia. ‘What I’m saying is that no matter how illogical it might be for the Mechanicus to send your Knights to their deaths, you have to understand that it’s not in their nature to let things go that once belonged to them. What is it they say? The Mechanicus never deletes anything? Right now, I guarantee that House Cadmus is still considered wed to Mars, and the forge-masters would rather see us all dead than have us walking around contradicting their records.’

‘Ach, you’re seeing enemies where there are none, woman,’ said Roland, settling himself down in the bed. ‘They want this Manifold with their ghost apostle back in one piece. How do they do get that if we’re all dead?’

‘You’re assuming there’s anything to find in Vikara,’ said Cordelia. ‘That this temple and the apostle even exist.’

That gave him pause.

‘You think Kyrano’s lying?’

‘It’s certainly possible.’

Roland considered her words, and closed his eyes, sending a mental command to release purgatives into his bloodstream from his boosted hepatic system. Cordelia saw the fog of whatever alcohol was left in his system dissipate almost instantaneously as clarity returned to his eyes.

‘I’ll piss a bloody waterfall come morning,’ grumbled Roland, ‘but if you’re right, Kyrano condemns Hawkshroud to death as well.’

‘I may not be right,’ said Cordelia, reaching over to tilt his face towards her. ‘But remember that the House Master needs to be both a fox to avoid the snares and a lion to scare away the wolves.’

Roland nodded in understanding, taking a long drink of water and wiping his chin with the back of his hand.

‘No, you’re almost always right in matters like these, but you’re forgetting one thing.’

‘What’s that?’

‘That I *want* to go on this mission,’ said Roland. ‘I *want* to ride out there and kill those bastard xenos. You know how many of our warriors died on Gryphonne Four, and I will reap an ocean of alien blood for every name carved in the marble of the Vault Transcendent.’

Cordelia sat up and put aside her cup.

‘Revenge isn’t a trustworthy motive for war,’ she cautioned, already knowing her words would fall on stony ground. ‘And it’s only vengeance if who you’re killing knows why they’re dying. The tyranid swarms won’t know or care who it is that’s fighting them. You won’t make them fear you, Roland.’

‘Oh, they’ll fear me all right,’ he said. ‘By the end, they’ll know House Cadmus, I can assure you of that.’

Seeing his will was now set in stone, Cordelia changed tack and slipped her arm across his chest, stroking the moulded hardness of his pectoral muscle.

‘Then if you are intent on riding out, you’ll need to make sure that you’re in charge of the mission. You have to be the Magna Preceptor.’

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘Another knightly house has been embroiled on Vondrak longer than us,’ said Cordelia. ‘The right of leadership falls, by strict protocols, to Aktis Bardolf of House Hawkshroud.’

‘Bloody hell,’ hissed Roland in irritation.

‘But I know how you can get him to willingly hand the role of Magna Preceptor to you.’

‘How?’

Cordelia smiled.

‘Simple really,’ she said. ‘Petition him.’

WARMAKERS

A thousands-strong crowd gathers in the evening rain to watch us ride out, and we give them a good show. Weapon arms pump skywards in salute and hunting horns blast from the carapaces of all eighteen Knights. Even Anthonis joins in the pageantry, albeit reluctantly. He has been so withdrawn after Persis died in the retreat from Gryphonne IV.

My Knight is alive beneath me, a towering giant as much a part of me as any limb of flesh and blood. When we arrived on Vondrak, the Knights who wore this armour before me were dreaming whispers pressing against the bone of my skull.

But the roars of the crowd have woken them.

Their hunger for glory and battle burns brightly.

I feel them at the edge of my perceptions, urging me to push the Lancer armour to the greater speeds of which it is capable. They are impatient to vicariously taste battle through me, but I restrain them for now.

Sitting immobile on the throne mechanicum, I see and feel the world through artificial means that are as real to me as any mortal sense. More so, for I can experience things in ways I cannot when divorced from the linking cables that bind me to my armour.

I turn my head as I feel the ghosts of warriors past urging me to let them see this new world for which we will fight.

Our route to the city walls does not pass through heavily industrialised areas of the city. This region of Vondrak Prime is all rain-slick glass and bronzed chrome, lit by the sodium glow of street lamps. We pass beneath arches and wire-spun confections of brass that look like the webs of mechanical spiders.

We ride through the city in a show of Imperial strength, and I am content to do so.

Squadrons of aircraft sear contrails into the darkening sky, and barely visible flocks of avian life forms with torn-cloth wings that might just be birds, but probably aren't, circle higher.

Soldiers and civilians line the route of our march, tens of thousands, cheering and waving aquila banners that hang limp with rainwater. Children carry burning flares and clockwork automata of Knights.

'None in Cadmus colours,' notes Roderick, seeing the same thing as me.

'When we return that will change,' I promise him.

'Do any of them even know what we're doing?' asks William.

Or even bloody care?

Though Malcolm does not ride with us, I practically hear his imagined response to William. My second in command musters his eight Knights to the south, in the vacant forge complex of Verdus Ferrox, where space and resources have been set aside for the Cadmus Sacristans and support personnel.

Cordelia tells me that despite her words to him last night, he and the others are unhappy at their exclusion from the mission. But there is no one else whose war-skills I would trust to keep Cordelia and the other consorts safe. Seeing what the loss of Persis has done to Anthonis, I would have it no other way, Malcolm's feelings be damned.

I say, 'They know we are here to fight for Vondrak, and that is all they need or care to know.'

The monolithic city walls come into view, and I see the bulky forms of six Knights gathered at the zigzagged approach to the towering gatehouse. The plates of their armour gleam in the rain, reflecting the flames burning in great cog-braziers atop the gatehouse turrets. Their armour is a bold sunrise-yellow that reminds me of the Imperial Fists. Yet where the Space Marines of that legendary Chapter are sparing in their honour markings, the Knights of House Hawkshroud show no such restraint.

Aside from shoulder plates bearing their heraldic crimson-
winged aquila, each Knight's armour is cluttered with all manner of markings. Campaign badges, ragged gonfalons bearing regimental crests, Chapter badges and litanies of past engagements all fight for space to be displayed. There is no order to their application, no consistency of decorative hierarchy in where the markings are painted. The effect is random and intrusive, as though the Knights had once abandoned their armour in a sump-level hab and its hive-scum inhabitants spent days defacing them.

My first impression of House Hawkshroud is not a good one.

There is no way to tell who the leader is. All are equally festooned with the insignia of other institutions, worlds and battles. Then one of the Knights steps forward, a Paladin.

I must assume this is Aktis Bardolf.

One of his arms is a reaper chainblade, as I bear when on the Cull, but which I exchange out for my relic blade when I don my Lancer armour. The other is the elongated barrel of a rapid-firing battle cannon.

An archetypal Knight chassis. Well-maintained, though judging by the number of corrosive burns I now see on their legs and weapon mounts, Bardolf and his Knights have recently seen battle.

That all these scars are upon their frontal armour improves my impression of Hawkshroud immeasurably.

My Knights slow their forward momentum and come to a halt behind me as I face the Knight Paladin. I stand tall and give a short bow to Hawkshroud's lead Knight.

'Do I have the honour of addressing Lord Bardolf of House Hawkshroud?' I ask across the pict-vox. If his armour is equipped as I expect, Aktis Bardolf will be seeing a holographic bust of my head and shoulders.

My own slate jumps with static, and a face swims into focus, the sallow-skinned man Cordelia saw on the viewing platform.

'I am Aktis Bardolf, but I'm no lord,' says the image. 'And I'm guessing you're Baron Roland of House Cadmus.'

'I am,' I confirm, guessing that Hawkshroud are not one of those knightly houses with a tradition of long, convoluted protocols of greeting, replete with formal catechisms, that must be spoken before any war-making can begin.

'About time you got here,' says Bardolf with a wry tone that excuses what I might otherwise take as impertinence.

Remembering Cordelia's advice from the night before, I muster my most formal tones and say, 'Warriors of House Hawkshroud, I, Baron Roland of House Cadmus, formally petition your honourable house for aid in reaching Vikara to rescue the Binary Apostle of Vondrak. How say you, House Hawkshroud?'

For a moment I think he is going to laugh in my face.

'House Hawkshroud never turns its back on a petition for aid,' he says, holding his blade over his chest. 'My reaper and those of my warriors are yours, Magna Preceptor.'

I am so surprised that I almost forget to accept.

Once again, I count my blessings to have so beautiful and wise a consort as Cordelia.

'Your honour does you great credit, Sir Bardolf,' I say.

He nods and says, 'We should get moving, Baron Roland. The Binary Apostle isn't going to rescue himself, is he?'

I lead the way beyond the city walls, moving swiftly through the outlying port districts surrounding Vondrak Prime. My Lancer is faster than any other Knight, and I advance at speed through the rain, every sense pushed to its limit.

The normal activity and noise of a busy port facility is utterly absent. The rig crews and bulk stevedores that once toiled to ship thousands of cargo containers off-world now break their backs in the magma-lit forges at the city's heart.

Nothing now leaves Vondrak, and the lifter rigs sit idle with long iron arms pulled in tight to heavy, counterbalanced chassis. All the war-materiels produced in the city's forges are now needed to save the planet itself.

The tyranid swarms have not yet reached Vondrak Prime, but that they will eventually is not in dispute. Thus far they have been contained by numerous battlefronts some forty miles distant.

I feel the emptiness of the vast structures around me. Warehouses echo with the drumming of rain on their roofs. Supply depots now lie abandoned.

The tyranids do not employ overwatching orbital surveyors, but even in the gloaming, the scrapcloth-winged *things* overhead will see everything that leaves the city.

And what one beast knows, they all know.

A machine as large and powerful as a Knight is far from silent, even through heavy rain, so we have not left Vondrak Prime alone. At Archmagos Kyrano's suggestion we mask our deployment within a larger one.

A company of Sable Swords under the command of a captain named Daegan sally forth in the west, while the southern and northern gates disgorge column after column of Colonel Rukanah's Sipahi, fast-moving formations of armour with powerful, line-breaking weaponry.

Accompanied by two cohorts of Archmagos Kyrano's skitarii and cumbersome war engines despatched by the Ordo Reductor, Cadmus and Hawkshroud pass through a minor gate towards the south-east. The skitarii and war engines make a show of taking up defensive positions among the towering structures of the port, and I lead the Knights between narrow canyons of crumbling brickwork, beneath tangles of overhanging steelwork and through billowing clouds of exhaust

thermals.

We will be obscured from the air and have to hope that whatever alien sensory apparatus the flying creatures possess cannot penetrate the tangled architecture of the port.

I bring my Lancer to a halt at an open junction. Ahead is an enormous turn-plate criss-crossed by deep rail tracks. Used to rotate vast hauler-engines, its piston mechanisms vent pressurised steam.

Strobing amber lights flash in the hot, wet haze. Open-topped containers lie abandoned on the rails, partially obscured by the fog. A monstrous piece of rolling stock sits at the centre of the turn-plate: a hauler-engine. Its motor cowling is a torn mess of claw marks and bio-acid burns.

'Now, did it take that damage in the mountains and still manage to get here in one piece, or did it bring something nasty with it?' asks Bardolf as he appears at the opposite corner. The pict-feed element of the vox is inactive. All I hear is his voice.

'I am going to assume the latter,' I say, indicating torn-open human bodies sprawled around the wreck of the hauler-engine. They have been comprehensively gutted, turned inside out, but not devoured. Each body has been taken apart and its internal organs laid around it in the manner of a Mechanicus adept trying to reverse engineer an unknown piece of archeotech.

'What did this?' mutters William as he too sees the carnage.

'One of the mantis beasts,' says Bardolf. 'Some call it a lictor. I've seen this before. They board escaping vehicles without the crew knowing and leave some kind of trail in their wake for the rest of the swarm to follow. They ride with their victims until they think they're safe and then kill them.'

'You think it's still here?' I ask.

'No, it will be long gone by now,' he says.

I know Bardolf is probably right. I have fought lictors before and though there is likely only one beast, I know full well the carnage even a single monster can wreak. I push my auspex out to the limit of its range.

The interior of my armour suddenly feels hot and clammy. I feel the data ghosts within it press against the base of my skull, hungry to better experience what is happening.

Sweat beads my skull. The threat auspex hisses. Searching.

No signal. I cycle through variant spectra.

Residual radiation flares from empty containers, and conflicting thermals are

making it next to impossible to take a reliable reading. Something registers to my right and I step to meet it.

My lance and relic blade flare with ignition and ammo hoppers shuck shells into the breech of my battle cannon.

'Do you have it?' snaps Bardolf, and the Hawkshroud Knights spread out, their battle cannons at the ready.

'No,' I say. 'It's nothing.'

The chains of a lifter rig sway in the rain. Rogue mechanical surge or a passing creature? I cannot say.

'Move out,' I order, knowing that jumping at shadows is just as dangerous to our mission as advancing heedlessly. 'William, Roderick, form up in echelon behind me. Anthonis, with me. Sir Bardolf, have your Knights circle south around the turn-plate. The entrance to the tunnel network is on the other side.'

'Understood,' said Bardolf, and Hawkshroud step off.

I lead Cadmus over the turn-plate, careful not to crush any of the bodies beneath the articulated claw-feet of my armour. There is no blood around any of them. The rain could have washed it away, but I fear it is more likely that these poor souls were killed far from here and laid out for others to find. Terror is as much part of the swarm's weaponry as teeth and claws and acid sprays.

We pass the wreckage of the hauler-engine, weapons loaded and primed. Every blip of the auspex sends a jolt along my spine, and it is an effort of will to keep from firing at every shadow.

Then we are across the turn-plate, and not a moment too soon.

'Weather's clearing,' says Sir Roderick.

I look up, and see he is correct. The rain is easing and the clouds are beginning to part. Within minutes there will be no cover to keep us from sight.

'Sir Bardolf,' I say. 'Time to get underground.'

I march to where a soaring rhomboidal archway plunges into a metal-framed structure from which numerous rails emerge. This leads beneath the surface of Vondrak and courses through the bedrock of the mountains. Over the thousands of miles of the underground line's length, many branches split away, each working their way back to the surface and an entrance to one of the many deep-core mineholds.

Vikara is two miles from one such minehold.

These entrances will have been blocked with demolition charges, but not in any way we cannot break through with thermal lances and battle cannons. This entrance has purposely been left open for us, though I see looping cables linking

hard-packed demo charges around the archway.

'I thought you were joking,' says Bardolf as his armour's suit lights ignite. 'And this is the only way?'

'Yes.'

I hear his sigh over the vox. 'Of course, you understand that the auspex readings down there are likely to be even worse than on the surface.'

'I understand that, but it is two hundred and fifty miles to Vikara as the eagle flies,' I tell him. 'And we cannot hope to travel that far overground without detection.'

'Then I hope you know the way.'

I call a topographical map of the underground network onto my navigational slate. Archmagos Kyrano had had the controller of the rail network, a behemoth of a man by the name of Topham, provide us with the most up-to-date schematic of the subterranean network.

I exload the map to my Knights and those of Hawkshroud as my stablights pierce the darkness of the tunnel. Bardolf's lights join those of my Knights.

None illuminate more than fifty yards.

'Gregor, Martyn,' I say, 'take position within the archway and ensure that nothing follows us in.'

'And that nothing comes out but us,' adds Bardolf.

'Blow these charges if it looks like a full assault coming through this tunnel,' I tell Sir Gregor. 'Whether we are still beneath or not. Understood?'

Both Knights signal their understanding, and I step towards the tunnel entrance. Aktis Bardolf accompanies me.

'You've seen the update stamp on this, I take it?' he asks.

I have been waiting for this.

'Yes,' I say. 'Seventy-four years ago.'

'So what's down there now might bear no relation to this map of yours.'

'That is true,' I say, 'but the Emperor will protect and watch over us in the darkness.'

I ride into the inky blackness of the tunnel before Bardolf or any of my Knights can gainsay me.

XENOSIGN

The pen scratched across the surface of the paper with quick, urgent strokes. Cassia could always tell which pages she'd written when Malcolm was at war. Even though he was still within the walls of Vondrak Prime – a snub to her husband if ever there was one – he was still joined with his armour.

The pages of this particular book were fresh and new, a recent purchase from the local commercia. Cassia hadn't ventured out herself; she'd despatched one of the child servants assigned to Cadmus to find her a blank book. It had taken the vacant-eyed simpleton nearly a day to return, but it had been worth the wait.

Cassia enjoyed the different smells of each world's paper, the subtle scents pressed into each one as she set down the day's events, conversations and thoughts.

Raisa's paper smelled earthy and smoky, like it had been stored in a damp cellar for years. Gryphonne IV's paper was glossy and tear-resistant. It left a greasy, chemical residue on her fingertips as she turned each page. Vondrak's paper had a pleasingly crude, grainy texture and smelled of ash and woodsmoke. Cassia would send the boy out again tomorrow for another, assuming he could remember which shopkeeper had sold him the book.

Cassia looked up from her book as a cold draught sighed down the empty corridor. She sat in a wide window alcove in the upper reaches of Lord Ohden's keep. She'd needed some solitude to gather her thoughts, but solitude was in short supply in the consorts' quarters.

Aikaterina's brat was playing up again, and his caterwauling was uniquely capable of passing through walls of solid stone and doors of reinforced steel. She'd left without an escort to explore the keep and find some peace and quiet to write in her journal.

William and Aikaterina had grand visions of their son becoming a Knight of

Cadmus, but Cassia had her doubts. Unless he toughened up, and fast, the child would never survive the Rite of Becoming. What a young man felt as he sat in the throne mechanicum would always be part of him, and that child was frightened of his own shadow.

Cassia's quill flicked across the page. She and Malcolm had not yet been gifted with a child, but that day would come soon enough. Malcolm's seed was strong, and Cassia's lineage filled with wide-hipped women who'd borne many strong sons and sturdy daughters. When she decided it was time for Malcolm to provide her with a child, Cassia wouldn't let a screaming infant shame her with its crying.

She paused in her writing to look down through the coloured glass of the window at the city below. Vondrak Prime was girding its loins for battle. Aeliana said she'd overheard the Sacristans say that the xenoswarms had broken through the southern front and were advancing on the city.

Even if that were true, it gave Cassia no cause for concern.

She'd read the informationals. Hive Fleet Hydra was a minor swarm, not even close to the strength of Leviathan. She'd seen battlefields and the preparations for war a hundred times. This one was no different to any other, and one lost battlefront was no reason to panic.

Cassia looked away from the scenes of war preparation and gasped in surprise.

She was no longer alone.

A black-robed adept stood with his hands laced before him and his hood drawn up over his head. The soft glow of augmetics and the gleam of nearby lumens on a ceramic faceplate were the only hints of what lay beneath the hood.

'Apologies, Lady Cassia,' said the adept. 'I didn't mean to startle you.'

'Then you shouldn't damn well sneak up on me like some kind of bloody assassin,' snapped Cassia, shutting her book and smoothing down her dress. She searched his robes for some identifying signifier, a stitched rune or cog or aquila, but there was nothing.

'Who are you?' she asked. 'And how do you know my name?'

'My name is Adept Nemonix,' said the adept. 'And I make it my business to know a great many things.'

'Are you Mechanicus?'

'I serve the will of the Omnissiah, yes,' he said. 'Though not in a capacity with which you would be familiar.'

'That's no kind of answer.'

'May I sit?' asked Nemonix, then did so before she could say otherwise. Even

the light coming through the window seemed reluctant to venture beneath his hood. She saw the dim outline of a porcelain mask with a single glowing orb at its centre and three vertical slits where she would expect to find his mouth.

Despite his inhuman appearance, his manner was curiously human and the voice entirely organic. Cassia was instantly suspicious.

'What do you want, Adept Nemonix?'

'Is that an actual book you're reading?' he asked, ignoring her question.

'Yes.'

'Do you know how rare it is for people to actually read a book made of paper these days? Fewer than one in thirty thousand ever bother to read anything that isn't on a slate or a devotional pamphlet. I find that immeasurably sad. It's just not the same without the smell of a new book's pages or the texture of its paper under your fingertips.'

Cassia smiled in agreement and glanced down at Nemonix's hands. They were utterly smooth, like those of a dressmaker's mannequin. She couldn't picture him with a book.

'We agree on that, at least,' said Cassia.

'If you don't mind me asking, what are you reading?'

'*The Spheres of Longing*,' said Cassia, the first book that leapt to mind when she pictured Malcolm's bookshelves. The idea of telling this adept of her journal seemed wrong on a fundamental level.

'Ah, the esoteric philosophy of Gideon Ravenor,' said Nemonix. '"Chaos claims the unwary or the incomplete. A true man may flinch away its embrace, if he is stalwart, and he girds his soul with the armour of contempt."'

'I take it you've read it.'

'Of course,' said Nemonix. 'It's required reading for someone in my profession. I have other examples of his work if you find his writings to your taste. Personally, I find Ravenor to be a touch overearnest. His former master, however, now there's a man who knows how to pen a lurid tale or two.'

'What is it you want, Adept Nemonix?'

He nodded and said, 'Direct. I admire that.'

'Then please extend me the same courtesy.'

'Of course,' said Nemonix. 'Your husband, Sir Malcolm.'

'What about him?'

'He is a brave warrior, a natural leader. He would make a fine master of House Cadmus should Baron Roland ever decide to set down his relic blade.'

Cassia's lip curled in a sneer.

‘You’ll have to prise it from his cold, dead fingers,’ said Cassia. ‘Roland isn’t about to hand over power, even to someone who deserves it. Did you know Malcolm was only three kills behind Roland this time?’

‘I did,’ said Nemonix. ‘I have studied the pict captures and bio-readers from this year’s Cull. And if I were being unkind, I might say that Roland has a distinct advantage in the Cull.’

‘What advantage?’

‘His Lancer armour.’

Cassia sighed, almost disappointed. ‘No, he doesn’t wear his Lancer armour during the Cull. He says it would give him an edge over the others.’

‘Indeed he doesn’t wear his Lancer armour during the Cull, but bonding with such a finely crafted piece of technology over a length of time *changes* the way a warrior’s mind processes inputs. Yes, Roland wears ordinary Errant armour on the Cull, but his mind and his link to his armour are far above that which any other Knight experiences.’

Cassia didn’t know if that were true, but it sounded plausible. How else could Roland have clung on to his position as Master of Cadmus for so long?

‘Do you think Roland is aware of that?’

Nemonix sat up straighter, as though backing away from such an implication. Every aspect of the adept’s body language conveyed a deep and genuine regret at being the bearer of this information.

‘I’m sure Roland doesn’t even know how evolved his cognitive link with his armour has become,’ he said. ‘Just as I have no doubt the good baron believes his continued success to be a result of superior skills. But…’

The unspoken accusation hung in the air between them.

‘Why are you telling me this?’ asked Cassia.

Nemonix hesitated before answering, as though unsure whether or not he was treading on dangerous ground. At last he appeared to reach a decision within himself.

‘Roland rides in search of a relic incalculably valuable to the Mechanicus, but he leaves his best Knight behind? Forgive me if I overstep my boundaries, Lady Cassia, but that does not sound like the decision of a competent leader. More like a petulant child who does not want his closest rival anywhere near his glory.’

Cassia nodded in agreement and said, ‘What are you suggesting?’

Nemonix leaned forward, as if afraid their conversation might be overheard, though they were completely alone.

‘I can help Malcolm,’ he said. ‘I can help him win the next Cull and give

Cadmus the leader it deserves. I can arrange for his Knight to be upgraded with Mechanicus technologies without anyone knowing. Enhanced target acquisition protocols, weapon modifications and the like.'

'Won't the Sacristans know about something like that?'

Nemonix shook his head and even though his face was obscured, she sensed his amusement. 'Sacristans, *please*. Who do you think trains them? They provide rote maintenance, following basic rituals of consecration, nothing more. None would even know what they were looking at, let alone its purpose.'

'And you can arrange this now?' asked Cassia, picturing Malcolm riding at the head of the Knights of Cadmus from the vaults beneath Golem Keep.

'I can indeed,' said Nemonix.

Verdus Ferrox was a collection of rusted and partially abandoned manufactoria on the southern edge of Vondrak Prime. Most of its functional machinery had been stripped out and moved to working forges, but here and there a hulking, cylindrical furnace or milling machine still thrummed with latent power in a hollowed-out structure.

Machines that no longer functioned, but which the Mechanicus no longer knew how to deactivate, burped streams of noxious fumes from louvred vents.

Numerous ore viaducts and waste chutes arched overhead, some running to barred culverts in the wall, others to shuttered evacuation chambers below ground. Most were empty. Some still drizzled toxic byproducts of failed industry in a corrosive smirr. Grainy particulates hung in the air like mist.

It was, Malcolm considered, a run-down crap-sink of a place, and Assembler Thexton's Sacristans were taking their sweet time in making it battle-ready. It was, Thexton claimed, too neglected, too damaged and too disconnected to be easily restored.

'It's a glacier of crap,' agreed Malcolm. 'So I need you at it with a thermal lance or I'll shove mine so far up your exload port you'll be breathing fire until the end of time.'

That got Thexton and his men moving.

He stalked the crowded forge complex, circumventing monolithic stacks of flaking rebar cages and dunes of fossil fuels piled higher than his armour. He bellowed orders to the thousand or so Sacristans through his hunting horn.

Ammo stockpiles too close to fuel reserves? Move them. Rally points not far enough away from potential chokeways? Resite them. Servitors and indentured workers not moving fast enough? Motivate them with extreme prejudice.

Last night's conversation with Cassia had unsettled him greatly, and he was taking out his indignation on the poor lot in his way.

Shouting and intimidation wasn't the subtlest form of leadership, but it was getting results. Verdus Ferrox was starting to look like it might actually be able to service a knightly house at war.

Sir Garratt and the rest of the Cadmus Knights prowled the perimeter beneath the city walls. Malcolm knew his own reputation was fearsome, but young Jaime Garratt was something else entirely. A feral wildcat of a man who styled himself as a champion of the underdog.

Probably because he came from one of the lesser noble families of Raisa and he'd fought tooth and nail to win acceptance into the Knighthold of Golem Keep; Malcolm liked him, but knew better than to turn his back on him.

'How goes it, Garratt?' said Malcolm. 'This place looks like it might not actually leak like a martyr on his way to meet the Emperor.'

Sir Garratt paused, and even through the crackle of the vox and the anonymity afforded by the carapace, Malcolm felt the younger man's bitterness at being left in Vondrak Prime. The other Knights continued their circuit of the forge complex.

'Ah, who the hell cares, anyway?' snapped Garratt. 'It's not us that'll be defending this place, is it? Bloody skitarii and Guard'll be taking the brunt of any fighting.'

'True enough,' agreed Malcolm, turning towards the open gates of the forge complex behind him. 'That's if they ever decide to damn well turn up.'

'Better be soon. I hear the southern front's folded like a Raisan mutant with a reaper in its gut.'

'So they tell me,' said Malcolm. 'And when the little people turn and run, who's going to stop the beasts getting in?'

'Cadmus all the way,' said Garratt, punching out his reaper blade and revving its bladed teeth.

'Cadmus all the way,' repeated Malcolm, stepping in and slamming the flat of his own blade against Garratt's. Nearby Sacristans jumped at the clash of the heavy reapers and backed away, fearing they were about to be caught up in an honour duel. A binharic admonition appeared on Malcolm's slate from Thexton. He ignored it.

A flash of movement on one of the ore viaducts caught Malcolm's eye. He glanced up. Something was up there. A flash of light on something wet. Smooth and glossy looking.

‘Jaime,’ he barked. ‘Get to the gates and shut them. Now.’

‘What? Why?’

‘Just bloody do it.’

Garratt heard the seriousness of Malcolm’s tone and his Knight turned to stride through a swathe of scattering Sacristans without another word. His horn blared the rising note of the Call to Arms. Answering brays echoed from all around Verdus Ferrox.

Malcolm dropped the threat auspex over his senses and felt the heat of aggression flood his limbs. Chem-shunts activated dopamine channels within his augmented brain to boost cognition speeds.

‘What in the name of Roland’s balls is going on here?’

His awareness of his surroundings became sharper, more encompassing. He saw everything around him. Structures greyed out, while Sacristans and servitors became textured colours, outlined in blue.

Flaring blooms of red appeared on his surveyors. Above, behind and to the side. Mostly above. Malcolm pushed his Knight out, rolling his shoulders and activating his battle cannon with a thought.

A targeting reticule appeared before him. He centred it on the main arch of the ore viaduct.

‘Not on my watch, you little–’

The battle cannon thundered. Once, twice.

The arch exploded, torn apart by twin high-explosive shells. Smoking debris tumbled to the ground in an avalanche of shattered masonry and steel and dust. Amid the debris slamming down were bodies.

Xenos bodies.

They spilled from the ruined stubs of the viaduct in an endless tide. Hundreds of broken alien forms with elongated skulls, hunched over and oddly angled. Hook-bladed limbs thrashed the air as they fell.

Scores were dead, but hundreds more were still alive.

‘Get clear!’ yelled Malcolm as the heavy stubbers worked into his shoulder mounts raked the alien bodies falling from the swaying structure. ‘It’s coming down!’

Ironwork supports pulverised in the blast snapped like splitting timber, and the entire viaduct came down. Thousands of tonnes of steel and stone dropped with a deafening crash of tearing metal and alien howls.

Culverts in the walls exploded with screeching monsters, spindle-limbed things with swords for arms and fang-filled chasms for mouths.

‘Knights of Cadmus!’ yelled Malcolm. ‘Gaunts in the wire!’

Death chokes the darkness. All manner of groundcars, cargo haulers, bikes, mineworking machinery, agricultural vehicles, fuel tankers and ore-carriers pack the tunnel. I am isolated from the smell of rotting, burned flesh, but I imagine it to be horrendous.

Scorched bodies sit within burned-out skeletons of groundcars, as though their drivers and passengers still wait patiently for rescue. Others sprawl over the rails or slump hopelessly against the melta-smoothed walls. I see fire damage everywhere. Hardly surprising given the flammable, ore-rich material that usually transits these tunnels.

A rock fall had blocked the tunnel, less than a mile from the black maw through which we descended into this lightless hell. Our battle cannons punched through it with ease, but these people had nothing. No way of reaching the transient safety on the other side of the cave-in. No way of escaping the fire that burned away their air and seared the meat from their bones.

‘Emperor have mercy upon them,’ said Anthonis, his armour’s lights sweeping over a packed cargo-8 with at least thirty people lying dead around it. Mostly women and children.

‘I’d say He’s all out of mercy for these poor souls,’ says Aktis Bardolf.

‘Have some damned respect,’ says William.

The sight of so many dead youngsters is unsettling for us all, but especially for William. He leaves a child behind in Vondrak Prime: a hearty-lunged son, from what Cordelia tells me. It takes a special kind of man to see dead children and not fear for the lives of his own.

‘I mean no disrespect, Sir William,’ said Bardolf.

‘Then speak no ill of the dead, nor disrespect for the Emperor,’ hisses William in response.

‘I did neither,’ returns Bardolf. ‘I spoke as I saw.’

I march my Knight between William and Bardolf.

‘These people are dead, and you two arguing about it will not change that,’ I say. ‘They’re dead, and we must move on.’

Sir Roderick marches alongside me, the carapace of his armour wet with drizzled moisture. Cracks in the ceiling drip with meltwater from the mountains above, and I am suddenly cold as I think of the millions of tonnes of rock just above us.

Pools of black water reflect the swaying, sweeping stablights of our armour as

we move on. I pick a path through the debris of fleeing people and blackened vehicles, moving through gaps where I can, working with Roderick to create them where there are none.

It is slow going, and as the days pass our threat surveyors find it next to impossible to function. In so enclosed a space, with so much metal around, I am daily assailed by a soft burr of distortion and blips of sensor ghosts.

Our stablights bend and twist with every mile we travel, and the shadows they throw on the walls are those of elongated monsters. I try not to let my mind form threatening shapes where there are none, but it is a primal survival mechanism from an earlier age when we were right to fear the shadows, and cannot easily be overridden.

The map on the slate before me ripples with interference. It is an inloaded data stream and should not be affected by our depth or the metallic composition of the mountains.

Something down here is making my armour jittery.

On the third day of travel, a private link between my armour and that of Aktis Bardolf clicks with connection.

'Are you sure we're still on the right route?' asks Bardolf.

'I am sure,' I say, though I have had to take a number of turns where I was less than entirely certain.

'My map says differently.'

I bring my Knight to a halt and turn to face the Master of House Hawkshroud.

'If you have something to say, then say it, Sir Bardolf.'

'I told you, I'm no lord.'

'But you think we are going the wrong way?'

'Not yet, but that map of yours is hopelessly out of date, and I know you've had to guess a few of these tunnels,' replies Bardolf. 'Sooner or later you're going pick a wrong tunnel, and that's going to get us all killed.'

I try to control my anger, but it is difficult when the Knights before me surge through the throne mechanicum. They have heard what they perceive to be disrespect in Bardolf's tone and want me to punish him.

It is only Cordelia's appreciation for the Hawkshroud mindset that keeps irritation from clouding my judgement.

Hawkshroud are intensely loyal to those who have earned their respect, and though our reputation precedes us, Cadmus has yet to prove our worth to Bardolf in deeds.

'I am the Magna Preceptor,' I say, hoping his reverence for that title will end

this.

‘And I respect that,’ says Bardolf. ‘But you won’t be for much longer if you get us lost down here.’

‘Is that a threat?’

‘It’s a promise, because we’ll all be dead,’ he says. ‘How long do you think we’ll last if we can’t find a way out soon? Our Knights will need to refuel and charge when we get to Vikara, and I don’t fancy trying to find my way out of here on foot. Do you?’

Once more, the previous Knights of Cadmus surge with fury at his insolence, and part of me wants to join them in their outrage. I *want* to be angry at Bardolf. I *want* to dismiss his concerns.

But he is right.

I take a breath and say, ‘You are correct, Sir Bardolf. I am so intent on showing the Mechanicus how House Cadmus can operate without them, that I have been reckless with the lives of our brave Knights.’

‘Making mistakes is easy,’ says Bardolf. ‘It’s admitting to them that’s hard. Let’s not make any more.’

‘Agreed,’ I say. ‘Shall we continue?’

‘We should,’ says Bardolf, turning his Knight back the way we came. ‘And quickly. We’re being followed.’

BLOODING

The threat auspex was unable to cope with the sheer volume of targets, so Malcolm muted its screaming warnings. Targeting solutions filled his vision, but he didn't need them.

It was impossible to miss.

His battle cannon tore teardrop-shaped craters in the concrete. Broken alien bodies and debris were flung skyward with every percussive detonation. Stubbers sawed through the swarms of gaunts. His ammo counters were depleting at a rate he'd not known since Gryphonne IV.

'Keep them away from the gate,' he ordered, walking backwards between a giant metal-shaping engine and the collapsed pier of the ruined viaduct. Dozens of beasts bounded towards him. Their hind legs were obscenely strong, powering them forward in a series of leaping, clawing bounds. They barged each other in their fury to reach him. He gunned them down, but at least a dozen survived to leap towards his head.

Malcolm brought his ion shield around and slammed half of them from the air. The rest met his howling chainblade and their bodies were churned to black matter.

Hundreds of fanged beasts poured from a culvert a hundred yards to Malcolm's left. He turned and twin blasts from his battle cannon collapsed it on top of them.

Still they squirmed from the rubble.

He heard more screeching and turned, slamming his foot down on a pack of swarming raptor creatures.

The human element of Verdus Ferrox were falling beneath the claws of the xenos by the score. Half-human cyborgs and all-too-human Sacristans were being torn to shreds before they could even defend themselves.

'Thexton! Get your people out of here right bloody now!'

Their screams of pain cut Malcolm deep. He knew all too well the horror of being a fleshy mortal on the ground when these murder-beasts were in the wind. He saw a Sacristan punctured through his chest by one ’gaunt and lifted for another to snap its jaws shut on his head. Bulk servitors stood mutely as they were disembowelled. Human labourers were sliced down without mercy and left to bleed out from horrifically cruel cuts.

Men and women were pounced on as they fled for the gate, scything claws stabbing them repeatedly in the back. Acid saliva burned them. Spitting darts of razor chitin sliced their legs out from under them.

The gaunts fell on them all, killing and feasting.

Malcolm’s stubber cut torn-meat lines through the tyranid assault, each solid slug bursting a ’gaunt apart. Their vital fluid was black and oily, not really blood at all, but some alien ichor masquerading as blood.

The call of hunting horns told him the location of the rest of his Knights.

Garratt had followed his orders and was making his way to the gate. Farrimond corralled a diminishing host with his stubbers and sweeps of his reaper. The roaring teeth of his blade threw hunks of alien flesh fifty yards through the air.

Vasey held a choke point at a culvert whose shutter remained treacherously open. Alien creatures poured inside from beyond the walls. Malcolm didn’t know how they could possibly have found a way in.

Every entrance was supposed to have been sealed.

However this vanguard force had got into Verdus Ferrox, Malcolm wasn’t about to let them reach the city proper. He’d be damned if he’d allow the forward elements of the xenoswarms into Vondrak Prime through House Cadmus.

Enoch and Silus appeared at his side, weapons hot.

‘Do we ride?’ asked Enoch.

‘A hard counter to break them,’ said Silus. ‘Containment and slaughter. Just like the Cull.’

Malcolm wanted nothing more than to charge headlong into the gathering mass of alien monsters. To stomp and cut and blast them to unrecognisable meat paste.

But this wasn’t like the Cull at all.

All a Knight had to do there was kill and kill again. Now Malcolm had a duty of care to those around him.

Roland had entrusted him with a duty, the honour of which it had taken Lady Cordelia’s words to make him see. The future of House Cadmus was in Malcolm’s hands, though not as she had suggested in the form of the house

consorts and its children.

'No,' he said. 'Protect Thexton's Sacristans. We lose them, we lose Cadmus. *They're* our prime objective. That and making sure these damn things don't get out of here.'

Malcolm's enhanced situational awareness painted a vivid picture of the battle for Verdus Ferrox. He issued his orders in clipped Raisan battle-cant and the Knights spread out.

They killed the beasts attacking the Sacristans, clearing them away from their charges with accurate bursts of stubber fire and pinpoint thermal lance strikes. Some of their own were lost in the shredding barrages, but better some than all.

'Like the First Knights, eh?' said Vasey, stomping down on a darting pack of gaunts. 'Shepherds keeping the livestock safe from the monsters.'

'Aye,' agreed Malcolm, shifting to his reserve stock of stubber shells. 'Except I don't plan on eating this flock.'

'There's a few with enough meat to spare,' laughed Vasey as his stubbers ripped through a pack of gaunts bounding around the flanks. 'Perhaps they could–'

He never finished his sentence.

The head-section of his Knight exploded in a roiling fireball of white-green fire.

'Imperator!' swore Malcolm, as arcing whips of lightning coruscated over the molten ruin of Vasey's carapace. He saw a charred body wreathed in spectral flames fall from the Knight.

A ghost trail of shimmering fire reached back to the culvert he'd previously brought down. Enormous chunks of rubble floated impossibly in the air around it.

'Raisa's horns, what *is* that?' said Enoch.

A bloated creature with a serpentine body folded back on itself hovered in the midst of the floating rock. Its head was an elongated hydrocephalic nightmare of rippling flesh and segmented plates. Atrophied limbs and vestigial appendages hung from a body undulant with peristaltic motion.

A shimmering haze of psychic energy hung around it. Malcolm's gun-auspex struggled to acquire it.

'Zoanthrope,' spat Malcolm.

He pushed out his armour's power systems, charging towards the suspended beast. Its head turned towards him. Fangs bared and black eyes glimmered with corposant.

'Stay on station!' ordered Malcolm. 'Get the Sacristans clear.'

His battle cannon bellowed again. More bodies disintegrated and blew apart. Even those beyond the immediate blast had their internal structure pulped by the overpressure.

The zoanthrope remained unharmed, the fire and shock of the blast morphing around its body as though it existed in its own personal bubble of space. Packs of gaunts raced to meet him, praetorians to the withered beast.

His reaper blade swung and a score of beasts died. Black ichor sprayed from sundered chitinous bodies, and he revelled in their screeches of pain. Stubber fire flensed them. Bodies burst and ripped open.

Malcolm's bulk was a weapon too. He stomped with heavy feet, crushing bodies with every step.

He was close now, almost close enough to strike.

He saw the swollen zoanthrope's flesh pulse with its own internal illumination. That same light shone in the eyes of the gaunts snapping around him, as though it drew some vital essence out of them.

A shrieking blast of the same white-green fire that killed Vasey thrust towards Malcolm like a lance. He threw up his ion shield and felt the searing heat of impact. Malcolm convulsed on his throne mechanicum, his arm feeling like it was bathed in melta fire.

Emerald sparks exploded from his pict-slate and fell from the cabin roof. Though he knew his flesh arm was unhurt, the repercussions from the connection pain would be just as real.

His Knight staggered, gyros straining to keep him upright. Its stumbling steps crushed a handful of gaunts, but more were surrounding him with every passing second.

Malcolm righted the Knight and looked up into the beast's eyes. They had dilated monstrously, and in those black, soulless orbs he saw himself die a thousand deaths, torn apart by its guardians and devoured morsel by morsel. He saw Cassia stripped to the bone by wriggling, maggot-like things with more teeth than body. He saw his children-yet-to-be cut apart by sickle-blade limbs and everything he ever cared about subsumed into a chittering hive where every screed of being was enslaved to the will of a monstrous overmind.

'Get out of my head!' yelled Malcolm, triggering a blast of 'slaught from his chem-dispensers. The Sacristans warned him against the use of so dangerously addictive a stimm, but right now he needed a dose of pure, unadulterated rage.

Pain bored into every neural receptor in his skull, and Malcolm screamed as it ripped through his body. It filled his veins with fire, his mind with towering fury

at the very presence of this abominable creature.

It was no longer a zoanthrope, just a beast to be exterminated. It didn't deserve the recognition of a name. Malcolm barged into the monster, slamming his head against the armoured carapace of its head. Bony plates split apart and milky efflorescent fluid gushed out.

He felt its pain course through him and revelled in it.

'I'm going to use your skin to wipe my arse,' he said and rammed his roaring reaper blade into its writhing underbody.

The fleshy sac of its vestigial form ruptured along its length at the tearing impact. Malcolm ripped the blade up. Soft, squirming entrails spilled out in a flood.

The zoanthrope fell from his blade in sopping chunks. Its flesh was devoid of mass, like a punctured fuel bladder. The rocks floating in the air fell to the ground, and an utterly alien death scream blew outwards like the blast wave of an artillery strike.

The swarming gaunts faltered in their attack, screeching and writhing in symbiotic pain. For an instant, Malcolm dared hope that this was the only creature directing the ravenous packs.

But moments later, the gaunts swarmed him, climbing his legs with desperate, slithering, scraping leaps, claws and fangs pulling them up his armour.

Still mad with the 'slaught, Malcolm slammed himself into the wall. Gaunts shrieked as they were crushed. His reaper tore others from his body, but not enough. He saw a trio of beasts scramble onto his head. He didn't need auspex or surveyors to see them – they were right in front of him.

Claws slashed down the armourglass of his canopy, leaving deep scores. Fang-filled jaws worked up and down on the glass, leaving grooves of acidic saliva in their wake.

The eyes of the gaunts were empty as they savaged the glass of his armour. He saw nothing. Not hatred, not anger nor any emotion he might have expected from a foe doing their damnedest to end him.

Just a blind urge to kill. Because that was what they were bred to do. Because a shoal mentality drove them into a frenzy. They weren't creatures in their own right, just fragments in a hive, specks of dirt in a sandstorm.

They exploded all over the glass.

Malcolm felt the impact of multiple stubber rounds. Not powerful enough to harm him or penetrate his armour, but enough to register. Anger touched him at the thought he had been fired upon by his own warriors, but he instigated an

emergency synaptic flush to get the ’slaught from his brain.

Garratt rode into view, his armour scarred and torn around the lower plates of his legs. Alien blood soaked him to the waist. Smoke drooled from his twin stubbers.

‘You’re clear,’ said Garratt.

‘The gate?’ said Malcolm, his mouth dry and gummy with stimm-residue and neural purgatives.

‘Sealed. The Mubarizan are there with two companies of troop carriers and super-heavies,’ said Garratt. ‘Three Baneblades and a Stormhammer. More on the way.’

‘The Sacristans?’

‘Safe,’ said Garratt. ‘Not all of them, but enough. That was a good call, Sir Malcolm.’

Malcolm nodded, knowing he was in for a hell of a rough ride when the stimm-hangover kicked in.

‘Bloody hell,’ he said. ‘They’ll call this a victory.’

Cordelia held Sir Farrimond’s hand as the medicae finished binding his chest and shoulders in a synth-skin wrap. Bio-acid had eaten through the carapace of his Knight and drooled onto Farrimond’s recumbent form.

The battle of Verdus Ferrox had been over for ten hours, but Colonel Rukanah’s flamer units were still clearing the last of the beasts from the forge complex. In saving Assembler Thexton’s Sacristans, Malcolm had saved House Cadmus, though Cordelia wondered if he truly appreciated the scale of what he’d achieved.

But it been victory won at a terrible cost.

Jon Vasey was dead, as was Axl Roddam. Farrimond and Enoch were wounded, and Malcolm’s armour was going to need extensive repairs to get it walking again.

Farrimond groaned as the last of the bandage was tied off, and Cordelia squeezed his hand. The young man had refused pain balms until Cordelia ordered him to stop being so stupid. One of the house’s newly elevated Knights, Mikel Farrimond had yet to choose a consort (and still believed it would be *him* that chose) and was full of that heady cocktail of idiotic youth and ego that made him think he was indestructible.

He looked so young.

His features weren’t yet drawn tight over his skull by the constant strain of

being bound to a mechanised war machine that took a little of its rider each time they bonded.

Had Roland ever been that young? She supposed he had, though she could barely remember the time before he'd gone through the Ritual of Becoming. He'd been young and dashing, as they all were, but even before he'd sat on the throne mechanicum, there had been a refusal to compromise that had drawn Cordelia to him.

That trait had been amplified by the ritual and had only grown stronger over the years. She'd nurtured his sense of dissatisfaction with the Mechanicus, and when the priests of Mars had let slip their hold over Cadmus, it had taken only the slightest push to convince Roland to cast off the Cog.

House Cadmus was bound to the Emperor and always would be.

'Thank you, my lady,' said Farrimond, as the medicae departed to treat another poor unfortunate.

'You were very brave, Sir Farrimond,' she said, but his eyes were already slipping closed as the balms took effect. Cordelia laid his hand down beside him and rose to her feet, smoothing down her dress.

'Very brave,' she said again, turning and making her way down the central corridor of the medicae building. Three hundred beds of wounded lined either side of the wide chamber, like pews in a templum, where those in pain came to give reverence to an ever-hungry god of suffering.

She pushed that thought aside as unworthy and dangerous.

This was but one floor among fifteen. One medicae building out of seven. The wounded from the collapsing southern front were spilling from the medicae primus to this overflow structure, and it wouldn't take long for it to exceed its capacity.

Cordelia wasn't the only one of the consorts who'd come to give succour to the wounded; the women of Cadmus were spread throughout the various levels of the building. Aeliana played her viola softly at the far end of the chamber, as Cassia read aloud from the book of Sebastian Thor. Aeliana's music and Cassia's words combined seamlessly to help alleviate the torments of those injured in the Emperor's service.

The music came to an end as Cassia reached the conclusion of the verses spoken by Thor at the death of the insane High Lord. A few of the wounded clapped, most just smiled, even through their pain. A few called out for more, but Cordelia stopped and raised her hands.

'Brave souls,' she said. 'My dear sisters need rest before returning to you.

Would you have Aeliana wear her fingers to the bone or have Cassia bereft of voice? Look to your own courage and fortitude for a time and they will return to you soon, I promise.'

Cordelia's words had the desired effect, and the wounded gritted their teeth and bore their hurts stoically. To do otherwise would be to admit weakness before a lady and demand of them more than could honourably be asked. Cordelia nodded to her fellow consorts, and they passed from the main ward-chamber of the medicae building.

Once beyond its serried ranks of injured, the consorts found solitude in a small chapel space, bathed in amber light and filled with the cloying scent of long-dead flowers. A modest statue of the Emperor was placed in a softly glowing alcove, kneeling beside a wounded soldier and tending to his wounds with the power of His divine light alone.

They took it in turns to kneel and bow their heads to the Master of Mankind, before sitting on the well-worn wooden benches. Aeliana massaged stiff fingers and Cassia rubbed tired eyes.

'A long night,' said Aeliana.

'You've done well,' said Cordelia. 'There's a lot of wounded men in there who'll survive thanks to you both.'

'What did we do, really?' said Cassia.

'Don't underestimate the power of a pretty face when it comes to wounded soldiers,' said Cordelia. 'You saw their faces when you stopped playing and reading. You helped, and you're going to keep helping. Once the tyranids surround Vondrak Prime, there's going to be a lot more wounded.'

It was a sobering thought and the three women sat in silent contemplation for a moment.

'Someone's going to swing for this, aren't they?' said Cassia.

'What do you mean?' asked Aeliana.

'You should have heard Malcolm when he came back to our chambers after the battle. The language he used…'

'Worse than normal?' said Cordelia.

Cassia nodded slowly. '*Much* worse.'

'Any reason in particular?' asked Cordelia. 'Other than the obvious, I mean.'

'He was all set to skin Assembler Thexton alive and wear his skin as a cloak,' said Cassia. 'He went on at some length about all the horrible things he was going to do to him.'

'Thexton? Why?'

‘Because the tyranids got into Verdus Ferrox somehow,’ said Cordelia. ‘And Thexton’s Sacristans were in charge of sealing off every way in.’

‘Clearly they forgot one.’

Cordelia shook her head. She’d spoken to Farrimond, and his account of how the battle unfolded didn’t match up to the notion that a single entrance to the forge complex had been overlooked or improperly sealed.

‘What is it, Cordelia?’ said Aeliana. ‘You’ve got that look in your eye that means someone’s in trouble.’

‘I know Thexton,’ she said. ‘He’s meticulous in that painful way only servants of the Machine-God can be. However many entrances to Verdus Ferrox there are, he wouldn’t have missed one.’

‘What are you suggesting?’ asked Aeliana.

‘That someone let the beasts in,’ said Cordelia.

‘Who would do such a thing?’

Cordelia sighed. She hated being right all the time.

‘Someone who stood to benefit from House Cadmus having no Sacristans left to maintain its Knights,’ she said. ‘An organisation who’d be happy to offer us freshly trained Sacristans if only we’d reaffirm our allegiance to Mars.’

‘You think the Mechanicus did this to us?’ gasped Aeliana, her cheeks ruddy with rising fury.

‘I think they’re so desperate to win us back, they’d stoop to any level to see it happen.’

Cassia brushed a strand of hair from her face. Cordelia saw the look in her eyes. At once sheepish and eager.

‘What?’ said Cordelia.

Cassia smiled. ‘A few days ago I was approached by an adept who called himself Nemonix. He told me some interesting things.’

‘Tell me everything he said,’ said Cordelia.

The side of the mountain blows out in a satisfying geyser of rubble and smoke. Daylight spears into the rail tunnel, and my auto-senses, so accustomed to the gloom, flicker momentarily as they shield my eyes from the brightness of the sun.

Aktis Bardolf took the shot, a well-placed pair of battle cannon rounds blasting a hole through the demolished railhead opening. It is not yet large enough to permit a Knight egress, but Hawkshroud’s Knights are even now tearing it wider with their reaper blades.

More light pours in, and Roderick steps to my side.

'What do you think we'll find outside?' he asks.

'With any luck, nothing,' I say, but I am not hopeful.

Neither is Anthonis. 'If we've been followed into the tunnels, the swarms will know where we are. Be ready to fight, Sir Roderick.'

'They will know we are beneath the mountains,' I say, 'but there are any number of places we might emerge.'

'And they could be waiting outside every one of them,' says Anthonis.

'Then you'll get to fight sooner than you imagined,' I say, stepping forwards. Hawkshroud has torn the hole wide enough for us to breach, three abreast. Sensible. We are likely to be returning this way at speed, probably with a host of alien killers snapping at our heels. The sooner we can get underground with our prize the better.

Aktis Bardolf waits for me at the entrance his Knights have opened in the mountainside. The rails beneath my Knight are buckled and bent upwards. I flatten them with my bulk; one less thing to trip a fast-moving Knight on the way back.

Bardolf's grainy image on the slate grins as he says, 'After you, Magna Preceptor.'

'You are too kind, Sir Bardolf,' I reply, extending my auspex through the smoke-wreathed arch. I sense nothing, but the tyranids are nothing if not masters of ambush.

'Do you really believe we were followed?' I ask him.

'I know it.'

'None of my Knights saw anything.'

'Would you expect to see a lictor?'

'No, I suppose not,' I concede.

'We could go back,' he says, giving voice to the treasonous thoughts that have been gnawing at my nerves ever since Bardolf told me we were being followed. 'If you think an entire army's waiting on the other side of that opening, say the word and I'll blow it shut again.'

'No,' I say. 'We go on.'

I march my Knight forward, stepping carefully over the rubble and broken blocks of archway the battle cannon shells have brought down. I emerge into the light and move away from the opening, stretching out every sense available to me. The former riders aid me in this, sweeping my surroundings in ways I cannot even begin to imagine. Everything confirms one thing.

I am alone on the mountainside.

I signal the rest of the Knights, and they emerge in pairs, hunched as low as they can get to the ground. Shadows on the rocks tell me it is late afternoon, the sun behind the mountains and keeping this flank in shadow.

'Vikara,' says Bardolf, moving forward to take cover behind a sheer slab of fire-blackened gneiss. He points down the mountainside with his reaper.

At first, it is hard to make out anything amid the sprawling, overgrown forests of alien weeds choking the life from the landscape, but then I see the remains of the city.

Its walls are tumbled wreckage, and its towers of steel are wrapped in alien foliage. Giant spines of organic matter jut from the city's plazas and thoroughfares, belching a toxic miasma into the atmosphere.

'It is like the ruin of a city left abandoned for centuries, not one that fell only recently,' I say.

Our Knights are still emerging from the tunnel, and I urge them to greater speed. We must be on the move. Every moment we remain static, the odds of our discovery grow exponentially.

Beyond the city, more of the spires, titanic, star-scraping things, stand stark on the horizon. The sky is a striated fog of sickly yellow and bilious green.

'It's like it's being terraformed.'

'I suppose that is *exactly* what is happening.'

There is movement in the city, but it is too far away to see what is making it. But one thing is certain.

'The temple is still standing,' I say.

Set on the side of the city closest to us is what looks like an oasis of normality. Amid the rampant xenobiology stands a single trapezoidal structure. Alone among the city's buildings, it remains untouched by the hideous alien flora.

'What's that surrounding it?' asks Bardolf. 'Void flare?'

I am wondering the same thing. A haze of refractive energies wreathes the temple, making it seem as though I am looking through a series of continually altering lenses. I blink away the discomfort of staring too long.

'My scanners can't focus on the temple,' says Bardolf, for the first time sounding unsure of himself. 'It's not registering on the auspex. If I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes, I'd swear on the aquila there was nothing down there but xenoforms.'

'Kyrano told me this Binary Saint was said to have developed specialised forms of shield technology,' I answer. 'Perhaps this is a side effect of some kind of

barrier we've not seen.'

The last of the Knights emerges onto the rocky flanks of the mountain.

'Then let's just hope there's a way in for us,' says Bardolf.

'Only one way to find out,' I say, heading down the mountain as fast as my armour will carry me.

We are a mile from Vikara when the threat warnings light up the auspex. There is no single source; the tyranids are all around us. Flocks of avian raptors take to the air behind the city, blackening the sky with ragged wings and whipping tails.

At exactly the same moment, the dense foliage around us comes to life with organisms and flickering plant life that is native to no world of the Imperium.

I wring every scrap of power from my armour, knowing that speed is our only ally here. We can fight, but to engage any of the creatures will only slow us down. To slow is to stop, and that will see us all dead.

'On the left,' shouts Bardolf.

I spare a glance in that direction and see a hundreds-strong pack of leaping, bounding things. Gaunts of some variety. They are too obscured by the alien plants and we are moving too fast to properly identify them.

'On the right too!' warns Anthonis.

'Stubbers only,' I order. 'Keep moving.'

Shoulder-mounted guns rake to the sides, keeping the beasts at bay for now. I push harder, driving my armour beyond its extreme tolerances. Assembler Thexton will have some choice words for me when he sees the state of my power core.

I switch the frequency of my vox to that of the forge-temple's Manifold and broadcast the binharic codes given to me by Archmagos Kyrano. He has assured me that whichever magos is in command will answer in kind.

Long seconds pass without answer, and I fear Cordelia may be proved correct in her suspicions towards the archmagos.

But then the vox bursts to life with an answering blurt of binary. I do not understand it, even connected to a living machine via my spinal plugs. But my armour understands it, and an approach vector appears on my slate.

A way in.

I crush the remains of a groundcar beneath my tread as I turn to follow the supplied course.

We reach an arterial roadway. Our pace increases.

The creatures parallel our course, each wing of pursuit slowly forcing its way

closer. Others will be moving to cut off our route onwards. I shoot the closest beasts with my stubber. The dead are crushed in the stampede.

And then I am over the ruins of the city wall and striding through its streets.

Buildings ravaged by rapacious bio-organisms pass to either side of us. Corrosive rain falls as arcing spores burst on the high walls either side. I lift my ion shield to catch the worst of it. Enough to keep me alive. Not enough to keep my upper carapace from becoming pitted and grooved by acid.

We follow the approach vector, twisting through Vikara's narrow streets. Always ahead of the swarms, but only just. They are fiendishly coordinated and we are running out of room. Fresh packs are being drawn in all around us, guided by a terrible gestalt intelligence.

Then I see the warped-lens distortion reaching out to a junction ahead. I round a corner at full stride, and the air before me ripples in waves, like heat from a metalled roadway. I see the forge-temple ahead of us, standing proud in the middle of a heptagonal plaza.

But there is something wrong with it.

It is as if the temple is nothing more than a frozen projection on a Theatrica Imperialis backcloth. An unconvincing illusion I have trouble believing actually exists. Especially as my auspex denies there is anything in front of me. All it sees is empty space, and I almost slow as I marvel at how completely we have been betrayed.

Before I do, the haze around the temple is gone. It does not fade. It does not dissipate. It simply is no more. And instead of a static image of an undamaged temple, I see a ravaged structure on the verge of collapse. Coils of energy flare from its cracked flanks and smoke billows from its numerous vent stacks. On any other day, at any other time, I would put as much distance as humanly possible between my warriors and this critical mass waiting to happen.

Standing beneath a semi-circular arch is a Knight, its armour a pale blue, chevroned with orange and jet. A banner depicting a rearing horse with a horn in the centre of its forehead streams from one shoulder.

Its reaper blade beckons us within.

I need no second invitation – packs of gaunts of all description are closing from every side. We are surrounded and there is nowhere left to run.

My vox-slate bursts to life. No picture, just audio.

The Knight's desperate voice, pulled taut by strain and sounding impossibly distant.

'Run!' it pleads. 'They can only realign the brane shield for a moment.'

We run.

SAINTS

‘You’ve been looking for me. Asking lots of questions.’

Cordelia paused by the door to the chamber she shared with Roland. The voice wasn’t one she’d heard before, but she knew to whom it belonged and managed to hide her surprise.

‘How did you get in here?’ she asked. ‘We have security measures in place.’

‘Not in any meaningful way.’

Cordelia turned to see a robed figure standing by the corner she had just turned. Black and without visible markings, only a hint of ceramic beneath his hood and the soft glow of a single ocular implant. Subtle, unlike most of his kind.

‘Adept Nemonix, I presume?’

‘Lady Cordelia,’ he said, and she didn’t miss that he hadn’t answered her question.

‘Adept Nemonix?’ she asked again, and she sensed his amusement.

‘Would it make you feel better if I said yes?’

‘It would.’

‘Then that is my current designation,’ said Nemonix, slippery as a Raisan tree-serpent.

Cordelia opened the door and beckoned him within. ‘You’ll join me? I have just sent for some hot tisane.’

‘Thank you, Lady Cordelia, I will join you, but I’m afraid I’ll have to decline the drink,’ said Nemonix.

Cordelia swept into her chambers, a modestly appointed suite of rooms with three receiving rooms, a sleeping area and an expansive dining space. She reached up and pressed a concealed stud on her bejewelled choker, activating the hidden picters and vox-thieves the house lifewards had installed.

Whatever passed between her and Nemonix would be recorded.

Cordelia took herself over to a seat beneath a long mural. Its colours had faded over the centuries since its creation, but it was still an impressive piece of work.

'The earliest days of Vondrak,' said Nemonix, taking the seat opposite Cordelia and framing himself nicely in the viewfinder of the picter concealed in the bust of a long-dead ancestor of Lord Ohden. 'Typical of similar artworks you'll find on any number of Imperial worlds – heavy on symbolism and idealism, light on details that likely match the moment.'

'I notice the Mechanicus feature heavily in it,' said Cordelia. 'A case of history being written by the victors?'

'Perhaps,' agreed Nemonix.

'Is that what you hope to do with House Cadmus? Rewrite our history?'

'I don't follow, Lady Cordelia.'

'Of course you do,' she said. 'You are clearly not a foolish man, nor, I suspect, are you one given to wasting time, so I must presume you have come here to make me an offer like the one you made to Cassia.'

'She told you of that?'

'As you knew she would.'

Nemonix chuckled. 'Yes, it was a statistical certainty she would speak of our conversation. Call it a declaration of intent, if you will. But, no, I'm not here to make an offer.'

'Then shall I tell you why I think you're here?'

Nemonix spread his arms wide. 'Please do.'

'The Mechanicus wants House Cadmus back in the bosom of the Red Planet, but if that's not going to happen then you'll happily see us destroyed.'

Nemonix didn't answer, but Cordelia didn't indulge the fantasy that she'd outmanoeuvred him.

The black-robed adept nodded. 'If, for the moment, we assume you are correct, then what possible benefit does Cadmus gain by resisting a renewal of its ties with Mars?'

'The knightly houses have always been free,' said Cordelia, fighting to keep her anger in check at the adept's bland confidence. 'Since before there even was an Imperium or Mechanicus, the knightly houses have stood proud and autonomous.'

Nemonix laughed. 'Really? Is that what you think?'

'Free of the Mechanicus, at least.'

'You're forgetting the debt each knightly house owes to the servants of the Machine-God,' said Nemonix, wagging a scolding finger. 'Without their support,

your precious machines would have turned to rust and scrap thousands of years ago.'

'We have the Sacristans.'

'Whom the Mechanicus train,' pointed out Nemonix. 'And you almost lost them at Verdus Ferrox.'

'No thanks to you,' spat Cordelia.

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Of course you do.'

'Pray enlighten me.'

'You let the tyranids in,' said Cordelia, her fingers curling to fists on the arms of her chair. 'Assembler Thexton personally checked every way in and out of that forge complex, yet suddenly culverts, waste viaducts and effluent channels open for no reason. Come on, how stupid do you think we are?'

'Clearly stupid enough to accuse the Mechanicus of wilful sabotage when there is no data footprint to back up such a wild and unsubstantiated claim,' said Nemonix.

Cordelia's eyes narrowed. 'That's what you do, isn't it? You erase any data the Mechanicus doesn't want revealed. You do the dark, manipulative things they can't be seen to do. And then you make it all go away. Well, I'll tell you this now, House Cadmus is not something you can make go away.'

Nemonix leaned forward in his chair, his hands laced before him. Cordelia tried to hide her revulsion at the smooth, doll-like nature of his fingers.

'I can make *anything* go away,' he said. 'That picter you have hidden in the bust of Lord Ohden? You'll find its data stream has, unfortunately, become irrevocably corrupted.'

Nemonix circled a finger above his head, like a squad sergeant indicating a regroup. 'And the vox-thieves? Such a shame they were inadvertently tuned to a Guard vox-net and recorded an hour of chatter between two supremely unprofessional sentries on the eastern ramparts.'

Nemonix rose to his feet and smoothed out his robes, brushing non-existent specks of lint from his shoulders.

'And I'd put another order in for that hot tisane if I were you. I think your request was accidentally deleted from the service cogitators.'

The pettiness of this last gesture seemed needless.

'I didn't want us to be disturbed,' said Nemonix, reading the confusion on her face. 'Not while I informed you that no matter what you do, House Cadmus *will* be part of the Mechanicus again. It would be best for everyone if Baron Roland

understood that simple fact.'

Cordelia stood and took a long, shuddering breath. She counted to ten in her head to keep a lid on her fury.

'Tell me one thing, at least,' she said at last.

'Of course.'

'This Binary Apostle Roland was petitioned to retrieve? Does it even exist, or has the Mechanicus sent our men off to die?'

Nemonix nodded. 'The Saint exists, and the mission is genuine. Kyrano and the tech-synod displaced from Gryphonne Four are desperate to have his essence, or at least what remains of it, returned.'

Nemonix turned and made his way to the chamber door.

'Really, Lady Cordelia, you underestimate me,' he said. 'No one profits from the destruction of House Cadmus, but such blatant secession cannot be allowed. It's the thin end of the wedge, you see.'

'Get out,' snapped Cordelia. 'Get out now.'

'Very well,' said Nemonix. 'But please believe me when I say that I hope your husband's mission meets with success. I also trust he will make the right decision upon his safe return to Vondrak Prime.'

Cordelia's anger turned to amusement.

'Then you don't know Roland at all.'

'You'd be surprised how much I know,' said Nemonix. 'Goodbye, Lady Cordelia. We will not meet again, and you should not look for me. It would be… inadvisable.'

'Are you threatening me?'

'Yes,' said Nemonix.

My limbs feel stiff and ungainly, weak after days spent as a giant with the strength to tear apart battle tanks. Despite the cold, my Cadmus uniform jacket is soaked in sweat. My skin runs hot as my bloodstream filters out the numerous chemicals not yet purged from my circulatory system.

Together with Aktis Bardolf, Roderick, Anthonis and William, I follow Magos Vril through the frozen data holds at the heart of the main temple structure. Hundreds of harried-looking tech-priests fill the cavernous space, together with coffles of calculus-logi linked by loops of pulsing brass cabling.

Clattering engines plunge into abyssal vaults far below, and coiled generator towers soar into the upper peaks of the temple.

Geysers of warm, oil-scented mist billow up from below. Crackling arcs of

lightning leap between the titanic machines.

'Is it supposed to be doing that?' asks Anthonis, peering over a slender railing.

'Information [clarify]: no, Sir Anthonis of House Cadmus, it is most certainly not,' answers Vril, working at a line of control slates with the hunched gait of someone who spends altogether far too much time poring over technical specs. 'What you are seeing is the physical manifestation of an ancient mind in free-fall towards self-extinguishment.'

'Can't you stop it?' asks William.

Vril pauses in his shuffling progress and turns to face William. He has a face quartered into differing metallic elements, not unlike the heraldic plates of a Knight. The upper two segments are bronze and iron, the lower two gold and brushed pewter. Each quadrant has an implant of some kind; either ocular, olfactory or vocal, though it is impossible to tell which is which.

'Sir William of House Cadmus, the workings of encoded memory engrams are a mystery to all save the Omnissiah, dizzyingly more complex than your own meat brain and far more efficient. To have survived for so long, the Binary Apostle has had to evolve into a singularity of being, the mechanics of which are beyond your feeble reach of comprehension.'

'And yours, by the sound of it,' counters William, always ready with a rejoinder.

'Does he even have a name?' asks Roderick.

'Is it even a *he?*' puts in Bardolf.

Vril is greatly perturbed by these questions and flaps his arms like some hunched, flightless bird.

'Yes, the Binary Apostle has a name, though it is one unknown to us,' says Vril, before adding in a moment of rare largesse, 'and perhaps even to itself.'

Before the others can rise to bait the magos some more, I cut to the more important matter at hand.

'You said self-extinguishment,' I say. 'Is the Saint dying?'

'Baron Roland, House Cadmus,' says Vril, as though only now just confirming my identity. 'The Binary Apostle is maintaining the brane shield, which is, as you are aware, keeping us alive, but the effort of doing so is destroying him.'

'I have never heard of a brane shield,' I say.

'I should be surprised if you had,' he says, holding up a hand to forestall any response at the implied insult to my intelligence. 'It is incredibly ancient techno-arcana that relies on an understanding of M-theory. Do you possess such an understanding, Baron Roland?'

‘No, but I am a quick study.’

Vril pauses, no doubt trying to think of how he can explain something complex to a man he believes to be mentally subnormal.

‘The central conceit is that our visible, four-dimensional universe is restricted to a brane, that is, a membrane, inside a higher dimensional space,’ he begins, and already I feel any hope of comprehension fall away. ‘A theoretically infinite number of dimensions of potentially infinite scale occupy other branes, which, in effect, means there can be an endless series of alternate realities, intersecting with our own in ways we cannot possibly imagine in any currently posited cosmological model.’

The silence that follows his ‘explanation’ tells him all he needs to know of how much we have understood.

‘So a brane shield moves us out of the brane in which our known universe exists and into another,’ says Anthonis. ‘Now is that a pre-existing brane or a newly created one?’

We turn to look at Anthonis and he shrugs.

‘I have a lot of time to read now,’ is his explanation, and I almost burst out laughing until I remember *why* he now has a lot of time to read.

Adept Vril has the good grace to sound impressed when he says, ‘A simplistic way of interpreting a complex theory, but, in essence, correct. And in answer to your question, the field generator shifts us into the nearest unoccupied brane, one yet to develop its own internal universe. There we reside in splendid isolation. Nothing can interact with us, but nor can we interact with anything beyond the extent of the field until its deactivation returns us to our origin point.’

‘I can see why the Mechanicus want the Binary Apostle back,’ says Aktis Bardolf.

‘Indeed,’ says Vril.

‘How long will it take you to unhook the Manifold engine from this temple?’ I ask, returning to the matter at hand.

The hesitation between my question and Vril’s answer is not what I hope to hear.

‘The Apostle has dwelled within this temple for millennia and will not easily be parted from it,’ says Vril. ‘Like all of us, the Apostle is mistrustful of change, as there is no guarantee what is left of the memory engrams will survive such a severance.’

‘Then we will cease distracting you, Magos Vril,’ I say. ‘Work as fast as you can, and inform me of when you are ready to move the Manifold engine. But a

word to the wise, be quick if you want it to survive.'

Our armour stands immobile in the circular courtyard towards the rear of the temple, like transhuman giants on a parade ground. Strange light diffracts over the curved plates, reflections that look like the underside of a frosted lake surface.

After hearing Magos Vril describe how we are kept safe from the tyranids beyond the temple, it is all I can do to keep my eyes from drifting to the disturbing sky I now know is not part of the universe to which I belong.

Workbenches dragged from the forge are arranged around the courtyard, and the warriors of both houses mingle and talk as we eat and drink.

As it turns out, we are not the only ones to have taken refuge here.

A nearby scholam has found sanctuary within the walls of the forge-temple. Perhaps a hundred progena and a few instructors, displaced from their training barracks, are also here. They sit on the other side of the courtyard, the youngsters staring in open-mouthed wonder at our armour.

No sooner had we climbed from within than a leather-tough veteran introduced himself with a powerful handshake and brisk salute.

'Raym Bartaum, drill abbot of Scholam Vikara, Sir Knight. Myself and our progena are at your disposal,' he'd said, and I accepted his declaration with pride.

Since then, Bartaum and his fellow drill abbots have been working their charges mercilessly with what few weapons they have left. That they will never survive to reach Vondrak Prime goes unsaid.

Before me, I have a tin cup filled with electrolyte-rich water, a plate of what I am assured is a high-calorific meal of sweet nutrient bars and a soup laced with slow-release stimulants.

I will need them all for the return leg of our journey.

Aktis Bardolf sits across from me, looking tired and pale. He is a mirror for how I feel. My initial low opinion of Hawkshroud has been banished. I have seen Bardolf and his Knights in action, and know they can be relied upon.

'Have you seen the Freeblade?' asks Bardolf.

'No,' I reply. 'Not since he guided us in. And how do you know he is a Freeblade?'

'What else would he be?'

I shrug. 'The last of his house, or a lone survivor like one of your Oathsworn.'

Bardolf shakes his head. 'The heraldry of a rearing unicorn? It's not one of the

major houses, nor any one of the minor ones.'

'Perhaps he belongs to a house unknown to you.'

Bardolf snorts. 'If I don't know of a house, it's because it doesn't exist. Trust me, I know my houses.'

From anyone else I would chalk such a comment up to boastful arrogance, but from the little I have learned of Aktis Bardolf, such a trait does not feature in his make-up.

'So what house do you think he was?'

'Impossible to know,' says Bardolf. 'That's the whole point of a Freeblade, isn't it? The mystery.'

I hear the heavy clank of grinding metal I recognise as a damaged Knight. I turn from my food as the frost-blue and white form of the Freeblade limps into the courtyard. The progena halt their training until the drill abbots bellow at them to continue.

The trailing banner of a rearing white horse with a fluted horn at its forehead hangs tattered from the Knight's shoulder plates. The Freeblade's armour is badly damaged. Corrosive burns have exposed much of its inner mechanisms, and a portion of its right leg has fused together, giving the armour a swaying gait and an arrhythmic foot pattern.

The Knight stomps over the courtyard towards us.

Freeblades are notoriously unpredictable. Honourable, yes, and still bound by the knightly virtues, but they follow a solitary path. Whatever has driven this Knight to walk the lonely road of the Freeblade, sundered from all ties of kith and kin, gives him a purpose that no one but he can know.

I experience a momentary thrill at the sight of the power and majesty of a Knight as it towers over us. It is one thing to wear such a magnificent suit of armour, another to see it loom over you with its weapons armed.

'I am Tellurus,' says the Knight, an obviously artificially generated voice emerging from a vox-grille concealed beneath his armour's head-section. 'Do I have the very great honour of addressing Baron Roland of House Cadmus and Viscount Bardolf of House Hawkshroud?'

'You have,' I say, looking over at Bardolf with an eyebrow raised.

'What?' he says to my wordless question. 'I told you I wasn't a *lord*.'

I look back up at the frost-blue Knight and say, 'Will you not address us face-to-face, Sir Tellurus? Even if you wish to remain connected to your armour, at least open the canopy that we might converse as men.'

'I will not, Baron Roland,' says the Freeblade.

‘A man could take issue with such behaviour.’

‘A man might well, but no insult is intended,’ replies Tellurus. ‘I have vowed to speak only when clad in armour.’

I share a look with Bardolf. The few Freeblades I have met have all been individuals in the truest sense, each with their own quirks and foibles. Why should Tellurus be any different?

‘Very well,’ I say, willing to indulge Tellurus and his vanity. ‘What service might we render you, Sir Tellurus?’

‘How long have you been on Vondrak?’

‘House Cadmus is only recently arrived,’ I say.

‘House Hawkshroud has been in theatre for two months, give or take.’

Tellurus turns his head to Bardolf, as though the time I have spent on Vondrak is an irrelevance.

‘Tell me, Viscount Bardolf, in your time fighting the spawn of Hive Fleet Hydra, have you borne witness to their greatest abomination, a tervigon brood mother with crimson and cerulean plates across its back and a skull of bleached ivory?’

Tellurus raises his reaper blade, and I see that many of the serrated teeth are missing.

‘This monster would bear a great wound upon its flank. Deep enough to leave the metal of this blade in its exo-
armour. Tell me, Sir Bardolf, have you seen the beast?’

Bardolf looks over at me and I shake my head. ‘We have not seen it, Sir Tellurus. I take it this is a beast you have crossed paths with before?’

‘Once,’ says Tellurus. ‘When it murdered my family and destroyed my house.’

Even though the Knight’s voice is generated by a machine, I hear a lifetime’s worth of pain.

‘You followed the beast to Vondrak?’ I ask.

‘I did,’ says Tellurus. ‘Reports of a Hydran tervigon that matched its description drew me to Vikara, but the beast is cunning and has thus far eluded me. Before I could follow rumours of fresh sightings, I was trapped in Magos Vril’s forge-temple.’

I stand and gesture to the many gashes on his armour. ‘You have seen vicious fighting in your pursuit of the tervigon. Could none of Vril’s tech-priests minister to your armour?’

‘No!’ snaps Tellurus. ‘I have my own hand-chosen Sacristans, but they remain sequestered in Vondrak Prime. They and they alone are permitted to tend my

armour.’

Despite his tragic past, the Freeblade’s obstinacy is beginning to irritate me. I return to my seat.

‘We have not seen your beast,’ I say. ‘So is there anything further you require of us?’

‘Magos Vril has successfully coaxed the final engram of the Binary Apostle back into the Manifold engine,’ says Tellurus. ‘We abandon this temple within the hour.’

‘And you’re sure this is exactly how it happened?’ said Malcolm, pacing the echoing vault in which the Knights of House Cadmus were being repaired. ‘You can’t be wrong about this. Only absolute bloody certainty will do. You understand that, yes?’

‘Of course, Malcolm,’ replied Cassia, putting the book into her shoulder bag.

The noise filling the repair hangar drowned out their voices. Only they could hear the words that passed between them over the beating of forge hammers, rivet guns and sparking arc-welders.

‘What did you tell Cordelia?’

‘Exactly what you said to tell her,’ said Cassia. ‘That I’d told that terrible adept you’d never turn on Roland.’

‘Good,’ said Malcolm with a feral grin of raw ambition.

I do not pretend to comprehend the techno-sorcery of a brane shield, but to see it in action is to feel its working on a visceral level.

Its outer limits are marked by the same undersea-haze, desert-mirage we saw from the outside, with one crucial difference. From the outside, we saw a static image of the forge-temple as it was at the instant of the shield’s activation. From the inside we see the tyranid host, but they are ghosts to us, moving among us as phantoms.

The beasts are oblivious to us, as insubstantial as mist. They move among us like reflections on still water, separated by an infinitesimal skein of interdimensional membrane.

My Knights and those of Hawkshroud stand before the forge-temple’s vast, smoke-belching stacks. As Magna Preceptor, I stand at the point of our spearhead formation, with Aktis Bardolf to my right, Freeblade Tellurus at my left.

Our shadows leap and dance before us, thrown out by blazing spears of lightning rippling from every port in the temple as it counts down to extinction.

Its regulatory systems are failing one after another. A Mechanicus forge-temple is basically a controlled reactor like those that hurl starships through the void. Only with constant rites of maintenance and continual calibration can they operate.

By Vril's order, that control has now been removed.

Within the hour, the forge-temple will cease to exist.

As will everything within two miles.

Vril grieves the loss of his temple, but is practical enough to know that some of its data surviving is better than none.

A Mechanicus-grade Capitol Imperialis belches fumes from its upper surfaces, its cavernous vaults packed with tech-priests, lexmechanics and calculus-logi. They carry the combined data burden of the temple's memory-engines. Protecting a Capitol Imperialis is a burden we could do without, but it is the only vehicle with a reactor capable of powering the Manifold engine holding the Binary Apostle over the journey to Vondrak Prime.

Atop the vehicle's prow section sits a vast turret the size of a palace dome. Jutting from this turret is the enormous barrel of a macro cannon. Called by some a doomsday gun, it is a weapon capable of bringing down Titans with a single shell and punishing starships in low orbit.

The refugees of Scholam Vikara are spread around the Capitol Imperialis in their rag-tag fleet of vehicles. Most of them are thin-skinned cargo conveyors, open-topped and vulnerable.

Raym Bartaum, who it transpires has previous experience in tinkering with the engines of Imperial Guard super-heavies, has overcharged the engines, hoping to coax some extra speed. Magos Vril has turned a blind eye to his transgressions.

No matter how fast they can go, most, if not all of them, will be destroyed before we reach the mountains.

'Are we ready?' I ask Bardolf and Tellurus.

The Hawkshroud Knight crouches and rolls his shoulders.

'As I'll ever be.'

The Freeblade raises his reaper blade and the teeth begin to spin around its killing edge. They turn slowly, as though fighting to build up speed.

'I am ready,' says Tellurus.

Greasy smoke leaks from his reactor housing, streaking the rearing horse banner with a sheen of polychromatic oil burns. Hydraulic fluids leak from pulsing feed lines at his legs and shoulders. Were Tellurus a House Cadmus Knight, I would send him back to the Vault Transcendent, but he is a Freeblade

and goes where he wills.

He will die today, and I will not dishonour his courage by asking him to abandon his armour.

‘Magos Vril?’ I say. ‘Initiate the shutdown.’

The panel before me hisses static, then Vril’s voice comes over the vox. Though he understands the necessity of what he has to do, it is still difficult for him.

‘Confirmation: initiating now.’

On the opposite side of the forge-temple, an eclectic mix of bulbous refinery carts attached to simple engines and ore haulers are moving. Crewed by the temple’s servitors, a hundred or more of these vehicles are now rumbling out to the edge of the brane field.

I know the instant the servitor convoy breaches the field. The apparitions of gaunts and larger beasts lift their heads as one, their screeching cries going unheard. Their motion reminds me of the behaviour of oceanic shoals, so precise and coordinated.

Leaping packs swarm and flow around and through the precincts of the temple, but we are shifted beyond their reach. They do not see or even know of our existence.

I sense the impatience of my armour’s former wearers.

I wait, letting the swarms fully take the bait of the servitor convoy. Right now, the beasts will be tearing open the vehicles and slaughtering the servitors. Only a few will have autonomy enough to fight back, but most will not have the capability to even raise a fist in their own defence.

Their deaths will serve a greater purpose.

A series of explosions from the upper reaches of the temple makes the decision for me. The ground shakes as buried reactors go into meltdown.

‘Knights of the Imperium,’ I shout. ‘We ride!’

GAUNTLET

Cordelia walked with Assembler Thexton through the rebuilding work of Verdus Ferrox. Load-lifters, cargo-8s and flat-bedded material haulers brought fresh-forged steel and adamantium for the bulk servitors and Mechanicus construction engines to undo the damage Malcolm's Knights and the vanguard organisms had wrought.

The assembler's face was pulled in a frown of confusion, and Cordelia had to hope her skill with the written word matched that of her oratory. She waited for Thexton to read her handwritten note a third time before speaking.

'You understand what I am asking?'

'Not clearly, my lady,' said the head of House Cadmus' Sacristans. 'And I am not sure I want to.'

Shaven-headed, and with only the most basic physical augmentations, Thexton was still more human than Mechanicus. A servant of House Cadmus, he had, nevertheless, been trained by the priests of Mars and approaching him was a risk.

But it was a risk Cordelia considered worth taking.

It had long been an open secret that the Mechanicus intended the Sacristans to be their eyes and ears among the knightly houses. Despite their vast knowledge, the lords of the Red Planet singularly failed to understand the bonds of loyalty between a Knight and those who worked to maintain his armour.

Closer than an ancient chevalier and his squire, a Knight and his chosen Sacristan were bonded through the armour and the shared histories of those who had worn it. Though a Sacristan might never see real battle, he would have lived hundreds in his connection dreams.

'You understand that you can't just go *looking* for this, you have to find the absences,' she said, stepping aside as a pair of lifter servitors stomped past on

piston-augmented legs. They carried rebar stanchions for the viaduct Malcolm's battle cannon had destroyed.

'I have to look for what's *not* there?'

'Exactly.'

'Then where would I begin?'

Cordelia halted and pointed to a towering construction cradle, its rigs and assembly scaffolds waiting for a war engine that would never come.

'Do you see that construction cradle there?' she said.

'Of course.'

'Now, if I were to say there was a Reaver Titan berthed there right now, then your failure to see a Reaver would be good reason to think that there *was* no Reaver there, yes?'

'Obviously.'

'But if I were to tell you there was, say, a grain of sand in the berth, then your failure to observe it wouldn't necessarily mean it *wasn't* there.'

'Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,' said Thexton. 'I am familiar with *modus tollens*, Lady Cordelia.'

'Of course you are, my dear Thexton,' continued Cordelia. 'The important difference between these two scenarios is that in the one, but not the other, you would expect to see some evidence of the entity if, in fact, it existed.'

Thexton looked down at the note again. Cordelia could see the urge to speak a question aloud.

She shook her head. 'Look for what's not there.'

And the light of understanding smoothed the frown lines from Thexton's face.

'Ah, of course, I see! Like detecting a planet in a distant galaxy, one not visible to conventional intergalactic auspex, but which we know is there by the level of light it blocks from its star in transit or the variation in a nearby celestial body's orbital period.'

Cordelia nodded, though she had no real understanding of what Thexton had just said.

'Can you do it?' she asked.

'Yes,' said Thexton. 'I believe I can.'

'Then do it,' said Cordelia. 'And do it quickly.'

I do not see the first of my Knights fall, but I feel them.

Their deaths are a knife stabbing up into my gut. Monteil and Creig. Their bio-signs vanish from my slate, but there is no time to stop.

No time to mourn.

We go on or we die.

Two dozen Knights is a force to be reckoned with, and the wedge of Cadmus' charge has punched through the beasts milling at this flank of the forge-temple. Most have been lured by the sacrificial convoy of servitors, but not all.

Cadmus battle cannons and thermal lances smash through the swarms of creatures, tearing a path for the others. In pulsing blasts of superheated lances and ground-shaking detonations we cut our way to the mountains.

Were it just the Knights who were escaping, I would rate our chances of success as high. But it is not only Knights who must escape Vikara. For a vehicle so monstrous in size, the Capitol Imperialis is fast, and I dread to think what safeguards Vril has authorised his engineering crews to disregard.

As fast as it is, it is still too slow.

At least a thousand gaunts swarm its tracks and flanks. Point-defence bolter racks flay them from its sides and try to keep them at bay. Hawkshroud are tasked with close protection for the Capitol Imperialis. Bardolf's Knights circle the lumbering vehicle within its void envelope, gunning down the endless tide of pouncing creatures seeking to climb its cliff-like flanks.

Hurricanes of stubber fire pulp beasts seeking to foul its tracks with their bodies. Reapers tear those climbing its flanks. I know they will not stop them all. The best they can hope for is to stop enough.

I turn my head and see thousands of xenoforms, everything from the smaller, hook-limbed creatures to the lumbering battering ram beasts with vast crab claws and bio-plasmic energies screaming in their jaws. Already my auspex cannot cope with the sheer volume of hostile creatures coming for us.

Simian horrors with drooling orifices on their serrated backs vomit spiralling scraps of organic matter. Flesh-sacs filled with acid or poisons so lethal they could kill hundreds with a single drop arc through the air towards us.

We intercept some with stubber fire. They explode in mid-air, showering the earth with toxic rain, but there are simply too many to stop.

The progena of Scholam Vikara are fighting from the backs of their flimsy vehicles. They are armed with rifles and pistols and swords. Weapons so tiny and ineffectual that it takes my breath away that men still take to the battlefield with them.

The courage it takes to do so humbles me.

Three of their vehicles have already been overrun, reduced to blazing wrecks within the first hundred yards of our race to the city wall. A cargo-8 flips over in

a seething explosion of jade-green bio-plasma.

Burning bodies tumble from its rear. I cannot hear their screams, and I am thankful. I have heard men die as tyrannic poisons devour them, and it is a sound I wish never to hear again.

A fleshy spore sac explodes above me. I throw up my shield as a spatter of hissing corrosives spray from its death. I clench my teeth in pain as acid eats at my shoulders.

Another Knight dies. Rabert, a warrior of honourable pedigree from one of Raisa's most ancient families. His consort, Valerie, is with child, and his loss is a terrible blow for her and Cadmus. Unlike Monteil and Creig, I see Rabert die. Acids have eaten away his ankle joint and though he limps onwards, still firing, still cutting with his reaper, he has been slowed enough.

One of the larger beasts intercepts him. It crushes his shoulder with a vast, serrated claw and tears it free with no more effort than I might rip a Raisan mutant in half. It spits a gout of seething bio-plasma in Rabert's face, and the convulsions wracking his armour tell me of his death agonies.

Other beasts drag Rabert down, and his mount is overwhelmed by their alien bodies. Blade-limbs hack and talons rend his armour to reach the flesh within.

A shell from my battle cannon obliterates Rabert's screaming killer. I cannot yet mourn his death, but I can avenge it.

Ahead, I see a host of beasts emerge from a disintegrating pile of tumbled blocks and twisted steelwork that was once a blockhouse on Vikara's outer wall.

Right away, I see there are too many for us.

I ready my battle cannon, but before I can fire my auto-

senses cut out for an instant as the thunder of something impossibly loud and blindingly bright overloads them.

The swarms in front of me vanish in a wall of fire with a seismic thunderclap.

The shockwave staggers me.

I crash into an adjacent wall, gyros fighting to keep me upright. Fire and smoke mushroom skywards from a titanic detonation.

A half a mile length of the city wall has vanished, taking with it the swarms gathered to block our escape. All that remains is a vitrified crater of smoking, glassy rock.

Only one weapon has the power to wreak so much destruction.

'The way ahead is clear,' says Magos Vril. 'You're welcome.'

I do not waste the path the doomsday gun of the Capitol Imperialis has carved us. I push hard through the raging vortices of searing thermals, low-grade e-mag

pulses and surging smoke banks.

My auspex distorts, but then I am through.

I see the jagged peaks of the mountains ahead, like a wave of rock crashing on the horizon.

Two miles distant.

So close I can almost touch them.

The Capitol Imperialis crunches over the scorched wasteland its weapon has wrought. Hawkshroud's Knights keep close, as though it is a livestock animal being kept safe from predator packs. The trucks and cargo-8s of Scholam Vikara bounce over the shattered landscape, and I dread to think of the pain they must be feeling driving through the firestorm of the macro cannon's aftermath.

The beasts do not pursue. A collapse of the overmind's control? Or animal instinct, making them fearful of the macro cannon's wrath?

It will not take long for the crushing will of the hive to smother that fear with blind fury.

But in that time we run.

Nemonix sat cross-legged in his featureless, data-tight cell at the heart of the forge-temple. Myriad means of information gathering had provided him with tens of thousands of hours of vox and twice that in pict-feeds, spread across the hundreds of sealed-off data-slates spread on the floor of the cell.

Specialised neural augmentation processed the swathes of information in the time it took to look at each one.

Collected from all across Vondrak, Nemonix had secrets enough to bring down the planetary nobility a hundred times over, to blackmail a dozen senior Guard officers and see the name of a decorated Space Marine blackened for all time.

None of that was of any interest to Nemonix.

All that mattered was Cadmus.

His gambit to have their Sacristans killed by allowing infiltrating vanguard organisms into Verdus Ferrox – thereby forcing Cadmus to fall upon the mercy of Mars or suffer a slow extinction through obsolescence and battle damage – had failed, but he had learned a great deal of the knightly house's internal politics over the last few days.

Not enough to bring them crawling back to the Mechanicus just yet, but Nemonix was playing a long game. And stripped of mortal concerns of the flesh, he had patience enough to wait.

The hologram of his earlier self paced restlessly around him. An affectation, he

knew. It had no capacity for boredom and no need for so overt a display of disinterest.

'I wish you'd stop that,' he said.

'Why are we still here?' said the hologram. 'Malcolm is on the hook, and it's only a matter of time until he challenges Roland. And with the technology you can provide, his mastery of House Cadmus is a certainty.'

'I want to be sure,' said Nemonix.

'How much surer can you be?' said the hologram. 'You heard them talking in the repair hangars. His consort has already lied to Lady Cordelia. You saw his naked ambition. It's done.'

'I want to be sure,' repeated Nemonix.

'Then don't let Roland and any of his Knights back in the city,' said his hologram, stopping in front of him. 'Take control of Rukanah's guns and shoot them down before they're even in sight of the walls. Blame a malfunction, bad code, whatever. You want sure, *that's* sure.'

Nemonix looked up from the hundreds of slates.

'You know, sometimes I forget what a ruthless man I was.'

SACRIFICES

The run to the mountains has been swift and unrelenting. Two of Bardolf's Knights died moments ago, holding a narrow pass while the rest of us continued uphill. Packs of airborne predators swarm us in slashing flocks, but massed stubber fire and flailing reaper blades are keeping them at bay for now.

Behind us, Vikara is an atomic wasteland, a seething nightmare of fire and radiation. A thick column of lightning-shot smoke claws its way skywards from the destruction of the forge-temple.

The swarms surrounding it are ash, and even those that survived the temple's destruction spent precious minutes milling in confusion.

And with those minutes we may just have bought our lives.

Incredibly, around half of Scholam Vikara's progena are still with us. Raym Bartaum shouts at the youngsters riding the damaged vehicles with smoking sides and tracks shredded with chitinous spines. Many of the progena are badly hurt, but they make no complaint as Bartaum and another drill abbot all but drag them onto the least damaged trucks and transports.

The exit Hawkshroud's guns tore in the mountainside is nowhere near large enough for the Capitol Imperialis, but our battle cannons are tearing it wider in a cacophony of thudding, rocky detonations. Rubble falls from the mountain in a thunderous avalanche.

'Its macro cannon could widen this with one shot,' says Tellurus, the rear of his armour belching smoke. Its exhaust vents glow cherry-red, the power plant in imminent danger of a catastrophic meltdown.

'But would likely collapse the tunnel entirely,' says Bardolf, hacking away boulders with his reaper. 'It's too much of a risk.'

Bardolf is probably right, but I wonder if it might not be worth the risk to see this opening widened quicker. After what is probably only moments, but feels

like hours, the entrance is finally cleared enough for the Capitol Imperialis.

'Must hurry,' says Bardolf, walking his Knight around the back of the descending Capitol Imperialis. I follow his gaze and see monstrously large, spider-like beasts on the horizon.

Titanic bio-killers with vast, chitinous legs and thousands of scuttling brood hordes clinging to their distended bellies. Bio-plasmic energies flicker between the bio-titans' legs and in their flanged jaws. Drooling sphincter cannons smoulder with toxins. Barbed tongues lash the air.

A Knight is a powerful war machine, but even we are no match for such a monstrous biological engine of destruction and consumption.

'Yes,' I say. 'Must hurry.'

We are in darkness again, following the subterranean rail network back to Vondrak Prime. A parting shot of the macro cannon has demolished the entrance behind us.

Nothing now will be getting in that way.

Ten hours have passed since we descended into the death-choked tunnels once more. We are making good time following the route mapped by the auspex on our way to Vikara. For all that the uncertainty of our path has been removed, none of the horror at what those trapped here suffered has lessened.

The fire-blackened walls still echo with the screams of those trapped when the tunnels were sealed against the tyranids. Their bodies are all around us, dead in their vehicles or sprawled where they clawed at the rock in futile hope of escape.

There is no need to hunt for gaps in the abandoned vehicles. Vril's Capitol Imperialis simply crushes them beneath its enormous weight.

'Forgive us,' I say, hearing the squeal of crumpling metal and imagining the crack of splitting bone and snapping sinew.

Bardolf and I lead the way through the tunnels, giant arc lights on the cliff-like frontis of the Capitol Imperialis piercing the darkness ahead. The shadows of our armour stretch out before us.

Moisture drizzles my canopy like tears.

I keep my attention focused on the auspex. The naked eye sees too many shadows, too many places to hide. I move mechanically, pushing my Knights on as fast as I can without leaving our fellows behind.

The clamour of the armour's previous occupants is growing painful. It will be good to be divested of them for a time. Until the void they leave in my soul

drives me to reconnect once more.

All I want is to get out of these damned tunnels.

I want to return to Cordelia.

Each step I make, every turn I take, each passageway that brings me closer to Vondrak Prime serves that one aim. I cannot help but let out a shuddering breath of relief when the auspex confirms what I now see with my own eyes.

We have reached the widest tunnel, the main arterial that leads back to the surface. Is that a tiny spot of light I see in the distance? Or is it simply wishful thinking to imagine we have reached our ingress point?

The auspex screeches a warning, and my vision veils in red.

Chittering beasts swarm the walls, pouring from sundered vents and ruptured ductwork all around us.

Stablights reflect from innumerable hardened carapaces and bulbous, hairless skulls. Multiple limbs are wet with secreted mucus. Razored claws glitter in the beams.

I see teeth and black, gem-like eyes.

Fangs scrape rock as they leap onto the roof and flanks of the Capitol Imperialis in droves. More drop to the ground in predators' crouches. Too many to count.

They hiss and screech. Black tongues taste the air.

My shout of warning names these monsters.

'Genestealers!'

Malcolm shuddered as connection plugs slotted home in his spinal ports. He felt the rush of power to his limbs and blinked as his sight was enhanced by the numerous onboard systems of his armour.

Verdus Ferrox became cover and angles, a battle zone with avenues of attack, rally points and kill zones.

The Knights left to him by Roland came to life around him, each one flexing and twisting as human and machine flowed together in seamless union. Jaime Garratt took the first step forward. Typical of the young buck.

Enoch and Silus waited for him. Stefan lifted his reaper, its teeth revving in anticipation of a fight.

Which there might be if things didn't go to plan.

Malcolm didn't want bloodshed, but he was prepared for it.

Farrimond sat in the canopy of his hastily repaired Knight, his movements a little too slow for Malcolm's liking.

'I should order you to remain behind,' said Malcolm.

‘Just try it,’ retorted Farrimond.

‘At least one of us needs to survive if this goes to hell.’

‘You think it will?’ asked Garratt.

‘More than likely, but it’s got to be done if Cadmus are ever to become truly great.’

‘Then let’s get started,’ said Garratt.

Malcolm nodded and marched his Knight through Verdus Ferrox. Sacristans scattered before him, and idly he wondered why Thexton hadn’t been overseeing the repairs.

At the head of his Knights, Malcolm reached the gates of the forge-temple. They rumbled open, and Malcolm paused in his advance as he saw the women assembled on the other side.

Lady Cordelia stood at their head, with Aikaterina and Aeliana to either side. Cassia held her book clutched close to her chest, head bowed and just behind Roland’s wife.

Cordelia took a step forward, her face cut from defiance.

‘You understand what you’re doing?’ she asked.

Malcolm leaned his Knight armour down until his head was just above Cordelia. She looked up at him without fear.

For someone so small, someone he could crush without breaking stride, there was strength and cold calculation to Cordelia he hadn’t noticed until recently.

‘You’re bloody right I understand,’ he said.

‘Once you commit to this path, there’s no turning back.’

‘I’m not one for turning back, Lady Cordelia,’ said Malcolm. ‘You ought to know that about me by now.’

‘Battle cannon,’ I say.

The command activates a red-ringed kill reticule. Too many possible targets. The auspex struggles to fix on a firing solution. I override it and shoot without aiming.

Recoil feedback shocks my arm. It feels good.

Twin shells explode in the genestealer swarm. I fire two more. Another two. I am trying to clear a path, but there are just too many of the swift-moving beasts.

Bardolf appears at my side. His Knight adds its own weapon to the barrage. More and more of the beasts are closing in. Stubber fire and battle cannons rip into the pack ahead
of us.

And then they are among us.

Claws that make a mockery of armour tear at the plates of my legs. I stifle a scream as I feel every hurt. They scramble up my body like Whiteshields on an assault course.

I crush some with my battle cannon. My relic blade slashes down. Left and right. The roaring of the blade is magnified tenfold in the confines of the tunnel.

I crush xenoforms beneath my feet, and I feel their bodies burst apart.

The point defence guns of the Capitol Imperialis rake indiscriminately throughout the tunnel. Magos Vril knows his guns can inflict only minimal harm to our armour but will be deadly to the genestealers.

I lose track of the battle, my situational awareness completely lost as I stagger through the tunnel with a score of genestealers clinging to my armour. Something jars my leg and I go down on one knee amid an abandoned convoy of fuel tankers, crushing the nearest one open. Viscous fluid gushes out, and I rear up to hurl genestealers from my carapace.

Tellurus is fighting like a man possessed, his damaged reaper blade hewing the screeching killers with finesse that is frankly astonishing. His Knight moves with a speed and precision I have never before seen.

Aktis Bardolf fights with his Knights, still honouring their duty to protect the Capitol Imperialis. House Cadmus rally to me, and we fight in a circle of Knights, many fewer than began this mission for Archmagos Kyrano.

Roderick flays the beasts from my legs with snap fire from his stubbers. William and Anthonis join our circle of resistance, firing battle cannons and thermal lances.

Another Knight's bio-sign winks out.

My auspex is too crowded, I cannot see who has died.

The tunnel is a strobing nightmare of light and dark. The aliens have smashed the great arc lights on Vril's mechanical leviathan. Only the stablights of the Knights spin and dip and rise as we fight for our lives.

More genestealers are boiling from the cracks in the walls and through the internal ducting systems. I see a handful burst apart, shot down by collimated fire from a rapidly moving trio of cargo-8s.

The last of the progena are still alive.

I see Raym Bartaum in the back of a vehicle that surely should not still be able to function, let alone lead others across the detritus of battle that fills the tunnel.

He looks up at my Knight and I see where they are going.

I want to shout to him, but there is no link between us. I did not bother to

establish a vox-protocol between us, thinking he and his charges would be dead before we reached the mountains.

How arrogant of me. How dismissive of ordinary human heroism that seems. I cannot stop him, so I do the next best thing. I honour what will be a supreme sacrifice.

'All Knights,' I say. 'Brace for impact.'

Archmagos Kyrano was used to the insolence of knightly houses, especially Cadmus, but to hear such demands from the mouth of a mere consort was a step too far.

He stood on a postern platform in the centre of his forge-temple's main gate, looking down on a sight that was, for want of a better word, rebellion.

'Clarification: is this some kind of a joke?'

'It's about as far from being a joke as it's possible to get,' Lady Cordelia of House Cadmus called up to him. Baron Roland's consort stood with a collection of Cadmus Knights and their consorts standing with her.

Had it not been for the seriousness of her demand, he would have laughed aloud.

'This is entirely out of order,' said Kyrano.

'I want to see Adept Nemonix.'

'Who?'

'Adept Nemonix,' said Cordelia. 'Your attack dog. The adept you sent to yoke Cadmus back under Martian control.'

'No such adept resides within my forge,' said Kyrano, pleased to be so certain this woman was deranged. 'Yes, I petitioned the dataproctors to despatch an adept, but he never arrived on Vondrak.'

'You know, I think you truly believe that, archmagos,' said Cordelia. 'Which makes you as much a victim of his manipulations as House Cadmus.'

'Lady Cordelia, don't you think that if there were an unregistered adept in my forge-temple I would know about it?'

'I think maybe you did, but that you've forgotten.'

'My neural augmentations do not forget anything.'

'I *know* he is in your forge,' said Cordelia, dragging forward a man in the robes of a Sacristan. 'Assembler Thexton might just be a Sacristan to you, but he's rather clever and meticulous when it comes to finding things.'

'Lady Cordelia, I assure you that–'

'Shut up, I'm not finished,' said Lady Cordelia. 'Adept Nemonix is *very* clever

at erasing his presence and clouding the workings of machines and people who rely on machines for their memories. But when you know what to look for or, rather, what *absences* to look for, it's actually quite simple to find someone who thinks he can't be found.'

Kyrano shook his head in exasperation. 'I literally have no idea what you are talking about, Lady Cordelia. And I do not have time for riddles and foolishness.'

Baron Roland's consort sighed and lifted a hand. 'It's very simple, archmagos,' she said. 'Either you open your gates or I'll have Sir Malcolm and his Knights here blow them off.'

The threat of violence against his forge horrified Kyrano, but he wasn't about to be dictated to by a consort.

Before he could respond to Lady Cordelia's threat, a heavy bass note of clattering gears and the motion of immense cogs sounded from within the gate housing. The twin leaves of the gate split apart and began to swing outwards with a ponderous, stately motion.

'What did you do?' demanded Kyrano, horrified at this gross intrusion within his sanctum sanctorum. 'This is a violation of the Cardinal Rights of the Mechanicus, as laid down by the Binary Saints themselves!'

'Not me,' said Cordelia, as the Knights marched through the opening gates with their weapons raised. 'I suspect you'll find that Adept Nemonix just let us in.'

The trucks of the progena race towards the stalled convoy of fuel tankers. Coming from who knows where, the tanker crews were within sight of safety when the rock fall that sealed the tunnel also sealed their doom.

Raym Bartaum stands in the rear cargo compartment. He has an exotic-looking weapon pulled tight to his shoulder, one with a conical snout and a coiled magnetic accelerator. I recognise it as a Mark XXXV Magnacore. Bartaum handles it with the aplomb of a veteran soldier.

The Knights have seen what I see and know what is coming.

Twin bolts of blue-white fire streak from Bartaum's plasma gun. Too fast for the eye to follow, the first strikes the tanker I broke open when I was driven to my knees. The second punches through the armoured skin of the tanker behind it.

The promethium within ignites with a deafening thunderclap.

And the darkness is banished utterly as tens of thousands of litres of volatile fuel gel explode. The blast vaporises Bartaum's vehicle instantly as a roiling

pressurised fireball fills the tunnel with a deafening roar.

Searing heat fills the pilot's compartment of my armour. Awful, intolerable heat that fuses many of its delicate control mechanisms. I feel the skin of my arms burn on the metal restraints of the throne mechanicum.

I feel the pain of those fires, but I will survive.

The genestealers have no protection at all.

I see them consumed as the churning clouds of flame burn them to greasy residue on my canopy. The flame roars back down the tunnel, burning the markings from our armour and rendering us equals. House gonfalons and kill banners are burned to ash, and our weapons are rendered useless in the blink of an eye as ammo feeds and fuel flasks detonate.

The pain is incredible, but survivable.

I hear the screeching cries of the aliens over the roar of the flames. Like insects burning under the lens of a magnifying glass or a mutant with its belly torn open and wailing to be finished.

The heat continues to rise, the confines of the tunnel intensifying the power of the inferno. I turn my armour towards the light above us and push through the billowing clouds of living flame.

'With me!' I shout over the vox. The heat within my armour sears my throat. I can barely breathe, and I can only hope my Knights and Hawkshrouds hear the order.

Sealed within the Capitol Imperialis, Magos Vril and his adepts will be safe from the fires spreading farther down the tunnel. If any other xenos organism has managed to follow us into the tunnels, it will be in for a fiery shock.

I stagger through the hellish conflagration. Each step I take is a victory. The heat in my armour is too much.

My vision blurs. Sweat coats me like a second skin.

I push on.

Every auspex and external sensory apparatus is gone, flash-burned in the instant of the tankers' detonation. I can no longer tell how far I am from the surface.

As I climb the trammelled slope of the tunnel, the rhomboid of daylight grows larger and larger. I can almost feel the cold, clear air being pulled down into the underground network. I open my canopy and suck in a lungful of fresh air, gasping as the chill of the surface touches my skin. The sensation is painful, but welcome. My eyes hurt and I blink away stinging tears.

I see a blurred, angular shape silhouetted at the mouth of the tunnel and know we have escaped.

‘Sir Gregor?’ I say. ‘Sir Martyn?’

Neither of the Knights I left to guard the entrance answers, but I am not surprised. So many of my armour’s systems are damaged or destroyed that it is a wonder I am able to stay upright, let alone maintain command and control.

I keep going, and the shape resolves in front of me.

It is not Sir Gregor.

Nor is it Sir Martyn.

The lictor vaults towards my open canopy. Its legs slam into my chest and whipping lengths of clawed, sinewed hooks dig into the plates of my armour. A tentacle-fronded jaw spreads wide, exposing fangs that hinge out in all directions.

I cannot move. I cannot evade this attack.

Mantis claws like scythes stab for my chest.

Before they impale me, a length of scorched steel intercepts them. Broken saw-blade teeth roar a handspan from my skull.

The reaper twists and slices up, tearing through the lictor’s arms. The creature looses a howling screech of pain. The flesh-hooks embedded in my armour loosen as the lictor fights to free itself.

It is not fast enough.

Tellurus brings his blade back down and hacks the beast in two with dazzling speed. Alien blood detonates from its execution, drenching me in unclean viscera.

The shorn halves fall from my armour. Pink ropes of wet sinew still dangle from my canopy.

Aktis Bardolf appears at my side and uses the fused, useless remains of his battle cannon to scrape away the lictor’s remains. A number of bony, cartilaginous hooks remain embedded in the metal cowl of my compartment.

‘Told you we were being followed,’ he says.

APOTHEOSIS

Cordelia walked with her head held high. As the consort of Baron Roland, she was no stranger to unusual places. House Cadmus had travelled to planets so different from Vondrak or Raisa that she was surprised they were still considered part of the Imperium.

But the interior of a forge-temple was something else entirely. Its workings, layout and ergonomics owed nothing to the human form and everything to the logic of a facility for machinery.

Its iron-framed processionals, steam-wreathed halls and pounding mechanical heartbeat were not for those whose concerns were of flesh and blood. She sensed, if not outright hostility from the temple, at least a measure that she was walking in a place that did not welcome flesh.

Behind her, Malcolm's Knights kept their pace slow, one step for every ten the consorts took. Their weapons were locked and loaded, and though she hoped they would not need to fight, the threat of violence was a very real possibility.

She emerged into a wide, glass-roofed space: a cathedral to the machine. Its walls were iron panels, acid-etched with scriptural binary, holy circuits and cog-toothed emblems of Mars. Silk-steel banners hung from soaring arches overhead, and beams of variegated light in precise spectra arced through the space.

A vast engine dominated the far wall, like a templum organ, but belching steam instead of hymnala and criss-crossed by clanking chains, slowly rotating gears and hissing pistons that boomed and thudded like the heartbeat of a sleeping god.

Where a templum might be expected to have pews upon which its worshippers might rest their weary bodies, this machine temple made no such concessions to comfort. The floor was metalled, inscribed with angular lines, strange symbols and annotations that looked like the interior of a logic engine but were probably something else.

‘Lady Cordelia,’ said a black-robed figure at the foot of the giant machine wall. His voice easily carried the hundreds of yards between them, amplified by either the temple’s acoustics or some innate property of his voice.

‘Adept Nemonix,’ she replied.

With her knightly escort, Cordelia marched towards the adept. A dataproctor, that was what Kyrano had called him. She didn’t know exactly what that meant, but didn’t let that show.

Nemonix was not alone. A shape limned with a haze of light was partially obscured by the adept.

‘Is that a hologram?’ said Cassia, clutching her book to her chest as though it were the most important thing in the world.

Right now, Cordelia supposed it was.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘It’s a hologram.’

‘Who do you think it is?’ asked Aeliana.

Cordelia said nothing, knowing that Nemonix would be able to hear every word that passed between them. It didn’t do to reveal your ignorance to an enemy.

They were halfway across the cathedral when Archmagos Kyrano emerged from a chain-hung transept. Blessed oil ran down the chains, and the ten skitarii warriors that followed him in glossy crimson battleplate gleamed with viscous trails of lubricant. Gleaming droplets fell from the perforated barrels of the tech-guards’ oversized weaponry.

‘I think the archmagos is as angry as you,’ said Aeliana.

‘Angrier, I’d say,’ replied Cassia.

‘He’s going to get even angrier in a minute,’ said Cordelia.

Neither Adept Nemonix nor his unknown hologram had moved or said anything further since his initial acknowledgement.

At last, Cordelia and her Knights reached Nemonix at exactly the same time as Kyrano and his skitarii, a precise moment that couldn’t have come about by accident.

The hologram accompanying Nemonix regarded the skitarii impassively. Its body language was maddeningly familiar to Cordelia, and it took her a moment to understand why.

‘Surely these guns aren’t necessary?’ said the hologram. ‘After all, I’m on your side.’

‘What is the meaning of this?’ demanded Kyrano. ‘Why is this hologram addressing me as though it has any right to a voice? And why do you have no identifying signifier or biometrics within your noospheric aura? I demand you

identify yourself.'

'I am Adept Nemonix of the dataproctors,' said Nemonix. 'And I am here at your express request, archmagos. I know you have no memory of such a request, but such is the price of utilising the unique skill-set of a dataproctor. I was never here and never will be. I leave no trace of my passing, no evidence of my work. All that remains are the results of what was asked of me.'

'Except that's not quite true,' said Cordelia.

'You were right,' said the hologram, turning its shimmering gaze upon her. 'She's a feisty one, this one.'

'I pity you, Adept Nemonix,' said Cordelia. 'How lonely a life must it be that you need a hologram of yourself to keep you company?'

'Not lonely at all,' replied Nemonix. 'And please spare me the psychoanalysis – I get enough of that from him.'

'Shall I tell you why I'm here?' said Cordelia.

'I already know why you're here.'

'I'm not sure you do.'

Nemonix sighed. 'I assure you that when it comes to a contest of who knows more, I'll win.'

'Neither of you should be here,' snapped Kyrano. 'This is *my* forge-temple.'

Cordelia fastened her gaze on the archmagos.

'By your actions, warriors of House Cadmus are dead,' she said. 'You don't get to talk here, you get to listen.'

'No, Lady Cordelia,' said Nemonix. '*You* get to listen. I came here with the express purpose of returning House Cadmus to the aegis of the Mechanicus. You know this. What you do not appreciate is that the outcome was never in doubt. Cadmus *will* restore the Cog to its heraldry and submit its future servitude to Mars or it will be destroyed.'

'I have Knights here who may see things differently.'

Nemonix laced his hands before him and walked through the assembled consorts. He glanced at Cassia as he passed and stopped before one of the Cadmus Knights.

'Sir Malcolm might not share your opinion,' said Nemonix.

The canopy of the Knight split open, the head-section opening to reveal the belligerent form of Sir Malcolm.

'This is your moment, Sir Malcolm,' said Nemonix. 'Seize this chance for greatness. You're ready to take command from Roland, and with the aid of the Mechanicus, House Cadmus will be yours.'

Malcolm glared down at Nemonix.

'You know the trouble with someone like me?' said Malcolm. 'If I can screw something up, I'll pick the worst possible time to screw it up because it's funnier that way.'

Nemonix might be inscrutable behind his mask, but the look of shock on the face of his hologram was priceless.

'I heard you,' said Nemonix. 'I heard you and Lady Cassia talking of accepting my offer. You told her to lie to Lady Cordelia.'

'At Lady Cordelia's request,' said Malcolm with a grin.

Cordelia held out a hand. Cassia handed her the book she carried.

'Let me explain it to you as simply as I can, Adept Nemonix,' said Cordelia. 'Cassia here is, as I'm sure you're aware, Sir Malcolm's consort. Like many Knightly consorts, she indulges her pastimes in quaintly anachronistic ways. Aeliana here plays her viola bereft of aural augmentation or dexterity enhancers. Aikaterina bore a child without pain balms or medicae-servitors. And Cassia here is an inveterate diarist. She keeps copious notes, all of them handwritten. You should see the chambers she shares with Malcolm in Golem Keep, wall-to-wall books, all filled with journal entries concerning her days. Everything from what she ate, who she saw and what she did and thought. I've only read the most recent of them, of course, and while I could do without the passages concerning Malcolm's prowess in the bedchamber, her detailed notes about you, Adept Nemonix, are *most* interesting.'

'Notes in a book? That's all you have?'

'*Detailed* notes,' said Cordelia. 'Including all the things I asked her and Malcolm to talk about openly. After your visit to my chambers, I realised you could probably hear and see everything that went on in Vondrak Prime. I just gave you what you wanted to hear. I made sure we never spoke openly and only communicated through Cassia's journal.'

Nemonix rounded on Malcolm.

'I heard you lay claim to Baron Roland's position,' he said. 'I know you want to lead Cadmus. It burns you every day that Roland keeps beating you in the Cull. It could all have been yours, Sir Malcolm – all you had to do was let me help.'

'You *really* don't understand us, do you, you stupid arse?' said Malcolm. 'A Knight has honour and duty hardwired into him from the moment of his Rite of Becoming. You really thought I'd betray Roland? I don't like him, I never have. I'm convinced I'd be a better leader for Cadmus, but if I have to take command without honour, then what's the point? I'll win the Cull soon enough, but I'll do

it without any damn help from you.'

Nemonix turned on his heel and stood before Archmagos Kyrano. His fury was obvious, and Cordelia tried not to let her satisfaction show.

'Lady Cordelia thinks she has the upper hand, but shall I show her how mistaken she is?'

'What do you mean?' said Kyrano.

'I mean that I *will* fulfil my obligation to you,' said Nemonix. 'Cadmus will either return to the Mechanicus or it will be destroyed. Show them.'

This last comment was directed towards his hologram, which held out a hand that stretched and grew into the outline of a shimmering pict capture.

Cordelia let out a sigh of relief as she saw a grainy image of Roland's Knight and a host of others emerging from a vast tunnel. They crossed an enormous turn-plate upon which sat a damaged hauler-engine.

The largest vehicle Cordelia had ever seen followed them, a towering leviathan of a thing. Every one of the Knights looked damaged, but at least they were alive.

'Right now, I have control of a dozen of Colonel Harun Rukanah's artillery pieces,' said Nemonix. 'Heavy guns all. Basilisks, Bombards and Manticores. And every one of them is currently targeted upon that turn-plate.'

Cordelia felt her skin grow clammy, but she had once last ace to play.

'How long do you think those other knightly houses under Mechanicus control will remain so when they learn what you did here?'

'They won't learn of it, that's the point,' said Nemonix. 'It's what I do.'

'I assure you they will,' said Cordelia. 'You might be able to manipulate machines and data, but you can't change what people remember, and I've made sure that every member of House Cadmus has read what Cassia wrote in her journal. They've made their own copies too. Every word she wrote of what you've tried to do here is part of their very *organic* brains.'

'And you think that matters?'

Cordelia knew she would never change Nemonix's mind, and turned to the one man who could.

'Of course it does,' said Cordelia to Archmagos Kyrano. 'Don't let him do this. Look at that pict-feed. Roland has done what you asked. He's brought the Binary Apostle back to Vondrak Prime. If you let him kill him, you're a traitor to your own kind, a murderer and a violator of human minds, no better than the beasts beyond the walls.'

Kyrano stared at the image the hologram was holding.

‘Adept Nemonix, is the Binary Apostle aboard that Capitol Imperialis?’ he said.

Nemonix cocked his head to the side, as though receiving a fresh data stream.

‘He is,’ confirmed Nemonix. ‘Contained within a Manifold engine of dubious provenance and limited lifespan. But do not let that concern you. I can bombard that turn-plate to kill those Knights without leaving so much as a scratch on the transport.’

Kyrano nodded, and looked hard at Cordelia and the book she carried. She could see him weighing up the potential outcomes, the return of the Binary Apostle set against the loss of a knightly house and the knowledge of what he had done here spreading to the others.

‘The only proof Cadmus has is ink scratched on paper,’ said Nemonix. ‘Irrelevant and inadmissible to the Mechanicus.’

‘But just the kind of very *human* thing the minds of the knightly houses will trust more than any binharic record that says otherwise.’

Cordelia saw him make his decision in those words.

‘Lady Cordelia, I have no memory of setting this adept to this task,’ said Kyrano, ‘but I accept that I did. That Baron Roland has undoubtedly done the Mechanicus a great service is beyond question.’

‘Then call him off,’ demanded Cordelia.

‘Adept Nemonix,’ said Archmagos Kyrano. ‘Any orders I have given you in relation to House Cadmus, I now rescind. I hereby sever any and all connections between us, and order you to vacate my forge-temple immediately.’

Nemonix nodded. ‘Very well, if that is your desire.’

‘It is,’ said Cordelia. ‘Now get out.’

Nemonix ignored her and said, ‘I accept your rescinding order, but I assure you, archmagos, this will set a precedent impossible to resist in future. You should prepare yourself for more of the knightly houses to follow the example you have allowed Cadmus to set.’

Kyrano watched the images of the Knights return, escorting the Capitol Imperialis through the outskirts of the city. Battered, bloodied, but unbowed.

The archmagos stepped aside, leaving a path for Nemonix to make his way from his forge-temple.

‘You may be right, Nemonix,’ he said, ‘But perhaps such a heroic example will be no bad thing.’

We return to Vondrak Prime through the very same gate we left. As Magna Preceptor, it is my right to enter the city first, but I order Aktis Bardolf and

Tellurus to march at my side.

'This victory belongs to us all,' I tell them.

A deputation of the Mechanicus awaits us, three full companies of skitarii led by Archmagos Kyrano. Malcolm's Knights and a deputation of Sacristans form up in an honour guard, together with a host of nobility.

I see Cordelia and our consorts, bearing the house banners, and smile as I see her holding my personal heraldry.

The transfer of protection is made with almost unseemly haste, and Archmagos Kyrano's skitarii escort the lumbering, battle-scarred Capitol Imperialis towards his forge-temple.

House Hawkshroud follow it through the city, unwilling to abandon their duty of care until the final transfer of the Binary Apostle's Manifold engine is complete.

Their devotion to duty is exemplary.

Despite my reservations on the durability of Sir Tellurus, he has survived the flight from Vikara. His armour is smoking and marches with painful steps, quite literally on its last legs. Whatever Sacristans he has will have their work cut out for them in making him battle-ready again.

Escorted by Malcolm's Knights, we make our way through the streets to Verdus Ferrox. None of us speak, for it is obvious to those who have come to greet us that not all of those who set out have returned.

When we reach Verdus Ferrox, I am shocked at the damage I see. The tyranid hosts have not yet infested the city, but I see evidence of a terrible battle.

'What happened here?' I ask, as I walk my armour backwards into a repair berth. Sacristans swarm over it, disconnecting feed lines, locking it in the berth and preparing me for disconnection.

'Just a wee skirmish,' says Malcolm. 'Some tyranid beasts thought they'd get a head start on their invasion. We had other ideas.'

I nod, wincing as the spinal plugs withdraw from my neck.

Stiff from so long in my armour, I clamber over the curved lip of my cowl, taking a moment to pull a bony hook left by the lictor free. I close my fist over it, thinking that it might make an interesting little trophy.

I climb down the rungs inset in the body of my armour and drop to the ground. My legs are unsteady, and my inner ear has not yet fully restored my sense of balance in a human frame.

Cordelia is there to support me. Her arm goes around my shoulder and she plants a kiss on my lips. She grimaces, perhaps tasting the last residue of the

lictor's blood.

'You need a bath,' she says. 'You stink.'

I am about to answer her when I hear a crash of metal on stone. The sound sends adrenaline jolting through me, and I roll my shoulders before remembering I am no longer in my armour.

House Cadmus Sacristans rush to Sir Tellurus. His armour has finally given out under the strain. His mount lies on its side, sparking and convulsing like a man in the throes of a *grand mal* seizure.

With Cordelia still supporting me, I run to the fallen Knight. What the armour feels, the pilot feels, and the pain of such bio-feedback will be agonising.

'Get him out of there!' I shout. 'Now!'

The Sacristans get to work on the shuddering Knight, and as I watch their efforts, I cannot help but think that Tellurus is resisting their efforts in some way.

Almost as though he does not want their help.

Then the canopy of the armour opens, and I see why Tellurus never speaks unless clad in armour. I understand in that moment something of what has driven Tellurus to become a Freeblade.

Sir Tellurus is not a *sir* at all.

Tellurus is a woman.

House Cadmus will not fight for Vondrak.

We answered a petition for aid, and have rendered unto the Mechanicus that which was asked of us. The Imperium will fight Hive Fleet Hydra, but it will fight it without House Cadmus. I do not make such a decision lightly, but after Cordelia informed me of the events taking place in my absence, I had no choice but to withdraw Cadmus from the conflict.

The warrior in me wants to kill Archmagos Kyrano for what he has done, the lives he has cost my house, but, as ever, Cordelia is the cooling wind to my raging fire. I see that no good can come of such a confrontation, but from the ashes of Kyrano's plotting, we have at least secured our independence from Mars forever.

I will carve the names of the fallen on the arch within the Vault Transcendent. To the dead of House Cadmus and House Hawkshroud, I will add the names of as many of the drill abbots and progena as I can discover. Without them, we would not have triumphed, and this honour is the least I can do them.

What has become of Adept Nemonix, I do not know. I doubt anyone on Vondrak knows. That he and his kind are considered necessary by the

Mechanicus makes me doubly glad to be free of their interference.

Any organisation that relies on dishonourable means of enforcing its will is not worthy of my service. It will take a great deal of rebuilding before House Cadmus will answer another summons from the Mechanicus.

The Knights of House Hawkshroud have elected to remain on Vondrak. Aktis Bardolf and I have sworn binding oaths of brotherhood to unite our houses. When last I saw the Knights of Hawkshroud march, I was proud to see a Cadmus sigil borne upon their sword arms.

At Cordelia's recommendation, I have not told Bardolf of Archmagos Kyrano's plot or how close we all came to annihilation at the hands of Nemonix.

Some things are better off unspoken.

And that is not all that will go unspoken.

In the wake of revelations concerning the true identity of Sir Tellurus, I sealed Verdus Ferrox and immediately ordered the Cadmus Sacristans to repair the Knight's armour.

The last of her line, Tellia, as is her true name, sat upon her dead father's throne mechanicum as Hive Fleet Hydra destroyed her home world and slaughtered the rest of her family. Rather than accepting her fate and letting death claim her, she fought back and escaped in a suit of Knight armour that resisted her control at every step.

It speaks volumes to her courage and character that she was able to pilot a suit of Knight armour without years of training, or going mad with pain at a connection without the correct input sockets drilled in her spine.

That a woman should be a pilot of a Knight goes against every tenet of knighthood and tradition. I should strip her of her armour and have her castigated for defiling millennia of tradition.

But I will not.

I owe Tellia my life, and I am bound by the same knightly code that should see her punished to honour my debt to her.

More than that, I admire her. I should not, but I do.

Cordelia has exacted a promise that I will never speak of Tellia, only of Tellurus. A hard promise to make, as deception is something every Knight of virtue abhors.

But in all my years of marriage to Cordelia, I have learned that when she sets her mind to something, it is best not to get in her way.

Sir Tellurus has also elected to remain on Vondrak, hoping to find and slay the tervigon beast that wiped out her line.

An honourable quest, but one I fear can only end badly.

House Cadmus is leaving Vondrak.

But there are always other enemies to fight, fresh wars in which to earn glory and renown.

I feel the call of my armour.

The Knights of Cadmus will march again.

GATES OF THE DEVOURER

DAVID ANNANDALE

There was no peace in sleep. Instead, there were the memories and the rehearsals of war. Her dreams shook with the thunder of her footsteps. At the gesture of an arm, firestorms swept the world. The landscapes were far beneath her gaze of judgement. There was no order to the dreams. They were all her wars and none of them. Their only constant, their only truth, was her towering being.

In the dreams, her identity was whole.

But there would never be peace.

She woke, and felt diminished.

Princeps Captain Ferantha Krezoc of the Legio Pallidus Mor, commander of the Warlord *Gloria Vastator*, rose from her cot and stood on the cold flagstones of her quarters. She felt the texture of the stone beneath her feet. She breathed as a mere human. She forced herself to see and acknowledge the facts of the chamber – the iron of her chair and desk, the Legio banner hanging from the vaulted ceiling, the gear wheel and skull of the shrine to the Omnissiah that dominated the wall opposite the door. The process was necessary. As incomplete as she was at this moment, she had to accept her reality. She had to retain the clear sense of Ferantha Krezoc, always, or she would vanish into *Gloria Vastator's* manifold, and so fail in her duty as princeps.

She acknowledged the pain of not being joined to the Warlord. That was her reality too, and to deny it would be a fracture of mental discipline.

But the illusion of completion in her dreams… Ah, that was a form of truth too. The reality of the illusion could not be ignored. It was the constant of her periods of unconsciousness (she could not call them *rest*). It was the pull of *Gloria Vastator* reaching into her soul. The dreams, Krezoc thought, were gateways to the God-Machine. Through them, she and the great engine's machine-spirit spoke to each other. They were not truly one in the dreams. That was the lie. But

the lie was the representation of the great truth. The truth of the bond. Waking brought the pain of disconnection, and the anxiety, tamped down from desperation only through force of will, to re-establish the link. To once more feel the mechadendrites of the Mind Impulse Unit jacking into the ports on her spine and at the base of her skull.

The phantom-limb ache was familiar. The pain greeted her at every waking. She would not be without the illusion in the dreams, though. It was a promise. It was the hope she would soon pass through the gate between human and machine once more.

Today there was a difference in her coming to consciousness. She felt an intuitive certainty. She and the Titan were about to be called upon to march.

Something was coming. War was coming. A new tide of fire and blood was drawing nigh.

Lord Governor Albrecht Feisler of Khania also woke from troubled dreams. His dreams were nightmares, scrabbling, swarming, writhing visions in which he sank beneath an ocean of clacking, ripping claws. He woke himself with a moaning shriek. He was entangled in the bedclothes so tightly he could barely move. His right arm was immobilised by a grave-swaddling of sweat-soaked sheets. He fought free, his breath becoming a whine of distress. He stumbled away from the bed. His legs were weak. The carpets of his bedchamber felt like a rough crust over the ocean that had been swallowing him. He did not trust it. He moved warily across the floor until he reached the balcony windows, then flung them open and ran to the parapet.

A warm, foetid east wind blew into his face. It carried the blended stenches of Hive Gelon's manufactoria and of the swampland beyond the city's walls. Hive Gelon was an industrial heap of smokestacks and cathedral spires. The military output of the forge world was vital to the campaigns in the subsector, and Gelon's Taurox and artillery plants never ceased their activity. The habs for the vast majority of the hive's citizens were little more than immense dormitoria attached to the manufactoria. Life in the hives of Khania was a state of eternal urgency. Production could never keep up with the off-world demand, so the people worked harder, faster, and the elites of Khania grew richer. The Administratum lords and the barons of industry inhabited the towers that rose through, but rarely pierced, the clouds of brown and grey and dirty yellow. Even Feisler's chambers, in the highest tower, were shrouded by the smog.

In the predawn gloom, the smoke was lit by the orange flames of burn-off. The

wind was strong enough to tear rents in the stinking clouds. The privilege of Feisler's position was not the panorama of Gelon: the hive's vistas were grey rockcrete, grey metal and grey streets. The land beyond was grey too, a darker grey of slag heaps, lakes of toxic sludge and the beginning of the swamp. There was life beyond the city's walls. The life that thrived on the leavings of Gelon's industry was as grim as the hive itself – an explosion of tumorous growths, sluggish reptiles and swarms of insects as dense as torrential rain.

No, the privilege of Feisler's position was not the view of Gelon. It was the sight of the stars. He could not see them every night; the wind had to be strong enough. He saw them now, through the streamers of smoke. He gazed at them, drawing on their silver light for strength, using them to banish the dreams. So it was Feisler, alone among the people of Khania, who witnessed the fall of the stars.

There were so many. They came as red filaments, drawing a scarlet veil over the sky. Then the darkness came, worse than any dream, and Feisler ran from the balcony, his world's desperate cry for help already resounding in his soul.

Khania shrieked, but no one heard. The shadow in the warp had come to the planet ahead of the first spores. From the perspective of neighbouring systems, Khania had fallen silent. Feisler and his subjects did not know they were already under attack before the crimson dawn. They were ignorant of the threat, except perhaps in the torment of their dreams.

But the silence itself was noted. It was monstrous in its significance. Khania screamed in the silence, and the Imperium answered.

The nearest system was Sevasmos. On Katara, the sole inhabited world, the Astra Militarum regiment of the 66th Kataran Spears embarked for Khania. The mobilisation was total. Every soldier in the Spears knew what the silence meant. The Devourer had come, and if Khania fell, Katara would be next.

Captain Harth Deyers paused on the ramp of the heavy lifter. His company of Leman Russ tanks was aboard, ready to be transported to the cruiser *Admiral Dammann* waiting at low anchor. These were his last moments on Katara. He hoped to return. He did not expect to. He was going into battle against the tyranids. The only honest hope he could cling to was victory, not survival. Could he think of a better end to his decades of service than to die for the salvation of Katara itself? No, he could not.

As long as salvation was achieved.

'Captain?'

He glanced over his shoulder. Lehanna Platen, his gunner on the Leman Russ *Bastion of Faith*, was descending the ramp. Deyers and Platen had served together for more than fifty years in *Bastion*. Platen was a sniper with the cannon. Deyers was not surprised she had caught his hesitations. 'Just having a last look, Platen,' he said. Beyond the space port, the lights of Chreontiades illuminated the falling evening. The city was the magnificent jewel of Katara. Crystal towers bounced the light between them. The elevations of the city flashed and twinkled. The walls of the towers were treated armourglass. They were as strong as they were inspiring, but at night it was easy to perceive the city as being as insubstantial as light itself.

This was a sight worth preserving. A city worth dying to protect.

Platen joined Deyers. Standing beside him, she barely reached his shoulder. She was a short, hard, barrel of a trooper, destined from birth, it seemed, to live in the confined spaces of the gun controls. She folded her arms and nodded at the lights of Chreontiades. 'How do you like our odds?' she said.

'Of winning or surviving?'

Platen snorted at the mention of survival. 'Winning,' she said.

'They're good,' said Deyers. 'We won't be fighting alone.'

'Are the Adeptus Astartes coming?'

'No, but two Legios of the Adeptus Titanicus are. So is the Navy.' Deyers spoke for his own benefit more than for Platen's. She entered combat phlegmatically. That she was even asking these questions showed how seriously she took the coming war. 'The Navy will destroy the hive ships. The Legios will obliterate the tyranid ground forces. Our role will be a supporting one.'

'A sound strategy,' Platen said. 'Very nice.' Her tone was hard and knowing, shaped by too much experience. 'So there is nothing to go wrong, is there?'

The wreckage of ships filled the vicinity of the Khania System's Mandeville point. Krezoc arrived on the bridge of the Pallidus Mor's transport *Nuntius Mortis* as the ship translated from the immaterium. Collision warnings sounded. Hololithic screens to either side of the oculus were dense with red runes as cogitators fought to keep up with the trajectories of the larger fragments.

'Ahead slow,' Shipmaster Belletow called. There was no question of evasion for a vessel as ponderous as the *Nuntius*. It would have to rely on its bulk and shielding to pass through the debris field intact.

As she made her way to the forward area of the bridge, Krezoc felt the vibrations in the deck from the first impacts. In the oculus, the darkness flashed

with the discharges of straining void shields. A huge chunk of a hull rumpled up through the oculus' field of vision. Exterior statuary and banks of silent guns were still intact too. Krezoc slowed, bracing. The wreckage slammed into the superstructure of the *Nuntius*. The bridge shook as if worried in the jaws of a giant grox. More klaxons sounded. Krezoc kept her balance. She moved on, to where Marshal Eras Balzhan stood before the oculus. To her left, she saw the other two senior princeps arriving. Each commanded a maniple of Titans. The demi-Legio dispatched to Khania consisted of four maniples altogether. A strong showing, Krezoc thought, regardless of the size of the force being sent by the Imperial Hunters. There had been no communication yet from the other Legio.

The *Nuntius* shook again. Screeches of binharic cant flew between the tech-priests on the bridge. Krezoc wondered how close the void shields were to collapse. There would have to be contact with the Imperial Hunters now. The campaign was already going awry.

As they do, Krezoc thought calmly. *As they always do.*

There should have been a large squadron of Imperial Navy ships on station. Instead, there was only the debris field, pulsing with the afterglow of cataclysmic explosions. The prow of a cruiser glided over the *Nuntius*, its severed end still blazing with ignited plasma. The transport moved through clouds of frozen human corpses. Scattered through the Imperial ruins were chunks of organic, honeycombed structures. They left a comet trail of organic soup as they spun end over end through the void.

Krezoc crossed the open space of the bridge to join Balzhan. 'Do we know what happened?' she asked.

'We know enough,' the old man said. The set of his jaw was grim. The marshal was squat, built heavily about the shoulders. Where Krezoc was wiry and taller than most of the other princeps in the Pallidus Mor, Balzhan's build seemed well-suited to brawling in a Militarum commissary. His skull, clean-shaven like hers, was encased in a metal brace, bolted into the bone as if holding his head together. The cross-sections of the brace were further mechadendrite ports. Both his eyes were augmetics, dark jewels shimmering darkly in his sockets when light caught their facets. 'It seems the Navy arrived at the same time as the Kataran Sixty-Sixth,' Balzhan said.

'Unfortunate,' said Krezoc. The intent of the campaign had been for the Imperial Navy to strike first, taking out the bio-ships and clearing the way for the Spears and the Legios. Simultaneous translation from the warp might have split the attention of the Navy, especially if the Spears' vessel had stuck to its

mission and made straight to send the troops planetside.

'Unfortunate,' Balzhan agreed, 'but not the determining factor.' He swept an arm at the careening ruins. 'The Navy did not send enough. Their vessels were overwhelmed by the enemy.' He paused. 'They managed to destroy one of the bio-ships, at least.'

The two officers marked the Navy's loss in silence. For a moment, Krezoc allowed herself to see more than the tactical disaster. She saw the specks of human debris for what they were – tens of thousands of lives ended in a lost struggle.

The Pallidus Mor had the reputation of icy indifference to death. The reputation was false. The gulf between indifference and a necessary acceptance of the realities of war was a vast one. The other princeps now reached them. 'Did the Spears make planetfall?' Merys Drahn asked.

'We don't know yet,' Balzhan told her.

Krezoc hoped they had. The Pallidus Mor had fought by the side of the 66th before. The campaign on Thoryvos had cemented a bond of shared sacrifice between the forces.

'And the enemy's position?' said Toven Rehliax.

Another impact, a hard one. Rehliax staggered. Balzhan was immobile, as if welded to the deck. He shrugged.

'Auspex!' Belletow shouted. 'It would be nice to know where we stand!'

'Readings coming through now, shipmaster,' Tech-Priest Thassanis announced.

'Port display,' Belletow said.

The collision trajectories vanished. They were replaced by a hololithic map of Khania's sphere. A tyranid bio-ship appeared, a foul parasite even in schematic form, over the central landmass.

'The enemy is in geo-synchronous orbit over the region of Hive Gelon,' the Mechanicus adept continued, his voice flat and electronically grating.

'How many ships?' Balzhan asked.

'One. The Navy destroyed the other. We are also receiving the transponder signal from the Imperial Hunter transport *Currus Venatores*. There are no other Imperial vessels in the system.'

Balzhan grunted. Krezoc winced as the shape of the conflict took form. The critical first stage of the campaign had failed. The tyranids may have been wounded, but even with a single ship, they held the advantage.

'Analysing vox-traffic from the surface,' Thassanis said. A few moments passed, during which the transport emerged from the worst of the debris field.

Belletow ordered the klaxons silenced. ‘Combat vox activity from the Kataran 66th confirmed,’ said Thassanis.

‘Their situation?’ Balzhan asked.

‘Sub-optimal.’

Dire, Krezoc thought.

‘The *Currus* is hailing us,’ Thassanis continued.

‘Open the channel,’ Belletow said. ‘Bridge vox-casters.’

Thassanis complied.

‘*This is Marshal Syagrius of the Imperial Hunters*,’ a voice boomed. Even with the vox distortion, the tones were deep, the voice cultured. ‘*I would speak with the commanding officer of the Pallidus Mor.*’

Balzhan moved to the work stations. A junior officer approached with a hand unit. ‘This is Marshal Balzhan,’ he said. ‘I am glad to hear from you, Marshal Syagrius.’

‘*Quite*,’ said Syagrius. ‘*I am not glad of the battlefield conditions*.’

‘They are not what we had hoped,’ Balzhan agreed. He sounded less aggrieved than Syagrius. In the culture of the Pallidus Mor, hope was an abstraction, a concept that was understood, but foreign. Victory was a duty, not an expectation. What was expected were the vicious contingencies of war. The situation over Khania was just another of those.

‘*You will agree that direct engagement with the surviving bio-ship is out of the question*,’ Syagrius said.

Krezoc bristled at the Imperial Hunter’s condescending tone. His words were more like an order than an observation.

If Balzhan was offended, he showed no sign. ‘I do agree,’ he said.

The transports were heavily shielded, but did not have the armaments to take on the tyranids. At least three Imperial Navy cruisers had been shattered. The transports would be taken apart in short order.

‘*We have little choice*,’ Syagrius went on. ‘*We cannot land in the near vicinity of the combat without being exposed to the bio-ship’s weapons.*’

‘You propose coming down at a point below the enemy’s horizon,’ said Balzhan.

Drahn whistled. ‘A long march,’ she said. The maniples would have to cross hundreds of miles back towards the besieged hive. Gelon and the Spears might well fall long before they could be reinforced.

‘No choice,’ said Krezoc. Just as there was no choice to fight until the unknown moment when further Imperial Navy forces would arrive.

‘*We have chosen a suitable landing site*,’ Syagrius said. ‘*I will have the coordinates sent to you*.’

There was a snap from the speakers. The Imperial Hunter had ended the transmission.

The three princeps exchanged looks. *Arrogant bastard*, Krezoc thought, and saw her sentiment reflected in the faces of the others. Battle coordination with the other Legio was not going to be easy.

This is just another vicissitude of combat, Krezoc told herself. *We will march through it as well*.

‘Princeps of the Pallidus Mor,’ Balzhan called, his ancient croak strong and echoing across the bridge. ‘Assemble your maniples. Prepare for war.’

After the xenos rain, an Imperial hail descended on Khania. It came down far to the east of Hive Gelon, on a hard, cracked plain of thorny scrub. Immense coffin shapes burned the sky with their contrails. Tectonic thunder boomed across the land as they slammed into the earth. Huge clouds of dust billowed high into the air. For a short while they reduced visibility on the ground to zero, blinding the Secutarii troops unloading from lifters. As high as the dust went, it did not reach the tops of the colossal monoliths. Now their hatches dropped to the ground, with more thunder and more dust. The God-Machines strode out from within their coffins, taking their first shattering steps on the surface of Khania.

The late afternoon light penetrated the command chamber in the head of *Gloria Vastator*. Krezoc saw it with her eyes, and with the sensors of the Warlord. She was whole once again, linked to the machine-spirit, fused with it in the manifold. And in the magnificent wholeness, she was also split. She held the power to annihilate armies in her immense arms, and she was the small human in the head of the monster. She surveyed the landscape with the senses of *Vastator*, and she looked upon them with her own. She revelled in the fusion. Taking the machine-spirit’s will in hers, she was suffused with transcendent power. Even so, she maintained a strong awareness of her physical body and her human identity. The split consciousness assured the safe function of the fusion with the God-Machine. Krezoc must remain Krezoc, or be devoured by *the Warlord*.

Below her throne, on her right and her left, were the four positions of the moderati. Their wills were the extensions of her own, controlling the weapon systems of the Titan. The weapons existed for her as clusters of power on her shoulders and arms. Her left shoulder: the carapace-mounted Apocalypse missile launcher. Her right shoulder: the Vulcan mega-bolter. Her left arm: the volcano

cannon. Her right arm: the quake cannon.

In her will: the power to melt a world.

Her adamantium body took a ponderous step. Then another. She commanded her arms of annihilation to rise, and they did. The beast that was the machine-spirit obeyed her. She completed its being just as it did hers. They were a unity of war. Each had felt the pain of the other's absence. Now they were one. Now they wished for the fulfilment of purpose. They needed an enemy to exterminate.

'Systems report,' Krezoc said. She knew the answers she would receive. She would know if the great body were in pain. But the details of its state were the duties of others to monitor and to experience. Speaking to the moderati and to the rest of the crew served another purpose, as well. The act of moving her lips helped maintain her consciousness of the flesh. It kept Krezoc the human whole.

Divisions that preserved totalities. This was the paradox of princephood.

One after another, the voices sounded in her ears, electronic transmissions from the reaches of the God-Machine's body.

'*Volcano cannon, status optimal.*'

'*Apocalypse missiles, status optimal.*'

'*Power plant, status optimal.*'

'*Void shields, status optimal.*'

Near or far, in the command chamber or deep in the core of the torso, they were all transformed into the same register. Human beings spoke the words, but the words became impulses sent to Krezoc by the vast being of the Warlord. They were components of the greater consciousness.

The Titanic paradox again: the voices were the confirmation of what Krezoc already knew, and they were the expressions of the crew's personal realities.

Gloria Vastator moved away from its coffin ship, away from the landing site and into the wider plain. Krezoc directed it to an open position and then held there, waiting for the rest of her maniple to form up around the Warlord.

Vastator's smaller brethren arrived. Each a colossus, but each overshadowed by the Warlord's bulk. The Reaver *Tempestas Deorem* and the Warhounds *Canis Ignem*, *Canis Vindictae* and *Fidelis Venator* shook the ground with their steps. A gathering of might, the maniple a great fist of unimaginable force, itself part of the larger assembly of the demi-Legio. A few hundred yards ahead of Krezoc's position, Balzhan's command maniple was forming up around his Warlord, *Ferrum Salvator*.

As the dust clouds settled, the Secutarii, the augmetically enhanced infantry of the Legios, moved in to take up their stations near the feet of the Titans. The

Pallidus Mor had come to Khania, and would soon be ready to march.

Another Legio had come, too, though. The Imperial Hunters were already assembled. To the west, the ground rose gradually for a few miles. The God-Machines of the Hunters were silhouetted against the sky, bestriding the ridge. The pale green and white of their armour was resplendent, even in the overcast day. The bone-ivory and night-black of the Pallidus Mor was funereal in contrast. The wind snapped the banners flying above the shoulders of the Hunters' Titans. The symbol of the Imperial Hunters was unfurled over the planet they had come to take back from the xenos. Black geometric shapes against a yellow backdrop formed a stylised torch – three small triangles radiating from the top of a circle, one large triangle pointing downwards. At the centre of the formation towered Syagrius' Warlord, *Augustus Secutor*.

The Imperial Hunters sounded their battle-horns in unison, as if declaring the campaign begun while the forces of the Pallidus Mor were still forming up. The hail of coffin ships had not yet ended.

The voice of Syagrius came across an open channel. '*Welcome to Khania, Pallidus Mor*,' he said.

That five words could be so laden with arrogance astounded Krezoc. Syagrius spoke with the presumption of command. With aristocratic condescension, he was addressing subordinates. The pretence of welcome was intended to put the warriors of the Pallidus Mor in their place.

Krezoc's lips curled in anger. *Vastator* took half a step, her frustration manifesting in the displacement of tons of metal.

'*Thank you, Marshal Syagrius*,' Balzhan answered. '*My compliments on your choice of staging ground.*' He was calm. There was no resentment in his voice, as if he had not noticed the insult, thus rendering it ineffective.

'*We have far to walk and little time*,' Syagrius said. '*Coordination is imperative.*'

'*Agreed*.'

'*Then you will also agree to the seniority of the Imperial Hunters in this joint mission.*'

Krezoc hissed. In the mindspace of the manifold, the machine-spirit reacted to her anger. It growled. It strained against her grip. Its pride was injured. It sought satisfaction.

Balzhan was silent.

'*I speak with all due respect to your rank, Marshal Balzhan*,' Syagrius continued, making it clear that he felt there was no respect due at all. '*Urgency*

and practicality force our hand. The Imperial Hunters are ready now. You are not. We have fielded five maniples to your four.'

'*As you say*,' Balzhan said after a moment. '*The situation is very clear to me, marshal. I will signal you when we are ready to proceed.*'

'*Very well*.'

Balzhan could have switched the exchange to a private channel between the commanders as soon as it had begun. He had not, and so every member of the demi-Legio had heard. Krezoc felt more than her personal anger reverberating through the being of the Warlord. The machine-spirit reacted to the injured pride of the entire crew. It chafed at the reins of her will. She held it and her temper back and opened a private vox-channel to Balzhan.

'*I know what you are going to say*,' he said before she could speak.

'Good. But I wanted you to know I was going to say it.'

'*Marshal Syagrius' manner is high-handed, but his rationale is correct.*'

'His rationale is blinkered. Relying on numbers and who got here first ignores the question of fitness to command.'

'*We have never fought by the side of the Imperial Hunters before. What evidence do you have that I am more fit to lead this campaign than Marshal Syagrius?*'

'The fact that he used such shallow justifications to assert his authority,' Krezoc said.

Balzhan was silent for a moment. Then he said, '*What is true is that we have no time for leadership disputes. The situation is what it is, and we can best serve our mission by making it work. That is our duty now.*'

He was right, and Krezoc had known the answers to her anger before she had begun the conversation. Balzhan was following the tradition of the Pallidus Mor, one that had been established over the course of millennia of grinding campaigns. The ideal was never present. The worst almost certainly was. Dismay and frustration were the roads to paralysis and defeat. There was reality and there was the mission. Duty lay in the recognition of one and the completion of the other by whatever means necessary.

Even so, there were things that needed to be voiced. Krezoc looked beyond her pride. Her concern was for the mission. Disaster had already struck. It would again, because such was the inexorable way of fate. But some disasters could be foreseen.

'*He is a marshal*,' Balzhan reminded her, as if reading her thoughts. '*He will not have arrived at his position through incompetence. His judgement regarding*

the landing was sound.'

'Yes,' Krezoc admitted, unconvinced. It wasn't Syagrius' skills or intelligence she doubted. It was his manifest assurance in his superiority that troubled her. Arrogance was a small step away from a belief in infallibility. And that was a gateway to catastrophe.

'*Then we march with clear eyes*,' Balzhan said.

'We march,' Krezoc repeated. *With wary eyes*, she thought.

The long walk to Gelon began. Syagrius set a fast pace. Detachments of Warhounds raced ahead of the main body of the demi-Legio, scouting for the first presence of the enemy. After the ridge, the terrain began a long, gradual slope downwards. Streams ran in jagged gullets, draining water towards the distant swamp. Here there was little moisture in the land itself, and only struggling life. Compared to the swamplands, it was a poor target for the tyranids. The invaders had come down instead on a huge concentration of biomass. And right beside the marshes, Gelon was another vast reservoir of prey.

The light faded from the first day of the march. Night fell, and there was still no sign of the foe. In the dark, lit by the glow from the command chambers like the eyes of furious gods, the Titans resembled a mountain chain moving across the plain. They were hulking shadows, their forms revealed in flashes when the arc lights of other engines, trained on the ground, happened to pass over them. The strides of the Warlords were ponderous and vast, covering huge areas with every step. The beat of the Reavers' and Warhounds' gait was faster. *Gloria Vastator*'s sensors picked up the complex battle rhythm.

The drumming ran through Krezoc's blood. It fed the machine-spirit's hunger for prey. Her need to strike, to tear the enemy apart, became more urgent. She felt the slipping away of the hours, and knew they marked the coming end of Hive Gelon and the Kataran 66th. At the same time, she perceived the rush of the forced march. She disapproved. Moving this quickly in the dark could propel the demi-Legios by their own momentum into the jaws of an enemy trap.

The warning came from three Warhounds at once. Two of them were Imperial Hunters. The third was one of the Pallidus Mor that Balzhan had ordered forward to keep pace with the Hunters.

'*Movement*,' one of the Hunters' scouts voxed on all channels. '*Enemy activity approaching from the west.*'

'*It's a swarming attack*,' the Pallidus Mor princeps warned. '*The front line is miles across.*'

‘*What bioforms?*’ Syagrius asked.

‘*Small ones. ’Gaunts*,’ the second Hunter replied.

‘*How deep?*’ Balzhan wanted to know.

‘*Very*,’ the Pallidus Mor Warhound answered.

‘*Ground infantry only?*’ said Syagrius.

‘*Affirmative, though we cannot see–*’

Syagrius cut him off. ‘*This is an attack designed to slow, not destroy. The xenos cannot muster the strength needed. Do not slow. Do not be distracted by the false threat. Full ahead.*’

Krezoc flipped to a command channel, narrowing it to Balzhan’s and Syagrius’ signals. ‘With respect, Marshal Syagrius,’ she said, ‘if we do not take some defensive measures, we leave ourselves vulnerable.’

‘*To what?*’ Syagrius said. ‘*Burn through the foe and advance. Speed is our priority and our weapon.*’ He snapped the channel closed.

‘*Do what you can*,’ Balzhan said. ‘*But maintain the pace. A gap in the forces will be worse.*’

‘Understood.’

Gloria Vastator was advancing with *Tempestas Deorem*. The Warhounds of the maniple were ranging ahead, though not as far as the Hunters’ scouts. Krezoc’s maniple was on the northern flank of the Titans’ formation. She had deployed the Warhounds to watch for a tyranid approach from that side. Now she called them back. They knew what was coming. What mattered now was to get through it.

The xenos wave arrived as the Warhounds rejoined the maniple. The Titans’ arc lights caught movement on the ground. The terrain undulated with a carpet of clawed monstrosities. From the height of the command chamber, the attack resembled a mass of insects flowing over the plain. There was no distinguishing individual tyranids. This perspective, Krezoc thought, showed her the truth of the enemy. The xenos beasts were not individuals. They were so many extensions of the Great Devourer’s will, no more a separate whole than the claws of a hand.

Or the cannon of the limb she now trained on the horde.

‘*Pallidus Mor*,’ Balzhan called to all the demi-Legio’s God-Machines. ‘*Exterminate the foe.*’

The Titans of Krezoc’s maniple fired as one. The end times rained down on the tyranids as all five Titans turned Vulcan mega-bolters on the nearest fringes of the swarm. *Tempestas* and *Vastator* followed up a few moments later with barrages from their Apocalypse missile launchers. With a rapid, deep, throbbing

rhythm, the mega-bolters scythed through the xenos horde, mass-reactive shells almost a foot long blasting them to mulch. The missiles hit in a staggered wave, fireballs marching through the tyranids, high explosives sending up wide clouds of dust and fragments of chitin. When the flames died, for a moment there was only scorched earth before the maniple.

The Titans marched forward into the breach, and as the xenos tide flowed in towards the gap, the Vulcans forced them back again.

'Maintain cohesion of the maniple,' Krezoc voxed. 'Warhounds, we'll have no need of scouting at this time.' If she sent the Warhounds out ahead now, into the middle of the xenos ocean, she ran the real risk of losing them. 'Concentrate your fire on the near enemy,' she continued. 'Thin their ranks for the Secutarii. *Tempestas Deorem*, you have the middle ground. We will strike deeper.'

The maniple responded at once. Three levels of destruction hit the 'gaunts. The Titans advanced slowly but steadily, the holocaust of mega-blaster and missile flights holding back the tyranids. Smaller numbers of the predators made it through to attempt to scale the legs of the God-Machines, but the Secutarii were holding their own against them.

Explosions lit the night as the two demi-Legios blasted the swarm. A solid wall of fire extended before the maniples of the Pallidus Mor, turning the landscape into a vision of burning fury.

Beyond the barrier, silhouetted by their own blasts, the God-Machines of the Imperial Hunters strode over the battlefield, wading deeper into the boiling mass of the tyranids. They were moving fast, opening up a space many miles wide between their ranks and those of the Pallidus Mor.

'Marshal Balzhan,' Krezoc voxed.

'*I see the problem, princeps*,' he responded. '*Marshal Syagrius*,' he signalled, keeping Krezoc in the channel. '*You will outpace us very quickly.*'

'*It is rather your maniples that are falling behind. Gelon has need of us, Marshal Balzhan. We must be bold.*'

'But we must not be reckless,' Krezoc put in. She did not care if she gave offence. 'You are leaving your Secutarii behind.'

'*They will do what they must*,' Syagrius said. '*As should all of us*.' His implication was clear. His offence was deliberate. '*These bioforms do not present a risk to the Titans. We must advance quickly while we have the opportunity.*'

'*The risks–*' Balzhan began.

'*Are less than the consequence of being too slow. I'm surprised I have to point*

this out.'

Syagrius severed the link.

'Marshal?' Krezoc asked.

'*Continue as you are*,' Balzhan said. '*Your example will be followed*.' He switched to the Legio-wide channel, then said, '*Command to all maniples. Extend your long-range fire to cover the Imperial Hunters*.'

Krezoc obeyed. She kept *Vastator*'s secondary weapons fire close to the region just beyond the Reaver's field of destruction, but now she raised the Warlord's right arm. Her will blended with that of Moderati Grevereign. They were two individuals, and they were one, and they were a whole with *Gloria Vastator*. The Titan's monstrous weapon limb reacted as if Krezoc were moving her own arm. Colossal energies and mechanisms were the blood circulation and contracting muscles of the Warlord. The charge built. Grevereign's focus oversaw the preparation of the weapon; Krezoc's selected the target.

A division of labour with the end goal of perfect synchronisation.

Always the paradox.

Ready, Grevereign signalled, and Krezoc felt the information as instinctively as if it had originated from her own nervous system.

The cannon fired. Concentrated through the weapon's crystal, raw energy became a beam of cataclysmic intensity that seared a trench through the 'gaunts rushing at the feet of the Imperial Hunters. The rocky surface of the plain turned molten. The trench glowed red. Scores of 'gaunts were vaporised on contact. Still more fell into the sudden flow of lava.

The hit was good, Krezoc thought, eyeing the long band of angry red in the distant dark. And it was still like trying to carve a path through the sea. If the Imperial Hunters pulled too far ahead, it would become impossible to provide them with adequate covering fire. Krezoc foresaw a decision looming for Balzhan. He would have to choose between preserving the combat effectiveness of the Pallidus Mor and embracing the impetuous charge of the Hunters.

Syagrius had not called back his scouts. The Warhounds continued to range ahead. Their reports came back over the vox at regular intervals, broadcast to the combined demi-Legios. *Updates about nothing*, Krezoc thought, fuming at the pointless risk. The deeper into the waves of 'gaunts the Warhounds went, the faster they had to go, just to keep the tyranids from swarming up their legs. The Imperial Hunters were using their long-range weapons to give the Warhounds cover, but Syagrius was urging them to go further and faster yet.

What warning do you seek? Krezoc wondered. *The enemy is here. Now. It is not*

a threat to dismiss. All she saw was a vainglorious race.

'*Light at the horizon*,' one of the Warhound princeps voxed. '*Multiple launches. They–*'

'*Exocrines!*' another shouted, just before their voices disappeared in prolonged bursts of static.

Krezoc saw the attack unfold at the edge of her visual range. She hadn't realised how far Syagrius had sent the scouts. Arcing streaks of burning plasma tore the darkness. They were the distinctive marks of the tyranid long-range bio-artillery. Somewhere beyond Krezoc's sight, the ponderous beasts with living cannons growing out of their backs had taken aim at the Warhounds. The attacks were coordinated, several plasma blasts coming down on a single target. The explosions were immense, turning the distance a blinding white. The static on the vox went on and on. Krezoc heard the fragments of a shout, and then there was silence.

The fusillade of the Hunters' heavy weapons suddenly intensified. They were reaching further, seeking to strike back at the still-invisible beasts that had drawn the first Imperial blood.

'*Marshal Syagrius*,' said Balzhan. *'What are your losses?'*

'Two Warhounds.' Syagrius cursed, then continued: *'We're pulling the others back but accelerating our overall pace. Direct your long-range fire to the incoming coordinates.'*

Krezoc tensed at the peremptoriness of the order. Balzhan answered before any princeps of the Pallidus Mor could respond to the insult. '*Have you considered the possibility that these actions are precisely what the enemy desires?*' he said.

'*Have you considered the consequences of delay?*' Syagrius retorted. His channel went dead.

A few moments later, a stream of binharic reached Krezoc in the manifold. It became the targeting coordinates. In concert with Vansaak and Grevereign, she raised the quake and volcano cannon arms.

Across the lines of the Pallidus Mor and the Imperial Hunters, flame arced through the night. A barrage to shatter cities reached out to unseen prey.

The Titans advanced through the thickening xenos tide, and Krezoc saw in the burning sky a grand illusion. It was the spectacle of folly.

Feisler paced his chambers. At the entrance, his honour guard stood by. They were frustrated because he refused either to accompany them to a bunker deep in the core of the hive or to consent to being airlifted away from Gelon entirely.

‘To where?’ he had demanded. ‘What location do you think is safe if Gelon falls?’

And he would not go to the bunker. There was no safety there either. There was only delay, at best. And a coward’s death.

Feisler shared the guards’ frustration, though. Like them, he felt that he was doing nothing. As the Devourer came for his city, how could he act to defend it? Gelon’s militia had been destroyed, barely holding out long enough to protect the hive until the Kataran 66th had landed. Now the defence of the hive and of Khania was entirely in the hands of the Spears and the Adeptus Titanicus. All he could do was bear witness.

So he made that his task. He would see the war until it ended or he was killed. It was the most honour he could salvage, little as it was. He had ordered vox-units and tacticarium displays to be brought into the main chamber. Now the vid screens changed every few moments, updating the configurations of the battle lines. The data was incomplete. Blanks opened up in the hololithic diagrams. Sometimes they filled in, showing the Spears still holding at those points. Sometimes they stayed blank, hinting at disaster. A cacophony of orders and shouts and screams came from the vox. Feisler tried to concentrate on the voices and the displays and form an accurate sense of the progress of the war. It was impossible. The balcony called to him: the vista of his world’s death was too horrifically compelling. That was what he had to watch. He moved back and forth between chamber and balcony, trying to make greater sense of what he saw, and hauled back by the scale of the horror.

Smoke from the fires of war thickened the clouds, but the wind was still strong, blowing clearings in them. The walls of Gelon stood for now; the battle was concentrated in the industrial dead lands between the walls and the marshes. The Kataran Spears were using the trenches of effluent and slag heaps for cover, while their armour fought in the more open spaces. They had made the wastes the true gates to Gelon. Larger and larger bioforms were moving against the regiment. It was as if the swamp had risen up and was marching on the hive. In glimpses, Feisler saw a great heaving on the ground, the movements spreading wider and becoming more pronounced all the time. Doom fell from the red skies in an unending rain. The distance was lit by the flashes of cannon muzzles and the blasts of shells, but also by the explosions of destroyed tanks. The Spears were holding out longer than the militia had. They could not win, though.

And there was no sign of the Titans’ arrival.

New clouds appeared in the upper air. They were darker and denser than the

others. They dropped towards the ground, moving against the wind. Standing at the threshold between the chamber and the balcony, Feisler saw they were composed of individual motes, swarming together, flying with purpose. Closer yet, and he saw the wings.

'Emperor save us,' he moaned.

At his cry, the honour guard rushed forward and began to form a protective cordon around him. Feisler waved them away. 'This is pointless,' he said. So were all the measures to protect the hive. Anti-air turrets on the walls and spires of Gelon opened up. Feisler knew how much use they would be against a foe this numerous and agile. There were no barriers to the flying Devourer. There were horrors of every size in the swarms. At their core were shapes so massive, Feisler expected them to carry off spires in their talons.

But the winged monsters did not descend on Gelon. They flew east, across the swamp, heading for a destination beyond Feisler's sight.

'Where are they going?' the captain of the guard wondered.

Feisler smiled, knowing hope at last. 'To attack a greater threat to them.'

The hope, so long absent he had to suppress hysterical laughter, vanished in the next instant. Something else was dropping from the clouds. Something colossal.

A hurricane of leather wings descended on the Legios at dawn. The swarms blotted out the light. They attacked the Titans' heads, a storm of monstrous bodies and wings cutting off Krezoc's sight of even the nearest of the God-Machines of her maniple. They shrouded the Warlord's command chamber, and though they could not pierce the armourglass, Krezoc could feel the clawing, snapping xenos hunger.

'Up Vulcan,' she said. In the maniple, the fusion of Krezoc and *Gloria Vastator* lashed out in anger. The Warlord turned its mega-bolter on the flying horde. Exploding bodies filled Krezoc's view. The swarm around *Vastator* thinned. Krezoc could make out individual enemies now, and the silhouettes of the Reaver and Warhounds taking down their assailants. The smallest of the threats were tyranid gargoyles. They were man-sized bipeds, a winged infantry. Their bio-weapons flashed harmlessly against the void shields. They disintegrated when struck by the Vulcan's huge shells.

'*They are wasting their strength against us with these insects*,' voxed Toven Rehliax, princeps of *Tempestas Deorem*.

'They have achieved their purpose,' Krezoc answered. 'They have drawn our fire and bogged us down.'

The march had slowed to a crawl. The 'gaunts on the ground were able to push the Secutarii harder, and the Titans could not move forward in zero visibility. Each step was hard won.

'*Auspex readings of larger bioforms inside the swarms*,' warned Gregor Narvathis of *Fidelis Venator*.

The reptilian monsters swooped out of the gargoyle clouds. From beneath their huge wings, tentacled creatures streaked like missiles towards the Titans.

'Priority fire on the hive crones,' Krezoc ordered. There were many of the bioforms, at least one attacking each of the Titans in sight.

The bio-missiles struck *Vastator*'s shields. Energy flashed. Krezoc felt the attack reverberate through the maniple. Her heartbeat lurched with the strain that surged through the Warlord's systems.

The shield flickered but held. The hive crone wheeled away to circle in for a second attack.

'Two missiles,' Krezoc said.

'Targeting,' said Grevereign. The Titan's auspex array fed data to the moderati. He would see the flight of the tyranid overlaid with vector and speed calculations. 'Now,' Grevereign said.

Krezoc launched the Apocalypse rockets a half-second apart. They streaked to their target. The hive crone accelerated into its turn, evading the first missile, and flew straight into the second Grevereign had aimed ahead of its path. The explosion swallowed the monster. Its wings crumpled. Smouldering, it fell to earth.

The air around the Titans of both Legios was filled with mega-bolter fire, missile arcs and las-bursts. Tyranids dropped, but two Warhounds had been immobilised by the bio-missiles' electromagnetic pulses. Krezoc's maniple was intact. It cleared the air enough to advance again. Ahead, the Imperial Hunters had concentrated their fire on the flyers closest to *Augustus Secutor*. Half a mile from *Secutor*'s right flank, a terrible brilliance ripped apart the dawn; the light bathed the battlefield in the glare of loss. *Gloria Vastator* was in a direct line with the blast, and the shockwave lashed Krezoc's maniple. *Vastator*'s void shields howled violet and went down. The wind that followed shredded the tyranid swarms. Winged horrors exploded into scraps of flesh. Xenos ash danced for a moment in the air and then vanished. A fireball reached for the sky, and when it failed, a mushroom cloud rose in its stead, towering over the plain with dark majesty, a billowing monument to the death of a God-Machine.

'*Marshal Syagrius,*' Balzhan voxed.

Syagrius did not answer. Whatever Titan the Imperial Hunters had lost, he refused to mark its death with the Pallidus Mor. They marked it instead with the greater strides of *Secutor*. Balzhan's Warlord lurched ahead of all the maniples. It strode into the blast zone of the destroyed Titan. Its way was clear, and it remained clear. The bulk of the swarms concentrated on the rest of the Hunters and Pallidus Mor. A single advancing enemy was less of a threat.

'Is he mad?' Vansaak asked.

'Glory calls to him,' Krezoc said. She tasted bile. Syagrius' gambit might work. *Augustus Secutor* had broken free of the great crush of the enemy. As long as an even greater concentration of tyranids did not wait between here and the few dozen miles that remained before Gelon, he might well arrive first to begin the assault on the enemy's front lines.

But he was dividing the forces even further. He had crossed a dangerous threshold.

'*Krezoc*,' Balzhan called her, '*what is your status?*'

She understood at once what he was about to say. 'Our way forward is clear for the moment, marshal,' she said. *No*, she thought. *No. Do not ask this of me*. Already, though, she recognised its necessity. The fate and the resolution of the Pallidus Mor were before her, and she would not turn from them.

'*Follow* Augustus Secutor,' Balzhan said. '*The rest of the Imperial Hunters are as bogged down as the rest of us*.'

She refrained from casting blame. Syagrius had seized an advantage, no matter how it had come about. He was shaping the war in accordance with his philosophy, and she must adapt accordingly, pass through the same gates as Syagrius.

More tyranid flyers were on the way. They sailed over the receding shape of *Secutor* and closed in on the demi-Legios. 'Maniple,' she voxed to her princeps, 'I have my orders. You have yours. Remain here. Advance with the main force.'

Gloria Vastator lurched forward. Its full strides ate up the ground. It moved into the scorched earth and through the slowly dissipating cloud. Beyond it, in the gathering strength of the dawn, the towers of Gelon appeared above the horizon.

Riding in the roof hatch of *Bastion of Faith*, Deyers was caught in the open with the bulk of the armour. The Kataran 66th had managed to push into the tyranid mass, holding the tide at the edge of the marshlands. Then the monster had come, and it smashed tanks like eggs.

'*What is it?*' Platen shouted.

The same cry came to Deyers over the vox from every position. '*What is it? What is it? What is it?*' The voices were those of good soldiers, warriors tested and true, loyal and strong, filled with the pride of their home world and unyielding faith in the God-Emperor. But the horror that came for them now was nothing any of them had ever experienced. It was beyond whispers and nightmares. Deyers had seen briefings on this monster, though. He had read about it on a data-slate as he had prepared for the mission. It had been included as a warning, but in the hope that it would not appear. He had absorbed its characteristics. He realised now that he had not begun to understand the reality of the beast. The reality of the hierophant.

The creature was insectile, if insects could be mountains. Its long, spiny, curved body was supported by four limbs ending in spear-like claws. A leg came down less than fifty yards from *Bastion of Faith*. A bladed tower plunged into the ground and sent tremors through the Leman Russ's hull. Far above, two bio-cannon forelimbs angled down at the field. Deyers stared directly into their huge maws.

'Break right!' he yelled at the tank's driver.

Tracks spun. Mud sprayed. *Bastion* slewed to the side. Electrical currents sparked down the length of the forelimbs. The Leman Russ picked up speed. A Chimera followed hard behind.

The cannons fired two blasts of seething organisms. One barrage hit the Chimera. The shape of the vehicle melted before Deyers' eyes. His ears were filled with a deafening, liquid hiss. Where the Chimera had been, there was only bubbling slag.

The other strike hit an infantry platoon retreating for the wastes. The troopers were too far away for their screams to reach Deyers, and they dissolved in a terrible silence, their deaths a monstrous pantomime. Deyers grunted with the pain of holding back his cry of horror.

'Concentrate fire on the head,' he voxed to his tank commanders. The order felt pointless, but it was an action to take, and his sanity needed even that attempt.

Platen and three other gunners fired within seconds of each other. The shells hit in a close cluster beneath the monster's jaw. The chitinous armour shattered. Viscous, shining fluid poured out of the wound and sealed it. The armour reformed, and the hierophant stabbed *General Vascano* with one of the immense, barbed spear-tips of its legs. It hurled the tank high. *Vascano* sailed over the wasteland and smashed against the high defensive wall of Gelon.

The hierophant changed direction, and *Bastion of Faith* was suddenly driving

across its path, beneath the barrels of the bio-cannons. The hierophant's jaws gaped wide enough to crush a Taurox.

Platen got off another shot with the cannon. The shell hit the lower jaw. The explosion made the monster look down, nothing more. It snarled at *Bastion*, the sound huge like the crack of an earthquake, yet high-pitched as the most inhuman shriek of madness. Deyers braced himself for the end.

The hierophant turned without attacking. It wheeled towards the east, moving quickly for the first time. Deyers did not question their luck. 'Pull back!' he yelled at his driver. 'Get us into the waste heaps.' They were poor shelter, but they were better than the open. The Leman Russ veered west. It crushed lesser bioforms beneath its treads as it retreated. Deyers looked back to see what had made the hierophant turn. He knew what he hoped to see.

There was a shadow at first, an ill-defined massiveness in the smoke. Then, its battle-horn sounding over the approach to Gelon, the Warlord marched into clear view, black-and-yellow banners flying proudly, an immensity of war and divinity. Deyers' heart leapt at the display of the Imperium's glory and the certainty of the enemy's destruction. A shout rose from the retreating Katarans, but its triumph turned to fear when the barrage of missiles erupted from the God-Machine's shoulder at the same moment that an immense plasma cannon fired a miniature sun at the hierophant. The attack would have reduced Gelon's walls to rubble. There was no place for mortals in the clash of deities.

The hierophant was fast. Its speed was impossible. It lunged to the right just as the Titan's weapons finished powering up. The plasma destructor's shot went wide. Some of the missiles found their targets. They blew spines off the massively armoured back of the hierophant. The monster did not slow or react to the wound. It charged the Titan.

Too fast, Deyers thought in horror. *It's too fast.* With despair crushing his infant hope, he wondered why there was only one Titan.

The swampland before Gelon was a holocaust as *Gloria Vastator* closed in on the battle. The tyranids had devoured vast quantities of the region's biomass. What was left was dead. *Augustus Secutor*'s attacks had ignited the desiccated remains. Flames raced over the marsh, consuming tyranids and vegetation alike. Above the fire, *Secutor* and the hierophant fought, god and behemoth laying waste to the landscape as they sought to destroy each other. The Warlord's void shields flared and crackled. There were cracks in *Secutor*'s defences: smoke streamed from the knee joint of its left leg and midway up its back. Even in a

Titan she did not know, Krezoc could see the effects of the damage. The God-Machine was slowing. Its huge mass sunk its legs into the marsh, and there were moments of hesitation as it turned and aimed its weapons at the hierophant. The pauses were erratic, small, barely perceptible except to Krezoc's experienced eye, but they were telling. The hierophant circled its prey, bio-cannons unleashing torrents of acid against flanks, sometimes rearing up and lunging forward, striking with the huge spears of its limbs. It had the Warlord on the defensive. The Titan's mega-bolter had better luck tracking the tyranid's movements. It hammered the upper carapace. Xenos blood fountained briefly from the wounds, but it was not enough.

'If we fire, we may hit *Secutor*,' Vansaak said.

'Agreed,' said Krezoc. As *Vastator* entered the burning marsh, she looked beyond the duel to the wasteland before the wall. 'The hierophant's upper carapace is too thick,' she said. 'We need to hit the underbelly.'

'And how do we do that?' Grevereign asked.

Krezoc looked at the battered regiment of the Kataran 66th gathered in the southern reach of the wastes, fighting hard against the artillery and infantry bioforms of the tyranids. There was nothing she could use there. Further to the north, there were hills of rusting, discarded metal and lakes of effluent.

Maybe, she thought. 'We go around,' she told her moderati. 'Marshal Syagrius,' she voxed, 'we will be drawing off the foe shortly.'

Her answer was a single word: '*Acknowledged*.' There was strain in the voice, but even more frustration and wounded pride. She heard no thanks in Syagrius' tone. She did hear resentment.

You are a dangerous fool, she thought. She wondered what contortions of the Imperial Hunters' culture had raised this man to his position of authority.

Gloria Vastator circled the duel. Krezoc held back on the primary weapons. *Vastator*'s machine-spirit resisted, enraged that it was not allowed to engage the enormous foe. She trained the Vulcan on the ground. Foetid water fountained up, mixed with the shattered debris of 'gaunts. That was enough, with the draw of the Kataran 66th, to clear the path of *Vastator*. Most of the tyranid forces were attacking the Spears while they gave the hierophant the space for its fight. Soon the Warlord had put the battle behind it. 'Magos Thezerin,' she voxed the tech-priest who governed the operations in *Vastator*'s core, 'I want a close auspex monitoring of the hierophant's movements. If there is any suggestion it is breaking off its attack on *Augustus Secutor*, I need to know.'

'*So ordered, princeps*.'

The world shook and burned behind *Vastator*. Krezoc directed the Titan's steady, monolithic stride towards the toxic lake on the right. Its surface swam with the multicoloured sheen of promethium. It was bracketed by scrapheaps so high there was enough ruined metal and fragmented rockcrete to build an entire manufactorum. *Vastator* splashed through the lake. Viscous waves washed up the lower part of its legs. Krezoc looked down, to the left and right, at the waste hills the Warlord passed between. Huge conduits from Gelon poured rivers and cataracts of chemicals into the lake. At the far end, the God-Machine moved into a space of more scattered debris. Metal collapsed beneath the enormous mass of its footsteps. Krezoc turned *Vastator* around to face the battle. In the manifold, her will worked with those of the moderati to coordinate the firing of all the weapons systems at staggered moments and different targets.

'Marshal Syagrius,' she voxed. 'Disengage from the fight if you can.'

Now, she thought. 'Now,' she said. And *Vastator*'s battle-horn sounded, shattering the air of Gelon with its challenge.

NOW.

A full barrage from the Apocalypse launcher began the assault. They locked on to the hierophant. It sensed the danger at the last moment and tried to evade. It failed. The arch of its body erupted in flame. As the rockets hit, the Vulcan mega-bolter opened fire at the base of the slag hills. Krezoc ran the line of shells along both sides of the lake.

The primary weapons powered up, but did not fire. *Vastator*'s anger built, strained at Krezoc's control, and was barely held by the promise of what was to come.

Black smoke roiled from *Augustus Secutor*. The Imperial Hunters Titan was wreathed in the choking clouds of its wounds. It took a step back from the hierophant. The tyranid turned from its injured prey to confront the new threat. It stalked over the marsh and into the wasteland, a being whose motion was scuttling, though it made the ground thunder with every impact of its limbs.

The hills of jagged metal collapsed, slumping into the lake. Tons of wreckage fell into the sludge. It filled the lake, angular metal stabbing up like grey icebergs.

The weapons charged, ready to fire, waiting.

The hierophant scrambled over the chaotic jumble the lake had become. Its advance slowed. Its limbs stabbed though the wreckage and tangled in it. Its maw gaped wide and it uttered a raging, soul-shredding shriek. The sound reached into the command chamber of *Vastator*. It tried to overload Krezoc's

receptors and tear her from the union with the Titan. She held tight to her focus.

The hierophant was halfway across the lake. Its bio-cannons fired.

'Now,' Krezoc said again.

Now.

Gloria Vastator fired the volcano cannon into the lake.

Water evaporated instantly before the heat of the immense laser. The volatile mixture of chemicals and promethium erupted. Krezoc stared into an explosion bright as the heart of the sun. The metal debris ran molten. The eruption swallowed the hierophant. It burned away the blasts of the bio-cannons. A mountain disappeared in its funeral pyre. For several seconds, the tyranid was invisible.

Then it screamed again. The shriek was worse, a thing of rage and mortal pain. The hierophant burst out of the heart of the conflagration. It was covered in liquid fire. Huge shards of pylons and girders impaled its underside. One of its bio-cannon arms hung shattered. Streams of molten metal covered its form. It leapt at *Vastator*, huge scythe limbs wide and angled to crush its foe in a piercing grip.

And once more: 'Now.'

Now.

The Warlord fired its quake cannon. The colossal shell, imbued with the matter of dead worlds, struck the belly of the hierophant with the power of a meteor impact. Defence tentacles vanished. The armour shattered. The entire thorax rippled from the blast. Dark fluids gushed from the interior of the monster. Once more the scream came, ragged now as a trauma too great to heal ripped through the system.

But it completed its leap.

It slammed against *Vastator*. Its limbs clamped against the God-Machine's flanks. They had their own terrible impact. They and the mass of the hierophant overloaded the void shields. The spear-tips of the legs struck through the adamantine hull. The slavering, agonised maw of the tyranid gaped before the command chamber. The remaining bio-cannon fired. Acid coated the frontal armour. Metal corroded and ran. The stricken monster tightened its grip.

The machine-spirit cried out, its rage and pain echoing the hierophant's. Krezoc gasped. The Warlord's pain slashed through the manifold, and through her receptors. In her throne, she arched her back in pain.

The mega-bolter hammered against the smouldering body of the dying monster. Nothing else could fire at point-blank range without disaster. The hierophant's

claws gouged deeper into the Warlord's flanks. They severed power conduits. Fires broke out in the access corridors of the Titan. The hierophant's death was not close enough.

Searing brilliance lit the day again. The blast area was smaller, but more concentrated. The movements of the hierophant ceased. Its jaw froze open. Its limbs pulled out of *Vastator*'s flanks and it fell back into the burning lake.

On the far shore, the muzzle of *Augustus Secutor*'s weapons still glowed.

The sky burned again in the hours after the full strength of the Pallidus Mor and the Imperial Hunters arrived at Gelon. This was a different fire. A purer one. A bright, purging aurora. The Imperial Navy's reinforcements had come too. Three grand cruisers and their escorts turned the single tyranid hive ship into burning plasma.

'*The war is ours*,' Syagrius voxed to the Legios. '*The enemy is in retreat.*'

'He is quick to proclaim victories,' Grevereign muttered. The marshal had claimed the hierophant kill as his, too.

'Then we will answer with caution,' Krezoc told him.

With a strong cordon established around Gelon, repairs to the damaged Titans were possible, and in the short term, Syagrius' triumphalism was understandable. The tyranids had lost what appeared to be their greatest weapon. No further infections would come from orbit.

For now.

At the end of the next day, when Krezoc stood at the foot of *Vastator*, looking up at the rents in the armour, Syagrius joined her. The two God-Machines were side by side inside the walls of Gelon. 'I hope the repairs will be complete before the campaign is over,' Syagrius said.

Krezoc eyed him coldly. 'I'm sure they will.'

Syagrius frowned at her sarcasm. 'You have too little faith, Princeps Krezoc.'

'It is placed differently from yours, marshal,' she said. 'Tell me, does it not trouble you that there were only two bio-ships here? Would you not expect more to come?'

Two days later, the shadow in the warp came for Gelon again.

OF GODS AND MEN

ANDY SMILLIE

Power.

It is a word that means many things to many men. It is the single thing that all men crave. It unifies worlds and divides brothers. It is the driving force in a man's life and the architect of his death. Yet few who ponder its meaning, or find themselves in its embrace, ever come to know its true nature.

But I do. I, Niall Cathalan, know of power.

God.

A word imbued with more meaning than any other. Man has worshipped gods since he has been able to look upon the stars. He has pondered their nature, striven to understand their divine intent. He has waged war in their names and died for their favour.

Gods. They are the refuge of the weak and the heretic. The gods of mortals do not walk this plane as *Validus* does, and if they did, they would be in awe, humbled by its might. It is a Machine-God. Where it walks, the earth trembles. There is nothing in creation that its steel hands cannot tear down, nothing birthed into the universe that can pierce its armoured shell.

We were one, *Validus* and I…

I know what it is to feel taller than any mountain, to crush my foe beneath a single, indomitable step. To unleash such terrible devastation that even the mightiest of continents burn in my wake. I have stood unopposed in every arena of war and consigned my foe to oblivion with naught but a thought.

I am princeps of *Validus*, Imperator Titan, greatest among the marvels of Mars, deadliest weapon of mankind. I am power personified…

…and I am dying.

I am small again. Without access to *Validus*' sensorium, my world is confined to what my limited, human senses can perceive. I cannot see beyond the horror in front of me.

The bridge is ruined. Broken deck plates claw at my flesh as I move over them. Power cables, hanging limp from the shattered ceiling, harass my limbs as I push past them. The stench of burned meat fills my nostrils, twisting my stomach until bile fills my throat.

Engineer Luag, Moderati Taran and Salas, the tactical officer, are slumped beside their stations. Their skin is scorched black by plasma discharge. They are all dead.

Man.

I was a man, once. A frail being of limited scope, full of petty concerns and weakness. As a man, a cadet in the Adeptus Titanicus, I dreamed of being a god, of sharing a consciousness with a blessed Titan, of inhabiting its mighty form. From the first caress of connection with *Validus*, the universe troubled me no more. Yet despite everything, here we are, gods at the mercy of the man I once was.

If we are to save our honour, I must remember how to be a man.

Inch by agonising inch, I pulled what remained of my mortal body across the chamber towards the moderati's station.

Validus was weakened by its march across the Boiling Sea. Its ablative plates corroded by the tide of acid, its leg bastions laid bare. It had stood no chance against a pair of ork super-heavies.

The giant ork war machines opened fire with all of their wrath, overwhelming the void shields and blasting our legs off at the knees.

We fell.

Left to die, we lay helpless as war raged all around us.

Now, the orks were coming to finish us. They would rape *Validus*, strip it bare of everything useful and use its blessed components to construct more of their infernal contraptions. I would not allow *Validus* to be defiled.

Omnissiah, forgive me.

I broke out of the half-dead embrace of *Validus*. I cried out against the cold sting of freedom. One by one, the data-cables had hissed and disengaged from my body, separating me body and soul from *Validus*. Long dormant nerve endings awoke to sudden pain as my ruined body toppled to the floor.

I pulled myself over the remains of the shattered amniotic tank, wincing as the

shards of armourglass tore my vat-thinned skin. It hurt, but then it hurt to draw breath with atrophied lungs, to fight the cramps threatening to snap my bones.

The un-bonding had been too sharp, too sudden. The proper ministrations had not been tended to. Torn from the Titan's consciousness, I was thrust back inside myself. My mind howled in despair. I had only moments before it closed down, leaving me to die a catatonic cripple, trapped in the corpse of my totem.

I reached the medi-pod, drew a stimm injector from it and jammed it into my neck. The stimms sung in my veins, so different from the dreams of the machine, yet they kept me alive.

The dose of neuromoxin has sustained me until now. I have another seven minutes at best. I hope I will only need half that time.

'Omnissiah, armour me against the weakness of flesh.'

I whispered the prayer and pulled myself across the floor to Taran's station. Like the rest of *Validus*' crew, the moderati is dead, his blackened corpse slumped beneath his console.

I reached up to the moderati's charred skull and pulled out the data-cables connecting him to *Validus*.

The moderati's jacks were different from my own, the plugs not immediately compatible.

Still, they fit after a fashion.

That is how I came to stand here, once again joined to *Validus*, once again both man and god.

I join *Validus*' mind in the data stream. It looms large, a dark cloud of binary pressing towards me. I am not bound with it like before. The moderati jacks cannot handle such an interface.

We stand apart, separate. Strangers bound only by purpose.

I try to speak, but my voice is lost in static. *Validus* turns to stare down at me. Its face is hidden in shadow, its voice an indiscernible whisper at the back of my consciousness. I push my mind. I will not be denied. Fulgurant fire flashes through the code, burning away the fog of data. In the mortal realm, blood haemorrhages from my ears and mouth.

It is worth it. At last I glimpse the god I have known. It is magnificent, a beacon of perfection.

'Die. Die now.'

I command the *Validus* to lay down its life. It growls in response, a bestial snarl that rises like gusting wind as it whips over my mind.

‘Die.’

Validus growls again, weaker this time. It is not angry. It is desperate, pleading. It has lived for thousands of years. It has no wish to die.

‘You must. There is no other way,’ I assure it, feeling its resistance ebb as its sensoria detect ork boarders in the lower torso. ‘Die. Die now.’

The data-cable sparks, burning away the flesh on the back of my skull as it shorts out. The link falls silent. *Validus* has cast me out.

Like each of us, it will die alone.

‘Terminal Detonation in ten seconds.’

I listen to the machine voice as it rasps from the banks of vox-casters studded around *Validus*’ body. It is not the Titan’s true voice. A god’s voice cannot be heard by the ears of men. A Titan speaks only to the soul of those bonded with its blessed machine-spirit.

‘*Eight seconds.’*

The droning machine idiom sounds no more like *Validus* than the klaxon wailing through the Titan’s corridors.

I can hear the rising thrum of the plasma reactor as it builds to critical.

These are my final moments. The explosives will soon detonate, condemning *Validus* and every ork within ten kilometres to oblivion.

This recording I leave for the Legio cadets. For the princeps who come after me. There is a lesson in this, one you must learn or suffer as I have. As *Validus* has.

Power… Power is fleeting, and even gods have their limits.

The cabal of tech-priests huddled around the vox-servitor. The lobotomised serf’s mouth had been replaced by an ornate brass grille, its naked feet blackened where they had been fused to the chamber floor. The servitor was the priests’ only link to that which existed outside the slate-steel walls of the receiving chamber. The priests were *Auscultarie*, guardians of the code, the binary source that carried all information in and out of Mars.

Information would unlock knowledge. Knowledge was power. Therefore, information had to be guarded, controlled. It was the singular truth of their order, and their entire reason for being.

‘*Validus* is dead?’ the First asked. All knowledge began with a question.

‘High probability.’ As was his function, the Second answered.

‘Despatch investigation team?’ The Third spoke last. Question, solution, action. The Three had always operated in such a manner. The sequence was sacrament.

Like the indomitable stream of binary that fed the serried banks of cogitators, which stood chattering around them, it would never be broken.

‘Will that suffice?’

The Second tilted his head as he sifted the data flow. ‘Estimated arrival at world designated Armageddon in fifty-seven years.’

‘Acceptable,’ the Third confirmed.

‘The machine is infallible. Princeps Niall is mistaken.’ The First spoke now of truth, of the certainty derived from the information.

‘Suggest record deletion.’

‘Yes. Expunge Princeps Niall from history banks.’

‘Concur. He is only flesh.’ The Three spoke as one, muttering in singular affirmation. ‘The machine endures.’

HUNTING GROUND

IAN ST. MARTIN

Asander stood at the foot of a goddess.

A snarling, wolfish face peered out ahead of her hunched shoulders, leering out across the plain in her tireless hunger for prey. Her claws were colossal weapons, implements of destruction that had reaped quarry from a thousand worlds. The curving, sculpted plates of her carapace were lacquered in a deep tourmaline red, so dark it was nearly black.

A name, shining in brilliant silver, was etched into her armoured greaves, just below the bladed lioness icon of the Legio at the ankles of the goddess' splayed feet. The artisans had placed the name there for a reason. All those who had deemed to raise arms against her, from mortal men to towering engines that could scour cities of life, had ended at her feet. All would spend their final moments learning the name of the one that had cast them into the waiting dark.

Her name was *Ruber Captrix*.

Asander's heart raced. She was always the most beautiful in the first quiet moments after a hunt. Even at her feet, he felt their distance as if it were the space between stars. The pain of separation was worsening as the years passed, and even moments after disconnection, he yearned to return to her, to join his frail flesh with her divine spirit and sanctified machinery. Where she ran, he ran. When she hunted, he hunted. Turning his gaze from the Warhound's countenance to the field around him, Asander smiled.

They had hunted well this day.

Everywhere the weak light of the planet's star touched, fighting to pierce the caustic veil of burning smoke that swallowed the sky, the corpses of the Great Devourer lay. Mounds of twisted alien bodies were heaped beyond counting, an ocean of pale, bleeding flesh with its rolling tides frozen in place. Shattered chitin and jagged chips of horn glittered upon the ground, like bits of shell

covering a beach. The field of tyranid dead stretched unbroken to the horizon, broken and destroyed by Asander to reach the true prey that slumped in death at its centre.

Bio-Titan. The memory sent a ripple of warmth over the princeps. Feeling the lesser Tyranid bioforms pop and rupture beneath the tread of *Ruber Captrix*, as surely as if it had been his own boots. The speed of circling the monstrosity's flanks, tearing its legs from its worm-like form. Waiting until the moment was perfect, the goddess and her sister striking the killing blow as one.

A piercing war-horn cut through the silence, jarring Asander from his reverie. He looked beside his engine as her sister goddess, *Domina Mortis*, roared again, her carapace just as charred and slathered in ichor after their run through the battlefield.

No, Asander thought as he crouched down, scooping up a handful of the soil. *Not a battlefield.*

He allowed the dirt to slip from his grasp, as he had done across all the worlds he had walked upon in the Omnissiah's name. This was a hunting ground, and Asander gave silent thanks for it. A sentimental ritual, perhaps, but Asander had seen enough engine deaths to understand each successful hunt was to be cherished.

There may come a day when *Ruber Captrix* would fall, when she would no longer be able to run and hunt. But it was not this day. For Asander, as the last grains slipped from his fingers, that was enough.

The Adeptus Mechanicus ark transport *Baiulus* crouched at low anchor above the slowly turning sphere of Tophet VI, perched in the silence of the void. The crust of the world below was webbed with iron and machine cities, vast foundries and hive manufactories dedicated to fashioning the tools of Forge World Agripinaa. Raw materials were smelted, blessed machines were forged, and millions of men and women were reborn into the skitarii legions indentured to Agripinaa as the skies were lit with the flames of industry.

Now, its surface was lit by fire of a different kind. War had come to Tophet VI, and the cry of its destruction, screamed out across the stars by its astropathic choirs, had been answered by the *Baiulus* and the engines of the Legio Debellator she carried. She came to rest beside a slim needle of vivid emerald. It was known as the *Asuncion*, frigate of the Subjugators Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. The Space Marines had come both to honour their oath to protect the Tophet System, and for the pleasure of confronting an enemy older than the

history of their Chapter.

Twisted fragments of shorn hull plating danced around the vessels. It glittered with the silver of bare metal, chased in hazard striping of gold and jet. Each jagged shard was older than the Imperium itself, forged in a time when the ship they had belonged to took to the stars to build the interstellar empire its commanders now fought to destroy.

The ship itself was wounded, but far from dead. After it had loosed its storm of death down onto Tophet VI, it had entertained the *Asuncion* for a moment before slipping from range, lost in the dark corners of the system. The Subjugators had taken to the surface, and now, so would the Legio Debellator.

Asander's heart raced in union with the plasma reactor of *Ruber Captrix* as she loped across the charred surface of Tophet VI. Her void shields shivered and flared with a hundred impacts as she charged a line of battle tanks, the princeps feeling their barrage as little more than the irritant buzzing of insects. The tanks bore ancient Olympian names upon their hulls of iron, war machines that had besieged the Throneworld itself, but to her, they were simply prey.

Dropping from the *Baiulus* beside the focus of the conflict around Tophet VI's hive capital, the Legio had fielded its engines in prime position to exploit a flanking advance. Their enemy were veteran and numerous, battle tanks and cohorts of Dark Mechanicum infantry, but a charge from *Ruber Captrix* and *Domina Mortis* had forced them from their assault on the hive's walls, fighting off the back foot to prevent the Titans from rolling up their lines at the flank.

Ruber Captrix roared, a booming report from her war-horns that sent jets of dust slashing over the enemy. She had driven past foes to rout it alone, but this was an opponent who would not wither from just her voice.

For them, it would take her claws.

Traitor tanks exploded in the Warhound's wake. Ancient Space Marines in thrall to the Archenemy were crushed beneath her feet. Asander could smell them, the thickened corruption bleeding from their machines and their dead. Warp-ensorcelled alloys. Flesh and blood twisted through with promethium and tainted cybernetics. It coated his tongue like poison.

Asander leaned forward in his throne, moving instinctively from side to side in harmony with the Warhound's swaying tread. Ahead of him, his moderati were silent in focus, their hands dancing over the pulsing light of their consoles.

'Void shields holding,' said Berowne, reaching up to snap a pair of goggles over his head. 'Vulcan mega-bolter reloaded and primed.'

The report set Asander's lips into a grim line of concentration. He pushed his right hand forward, making a fist. *Ruber Captrix* raised its arm in concert, the twin barrels of its weapon ticking as they began to spin.

'I have the shot, my princeps,' said Berowne, his eyes locked to the targeting matrix on his viewscreen. Reticles bracketed over a pair of Vindicator siege tanks rapidly turning to withdraw from the Warhound's line of sight.

'Fire.'

Twin tongues of flame leapt from the tips of the mega-bolter's barrels. The air filled with the tearing scream of hundreds of mass-reactive shells launching. Streams of empty casings poured from ejection ports beneath the weapon, smashing and clattering to the ground like a disjointed chorus of broken bells.

The first Vindicator vanished, shredded by the fusillade. The second threw its powerplant into overdrive, surging in reverse to escape. Bursts of thick black smoke popped across its hull as it threw up a smokescreen to cover its retreat. Berowne stared into his console as the Warhound snuffed the cloud of smog and crackling electromagnetic interference for heat traces and auspex returns. He found the target within the smoke and tracked the tank, leading the fire of *Ruber Captrix* back into the pall. Darts of fire slashed into the smokescreen, and the Titan's crew was rewarded by a orange sphere of exploding flame that ripped out at its centre as the tank's fuel cells ignited. Asander glimpsed the tiny figures of Iron Warriors leaping from the wreckage, still firing their boltguns as they withdrew into the thinning smoke.

Berowne chased the regrouping traitors with bursts from the anti-infantry bolters mounted in *Ruber Captrix*'s chin.

'Forget them,' murmured Asander. 'Our focus is on the armour.'

'Aye, princeps.'

'Mistress Vyola,' Asander looked to his second moderati.

'Sir?' she asked.

'Bring us around behind their formation, running speed.' Asander's eyes narrowed. 'Let us ensure the rest of those seeking to break free die beneath our feet. Berowne? This smoke does us no favours. Let us illuminate our path.'

The plasma blastgun that formed the majority of *Ruber Captrix*'s left arm thrummed. Its focusing coils shivered as energy was siphoned into them from the caged star of the Titan's reactor core. Asander felt the building energy prickle the skin of his arm with gooseflesh.

'Power transfer successful,' came the calm crackling tones of Komnena, *Ruber*

Captrix's tech-priestess, from her station behind the cockpit. *'Charge threshold achieved, and maintaining within tolerance parameters, Omnissiah be praised. The instrument is primed for discharge at your command.'*

Berowne leveled the weapon on the centre of the enemy formation. 'Target acquired.' He hauled back a lever beside his throne. 'Target locked.'

Asander lowered his head, feeling the hull of *Ruber Captrix* groan as she crouched to brace. His arm began to itch, sheened with sweat.

'Fire.'

A blinding sphere of energy screamed from the left arm of the Warhound. It hurtled down into the line of enemy armour on a comet's tail of hissing light. The smokescreen burned away to nothing as it tore past. Entire swathes of the invaders were obliterated, fused into molten smears of vitrified ruin. Hull plating was burned to slag in an eye-blink. Infantry were evaporated, leaving behind nothing save stark shadows scorched into the ground where they had stood an instant before.

Domina Mortis fired her own plasma blastgun from *Ruber Captrix*'s left, and under such a bombardment, the enemy lines fractured. Unlike traditional Titan maniples deployed by other Legios, fielding monstrous Warlord and Reaver Titans bristling with weaponry that would not be out of place on a small starship, the force under Asander's command was composed entirely of Warhounds. The Scout Titans fought as a pack, harrying and surrounding larger prey and working in unison to bring it to its knees. The other two Warhounds of the depleted maniple, *Regina Verum* and *Argentum Sororis*, ran together on the opposing flank, sowing the same carnage amongst the enemy and driving them from the hive city's gates.

Asander watched the columns of charred battle tanks throw up tails of dust and smoke in their wake as they retreated, and angled *Ruber Captrix* behind them. The Warhound's bestial sentience slavered to run the routed enemy down, and the aging princeps was inclined to agree with her. His eyes scanned into the distance across the surface of Tophet VI, searching the land beyond the hive's walls behind him. He was about to give the order for his engines to give chase, when his vox crackled.

'Lord princeps.'

The voice was inhumanly deep, flawed by vox interference but unmistakably that of a transhuman.

'I am Brother Garrido. On behalf of the Subjugators Chapter, Adeptus Astartes, I bid you welcome to Tophet Six and offer my thanks for your intervention. If you

would dispatch a command delegation, we would have your council in coordinating our defence.'

Asander paused. He frowned, looking back at the savaged battlements of the hive. The Legio had arrived not a moment too soon. Whole sections of the walls had been torn down into mounds of rubble. Demolished Imperial tanks and defence batteries lay twisted and broken like a child's toys, strewn amongst the wreckage in a sea of hundreds of dead skitarii and planetary defence auxiliaries.

Tapping a series of keys on his armrest, Asander opened a vox-channel to the other Legio engines.

'Hold.'

The strategium was a small, cramped room, cold and filled with the soft chatter of cogitators and vox-stations. The council of commanders was to be conducted without binharic cant, though the majority of the chamber's occupants were capable of the Mechanicus' chosen method of communication. This was done in deference to the pair of warrior-giants dominating one corner of the room.

Brothers Garrido and Ayolas of the Subjugators stood in silence at the edge of the central table. Their armour showed signs of the intense siege, rent with deep gouges and bearing patches of flat grey ceramite where the bright green lacquer had been scorched bare. The jet fist of Dorn stood unbowed upon their pauldrons.

They had made planetfall numbering ten battle-brothers, a force capable of turning the tide of any engagement. Now they stood at six. Garrido had arrived bare-headed, displaying the blunt, oversized features that came with ascension to the Space Marines, and cold eyes that offered nothing in the way of mercy or rest. Ayolas remained helmed, his face hidden behind a snarling, grilled visor.

An assembly of Mechanicus leadership was present, including the skitarii commander and various high-ranking adepts wearing the black and scarlet-edged colours of Agripinaa, the hues of sacred Mars reversed. Asander represented the legio, along with Cynna, princeps of *Domina Mortis*. Berowne and Vyola tended to *Ruber Captrix*'s rearming and repair, while *Argentum Sororis* and *Regina Verum* stood watch over the walls.

'The enemy has been driven back,' began Garrido, stepping forward to place his gauntleted fists upon the central table. 'But not beaten. These cursed ones are dogged in their sieges. If they withdraw, it is only to reorganise and marshal greater forces to the fore.'

The Space Marine nodded to a tech-adept, who activated a hololithic projector.

A grainy image leapt over the assembled commanders. An enormous hunched figure, a walking cathedral of twisted metal and spiked carapace, dominated a valley landing zone, ringed in battalions of traitor armour and Dark Mechanicum battle servitors.

'This was the last transmission from our Thunderhawk,' continued Garrido. 'Performing reconnaissance on the hostile staging ground prior to our losing contact. It is confirmed as a Warlord-class Battle Titan.'

'Is this the only image you have?' asked Asander. 'What else is known of the disposition of this engine?'

The Subjugator tapped a command into the projector. A section of the image expanded to fill the frame, centring over the pixelated image of a defiled icon on the Titan's torso. Though twitching and blurry with distortion, the image of a lioness could not be mistaken.

'Perhaps we might dispense with the notion of any present party's stupidity and cut to the matter at hand.' Garrido leveled his gaze at Asander. 'I believe you know exactly what its disposition is. Tell me why this traitor Titan bears the mark of your legio. Now.'

The strategium went silent. Asander met the Subjugator's glowering stare with a practised calm he forced into his words.

'As you are undoubtedly aware, the forge world Agripinaa lies in the vicinity of the warp anomaly colloquially designated as the "Eye of Terror". Consequently, it is frequently the target of Archenemy invasions. To counter this, the forge periodically deploys expeditionary advances into the anomaly, to disrupt potential incursions and compel the enemy to adopt a more defensive posture.

'Legio Debellator has participated in such expeditions. My maniple was slated to deploy. However, after a prolonged engagement with engines of the eldar xenos, we were replaced in the rotation by another maniple. When contact with the expedition failed and was never re-established, we believed the engines lost.'

'Until now,' growled Garrido.

'If the Archenemy has corrupted our engines,' replied Asander, 'they must be destroyed, and our fallen avenged.'

'The cursed Fourth Legion will renew their assault,' said Garrido. 'And your fallen Titan will walk with them, there can be no mistake.'

Asander did not wilt under the Subjugator's gaze. 'The Legio will hold your walls,' he said with finality.

The delegation dispersed. Asander turned and walked from the strategium, still feeling the eyes of the Subjugators boring into his back.

‘I don’t like it, Roan,’ said Cynna, once the chamber doors closed behind the two princeps. ‘The Grand Master sent us here for Demaratus, and our imperative is better sought in the open where we can hunt.’ They had shared in many hunts together, long enough for her to trust the instincts of the older commander. ‘What are you thinking?’

Asander glanced sidelong at Cynna. He felt weak, longing to feel *Ruber Captrix*’s snarl return to his heart. ‘I think the best place to set a trap is where our prey feeds.’

Berowne could not suppress the chuckle, try as he might.

‘Something is amusing to you, moderati?’

Berowne turned back to Asander, his grin vanishing under the princeps’ withering stare. ‘Apologies, my princeps. It is just… the very notion of it.’

‘Of what?’ asked Vyola distractedly, hands pressed to her temples to adjust the heavy tactical visor she wore.

‘The fact, my dear,’ answered Berowne, ‘that we are using the Adeptus Astartes as bait.’

‘Careful to avoid being within earshot of them when you say that,’ the other moderati replied. ‘The demi-gods would backhand your head from your shoulders for less.’

‘While I do so cherish your comradely banter,’ Asander chastised them, ‘attend to your stations. Both of you.’

‘Aye, sir.’

The princeps rolled his neck, feeling the pull of the segmented MIU cables slotted into his temples and spine that linked him with *Ruber Captrix*. Its irritation was boiling over into his mind, colouring the bodiless view of the Titan’s surroundings he viewed through the manifold with tinges of crimson and black. It had an impatient soul, and waiting crouched within a forest of industrial cooling towers behind the crumbling bastions of the hive, away from the gathering storm of the Archenemy advance, wounded its bestial pride. Asander pressed at the limits of his sight, questing out with the maximum range of his auspex and thermal scans.

Where are you, Demaratus?

The crump of artillery sounded behind *Ruber Captrix* as the hive’s remaining batteries hurled their defiance at the ocean of steel filling the horizon. The tremors of the Earthshakers rocked the ground, sending sympathetic shivers up Asander’s shins. The clatter of breaking masonry falling against the Titan’s

carapace was an irritant tap against his back and shoulders. The battle would begin in earnest now, and it would take all of his concentration to keep *Ruber Captrix* in line.

The Subjugators had done laudably in organising the defence. Knowing that their numbers were too few for a direct tactical application against a sizeable force of battle tanks and mechanised infantry, Garrido had instead deployed his battle-brothers at intervals amongst the mortal soldiery of the planetary defence forces on the ramparts. They would be anchors within the storm, islands of implacable lethality lifting the morale of the entrenched Imperials as they sold their lives to hold the walls.

The Adeptus Mechanicus defenders maintained their own formations. Battle cohorts of Agripinaa skitarii waited in silence in the yawning breaches in the hive city walls. Vanguard infantry stood in ordered rows, surrounding hulking dunecrawler walkers, while Ironstrider and Sydonian dragoon cavalry held the flanks.

The noise of a hundred engines joined the crack of the Imperial guns as the Iron Warriors charged over Tophet VI's scorched plains, the smoke of their exhaust choking the sky with a liar's night. Screaming munitions filled the air like shooting stars, smashing down into the walls. Skitarii were blown apart, cybernetic warriors unmoving as the comrades beside them were shredded by shellfire. Sections of the walls shattered, sinking in clouds of dust as if the earth were swallowing them.

Still, the Legio Debellator held. They would not move until their prey exposed itself.

Asander felt her even before he heard her. Tremors that put the Earthshaker artillery to shame rattled up his legs, squeezing them with cramps. His thermal scans spiked an instant before a blinding flash left prismatic after-images dancing over his eyes.

An entire section of the wall vanished, as though it had never existed. The edges of the ramparts standing on either side were blackened with the telltale carbon scoring left in the wake of the most powerful las weapon not equipped aboard a void warship. The destruction continued on two kilometres into the hive, leaving a black valley of fused slag where once there had been streets, manufactories and tenements filled with people.

Through the manifold, Asander watched a shape resolve in the smoke, like a predatory monstrosity rising with sinister slowness to the surface of the deep ocean.

The pict captured by the Subjugators' Thunderhawk in its final moments did no justice to the sacrilege Asander glimpsed through tear-streamed eyes.

A Warlord Titan, crown jewel of any Legio of the Adeptus Titanicus, defiled. A behemoth of breathless scale, corrupted. A war engine that Asander had hunted beside for decades, its ancient, noble spirit violated.

Betrayed. Cursed.

The Warlord Titan that had once been *Ecce Bellum* of Legio Debellator passed from the smoke, a torrent of steam, oil and blood streaming from the volcano cannon that was its right arm.

Then the screaming began.

Asander's body locked in spasm as it blasted across the manifold. Berowne and Vyola reeled in their thrones, their hands clamped over their ears as a wall of discordance and virulent scrapcode struck them like a hammer blow. The cockpit lights were extinguished as tocsins wailed and amber emergency lighting flickered online. Dark blood trickled from Asander's ears, eyes and nose. The scream was beyond conception, depthless in its horror.

And at its core, with pain so deep and heart-breakingly clear, Asander recognised a voice.

The Warlord's tread drew nearer, sounding as though the world were splitting open with every step. The volcano cannon fired again, and more of the wall disappeared as the shadow of the colossus spilled into the hive. Iron Warriors and skitarii swarmed around its feet, insects fighting and dying beneath an uncaring god. Mortal soldiers were ripped apart by black-metal abominations of the Dark Mechanicum that fed on the living and the dead. All were crushed indiscriminately as *Ecce Bellum*'s tread carried her through the last of the walls. Dust and smoke swirled around the Warlord's legs like twisting skirts as she advanced into the hive proper.

Asander cried out, his MIU cables snapping taught as he fought to regain control and bring *Ruber Captrix* back online. It felt as though he were pushing a mountain of razors and broken glass off his chest. The spirit of his engine howled in primal rage, and he plunged his mind into its fury. It numbed his pain, granting him strength, and the cockpit shivered as consoles and lights began flickering to life.

'Status,' Asander hissed through clenched teeth, eyes screwed shut in pain and concentration. 'Report.'

Berowne cuffed his nose, smearing blood across the back of a gloved hand. 'Targeting systems back online. Weapons live, ready to fire in one hundred and

eighty seconds.'

'Locomotive systems resetting,' Vyola called back to the princeps. 'Re-spinning the power couplings. At minimum output, we can walk in seventy seconds.'

'The heart of Ruber Captrix *has returned to balance,'* voxed Komnena. *'Her core is conciliated with the requisite rites, and its fire beats in union with the Omnissiah – praise be.'*

Asander grunted, angling a pain-clawed hand to tap at his vox and open a channel to *Domina Mortis*.

'Are you with me, Cynna?'

The reply came after a moment, the other princeps' voice tight and breathless with pain.

'Domina Mortis *endures. We are with you.*'

Asander voxed *Argentum Sororis* and *Regina Verum*, receiving similar affirmations from their commanders. He raised his right arm, feeling his hand twitch as autoloaders filled the chambers of his Vulcan mega-bolter.

'Then with me – we hunt!' Asander killed the link, glaring down at his moderati. 'Forward, running speed! I want firing solutions, and *now!'*

As *Ecce Bellum* plodded ponderously into the hive, it was *Regina Verum* who struck first. Pressed against the inner walls of the Imperial fortifications, the Warhound waited for the Warlord to stride past her position before spinning up her powerplant from idle. She pounced from concealment, loosing sheets of flaming gel from her inferno cannon and saturating the back of the enemy engine with clinging fire. The massive engine's void shields flared star-bright as the burning slick popped and spattered on its multi-layered surface.

Ecce Bellum halted, her torso grinding with abused cogwork and hydraulics as she traversed to bring her weapons to bear on the threat, but she was too slow. *Regina Verum* flashed past her, sprinting at full speed deeper into the industrial park surrounding them. The Warlord's pained screams spiked from her war-horns in rage, and she trudged after *Regina Verum* in pursuit. Fire slashed down from her weapon batteries, but the nimble Warhound weaved a serpentine path, dodging all but glancing shots that sparked from her void shields.

As the Warlord strode deeper into the complex, another signal appeared on her sensors as *Argentum Sororis* attacked, strafing behind the larger engine and raking her legs with mega-bolter and turbolaser fire. *Ecce Bellum* reeled, and the engine was forced to engage stabiliser locks to arrest her stumble. As her void shields burned, two more contacts appeared at close range on her flanks.

Ruber Captrix and *Domina Mortis* leapt forward as one, skidding to a halt to fire their plasma blastguns together. Steam burst from the glowing weapons as they loosed comets of blue-white energy, before lunging forward again at a sprint. The plasma blasts struck the forward shielding of *Ecce Bellum* in the same instant, concealing the Warlord behind a blinding flash as the voids succumbed to the onslaught and overloaded with a thunderclap.

Asander felt a tooth crack as *Ecce Bellum*'s screams rose in volume. Warnings filled his vision as the missile pods on the Warlord's carapace snapped open. Twin plumes of smoke burst across the giant's shoulders as she emptied her missile tubes. Dozens of warheads corkscrewed out on trails of supersonic exhaust.

'Evasion stride!'

Ruber Captrix wound through the forest of industrial piping and cooling towers as missiles smashed down all around in a deafening barrage. Asander felt Cynna cry out through the manifold as a direct hit broke through her voids and sheared away her plasma blastgun. A warhead impacted on his right side, and he bit into his lip as he felt his collarbone snap.

The Warhounds returned fire from their mega-bolters, stitching fire across the twisted carapace of *Ecce Bellum*. Her once-pristine armour was now blackened saurian hide soaked in grotesque scales of congealed blood. Spikes of rusted iron and horn thrust up through it in random clusters, jagged and weeping straw-coloured fluid as they burst from the strike of heavy mass-reactives. *Domina Mortis* peeled away on the Warlord's left, trailing smoke from her crippled left arm. Asander sprinted past on the right, dipping low but not fast enough to avoid a glancing slash from *Ecce Bellum*'s power claw. The energised talons pierced the void shields as they raked across the back of *Ruber Captrix*.

In the moment they touched, Asander felt Demaratus at the monster's heart. He felt the memory of a man he had found as a child, he felt–

–corruption slither over his tongue, crawling with clawed legs down his throat. Filling his lungs with swelling larvae, quivering as they burst to send their poison spiralling into his blood–

Asander hissed, thrashing his head and shaking his MIU cables like a gorgon's crown. Blood pooled at his seat from the deep claw wounds in his back. The shouts of his moderati blurred, sounding as distant as another man's dream. Another missile smashed into the back of *Ruber Captrix*, and it took everything for Asander to keep the Warhound on her feet as she was hurled forward. He heard *Argentum Sororis* crash into a manufactory complex, her leg a crippled

mass of twisted metal, still firing her turbo laser defiantly from her knees. He couldn't see *Regina Verum* or *Domina Mortis*. He knew that *Ruber Captrix* was still standing, but he couldn't feel his legs.

Psycho-stigmatic wounds ripped open across Asander's face as his voids collapsed under the firestorm of *Ecce Bellum*'s close defence batteries, the claret mask feeling as cold and distant as the screaming klaxons within the Titan's cockpit, and the panicked shouts of his crew. *Ecce Bellum* was rounding on him, lumbering with glacial, inevitable malice to swing the barrel of its volcano cannon to bear. The devastating weapon trembled, gathering annihilation into itself, poised to fire.

Asander reached up towards *Ecce Bellum* through the manifold, using the instant of their contact to anchor his mind and scream out into the Warlord.

<Demaratus!>

Ecce Bellum hesitated. The engine paused for a moment, the barrel of the volcano cannon wavering. Asander coughed, and warmth spilled down his lips as he stared up at the colossus poised to murder him.

<You were an orphan of the Drysax slums on Yopul Quintus,> he gasped. <I found you, tinkering with engines before you could walk or speak. I took you with me to the legio. I raised you. We, we walked as God-Machines across the surface of eighteen worlds together. We felled xenos of the t'au, the eldar, the greenskins, you and I!>

Through the ever-present scream, Asander could barely make out bursts of choking, trembling words.

<…left me… abandoned me… left me for them to take me…>

<I let you go into the Eye when I should have been there with you. I should have been there to protect you!>

The voice rose, anger tainting the words as the daemon possessing the engine poured in. Asander felt heat sear his face as the volcano cannon primed.

LEFT ME ABANDONED ME LEFT ME LEFT ME LEFT ME

<Demaratus, remember!>

The scream eclipsed everything. Twin voices, man and daemonic machine, rising to swallow all other sound. The machine and daemon cried in anger and outrage, the man in agonised defiance, as the cannon refused to fire.

<…Roan…>

<Demaratus?> Asander rasped.

<…can't hold it back… much longer…> The volcano cannon of *Ecce Bellum* spasmed as her princeps grappled with the daemon infesting the engine's heart.

<*You have to… fire now. Please… Roan… kill me.*>

<Dem,> Asander choked. <I can still–>

<*Shoot!*> Demaratus screamed, the words twisted with inconceivable pain. <*Do it, please! Please!*>

The volcano cannon dipped, its servos smoking as it ground down and levelled at *Ruber Captrix*'s head. Asander's world shrank to the barrel of the enormous weapon, as pinpricks of light gathered deep within it. He cried out, raising his left arm, feeling the faint tickle of static raise the hair on his forearm as he made a fist.

<I'm so sorry.>

Ruber Captrix fired her plasma blastgun at point-blank range. The shot struck *Ecce Bellum* directly in the faceplate, obliterating her iron skull in a welter of aerosolising blood-oil and spinning armour splinters. The screams ceased, shrinking back to echoes and after-images across the manifold.

Decapitated, the Warlord wavered for a handful of heartbeats, swaying back and forth, before falling back to crash with a meteor's force into the streets of the hive.

The few remaining forces of Iron Warriors and Dark Mechanicum not crushed in the Titan's fall were routed by a blistering counter-attack by the Agripinaa skitarii, hounded from the hive city to be destroyed in a protracted chase across the plains of Tophet VI.

Asander felt his vision curdle and blur as it narrowed into blackness.

Moderati Vyola grunted as she dragged Asander down from *Ruber Captrix*'s cockpit. She looked up at the Warhound from her splayed feet. She was savaged, and Vyola was amazed that she had remained standing. It would take months of extensive repairs before she could hunt again. Vyola couldn't bear to look upon what had been *Ecce Bellum*, nor would she bring herself to consider the fate of the other Legio engines she had walked with into the Eye.

Asander stirred, and Vyola adjusted his arm around her neck to keep her princeps upright. His legs dragged limp behind him.

'Berowne?' Asander asked in a whisper.

Vyola paused. 'His last act was firing the blastgun,' she answered quietly, remembering her comrade's slumped form in the throne beside her.

Asander didn't respond, his glassy eyes staring absently into the ground. 'Set me down.'

Carefully, Vyola lowered him down, propping him up against *Ruber Captrix*'s

foot. Asander gazed at the broken rockcrete and burnt soil of Tophet VI, before gathering a handful into his hand. He gave silent thanks for his hunting ground, looking up at his venerable Warhound as the earth fell between his trembling fingers. She was always the most beautiful in the quiet moments after the hunt.

Ruber Captrix was unbowed. She would hunt, she would stand, and she would walk again.

Even if Asander would not.

VENGEANCE OF THE IMMORTAL

GAV THORPE

The air swirled with a thick purple smoke from a hundred censers as Sythika ascended the gantry to the head of *Evocatus*. Each tread of the princeps maximus on the metal steps was accompanied by the crash of metal drums on the loading deck below, so that it seemed her footsteps were as mighty as those of the Warlord Titan she was about to board.

She looked over to the head of the giant war machine, staring ahead through the locking pins of the docking superstructure. It was fashioned like the helm of a knight of ancient Earth. The viewers of the main bridge had dark blue lenses in the eyes, rivets the size of fists lining the overlapping plates. She gave the silent engine a slight nod of respect inside the hood of her robe and continued up the steps to the bridge that linked the stair to the open access door in the carapace.

Behind Sythika came the moderati, Scanntor and Pharuis, left and right hands, then Dolco and Gasia, left and right carapace respectively. Their MIU cables trailed behind them like plaits, as did Sythika's, carried by small servocherubs with thrumming wings.

Ten steps behind the piloting crew came the enginseers, four in total, headed by Kauath Sahsu, the enginseer dominatus. They broke away from the short procession to head into the bowels of *Evocatus* where they would finish the preparations to awaken the beast of war.

Chanting drifted up from the choir behind the line of censer-bearing tech-priests below, praising the history and victories of the Warlord. Battlefields and worlds dating back thousands of years, to conflicts that pre-dated even the Imperium by a millennium.

The names of the many princeps was not mentioned – the roll of honour of past commanders held in the archives was too long for such recital, numbering as it did seven hundred and twenty-eight individuals. Such fleeting individuals were

unimportant in the schemes of the Cult Mechanicus, a necessary fleshy component required for the running of the god of war they had raised up for the glory of the Omnissiah.

Sythika knew her place well enough. *Evocatus* would, Machine-God willing, outlast her tenure even if she lived long enough to die of natural causes. Such was the drain on a princeps body and mind she could hope for at most three decades service in total, a blink in the timeless life of a Titan.

Even so, her rank accorded her some respect and she halted at the metal door before stepping into the ruddily lit interior. She looked down to acknowledge the banners of the Legio Praesagius raised by three companies of skitarii assembled in her honour, the standards of the True Messengers black and gold like the machines that made up their ranks.

Ducking inside, she moved from the heady, rarefied atmosphere of the docking temple to the unadorned, functional corridors and bulkheads of the Titan's interior. Sythika could feel the gentle vibrations of the idling reactor, the sense of it causing a frisson of excitement to run through her.

She made her way quickly along the passages to the bridge, and took up position in the command throne at the centre of the Titan's head. Below and in front of the princeps maximus, the moderati settled at their stations.

'Requesting MIU interface,' they chorused, having spent so much time in each other's company that their thoughts ran to the same rhythm even before they were bound together with the spirit of *Evocatus*.

Together they slid their cables into the waiting circuitry, fingers hovering above the activation runes. Sythika did the same, plugging the wire hanging from the back of her neck into the neural socket in the arm of the command chair. She met the looks of each moderati in turn and nodded, as she had done forty-eight times before, the routine as much a ritual as the censer-swinging and chants that continued outside and were being carried out in the engine rooms.

'Blessed Machine-God,' she said quietly, intoning the prescribed words of the *Archaia Titanicus*. 'Grant us this day the grace of your favours. Gift us the boon of knowledge so that we might learn of your will. Hear our thoughts and carry them upon the beam of wire-light to the mind of our great protector.'

She took a breath, anticipation and expectation vying with anxiety for several seconds.

'Let's wake up the old beast,' she told the others, and touched the Rune of Activation.

In the darkness of the cave, the beast waited for Sythika. She felt the heat of its breath radiating from the blackness. She heard the rumble of a heartbeat throbbing. A rasp of flexed claws. A growl. Two points of light grew brighter, eyes opened to bring the stare of the immortal beast full upon her.

She muttered placating verses, soothing the angry mood of the beast. Sythika ventured into the darkness a little further, knowing the way though blinded, screwing up every iota of her being to confront the monster that lies just out of sight. The princeps maximus was aware of the huge bulk just beyond the scope of her senses, the dormant power that could crush her at any moment.

Still Sythika advanced closer, daring its wrath. There was no other way to waken the beast but to prod it into life with her proximity. Her thoughts would become its thoughts. Its body would become her body…

In their wisdom, the ancient primogenitors of the Collegia Titanicus had seen fit to pattern the spirits of their war machines upon ferocious Terran animals. Perfect for a war machine, possessed of the instinct to hunt and kill. Frightening and deadly.

It made it no easier that she was fully aware the entire scene was a construct of her subconscious. Just like that moment in a dream when one wonders if one is dreaming, she was both inside and separated from the beast, connected via the MIU but not yet wholly cohabiting the circuitry of its artificial thoughts.

She was careful not to goad, to threaten, but instead coaxed and gently cajoled. While she awakened the dormant thought patterns of the Titan, she could feel its strength returning as the ancient reactor was stirred into vigour by the attentions of the enginseers. Energy flowed through conduits into the systems and sub-systems of the massive waking engine, bringing light and heat and awareness. Stoked by the activations and prayers of the tech-priests, *Evocatus* roused from its slumber, its mind flashing with predatory thoughts.

Like a veteran stable hand approaching a troublesome steed she knew the precise moment to act. Sythika leapt into the unfolding pattern-wave of *Evocatus*' growing mental pulses, letting her thought-forms weave into its own sentient matrix. Sythika eased herself along the troughs and peaks, aligning her thoughts to that of the beast.

When the roar came, when the claws and fangs flashed, they were the voice and the claws and fangs of Sythika.

At the moment of connectivity, she became aware of the others taking up their places around her, reactive nerve bundles connected to the brain stem node. She was the thought, they were the deed. The senses of the Titan flooded through

her: visual, aural and impossible mechanical inputs her brain had learned to interpret as touch and smell.

Sythika wakened the beast and stretched, letting plasma and electricity flow through its limbs, charging weapons decks and locomotive servos.

'Animus animatus. Princeps online,' she told the others. The statement was redundant; the moderati were well aware of her position of control. Nevertheless there was a form to follow lest the beast become recalcitrant again.

'Sinister animatus. Power fist online,' Scanntor said out loud, though his words echoed through the MIU for a moment after.

'Dexter animatus. Volcano cannon online,' Pharuis told them.

Gasia and Dolco spoke together, their vox-filtered voices initially discordant before becoming unified.

'Sinister minoris animatus. Gatling blaster online.'

'Dexter minoris animatus. Gatling blaster online.'

With a thought, Sythika sent a message-pulse to the docking template systems. Monstrous gears ground into life, shaking the walls as they drew back the boarding gantry and the main doors of the drop-ship rumbled open. Daylight flooded in, blanketing the Titan's senses with their crimson taint. Warning sirens blared and hazard lights strobed yellow while the princeps maximus and temple command exchanged flash-dumps of data regarding the Titan's status and the full mission brief. Sythika absorbed the information without fully processing it, the memory-core of the Titan archiving the details for later retrieval.

She received the permission-flare through the MIU connection, confirmed by vox-cast from the control booth.

'*Evocatus* is cleared for battle. Set forth and crush the enemies of the Machine-God, Warlord of the True Messengers.'

At her thought-command, *Evocatus* took a step, and another. Three strides brought them clear of the docking temple and into the bright sunshine and clean air of Placia Mundus. The beast surged forth and Sythika let free its roar.

The deafening bass-note of the Titan's war-horn sounded across the valley in challenge to the waiting foe.

Battle Group Indictus formed on their princeps maximus thirty kilometres from the last enemy sighting. Alongside *Evocatus* strode the other Warlord, *Iron Brother*, and the Reaver Titans *Glorious* and *Conqueror*. Several kilometres ahead of them, the Warhounds *Tempestum* and *Wolf Runner* scouted for the foe. The last contact had been near the White Rift oil refineries on the edge of the

Capacia Massif – a tortured range of steep gorges and vertiginous cliffs that would be a death-trap for any Imperial Titan battle group. The war assets of the Adeptus Mechanicus were stretched thin enough already without wasting lives and engines trying to prise the renegades' grip from the mountains.

Covering the kilometres of wilderness with long strides, the war machines advanced in echelon, *Evocatus* at the leading end of the line, the *Iron Brother* anchoring the other two kilometres to the right, the Reavers between them. The plains were marked by the ancient lines of long-forgotten highways – roads all but reclaimed by forest and scrub.

The Capacia Massif was open dust country, barely a shack or bush for cover, a perfect killing ground for Titans but a graveyard for tanks and infantry. Divested of the usual drama of an accompanying battalion of skitarii, the Titans of Battle Group Indictus forged on into a growing storm, intent on engaging the enemy at all costs.

Flickers of recollection collided inside Sythika's thoughts. Not memories, not as a human would reckon it. Mimetic engrams, laid into the circuits of *Evocatus* over thousands of years, like well-worn tracks left across the ground. Images of battlefields past, of worlds trodden ten millennia before she had been born. Grey skies that flashed with lightning over a desert of red oxide. Wastelands carved by hundreds of dust devils that swept through the puny squads of infantry, tossing them about like insects while the Titans of the Legio Praesagius strode through the tempest. Ancient seabeds littered with bones of massive prehistoric creatures laid bare by oceans retreating beneath the burning heat of blazing twin suns.

While she experienced these not-memories, Sythika analysed the incoming stream of augur data, from both *Evocatus*' scanning arrays and the telemetric feeds from the rest of the battle group. The Warhound hunting pair went deeper into the growing storm, visibility reduced to a few hundred metres, aural scans wiped out by the howling winds and scratching whisper of tonnes of grey airborne dust.

'Cyclone speed increasing, princeps maximus,' reported Taithan of the *Wolf Runner*. *'Footing stable, but energy readings are spiking off the scale. Something in the bedrock, perhaps.'*

'Or enemy Titans,' Sythika replied. 'Hold position and await our arrival. There is a traitor battle group somewhere near here. We could be right on top of them and not know it in this filthy storm.'

'Orders received, princeps maximus. Maintaining picket patrol until your arrival.'

The beast that lurked in the heart of the Warlord Titan sensed the princeps' apprehension and responded with contempt. Sythika could feel its desire to fight, its longing to be free of the weak fleshy yoke that had been placed around its neck. It took effort to suppress the resurgent animal personality to focus on the data stream and the mission at hand.

'Engage and destroy,' she reminded her crew and the commanders of the other Titans. 'We cannot afford to allow a breakthrough here. Reinforcements will be in orbit in a matter of days, but until then, we are all that stands against the traitor war engines. We are likely outnumbered. Our strategy must be to isolate and annihilate.'

Evocatus' anger rumbled at the back of her thoughts, waiting to be unleashed as Sythika led the Titans further into the storm.

Encased within the metres-thick metal skin of their engines, the crews of the Titans paid no heed to the deadly nature of the elements screeching around their war machines. Wind-driven sand that would strip flesh from bone swirled and ebbed around the huge limbs of the walkers, settling in the thick weave of kill banners hanging from the gigantic weapons, creating trembling drifts against the gun mounts of their carapaces. Underfoot, the ground sank beneath their heavy tread, leaving a trail of compressed craters to mark their progress swiftly filling with freshly blown dust. Above, the sky was a uniform pale grey but for a wavering disc of white that marked the position of Placia Mundus' post-noon sun.

Evocatus' scanners blinked with the location transponders of the two Warhounds, zigzagging on their patrols ahead, some two kilometres distant. The vox-link crackled with interference from the storm.

'Erratic contact, princeps maximus,' reported the princeps of *Tempestum*, Targilio. *'Could be radioactive deposits, could be an enemy reactor.'*

'It's an enemy,' cut in Taithan, *'unless your deposit is moving closer.'*

'Number, distance,' snapped Sythika. 'Battle group, power to void shields.'

As she gave the command, she shunted the power flow of *Evocatus* from the locomotive actuators to the void shield generators. In the systems chambers at the Titan's heart, the enginseer oversaw the transition, monitoring the power output of the reactor and adjusting their coolant stream accordingly. Around the Warlord Titan, banks of warp energy shimmered into existence, flaring white and purple as they crackled through the sweeping sandstorm.

'That will slow us down, princeps maximus,' replied Dorfana of *Conqueror*.

The poor quality of the vox did not mask her disapproval.

'You would prefer that we ran headlong into the enemy without our shields raised?'

'No, princeps maximus. But our scout pair are vulnerable.'

'Taithan and Targilio know their role today, *Conqueror*.'

'The feint,' said Targilio.

'That's an odd way of pronouncing "bait", hunt-brother,' Taithan replied with a laugh.

'I have a second– No, wait…' Targilio showed no signs of humour as he relayed his scan results. *Tempestum* was the further forward of the two Warhounds, just in sight two hundred metres from its companions. *'Three definite readings, estimate Battle Titan size.'*

'Reavers or Warlords?' asked Taithan.

'Alas, the Machine-God did not bless me with magical eyes to guess the nature of a plasma reactor from a blurry dot on a screen.'

'Confirmed – I have fresh readings also, princeps maximus,' said Taithan. *'To the left, north-east. Two definite energy signatures.'*

'Five so far,' replied Sythika.

'Eight, princeps maximus,' Targilio corrected her. *'Now we have eight readings, all within two kilometres of my position.'*

'Time to withdraw, hunt-pair,' Sythika told her Warhounds. 'The enemy must have seen you by now.'

'There might be more,' protested Taithan. *'I swear there's another reading directly north. Another thirty seconds to make sure…'*

'Now!' growled the princeps. 'We fight as one today. This is not a raid on a supply column – this is pitched battle. Concentration of force means everything we have against a single target at a time. That includes both of you. The enemy are coming from the left and ahead – fade south-east and bring them to us. That should give us a flank to work against. We take the fight to them and hit before they know our strength. Battle group, attack speed.'

It was impossible for Sythika's flesh-and-bone body to feel the way *Evocatus* felt – if the MIU-patterned programming and sensory augur inputs could be deemed feelings at all. Neurons and synapses could only learn and re-learn so much, so it was that the energy signatures of the converging enemy Titans came to the princeps maximus in a conflation of touch and smell. Like a scent carried on a wind, the energy output of the enemy Titans left unique traces across

Evocatus' multi-spectral arrays.

A kilometre distant, almost directly north, she could feel the ponderous approach of another Warlord – she had dubbed it *'Abomination'*. A second Warlord was further east, a kilometre and half from contact, nothing more than a swirl of heat in the raging storm. This one she had named *'Abhorrent'*. A trio of Reavers completed the enemy battle group within striking distance – several other unidentified enemy signatures flittered through the storm at greater distances, a few more minutes from engagement.

Had it not been for the dust cloud, the battle would have already begun.

Less than two kilometres apart, the battle groups were well within the range of the support weapons they carried – in the case of Indictus that was the rocket launchers of *Glorious* and *Conqueror*. Yet without a solid targeting contact, such longer-ranged weapons were rendered no more useful than the gatling blasters and las-blasters that would come into play soon enough.

Indictus formed up closely to each other, the Warlords flanking the Reavers to mask their reactor signatures while the two Warhounds criss-crossed ahead, feinting and retreating, threatening to dart around a flank, keeping the enemy battle group occupied like a pugilist throwing out jabs while waiting for the moment to land a more punishing blow.

The input from *Abomination* was getting stronger, only seven hundred and fifty metres away. Sythika could feel the pulse of void shields throbbing through the storm cloud. In her visual feed from *Tempestum* – a crude, detached interaction compared to the MIU impulses of *Evocatus* – the princeps maximus saw glimmers of blue in the grey, the merest hint of energy shields.

'Weapons ready,' she told the moderati and received their affirmatives. From the reactor bay the enginseers sent their reports: all systems optimal and stable.

'Detecting a locking beam, princeps maximus,' warned Dorfana in *Conqueror*. *'Second Titan advancing in the energy wake of* Abomination*.'*

More than one, it quickly transpired. So close their void shields had merged, two Reaver Titans had used the much larger Warlord to screen their advance.

'The plan is the same,' Sythika quickly told the other princeps. 'Target locks, full bombardment of the Warlord. We'll deal with the Reavers when it has been crippled. Hunt-pair, start stripping their shields.'

The Warhounds sent their acknowledgements and surged forward, disappearing into the storm. Sythika slowed the advance of *Evocatus*, directing more power to the scanning arrays and targeting cogitators. A few seconds later, the tactic paid off as the Warlord Titan shuddered with momentary pleasure – it had found its

prey. On the visual displays, targeting reticules danced across the wavering image of *Abomination*, flickering between amber partial-locks and red full-locks.

'Feedback,' snarled Dolco. *'I'm getting a judder from the mounting pins, Sahsu. No target lock.'*

From the console of the other moderati came the whine of lock-beams finding their mark. A moment before the princeps gave the order to open fire, a spark of plasma erupted from the cannon of *Conqueror* to her right, a miniature star that seared into the bank of roiling sand. The energy bolt splashed against the void shields of *Abomination*, momentarily lighting the sphere of energy with an orange glow.

'Hold fire for a hull shot,' Sythika admonished her fellow princeps. 'Shields are still active.'

'Apologies, princeps maximus – our heat exchangers are malfunctioning. Containment was weakening.'

Sythika thought the order to open fire and *Evocatus* responded, flooding its systems with power to the moderati's systems. One gatling blaster roared forth a fusillade of shells, throwing ripples into the dust cloud that turned into shimmering explosions of power from the enemy Warlord's void shields. A las-blaster snapped in response, coursing white beams over the shields of *Glorious*, engulfing the Reaver in a dome of coruscating purple.

The second gatling blaster burst into life, its ailment rectified by the attentions of the tech-priests and their orderlies. More heavy shells screamed into *Abomination*'s defensive fields with showers of sparks and forks of black lightning.

The Warhounds had manoeuvred into position with their short-ranged but rapid-firing mega-bolters, scouring the shields of the lead enemy engine. Thousands of explosive shells ripped at the void shields, a blaze of fluctuating light amid a corona of energies, dust particles that lashed like tentacles. More fire from *Conqueror* descended on the traitor machine, rockets and plasma slammed into the exposed metalwork of its hull as the final void shield generator sparked and spasmed its last efforts. Fully revealed for the first time, *Abomination* was an ancient machine, easily as old as *Evocatus*, its carapace scarred by millennia of repairs, the livery of black enamel decorated with yellow flames pocked and cracked from uncountable battles.

Sythika recognised the markings immediately. The enemy came from a Legio made infamous during the schism of the Horus Heresy, who had betrayed the Machine-God and, more pointedly, nearly wiped out the Legio Praesagius. The

Fire Masters.

The traitor did not submit meekly to this rude attention; continuing volleys from its paired lasblasters hammered at *Glorious*, ripping away the last of the Reaver's void shields moments after *Abomination*'s defences were down. Triumph filled Sythika from the beast's thoughts, urging her to deliver the killing blow to the wounded prey.

'Targeting,' Pharuius declared an instant before Sythika was going to call for the volcano cannon.

Activity aboard *Evocatus* paused while power siphoned from secondary chambers to the massive energy weapon slung upon the right arm. Activation runes lit up in sequence around the moderati, bathing his face with amber and then green.

Abomination opened fire in the gap between *Glorious*' shields failing and the volcano cannon unleashing a sun-bright lance of power. Tank-sized quake cannon shells smashed into the Reaver, splintering metres-thick ceramite and metal, twisting the reinforced skeleton beneath. The beam of the volcano cannon hit *Abomination* high across the carapace – too high for Sythika, whose irritation surged through the MIU and caused *Evocatus* to sound its war-horns in response. One of the macro-cannons exploded at the touch of the beam, its mounting sheared through, but the traitor Warlord was otherwise unharmed.

Conqueror moved to interpose itself between *Abomination* and *Glorious*, fully active void shields gleaming like moonlight in the swirls of dust and laser. The enemy Reavers were now clear of the Warlord that had masked them; pencil-thin targeting beams flickered in the darkness, their weapons searching for a solid lock.

'Keep on *Abomination*, fire for full effect,' Sythika urged her battle group, trusting their void shields to weather the fire about to erupt from the pair of Reavers. Plasma and rockets burst in red-and-blue fire over the beleaguered traitor, turning exposed infrastructure to slag, honour banners set ablaze.

Crossfire from the Fire Masters Reavers drove the Warhounds back, even together no match for a full Battle Titan bombardment. With the line of fire open on *Conqueror,* the Reavers turned their attention on Dorfana's war engine.

'We can handle this,' the princeps of *Conqueror* assured her companions. *'Finish the Warlord, then we'll let these traitors have a taste of our wrath.'*

The volcano cannon was seconds from recharging, but the continued advance of both sides had brought them almost to closing distance – within minimum range of the Titan-killing weapon.

‘Scanntor, get ready.’

‘Always ready, princeps,’ the moderati of the power fist replied. At his thought, the immense energy-wreathed gauntlet flexed in anticipation of the combat.

‘Moving to melee range, cover our back,’ Sythika told the rest of the battle group.

The very moment that she thought to engage *Abomination* in close combat, the beast latched its thoughts on to the other enemy Warlord. The princeps maximus had not been ignoring it, but had reasoned that *Abhorrent* would wait its turn after *Abomination* was destroyed. *Evocatus* fixed upon the signal of the approaching war engine, dragging her thoughts with it.

The sense of it – the smell of the plasma reactor as Sythika felt it – was familiar.

Too familiar.

She felt the beast in the heart of *Evocatus* rebelling against her command. New images flooded her thoughts, more powerful than anything she had encountered from the Titan before. These were not random mimetic engrams; these were fixed processor patterns, all but ingrained into the hardware with continued playback…

She watched stars fall from the sky and a city burn. Evocatus *had no name for this place, no words for what was happening other than rage – a deep-seated hatred and a thirst for revenge that overpowered all other consideration.*

Sythika knew well what she experienced, though she had never before seen it, and the events witnessed had taken place ten thousand years before.

Calth. The great betrayal, when Titan had turned against Titan even as the legios had embarked to take the Great Crusade into the furthest stretches of the Eastern Fringe.

That had been the treachery of the Fire Masters, when the other Legio had turned its guns on the defenceless True Messengers in the cause of Horus.

Sythika was powerless to resist as *Evocatus* swung away from *Abomination*, all sensors and weapons turned towards *Abhorrent*. Another flare of recollection came – *of the other Titan raking gunfire across* Evocatus’ *carapace from the flank, setting fires in its gut with pinpoint strikes…*

Pain.

The closest a Titan felt to pain was pulses through the damage control systems, but to Sythika it came as mortal pain, in her chest and heart. Worse still was the sense of incomprehension, the dull but living thoughts of *Evocatus* quickly becoming a mass of hurt and confusion that its ally would harm it in this way.

‘Princeps, what are your orders?’

‘Evocatus*, designate new target?’*

‘Target lock lost, volcano cannon offline.’

‘Void shield failing! Princeps majoris, we must respond!’

Sythika felt the alarm of her moderati, heard the protests of her fellow princeps. She had to regain control of the beast. She had to master *Evocatus* and finish *Abomination*, or the battle was surely lost.

She took a torch into the cave with her, hoping that the light would shine into the heart of the beast, to show it the way out of the darkness. Its growls and snarls betrayed a fury held in check for thousands of years, now on the verge of breaking free. She knew its desires. She shared the will to rend and tear and bite and slash and trample every part of its foe. The animal rage consumed her, and just as the fear threatened to overwhelm her, so the ire of the beast swamped every sensation.

She tried to ride it, to soothe the roaring that raged as wailing war-horns. She tried to calm nerves afire with thoughts of vengeance, data displays and warning lights red across the board as *Evocatus* dragged on its power reserves to fuel its strides towards the hated enemy, pushing the plasma reactor to overdrive.

The void shields flickered, falling away like shucked skin, a weight discarded so that the beast could break into a charge.

Defenceless, they would surely be broken upon the guns of *Abhorrent*, which she could feel now as a malign gaze upon her, its targeting arrays fixing upon the Warlord that so recklessly hurtled towards it.

She tried again, but the beast lashed at her, carving open her thoughts with a snarl and swipe.

Sythika retreated, trying all she could to emanate calm, to pour stillness into the turmoil of the beast’s thoughts. She was water on the fire, the stillness of night against the raging sun of noon.

The hatred and rage went unquenched. Her thoughts buffeted and stretched, she almost lost contact through the MIU. She narrowly averted total disaster – mindlock, or worse, a full reality divorce – and gripped on to the metaphorical hide of the beast as it rampaged around its cave, lashing out at random.

‘You have to take control, princeps!’ Dolco sounded like he was giving her an order, but she realised it was a plea.

Take control.

Sythika was not sure how. For all the years she had ridden with the beast they

had fought together, a partnership, not mistress and slave. Mutual respect had bound them together.

Yet the thing that now burned her thoughts with searing lashes of ire was not the beast unleashed, the animal that had never really been tamed. It was the feral spirit of *Evocatus* as laid down by the ancients, and it cared nothing for the desires and fears of fleeting mortal lives.

Control.

There was no other option. Sythika had to dare the whirlwind of the beast's thoughts, risk having her persona shredded by the bellowing, storming incarnation of fury that had erupted through the MIU.

Her thoughts swelled as her own failings came back to haunt her. Every time she had appeased the beast, she had never really been in control. She was a disgrace to her rank.

Fuelled by this, her anger rose, but she did not allow it to break free like the beast. Instead she channelled it into ball of disdain for the creature that had cowed her for so long.

Sythika asserted herself, striding into the cave alight with flame from head to foot, a whip of fire in her hand. She stared the beast in the eye, lash ready to strike.

'You are mine,' she growled. 'I am the lord here. I am the princeps.'

The beast roared, but there was uncertainty in its rage.

'Submit!' roared Sythika, the command like the boom of a detonation, a white star of indignation that filled the cave with light, leaving no shadow for the beast to dwell within.

Exposed, confronted, no longer the unseen dread, the beast fled from her unyielding gaze.

In an instant, green lights flickered into life across the consoles and displays. A chorus of relief and triumph from the moderati acknowledged that the systems were back under their control.

A check of the chronometer revealed that the confrontation had taken a matter of seconds, though it had felt like hours. Sythika felt calmer than ever before as she eased her thoughts through the massive war machine's systems, guiding limbs as though they were her own, feeling the burn of the plasma reactor like the heart in her chest. For the first time since she had come to *Evocatus,* she felt truly one with the machine, no longer scared of it, of the responsibility and the risks.

She turned the Titan back, ponderously coming upon *Abomination*. As Scanntor

readied the power fist and *Evocatus* picked up speed for the charge, Sythika let a reassuring thought flow through the MIU link.

'Together, we will right the ancient wrongs,' she assured the Titan. 'Together, vengeance will be ours.'

THE ZHENG CIPHER

JOSH REYNOLDS

The radium carbine bucked in Alpha 6-Friest's hands as she pivoted and fired at the hormagaunt springing towards her out of the press of battle. The rad-bathed bullet punctured the alien's skull, scorching the chitin black as it passed through and out the other side. She spun, carbine juddering as she fired again and again, trusting in her targeting sensors to send the bullets where the Omnissiah willed.

As she moved, her augmented limbs carrying her smoothly from one firing stance to the next, she took note of the disposition of her skitarii, calculated the efficiency of their current firing pattern, and found it wanting. 6-Friest stepped back, avoiding a scything talon, and smashed the butt of her carbine into the wailing hormagaunt's fang-studded maw. The front of the alien's skull crumpled and burst, spattering the front of her armour. Even as it fell, she was already seeking out new prey. The radium carbine slid through her fingers, spinning swiftly back into a firing position with a casual twitch of her wrists.

<Tighten up ranks.> She sent the thought pulsing out along the neural node-line that linked her combat-maniple. They responded with action rather than assent, tightening their formation, drawing together into a tight phalanx. Radium carbines hissed and barked, punching steaming holes in the heaving tide of alien chitin that sought to drown the cohort of skitarii vanguard attempting to pass through it.

<Watch your left, 10-Dulak,> she thought, sending a warning to one of her skitarii as something with too many limbs and claws rose up out of the press of lesser vermin and lunged for him with blades of bone and whips of stinging flesh. The rad-trooper whirled and fired, again and again, until the tyranid warrior staggered and sank down, its body shrivelling and steaming as the baleful energies ate away at its flesh. The radium carbines she and her skitarii carried were masterpieces of baroque beauty, each one older than its wielder by

several generations. That beauty, however, belied a vile function – every shot bathed the immediate area in deadly radiation, rendering it as inhospitable as the rad-wastes of Mars itself.

Which was not to say that Kotir-8 was all that hospitable otherwise. The once harmlessly barren mining colony had been reduced to a xenos-infested wasteland, stripped of what little life it had possessed, its rocky gorges and snow-capped crags covered in a seething carpet of organic savagery. There had been two hundred and sixty-three extraction facilities on Kotir-8. Now there was one. Soon enough, there would be none. It was as inevitable as rust and ruin.

The facility in question rose above the seething horde. It was a hummock of metal and stone, built to withstand the worst environmental hazards the galaxy could throw at it, and to protect the extraction plant and its workers. Defence emplacements consisting of plasteel weapon blisters swivelled and rolled, spraying the forecourt of the facility with autocannon fire and cleansing flames. While the facility's firepower was substantial, it barely slowed the frenzied mass of alien bodies that swarmed about its walls like an angry sea of chitin and ichor. Soon, those defences would fall silent, ammunition cylinders and fuel drums emptied, and the armoured doors would buckle and burst, as they had two hundred and sixty-two times before.

Speed was of the essence. The facility held something too precious and important to allow it to be so savagely consumed. That was why 6-Friest and her combat-maniple had been dispatched, to fight their way across the arid plains and jagged crags from their point of arrival at one of the fallen facilities, to this last redoubt.

She recalled the juddering descent, the orbital lander losing pieces of itself as it plummeted through the swirling clouds of alien madness. Flying bioforms – gargoyles, harridans and worse things – had converged on the lander as it pierced the upper reaches of the atmosphere, tearing it apart as it fell. She had lost two skitarii in that hellish drop, torn from their safety harnesses by the claws and tendrils of the monstrous creatures and dragged out into the crawling sky. Others had died on the march, pulled away from the group and into a tangle of talons and teeth, or else consumed by alien bile. But the vanguard had marched on, as relentless as the will of the Omnissiah Himself. And now that they were within sight of their goal, 6-Friest had no intention of slowing down.

6-Friest signalled the closest of her combat-maniple, and they swung their carbines around, aligning them with hers. As one, they fired, punching a hole in the frenzied ranks of the enemy. Just beyond the leaping, skittering forms of the

hormagaunts, she could see two more of the multi-limbed warrior forms striding forward.

<9-Jud, target the synapse creatures.> A moment later, 9-Jud's radium jezzail shrieked. The long-barrelled rifle was a precision weapon, requiring a steady hand, eye and mind. 9-Jud had all three, thanks to the blessings of the Omnissiah. One of the tyranid warriors staggered as a bullet smashed into its chest. It lurched forward, screamed and toppled, black bile and steam spurting from its open jaws. The last of the warrior-forms broke into a loping run, smashing through the massed ranks of its smaller kin in its hurry to close the distance.

<Under optimum range, Alpha,> 9-Jud sent.

<Acknowledged. Engaging conqueror protocols,> 6-Friest responded. She slung her carbine and stepped forward, unhooking the arc maul from her belt. With a snap of her wrist, she activated the weapon. Energy crackled around its bludgeon, and she felt her combat-nodes shiver in sympathy as the weapon linked itself to her.

The tiny, fierce machine-spirit within the arc maul gave a static snarl of eagerness as she broke into a trot. It longed for war the way an adept longed for enhancements, ever-greedy. She knew that feeling well, and was happy to have the opportunity to indulge it. When metal met flesh, flesh failed. It was a lesson the hive mind had yet to learn, but Omnissiah willing, she would teach it today. She swung it in a tight circle, filling the air with the hum of arc generators as she moved to intercept the tyranid warrior.

The creature was already staggering, black froth dripping from its jaws. Even the alien horrors birthed by the hive fleets were not immune to the searing breath of Mars. To meet the vanguard in battle was to meet death, either by bullet or by simple proximity. But the quicker the synapse creature was put down, the quicker the rest would scatter, and the quicker she and her combat-maniple could complete their mission.

She ducked beneath its first sweeping blow with a bone-
sword and brought the arc maul down on its exposed elbow joint. Electricity surged through the limb and the tyranid howled in agony as it rounded on her. She stepped back, narrowly avoiding the tip of a second blade. Her targeting array pinged as it focused in on a weak point in the creature's armour, and she smiled beneath her helm. The creature had overextended itself. She lunged forward and smashed her arc maul into its knee, elbow and then, finally, its jaw, pulverising each in turn in a burst of blue lightning. Bone blades skidded across

her war-plate in a scatter of sparks, but failed to cut through the ancient artificer armour.

6-Friest stepped back as the tyranid slumped. The beast wheezed and tried to stand, but before it could do so, she pressed the barrel of her carbine to its wide skull and pulled the trigger. As the synapse creature slumped, a quiver went through the ranks of hormagaunts. Bestial instincts reasserted themselves in the absence of the guiding will of the hive mind, and the creatures began to retreat.

6-Friest knew it was only a temporary reprieve. Quickly, she signalled for her combat-maniple to head for the main doors of the facility. They did not wait for it to open. One melta-charge later, 6-Friest was stepping through a smoking, slag-lined hole and into the facility beyond. A ring of autoguns greeted her, and above them, pale, frightened faces. She let her carbine dangle from its strap and reached up to unlatch her helmet. The fear did not fade from the faces of the facility crew.

She did not blame them. Her features were as pale as theirs, but scarred by radiation and war. Her skin was peeling away in dry sheets and her teeth were few and far between. What hair she had was shorn close to the scalp, and as dry as the red sands. Her eyelids were gone and her eyes were covered by the goggle-like augmetics, filled with blessed salve, and constantly whirring and oscillating, recording information to be transmitted to her master in orbit. Thankfully, her gums no longer ached, and the old burns on her neck and cheeks had long since stopped hurting.

‘Rad-troopers,’ someone muttered.

‘Where is your adept?’ she croaked. She cleared her throat and asked again more clearly. It had been months since her last physical conversation. The neural link was more efficient, and easier on vocal cords seared by the rad-storms of Mars. She snapped her fingers. ‘Your adept,’ she said again.

‘Here! I am here,’ a voice said. A tall man clad in filthy Administratum robes shoved through the ring of guns. He was worm-pale and bald, with bloodshot eyes and a jaw coated in stubble. ‘Adept Sooj, at your service…?’ he said.

‘Alpha Vanguard 6-Friest,’ she said, clipping her helmet to her belt and turning. ‘9-Jud, 4-Hest, establish a perimeter. 12-Udo, take four others and come with me. 10-Dulak, take the rest and establish a defensive cordon around the loading bay. Chronometers set for departure schedule epsilon.’ She turned back to Sooj. ‘The cipher, adept. Is it safe?’

‘The–? Oh! Ah, yes,’ Sooj said hurriedly. He stared at her face with what she suspected was horrified fascination. Few outside of the skitarii barracks saw the

warriors of the vanguard up close, and fewer still wanted to. Their very presence was death to the unaugmented or unprotected, their robes and war-plate tainted by the baleful energies of the weapons they wielded in the Omnissiah's name. 'Our tech-priest kept it in the examination nave.'

'Take me to it. Now,' she said. Sooj nodded jerkily and hurried away. 6-Friest followed, 12-Udo and the others falling in behind her. She ignored the facility crew as they made way for her. They parted, giving her a wide berth as she swept through them. There were only a pitiful few left, a dozen at most, hollow-eyed and stinking of stale caff-rations and chemicals. They clutched their weapons with fervent devotion, however, and she did not doubt their willingness to fight. They slunk behind her skitarii, following at a distance.

'I-I rather expected more of you, when you said you were coming,' Sooj said. Contact had been established early on in the invasion. A ship had been dispatched as soon as word of the cipher's recovery had reached those who recognised its importance. It was only by the will of the Omnissiah that they had reached Kotir-8 before it was fully enveloped in the coils of the hive fleet designated Leviathan.

'How many crew were assigned to this facility, adept?' she asked, as she followed Sooj. He glanced at her and gave a harsh caw of laughter.

'One hundred and fifty-five,' he said. 'We have lost one hundred and forty-three personnel since the xenos made planetfall. As such, the continued operation of this facility has proven impossible.' He didn't look at her. 'I have recorded each name, and the manner of their passing, as it occurred. Each of them did their duty, and to the last. May the Emperor bless and keep them.'

'Your tech-priest was one of the casualties,' 6-Friest said.

It wasn't a question. Sooj nodded and hugged his sides as he led her down a corridor lined with rattling pipes and clattering gauges. Bundles of cable hung from the ceiling where they'd been rerouted to provide power, likely to the defences. It made her soul cringe to see such butchery of the Omnissiah's own, but under the circumstances, she was sure the Machine-God would be forgiving. The living quarters for the crew occupied three honeycomb levels, one atop the next.

'Yes, old Rebos. He's the one who identified the cipher. Something… took him, on the third day. It took others as well, but Rebos was a blow,' Sooj said. He shook his head, and ran trembling fingers across his shaved pate. 'Without him, I have had sole responsibility for the continued survival of this facility and its remaining crew.' He glanced at her again. 'I am glad you showed up when you

did, Alpha 6-Friest.'

'And I am glad you were able to hold out as long as you have,' 6-Friest said.

'All blessings be to Rebos and the God-Emperor,' Sooj said. 'It was he who insisted on the proper maintenance of the weapons systems, and the power reroutes.' He gestured at the loose cabling. 'I was more concerned with the day-to-day operations…' He trailed off. Then, hesitantly, he asked, 'Are… are we the last?'

'You are. Kotir-8 is lost,' 6-Friest said. 'You have done the Emperor proud, and the Omnissiah's blessings will be upon you, for your efforts here.'

'I'm just happy to be leaving,' Sooj said. There was an edge of hysteria to his voice. His bio-rhythms were erratic, and 6-Friest could only vaguely imagine the strain he'd been under. Administratum adepts were not conditioned for war or survival, merely for calculation and the proper keeping of records. But the Machine-God had seen fit to gift Adept Sooj with a modicum of utility, enabling him to persevere where others of his caste might have crumbled and become worse than useless. It had enabled him to keep safe that which she and her combat-mantiple had been sent to retrieve, in the face of the alien fury now consuming the world around them.

'The cipher, adept,' she said.

'Here.' Sooj led her into a chamber that she recognised as a Mechanicum nave – a laboratory, where Rebos would have studied, synthesised and recorded the materials discovered during the facility's operations. Bits of archeotech and other, older remnants cluttered examination tables or slowly cycled through automated scanners. A robed servitor stood in one corner, steadily recording the findings of the scanners, its servo-stylus scratching quietly across the parchment which emerged from the feeder unit built into its augmented chest cavity only to fall in rolls and tangles about the floor, unread and soon to be destroyed forever.

'Kotir-8 was a historical junk-heap, or so Rebos claimed. A millennia of history, buried beneath the topsoil. There were colonies here well before the Great Crusade, and well after. They were lost to war, and worse things, but the infrastructure was still here. Whole hives, buried beneath the arid soil, lost to recorded history,' Sooj said, looking around. 'The ore-haulers recovered bulkheads, miles of cabling and deck plates. We never discovered whether it was a ship or something else.' He looked at her. 'And now I suppose we never will.'

'No,' she said.

Sooj went to one of the tables and retrieved a cylindrical tube, inscribed with the sigils of the Adeptus Mechanicus. It was old. She could tell that even without

the aid of diagnostic sensors. The brass tube had turned green with age, and hardened soil still clung to the teeth of the cogwheel symbol emblazoned on each end. He extended it towards her, and she accepted it reverentially.

She ran her fingers across the markings, wondering at the man who'd made them. Inside was a message of some kind, a recording or a coded transmission. The words of a forgotten age, thought lost but now returned, by the grace and mercy of the Machine-God. The final testament of Magos Zheng, explorator and saint of the sacred brotherhood of the eternal cog. He who had gone beyond the Ghoul Stars, and vanished into the firmament of heaven without a trace. Until now.

It was worth a world, she thought, to recover this. Perhaps that was why the Machine-God had drawn the explorator fleets to Kotir-8 in the first place. So that the cipher might be found, before it was lost forever.

She felt the touch of the Omnissiah's will upon hers as she ran her fingers across the cylinder, and knew a moment of joy that the responsibility had fallen to her. She had ever served the Machine-God to the fullest of her capabilities, and this was her reward, to stand here, holding the legacy of Zheng, to return what had been lost to those who would care for it forevermore. 'I serve, and gladly,' she murmured.

'He never said what it was. Only that it was of immense value,' Sooj said.

6-Friest did not reply. Sooj would not understand, for his intellect was caged in meat, rather than at one with the choral nodes of the Great Work. Her eyepieces oscillated, summoning a digital overlay of the facility's schematics. She gestured. 'The loading bay, for the orbital haulers – it's there? What is its status?'

'Ah… uncompromised, as yet. Once we open the bay doors though, they'll get in.'

'They always get in,' 6-Friest said. 'It is what they are designed to do. Just as we are designed to reduce them to the protoplasm from which they are made. You and your men will accompany us to the bay. The extraction vessel is waiting for our signal.' She turned and left the lab, the cipher cradled to her chest.

'I– yes, of course,' Sooj said. He nodded and gestured. His men followed without complaint as the adept led the vanguard to the bay. The cavernous structure occupied a third of the facility, and was dominated by clanking carrier-belts, manned by sorting servitors, who now bent, pushed and separated the empty air in lieu of the stream of ore, which had long since ceased to pour from the great feeder chutes that lined the inner wall.

Steam vented from cracked, untended pipes, and gauges rattled querulously in dark corners. The facility had its own crude form of spirit, as did all complex machinery, however large or small. And that spirit knew that it was dying. Alarms whooped and fell silent in mournful song, and melancholy power surges fried unsanctified circuit boards, filling the air with greasy smoke and the tang of scorched metal.

6-Friest made a silent prayer for forgiveness, hoping the facility would understand. They all had their function, and they must perform it as the Omnissiah willed. They made their way towards the pentagonal landing platform, where in better times suborbital haulers would have landed to collect the raw ore, to be turned into promethium at the massive refinery-cities that had once girded Kotir-8's equatorial zone.

She heard the ping of the suborbital flyer's approach warning, and signalled her skitarii to open the landing bay. The great skylight, made from fractal plates of rad-hardened plasteel, groaned and squealed as it slid open. A few opportunistic tyranids took the opportunity to drop into the bay, screeching with hunger. The skitarii opened fire, sweeping the xenos beasts from the landing platform within moments.

The outpost shuddered, and alarms began to blare with a consistency they had not had before. She heard the distinctive hiss-crack of a radium jezzail echo through the bay, and knew that the outer defences had been breached. 6-Friest turned. <9-Jud, report.>

<Enemy has engaged assault protocols. Assault bioforms in evidence. Orders?>

Assault bioforms – that meant something larger than hormagaunts or the synapse broods. <Hold position. Continue situation analysis,> she sent. The unspoken addendum was 'until you are unable to do so', but no skitarius needed to be told that. Then, after a moment of hesitation, she added, <Omnissiah guide you, 9-Jud.>

<Acknowledged, Alpha. And… thank you.>

She cut the link without replying. As she did so, she saw 10-Dulak and the others falling back into the bay. Defender protocols had been engaged, and her skitarii knew what to do without being told. They closed the bay doors behind them and sealed them. 9-Jud and 4-Hest were not with them. Someone needed to slow down the enemy, while the extraction was completed.

6-Friest felt no guilt at the thought. It was a necessity, and one that the warriors of the vanguard were ever-prepared to make. They lived and breathed the very stuff of death, and it was their constant companion. *Some parts wear out quicker*

than others, but all are necessary, all serve, for however short a time, she thought. 9-Jud knew that. Cogs did not complain. She hefted her carbine and checked her ammunition.

The lander appeared over the platform, thrusters humming as it descended on columns of super-heated air and promethium. Its anti-personnel weapons hissed as it sank down, and chunks of burning tyranid pattered down onto the platform around it. It was small, as such flyers went. Barely large enough to carry a few passengers and the crew of specially designed servitors that manned it.

Sooj stared at it in incomprehension. 'It's… Is there a larger ship coming?'

'No,' 6-Friest said. She didn't look at him.

'But you said– We were to be extracted!' Sooj's voice rose, and his men began to murmur amongst themselves. The hope of survival, of escape, had ensured that they held on. If that hope were taken away, there was no telling how they might react. Nonetheless, 6-Friest did not have it in her to lie. Deception was the way of meat. The machine provided only clarity, painful and bright.

'One may die, yet still endure if his work enters the greater work,' 6-Friest said, still not looking at Sooj. The adept shook his head.

'I don't…'

'We must endure the present, that those who come after may continue the great work,' 6-Friest continued. She looked at the adept now. 'The words of Technomagos Mojaro, on the eve of the Xenarite Schism. We are not flesh, adept. We are but cogs in the God-Machine, turning as the Omnissiah wills.' Almost gently, she added, 'Sometimes those cogs must be stripped out, for the good of the machine.'

Sooj looked at her blankly. Then, his eyes widened. 'This isn't a rescue,' he said hoarsely. 6-Friest cocked her head.

'It is,' she said. She gestured with the cipher. 'But not for you.'

Sooj turned pale. It was an impressive feat, given his pallid appearance. 6-Friest's sensors registered a drop in blood pressure, and she moved to steady the adept. He attempted to slap her hand away, but only succeeded in bruising his own. Cradling it, he backed away from her.

'You're going to let them kill us,' he hissed, in a strangled voice.

'No. You may fight, if you wish. Survival is unlikely, but the option is available,' 6-Friest said. Her sensors registered a spike in adrenaline. She glanced at his face, noting the increased respiration, the dilation of pupils and the subcutaneous twitch of the muscles in his hand. Sooj lunged for her weapon a half-second after she extended her hand to intercept his. She caught his wrist and

squeezed.

Bone cracked, and the adept shrieked. 6-Friest felt a moment of pity, as the other survivors reacted with predictable hostility. Autoguns bobbed up, even as their wielders were cut down by the carbines of the rad-troopers. In moments, the last survivors of Kotir-8 were so much inert matter. All save Sooj. She looked down at the adept.

He'd fallen to his knees, his wrist still trapped by her grip. He cursed her, even as he flailed at her with his free hand. She looked down at him. 'You would not have survived exposure to us, adept,' she said. 'Your moment has come, whether at the claws of the tyranids, or from the slow dissolution that come with the radiation that is our blessing and burden. Be at peace, and know that your name will be remembered, in the record of this event.' She reached down and caught hold of his head. 'The machine will endure.'

Then, with a single, sharp motion, she snapped his neck. It was a small mercy, but one she was only too happy to provide. Sooj had served faithfully, and well, after all.

The alarms fell silent. She looked towards the doors and shivered as the neural strand connecting her to her combat-
maniple shuddered. 6-Friest felt 9-Jud's death through its quivering filaments. She felt the heat that washed over him, consuming his organic components and cooking his brain within its shell of bone and metal. His last thought pulsed across the surface of her mind before flickering into static. 'Like the breath of Mars,' she murmured. He'd always been a bit of a poet, she thought, as she turned towards the heavy bay doors. Something slammed against the metal, causing it to distend and bulge.

<Fall back to the landing platform. Hold position. Defensive protocols.> She turned and darted up the steps to the top of the platform, robes swirling about her legs. The side of the lander opened like a blossom of metal, accompanied by the hiss of unseen pneumatics. A cloud of incense issued forth, heralding the figure which stepped out to meet her as she reached the lander.

The servitor was rad-hardened, and its head ended at the top of its lower jaw. The rest of its head was taken up by a holographic projector, surrounded by censer-exhausts, which spewed caustic, sterilising incense into the air around the servitor. The inhuman features of the technomagos in charge of her operation flickered into view as the servitor stepped down out of the transport.

'Report,' he said.

Wordlessly, 6-Friest held up the cipher, in its protective case. The technomagos'

holographic eyepieces whirred and clicked, focusing in on the cipher. A burble of sound squawked through the servitor's speakers and it held out a bulky claw. She deposited the cipher into its care, and the servitor slid it into a specially prepared node on its armoured chassis. Safe within that node, the cipher would remain inviolate, even if the servitor were jettisoned into the vacuum of space.

'At last,' the technomagos rasped. 'The final cipher of Magos Arcturus Zheng, devised before his disappearance beyond the Ghoul Stars. What knowledge it must contain, what secrets…' The eyepieces whirred and clicked again, focusing on her rad-scarred features. 'You have done well, Alpha 6-Friest.'

'Acknowledged, Archmagos Vule,' she said. She glanced at the transport. It was small, albeit bulky, but it could hold herself and several of her remaining skitarii. She looked up, through the open bay. The skies were full of tyranid aero-forms, the clouds choked and stricken through with purple, sickly veins of crackling bio-luminescence. 'Probability of priority evacuation?'

'Nil,' Vule said.

6-Freist closed her eyes, but only for a moment. 'Understood,' she said, tonelessly.

'Your rad-output is unacceptable, Alpha 6-Friest. It might damage the cipher if proximity continues,' Vule said.

'Explanations are unnecessary, archmagos,' 6-Friest said. She raised her helmet and slid it on, locking it into place with a twitch of her fingers. 'Cogs do not question. They merely turn. I only ask that prayers be said on our behalf.'

Vule was silent, for long moments. Then, the servitor reached up, as if its puppeteer, so many millions of miles above the dying world, had inadvertently tugged on a string. The claw twitched, mere millimetres shy of her arm, before falling back. 'Omnissiah bless you, daughter of the machine,' Vule said. The hologram flickered and faded. The servitor turned and trundled back up into the flyer. 6-Friest turned away.

The doors at the end of the bay exploded inwards, skidding across the floor, trailing sparks. A tide of alien filth flooded into the loading bay, led by the roaring, monstrous shape of a carnifex, its carapace scarred by rad-burns. The bay shuddered as it screeched in rage.

'Omnissiah guide and keep you all,' 6-Friest said, as she hefted her weapon. 'And pray for our brothers, whose task is not yet done. Our burden is soon to be set aside, our service to the Machine-God complete, but theirs must continue.'

'We pray,' her maniple murmured, as one.

The carnifex surged up the steps of the dais, plasma belching from its distended

maw. Hormagaunts swarmed up the steps alongside it, and behind them came worse things. A crawling tide of filthy creation, a wave of flesh. When metal met flesh, flesh failed. But in failing, it could tangle and swallow. But it could not, would not, consume. She stroked her carbine, wondering how long it would be forced to sit and wait for the servants of the Machine-God to come and take it away. *I am sorry, old friend,* she thought, as she and her skitarii opened fire. *Be patient, for they will come for you, and you will sing the death-song of Mars anew, on other battlefields.* The radium carbine shivered in her grip as she fired, as if in melancholy response.

The carnifex reached the top of the platform. A skitarius died, rent asunder by snapping claws. Another was incinerated by a boiling gout of plasma. 6-Friest lifted her arc maul and stepped past the burning remains to confront the monstrous flesh. Behind her, she heard the roar of thrusters. Her mission was done. Her purpose was served, all sub-routines completed.

The carnifex rose up over her, pale flesh already blackening and blistering from its proximity to her and the others. Its jaw sagged, and she could see the incandescent mass growing within its gullet. She smiled as she felt the wash of its heat roll over her, consuming what little flesh was left to her, even as she swung the arc maul towards its skull. 9-Jud had been right.

It was just like the soothing breath of Mars.

CLADE

ROB SANDERS

‘When the forge world of Velchanos Magna was rediscovered, the forces of the Adeptus Mechanicus went to war to reconquer it from the Dark Mechanicum. But at the heart of the world lurked a daemon called the Abystra Dynomicron, and its corruption flowed through liquid metal across the planet and powered the dark forges that created the deadly war machines ranged against the Cult Mechanicus forces.

‘Magos Dominus Theronymous Gant was at the forefront of the campaign, commanding skitarii legions and Legio Cybernetica constructs as he fought to bring the Omnissiah’s light back to Velchanos Magna. After one particularly vicious battle to claim the Anathdrach forges, Gant’s foe, Forge Master Vasco Phaedrega, escaped and the tech-priest dominus swore to hunt and kill the heretic and his twisted skitarii bodyguard.’

– From *Wars of the Machine Cult*, publication suppressed

The spidery hydraulics of Theronymous Gant's legs were largely hidden beneath his vestments but they made short work of the wreckage-strewn terrain of the Planum Obsequia. The tech-priest was a hunched figure with multiple bionic limbs and mechadendrites snaking out from beneath his heavy robes. He walked with his rod of office in one of his many hands, stabbing its interface tip into the grit, scrap and corpses of the battlefield with crabby insistence. The stave's workings glowed blue in the forge world's perpetual night, lighting the way through the destruction.

The constructs of the Dark Mechanicum had paid heavily for their twisted faith. Gant skirted a monstrous crater that still steamed in the emptiness of the ashen wastes. A God-Machine or one of the Adeptus Mechanicus ships stationed in orbit above had visited its fury on the warped forces gathered here. The planum was littered with bodies, cybernetic limbs and exposed workings.

Gant was followed by Breacher-Clade Rho~4 Servotaurox. Made up of twelve Kataphron heavy battle servitors, the Breacher units were tracked like small tanks. The armoured torsos of turret-interfaced servitors little knew the honour they bore. The Kataphrons were holy weapons of the Machine-God, designed to tear the heart out of enemy formations with their hydraulic claws and arc rifles.

Gant held up one of his many bionic appendages and the Kataphron Breachers crunched to a halt. Gant's telescopic optics whirred to focus on a series of footprints. They were uniform, like those of bionic replacements, and deep – no doubt belonging to constructs carrying the weight of their war-plate, weaponry and augmentations.

<Mark coordinates,> Gant streamed in the binharic cant that the heavy battle servitors understood. <Targets have changed their heading.>

Rho~4[1/12] trundled forward. As the prime unit of the Kataphrons, the priest's

orders were run through him. The servitor gave the simultaneous impression of a man caught in a machine trap – a soul furious to be free – and a cybernetic monstrosity drunk on its own destructive power. The only flesh visible was the Kataphron Breacher's half-face. Hive world tattoos wove elegantly about his eye and furrowed brow, running up across his shaven head. An ornamental cog attached to his nose clinked against the vox-grille that replaced his mouth.

<See?> Gant said, the steam of his breath departing the rebreather flasks that protruded from his hood. He poked the interface tip of his glowing stave at the prints.

Rho~4[1/12] did nothing but update his acquisition protocols and targeting data with numbers and dimensions. Gant snaked the curved alloy of his spine up and around, stabbing his rod of office in the direction the footsteps had taken. His optics whirred, extending telescopically from his hood. The priest cycled through his filters. An annotated enhancement suggested that his target had headed for the Neotrontia Collector Fields and beyond that the towering forges of the Crucib-Pentadictum.

<See how these foul hereteks run before the wrath of the Great Maker?>

As Gant led his Kataphron Breachers across the Neotrontia Collector Fields – like the nomadic caravans of earliest Mars – he could hear thunder on the horizon. The God-Machines of the Legio Interfectra were engaging monstrous traitor Titans amongst the ore-depleted peaks of the Augol Mountains.

Gant's spidery hydraulics cracked the shattered pieces of solar cells and he looked up. With Velchanos Magna tidally locked with its dismal star, this side of the planet did not receive any light for the collectors to harness. The magos dominus suspected that instead of sunlight, the arrays gathered energy in the form of the fell radiance that ordinarily afflicted the forge world's skies from the warp storms above.

Looking down at a larger piece of solar cell, the reflective surface broken and warped, Gant's optics detected something looking back at him. The mirror raged with the infernal glow of the planet's daemonic core. Gant looked about at the sea of shards. The Abystra Dynomicron was watching him. Lifting one of his appendages, Gant let its tip strike the mirrored surface before putting his augmented weight on the smashed remnant and shattering it further.

They soon came to the Crucib-Pentadictum. The forges of the monstrous complex towered above them, but the great powerhouses of production seemed long-dead. All was silent but for the jangle of chains and the sound of grit on the

wind. The furnaces were dormant. Bulk conveyers sat on the freightways and cargo plazas. The sprawling installation was devoid of life, mechanical or otherwise.

<Engage search-and-destroy imperatives,> the magos dominus told Rho~4[1/12].

As grit and glass turned to rockcrete and freightway rails the Kataphrons spread out, turning in their armoured turrets. As they scanned for targets, the weaponry that replaced their arms hummed to ominous life.

The forge shrines were but perverse reinterpretations of form and function. The chassis and carcasses of long-dead unbelievers decorated the buildings alongside ruinous symbols that had been painted, scorched and stamped into the architecture. Vanes had become crowns of corruption-smeared spikes, while gaping entrances and production accessways had melted, sagged and warped into horrific metal maws.

Gant slowed and stopped, looking down at the cracked boulevard they were following. A small trench went up its centre, filled with an off-colour bar of solidified iron that ran like a single rail up through the complex. Gant had seen such trenches all over Velchanos Magna, with no idea to their purpose. It was just one of the world's mysteries that were yet to be solved. He knelt to investigate the dull and unnatural lustre of the metal.

The bark of a shot echoed about the boulevard, and Rho~4[8/12]'s head exploded. As the servitor's weaponry drifted downwards with a dying hydraulic hum, Gant snatched up his macrostubber. Rho~4[1/12] rumbled forward, placing his bulk between the shooter and his master. Broadcasting a warning in binharic cant, the Kataphron Breacher lifted his hydraulic claw, indicating that the priest should assume cover. As Gant moved behind the corpse of Rho~4[8/12], several more shots rang out, sparking off the dead battle servitor's breacher-plate.

<Nullify threat,> the magos dominus commanded.

Rho~4[1/12] and three of his Breachers accelerated up the boulevard, their tracks chewing up the shattered rockcrete. With sprockets and wheels thrashing away, the heavy battle servitors bounced and smashed through the wreckage adorning the freightways.

Lifting their weapons, the Kataphrons smashed the furnace roofs with helical arc-streams. An enemy shooter dropped to the rockcrete floor and smouldered. Crashing through vanes with the gravitic fields of his torsion cannon, Rho~4[1/12] seized a second cybernetic shooter and ripped him out of the busy architecture. As the tumbling body of the enemy sniper snapped and broke under

the force, Rho~4[1/12] dragged his foe down into the crumbling rockcrete floor. Accelerating further, the Breacher ran his tracks straight over the shooter's helmed head.

Moments later Rho~4[2/12] skidded to a stop beside its primus unit, as Gant clung to the breacher's back with his mechadendrites and bionic talons. The priest looked down on the headless body of the shooter. Dressed in the rubber cloak and hood of Anathdrach forge-temple guard, the Dark Mechanicus skitarii was a mess of deviant, warp-flushed workings.

Gant heard the static-laced sound of vox-hailers.

'Pig-priest,' a voice echoed across the boulevard. The wet, metallic hack of a rebreather drowning in corruption got the magos' attention. 'Acolyte of an empty god. You wish to follow me? Follow me into the embrace of oblivion, into gratitude of our true galactic masters, the crafters beyond the veil. Join me in a realm of knowledge unbound and advancements undreamed of…'

Gant recognised the voice as belonging to Phaedrega. He looked about the complex, the empty boulevard and the derelict darkness of the furnace works lining the freightway. His quarry was nowhere to be seen.

'I shall pass, I think, forge master,' Gant called, his own voice bouncing between the buildings.

'Join me,' the vox-hailer crackled and seethed with static, 'in sacrificing all to the otherworldly lords of incalculable creation. Let us give ourselves – flesh and metal – to the Abystra Dynomicron. Let our deaths be sparks in the darkness, the soul-fuel of gods terrible and true.'

Phaedrega's invitation echoed about the Crucib-Pentadictum.

'You first,' Theronymous Gant called back.

The wet rasp of laughter tailed off into a hiss of madness and determination.

'I fear not the darkness,' Vasco Phaedrega said. 'That which comes next…'

Rho~4[1/12] turned in his turret to face his master and blurted forth a harsh stream of cant. The Kataphron had detected movement on the boulevard ahead. Peering forward, his telescopic optics extending, Gant saw figures moving out of cover. The thrash of tracks, the hum of hydraulics and the roar of power plants filled the air as his Kataphron Breachers moved into formation.

<Destroy the untrue constructs,> the magos dominus ordered.

Rho~4[1/12] issued a stream of orders in binharic cant, prompting Rho~4[3/12] and Rho~4[12/12] to assume Gant's flank while the magos held on to Rho~4[2/12]. The primus unit tore up the cracked and cratered freightway, leading the rest of the Kataphrons into battle. Like a line of small tanks

advancing along the boulevard, the Breachers charged their arc rifles and torsion cannons.

As they accelerated to attack speed, the tracks of their armoured hulls leaving a dust trail of pulverised rockcrete, Gant could see Vasco Phaedrega limping across the freightway at a crossroads ahead, dressed in black, ribbed robes like his skitarii. Phaedrega was reciting some fell incantation, falling in and out of rancid code and languages the magos dominus' cogitators failed to recognise.

Like a living shield of armoured plate and devotion, Rho~4
[1/12] and his Breachers surged forward. Accelerating up behind with Rho~4[2/12] and the pair of battle servitors acting on their aegis protocols, Gant filled the channels with canticles of faith.

<You are the children of the Omnissiah,> Gant told the Kataphrons. <Forged from lives unworthy, to serve as a cog in the great machine. Let the Motive Force flow through your flesh, your workings and the weaponry with which you have been blessed. Be form. Be function. Be one with your hallowed purpose and protocols divine. The enemies of Great Mars stand before you. Their wayward designs and corrupt imperatives are an affront to all that is logical and governed by reason. They deserve only destruction, delivered by servants of the Machine-God, cybernetic and true. Destroy the false constructs!>

As the Kataphron Breachers closed on the malformed Phaedrega and his temple guard, the skitarii primed their carbines. They stood in an unflinching circle before the accelerating might of the Kataphrons thundering down on them. Gathered about their corrupted forge master at the heart of the crossroads, the skitarii stood fearlessly with the furnace towers of dormant forges looming over them.

As the Kataphron Breachers cleared their weaponry to fire, the Anathdrach temple guard did something that was unthinkable to Gant. They turned – the barrels of their carbines aimed inwards – and blasted Vasco Phaedrega with a single salvo of warp-tainted rounds. The forge master was flung this way and that as gunfire tore through his robes and workings. Before the heretek had hit the freightway floor, and with his techno-incantations still echoing through the forge-complex's vox-hailers, the skitarii of the Dark Mechanicum turned their weapons on themselves. Bringing the muzzles of carbines up to their hoods and under their chins, the temple guard of Anathdrach ended themselves. In a flash of automatic fire and a shower of brain and workings, their warp-tainted bodies crashed to the floor beside their fell master.

As the Kataphrons slowed and lowered their weapons, Rho~4[2/12] rolled on

through their ranks. Coming to a stop, the Breacher allowed Gant to disembark. Climbing down from the rear hull of the heavy battle servitor, the magos scuttled towards the corpses on the crossroads. Stabbing his staff of office into the crumbling rockcrete, he made his way through the cybernetic corpses, while the Kataphrons established a perimeter around the slaughter. The magos dominus picked through the remains. He jabbed at dead skitarii with the interface prong of the walking stave and turned corpses over with his snaking mechadendrites, trying to decipher why they would turn on their master in such a way when their doctrina imperatives should have ensured their loyalty and obedience.

Aiming his shoulder-mounted eradication ray down at Vasco Phaedrega's corpse, Gant turned the forge master over. Beneath the heretek's bullet-ridden body, the magos dominus found one of the strange trenches. He looked around. Running like rails of rancid iron through the rockcrete of the boulevard, the trenches came from four directions, meeting in a cross at Phaedrega's feet.

With a metallic flash, the solid iron at the intersection raged to an infernal glow. As Gant backed away, the metal within the trench heated, turning rapidly molten. Stepping over and away from the spitting fury of liquid iron, the magos dominus watched the glow shoot out along the trenches. Cursed iron sizzled and liquefied along bifurcating channels that split and split again, creating the layout of a great circuit across the complex boulevards.

Gant did not know whether the ruinous forge master had invoked the daemonic core of the planet or whether the Abystra Dynomicron had sacrificed its dark servants in order to invoke itself, but he knew that he had walked into a trap.

As the Kataphron Breachers circled the site of the ritual sacrifice, their weapons ready, the raging heat of daemonic sentience melted the iron running along the freightways and into the dark and dormant forges. Within moments, the installations came to dreadful life. The magos could hear the heavy-duty labours of possessed machinery from within, and the forge world's night was lit by the sudden infernal blaze of daemonic industry.

Gant saw shadows in the forge entrance-maws. Shadows became silhouettes. Silhouettes became mechanical menaces, stomping out of the fires of roaring furnaces. A small army of daemon engines stalked from their birthing pools of liquid iron and out into the night. The possessed machines glowed with both the infernal heat of their creation and the unnatural light of their inner malevolence – nightmares of steaming plate and warped weaponry. They proceeded from every forge, marching out onto the boulevard like statues given relentless life. Warp-fuelled automata staggered like newborns, their plate and twisted limbs adorned

with spikes. Hunchbacked Decimator engines towered over the hellish machines, tottering under the weight of their own armour and dragging the sparking talons of siege claws along the ground.

Guided towards the servants of the Machine-God by the Abystra Dynomicron, the army of daemon engines spilling from the forges moved up the freightways. They marched with a mechanical, doom-laden gait towards the crossroads intersection and Gant's clade of Kataphron Breachers. There was nowhere to flee. The daemonic core of the planet had him. It had used Vasco Phaedrega as bait in the gargantuan trap that was the furnace-lined production complex.

<This is the spawning ground of evil,> Gant announced in binharic cant. With his every word the daemon engines of the Crucib-Pentadictum came closer.

The Kataphrons remained in position around the magos, their tracks still and arc claws spitting and snapping. Their weaponry was aimed along the freightways in all four directions.

<This is a place where workings are perverted, iron is not itself and the holy sanctity of the machine is enslaved to the will of unnatural flesh. Abominations from beyond wear perversions of our weaponry, systems and plate like a second skin. These are not the will of the Great Creator. Their actions proceed not from the Motive Force. They are machines unrecognised by the Machine-God and heretical in his eyes. He therefore charges us to eradicate these abominable automata and send the things that pollute them back to the unreality from whence they came. My protectors, do your sacred duty.>

Rho~4[1/12] issued orders, prompting designated even number Kataphron units to reverse, enclosing the magos dominus in a shield of battleplate. Designated odd number battle servitors rolled forward with the primus unit to meet the enemy.

With their tracks shredding the crumbling rockcrete of the boulevard, the six Kataphron Breachers smashed into the forward ranks of the daemon engines. Foetid battle-automata were knocked aside, off the uncertain hydraulics of their newly forged legs, and crashed to the floor. The battle servitors turned in their turrets, hydraulic talons fixing onto robots and hurling them into their hell-crafted kindred. The crackling talons of arc-claws sizzled through plate, retracting with coruscating pincerfuls of daemonflesh and dread workings.

Helical streams of electrical energy flashed from the Kataphron Breachers' arc rifles. As the streams slammed into warped battle-automata and hunched Decimator engines, workings and weaponry exploded in violent showers of sparks and metallic frag. Daemonic blood oozed like oil from between clinkered

plates. Like an electrostatic exorcism, the arc-streams rattled through the daemon engines, banishing the immaterial entities of furious malevolence that drove the monstrous heaps of scrap.

While the Kataphrons seemed an unstoppable force of fury and destruction, the daemon engines kept coming. Even as the battle servitors tore hellish hearts from armoured chests, crushed prone war machines beneath their tracks and drove the monstrous essence of daemonic fusions from their armoured tombs, more of the dread automata proceeded from infernal furnace works. Decimators smashed lesser engines aside to get to the Kataphrons, roaring their elemental rage. Rho~4[11/12] was impaled on the talon of a siege claw and torn from his turret socket. The servitor's truncated body was thrown between Decimator engines, who tore his body apart.

Rho~4[5/12] was immobilised by a small horde of twisted battle-automata who smashed their crackling power fists down through his hull and left track. Swamped by droning daemon engines, the Kataphron Breacher was rendered into ruptured flesh and scrap.

Rho~4[9/12] fought with the furious might of the Machine-God, all but clearing the western approach before walking heresies blasted walls of warpflame from the barrels of carapace-mounted combustors, and the Breacher was lost in the torrent.

The Breachers protecting Gant offered supporting fire from the sacrificial site. The blinding brilliance of arc streams blasted through the warp-tainted automata, overloading their workings and turning their hell-crafted forms into explosions of immaterial flame and pranging shrapnel. Torsion cannons cut swaths of destruction through the advancing metal monstrosities. As the torque fields fixed on hulking limbs, weaponry and spiked plate, the projections revolved, tearing a churning maelstrom of invisible force through the enemy.

Daemon engines had appendages torn from their bodies, plate was wrenched and twisted savagely from Decimators and automata were broken in half. Forge-spawned robots were thrown backwards while other infernal constructs were smashed into ruins that sparked and streamed smoke from the freightway floor.

Within the armoured circle of Kataphron Breachers, Gant stepped from rear hull-section to rear hull-section, aiming his own weaponry between the brute forms of his heavy battle servitors. Tapping on plated shoulders with his staff of office, the magos dominus had the Breachers lean aside as he sent hailstorms of bullets from his macrostubber into the approaching enemy. Locking his shoulder-mounted eradication ray into position, Gant fired the powerful weapon,

melting monstrous Decimator engines into nothingness and evaporating from existence entire columns of relentless daemonic machines.

<Bring these aberrations iron enlightenment,> Gant commanded as a Decimator took the head of Rho~4[3/12] in the talon-tips of its siege claw and ripped it from his armoured shoulders, leaving a gore-spouting stump. <Bring it with beam, track and claw.>

The magos dominus emptied his macrostubber into the daemonic war machine as it turned and charged towards him. Crumbling shards of rockcrete bounced on the boulevard with its every step while its armoured chest turned into a display of sparks and stub ricochets. As the priest's weapon ran dry the Decimator engine answered with its own storm of lasers, cutting through Rho~4[2/12] with sizzling beams of warp-streaked light. As the heavy battle servitor died in his turret, Gant was forced to leap onto the hull of Rho~4[10/12], who suffered a similar fate.

Suddenly the great Decimator stopped, as though its thunderous advance had been halted by some unseen force. Pulled down to its knees, the rockcrete shattering beneath it, the thing's weaponry grew silent. The sound of shredded workings and cabling could be heard within the plate of its barrel chest. Gore and oil splattered to the ground as the abomination's head was pulled backwards into its chest to be churned up with the rest of its afflicted innards. As the daemon engine fell forward and collapsed in a heap, Gant saw that Rho~4[1/12] had rolled up behind the thing and blasted rotating beams of gravitic energy up through the daemon engine's back.

<Bring down these unhallowed temples of creation,> Theronymous Gant called to the remaining Breacher units, gesturing around at the forges. Many of the furnace works had already fallen to darkness, their remaining resources and the fell power of the Abystra Dynomicon spent. The balefires of creation had died away and the toothed maws from which the metal monstrosities had proceeded were now empty. Concentrating their fire on those forges that still burned bright with the molten iron of birthing pits, the Kataphron Breachers tore the guts out of the buildings with torsion cannons and overloaded the sentient machinery that toiled within in arc-streams of electrical energy.

Rho~4[6/12], still fighting the daemon engines, exploded in a ball of flame and his ruptured power plant took out a throng of battle-automata that had been beating the Breacher into the freightway with their power fists. With that last knot of foes defeated and straggler engines still marching into the withering fire of Gant's heavy battle servitors, the magos dominus was about to announce their

victory. The furnace works all about them were either demolished wrecks or twisted temples of silent darkness. He turned his eradication ray on the last operational forge, blasting the entrance columns, causing the superstructure of the furnace works above to collapse and bury the bright blaze of the maw in thousands of tonnes of wreckage.

Then he heard an ungodly roar. The trench of daemonic iron that fed the forge with its malefic power still burned bright in the boulevard before it. The small mountain of wreckage that the building had become began to quake. A pair of huge hydraulic pincers punched through the scrap to take hold of a girder that had collapsed across the entrance. At first Gant thought that the monstrosity beyond might heave the thick girder aside but instead it cut through the structural support with ease.

As the magos dominus stumbled back, Rho~4[1/12] and his remaining Breachers thrashed forwards on their tracks. The daemonic war engine pushed through the wreckage of the forge, shaking off cabling, struts and sections of roof. It was unlike the daemonic walkers that had marched from the other furnace works. Scuttling forth like a spider on spiked hydraulic legs, the infernal engine cleared a path with its metal claws. Riding atop the legs was a tank-like hull that mounted fearsome weaponry, including the fat barrel of a battle cannon. Crowning the abomination was a daemonic skull of black metal that leered at Gant and what remained of his Kataphrons. As its horrific maw opened and an inhuman bellow of mechanical rage emitted from its armoured chest, Gant thought he heard the frustration of the Abystra Dynomicron.

Arc-streams of searing energy blazed from Rho~4[12/12] and Rho~4[4/12] and danced across the daemon engine's form. Grabbed in one colossal pincer, Rho~4[12/12] was turned into a mulch of pulverised flesh and plate. The abomination's second claw came down like a hammer, smashing Rho~4[4/12] down through his own hull and tracks. The resulting explosion damaged the claw and knocked the magos dominus back into a stagger.

As the metal monster retracted the sparking stub of its mangled limb, Rho~4[7/12] blazed an arc-stream across its armoured chest. For a moment the daemon engine stalled before returning fire from its reaper autocannons. A torsion cannon blast from Rho~4[1/12] turned the weapons array into a mangled mess of twisted barrels and spilling ammunition belts. Jammed, the weapon exploded, knocking the daemon engine sideways on its scuttling legs.

Locking hydraulics in place and bracing itself, the daemon engine blasted a shell from the fat cannon mounted centrally on its spiked hull. Rho~4[7/12] was

annihilated by the apocalyptic blast that thundered through a forge opposite and brought the building crashing to the ground.

Only Rho~4[1/12] was left. The Kataphron Breacher voxed a stream of binharic cant at his priestly master. The battle servitor needed to get the magos away from the great daemon engine.

<Your aegis protocols be damned,> Theronymous Gant roared back. <By all that obeys logic and is true, this aberration of iron will be destroyed.>

As the daemon engine reached out, Gant blasted away with his eradication ray, turning the monstrous claw at the end of the appendage to streaming smoke carried away on the wind. With a resounding *clunk*, the engine smashed Gant's augmented body aside with the stump. It angled a multi-barrelled missile launcher down with a series of nasty clicks, forcing Gant to engage his refractor field.

As a missile slammed into the protective field, the magos dominus was knocked back, his form at the centre of a crackling ball of energy. At such close range the daemon engine was also battered back, but that didn't stop the thing firing another missile at Gant. This time he was knocked head over cybernetic body, coming to rest at the foot of a furnace building's column, his refractor field sizzling to nothing about him.

The daemon engine turned its hull on its spidery legs and shrugged off the attentions of Rho~4[1/12]'s torsion cannon. As armoured panels twisted and detached from its obscene mechanical body, it locked hydraulics and fired the monstrous battle cannon. Rho~4[1/12] sped backwards and missed the worst of the catastrophic blast, but as a fountain of rockcrete was sent skywards, the Kataphron Breacher bounced on a smashed track. With the explosion washing over his breacher-plate and grit raining down about him, the battle servitor came to a shuddering halt.

'Over here, you abominable machine…' Theronymous Gant vox-hailed across the freightway. The daemon engine turned on its hydraulic legs, its battle cannon moving towards the magos dominus and then back towards the battle servitor who, though immobilised, was recharging his weapon. Gant fired a beam of discorporating energy from his eradication ray straight through the legs of the monstrous machine, blasting a spiked limb to nothingness. Unbalanced, it toppled backwards.

< Rho~4[1/12],> Gant transmitted in binharic cant. <Bury this thing.>

The Breacher turned in his turret with a damaged judder and blasted the gravitic force of his torsion cannon at the nearest forge, tearing the structural innards out

of the fell temple. The building cascaded down around the Kataphron. Heavy support struts, corrugated wall sections, girders and furnace works architecture smashed down around Rho~4[1/12] like an avalanche of steel.

As the Kataphron disappeared beneath the collapsing forge, the tumbling wreckage partially buried the daemonic war machine. With girders lying across it and the twisted detritus of the temple weighing it down, the abomination could not get to its legs or turn its armoured hull. Its monstrous weaponry was now fixed on the sky.

Scrambling up the mound of wreckage, hidden by a miasma of dust, Gant made his desperate way up towards the buried engine. Holstering his macrostubber and locking his spent eradication ray in place on his shoulder weapons cradle, the magos dominus pulled his cog-bladed power axe from his back and gripped it in two of his many bionic talons. Using his walking stave to steady himself across the debris, Gant pulled himself up towards the daemon engine with the snaking length of his mechadendrites.

The infernal creation was still attempting to raise its bulk from the wreckage and turn its useless weaponry. The leering metal skull of its daemonic form roared the ire of not only the furious entity that possessed it but also the Abystra Dynomicron that had given it dread life.

Swinging his power axe down with all the force in his augmented body, Gant attempted to chop the abomination's head from its mechanical body. The sizzling serrations of the cog-blade bit into daemonic flesh again and again. The thing roared, and then it screamed. Its death was not clean, with the axe taking five strikes to cut through the brawn of its neck. Finally, and with the agonised screeches of the monstrosity still echoing about the Crucib-Pentadictum complex, its metallic head bounced down the wreckage slope.

Taking a moment to thank the Omnissiah for the victory, Theronymous Gant followed the head down to where Rho~4[1/12] had been lost to the collapsing forge. Using the power axe like a pick, the priest began to dig the heavy battle servitor out of the wreckage. Uncovering his head and shoulder, Gant soon realised how pointless the endeavour was. A girder had caved in the servitor's tattooed head and knocked the ring from his nose. The magos stood there for a moment before grunting. He hadn't uncovered Rho~4[1/12] out of concern or respect.

Without the Kataphron Breacher and his tracks, it would be a long walk back to the forces of the Machine-God.

Shouldering his power axe, Magos Theronymous Gant left the heavy battle

servitor behind and made his way south out of the complex, his staff of office tapping the freightway as he did.

VANGUARD

PETER FEHERVARI

The pursuit of knowledge is absolution.
The conceit of absolute knowledge is merely hubris.

– Ordinance Mechanica Obscura #01010

The sky bled streamers of poisonous light over the grey-green morass of life below. Like the tentacles of some ethereal leviathan, the radiance touched and tested everything, questing for a foothold upon reality. The jungle shivered beneath its glare and the random chitter of numberless insects became a profane harmony. Like called to like and the tainted planet stirred towards wakefulness in the unclean dawn.

But Omnissiah willing, this world will sleep a while yet, Magos Caul reflected as he cancelled the blasphemous simulation conjured up by his cogitation engines. *I still have time…*

His carmine robes hung in loose folds about his skeletal frame as he floated above the concentric, whirling wheels of his data throne. His quartet of multi-jointed legs was furled up in arachnid repose and his myriad lenses had faded to dull green stains in the darkness of his cowl, disengaged while he gazed inwards at the infinitely malleable regions of the datasphere. The cogitator banks embedded in the wheels of his throne chattered as they saturated his nexus chamber with information from thousands of sensors across the planet.

<Canopus 30,> Caul clicked in binharic cant, switching his visual input to a defence servitor welded to the dome of his bastion. The position was optimised for the elimination of aerial predators and megaspores, and offered an unparalleled view of the contaminated sky. Through the servitor's eyes he saw the warp-spawned anomaly from his simulation as a numinous spiral behind the dirty clouds of Phaedra's troposphere. As night fell it would deepen into a multi-hued aurora that was vile, though only a ghost of the horror he predicted.

Ghostblight, whispered a voice. It came from the neural cage where the magos' instincts were interred alongside the rest of his humanity, smothered but not quite dead. He dismissed it as he dismissed every shadow of his former

existence. His induction into the divine logarithms of the Omnissiah had elevated him above such emotionally charged nonsense.

Hypothesis: the anomaly encapsulates a binary reaction – a feedback loop of corruption, Caul speculated. *It draws current from the planet's taint and in turn galvanises its host to greater virulence. Query: which is the host and which the parasite? Is this a symbiotic conjunction?*

The anomaly had first manifested in the sky twenty-seven days ago, invisible to the naked eye, but triggering dozens of Caul's sensor stations. He had failed to determine its origin, but it was growing stronger with every passing hour and building towards a Category Gamma warp storm. Could his fortress withstand a death world infused by the immaterium?

The magos redirected his focus to a servo-skull patrolling the perimeter of his base and trained its gaze upon the immense structure he had forged around his explorator ship nearly two centuries ago. The Iron Diadem was a tangle of manufactories and silos mounted upon a stalk of titanium pipes rising from a vast lake. Over the decades Phaedra had assailed the refinery with a tirade of spore tsunamis, silt quakes and hurricanes, yet its lamprey grip on the lakebed had never faltered.

Unfortunately the imminent catastrophe was not one of Phaedra's paroxysms.

Phaedra. Even the name sounded subtly poisonous to Caul. He had remained here only to dissect and codify the planet – *the enemy* – until leaving had ceased to be an option. During his sojourn he had crossed lines that some would call heretical.

But my purpose has always been pure, Caul reasoned. *This world exemplifies the degeneracy of the flesh. Its jungles are an inconstant, decaying riot of rage entwined with lust. Know thy enemy and decode it well.*

Yet his crusade might soon become untenable, and if he were lost then research of incalculable value would be lost with him. That was unacceptable.

<Initiating inload enhancement protocol Kappa,> the magos intoned.

A swarm of delicate mechafilaments uncoiled from his cowl, swaying as they trawled the data-charged air like the feeding tendrils of a cuttlefish – filtering, filing and cross-referencing readings from across his territory, devouring parameters of light refraction, particle density, atmospheric pressure, gravitic arrhythmia and scores of other variables to fuel the ferocious engine of his mind. Caul tore through it all in seconds, slicing and splicing facts into possibilities, rejecting or promoting those possibilities to probabilities, then cycling back to hone the most promising towards a single categorical *certainty*.

It was a sublime effort, yet the answer eluded him like some slippery, chimerical prey.

<Inconclusive.>

Caul withdrew his mechafilaments and intoned the seventh mantra of Algebraic Concord to dispel the spectre of frustration. Every time he tried to determine when the storm would break, his conclusion was different. Sometimes he settled on months, sometimes weeks, but just as often it was days or even decades. The degree of inconsistency invalidated every answer. Even for a magos the variables were too byzantine – too *chaotic*…

I will not make the attempt again, Caul vowed, but it was an oath sworn only to himself, not the Omnissiah, for he knew he would break it as he had done countless times before. It was the same obstinacy that had chained him to Phaedra – an almost pathological refusal to accept imperfection.

<Timeframe irrelevant/apogee event inevitable.>

My research will be preserved. This time the oath *was* for the Omnissiah because Caul intended to honour it.

Submerging himself in the datasphere, the magos cast his consciousness further afield, leaping from one relay beacon to the next, riding the data streams that shadowed Phaedra's labyrinthine waterways, seeking the holy warriors he had entrusted with his fate.

The convoy of skitarii war galleys sliced through the slime-
encrusted rivers of the Coil in orderly procession, their massive steel watercogs labouring against the ooze while their chimneystacks wheezed black smoke. The five vessels were identical in size and unmistakable in intent, their blunt, cannon-crowned prows and crenellated gunwales giving them the appearance of floating fortresses. Each had set out from the Iron Diadem bearing a maniple of one hundred skitarii warriors and their sacred war machines, together with a support crew of enginseers, bonded ratings and deck servitors. Still the voyage had taken its toll on their numbers. Some had been snared by Phaedra's lazy, lethal wiles – an incautious rating beheaded by overhanging razorvine; another snatched by a wyrmtree lurking on the riverbank, and an engine crew lost to an infestation of swarming skrabs. And more had fallen to the true enemy, whose stealthy hit-and-run attacks had grown more frequent as the convoy neared its destination. The losses were regrettable, but sure to happen. Most importantly, they had been planned for.

Standing on the elevated observation deck of the leading vessel, Alpha

Phaestus-IR01 swept the riverbank with his long-barrelled rifle. The wooden stock of the antique weapon was wedged into the crook of his right arm in the age-old posture of a marksman as he scanned the jungle. Night had fallen, but his ocular omnispex transformed the bioluminescent snarl of fungi and petrified coral into a high-contrast abstraction – the white heat of scurrying animals and the passive grey of vegetation. It was all irrelevant noise to the veteran skitarius. He was searching for the shrewd motion of sentient life. Enemy life.

His bonded war brethren were deployed around him at equal intervals, each covering a different watch vector. An ignorant observer might have mistaken the skitarii rangers of Squad Irridio for identical clones or stylised simulacra of men. All wore hooded crimson robes over interleaved segments of dark armour, hiding their features behind jutting rebreather masks and bulbous goggles that gave them a pitiless insect-like cast. They had apparently suffered the same catastrophic trauma to their lower limbs, for from the knees down every warrior's legs had been replaced with sculpted titanium augmetics. Only initiates of the Cult Mechanicus would have recognised this stigmata as the Red Planet's due, a hallowed rite of passage shared by all skitarii. They were holy warriors so it was only fitting that they strode the land with the purity of the Omnissiah to guide their path.

Especially a land as corrupt as Phaedra.

<Contact: 1 unit/unidentified. Coordinates follow…> Ixtchul-IR04 reported from his position in the ship's watchtower. To outsiders the ranger's signal would have sounded like a random burst of static, but to his fellow cyborgs it was a data-rich message. Three acknowledgments pinged back instantly, then seconds later a fourth – Brok-IR05, always the slowest of the squad. Alpha Phaestus-IR01 felt no rancour, for this wasn't a lapse on his subordinate's part; Brok-IR05 was simply the least of them, which was why he was designated the squad's '5'.

Every cog has its consecrated place in the machine, he reflected.

His vision flickered momentarily as he interfaced with the lookout's optics, then the dark riverbank was replaced by an eagle-eye view of the river ahead. Through Ixtchul-IR04's eyes he saw a thin figure waiting on a coral outcrop. It stood in a pool of light cast by a saucer-shaped construct hovering above its head like a diminutive spacecraft. A pulse of pious revulsion spiked the Alpha's brain at the sight of the alien machine, for though it was barely four handbreadths in circumference and appeared to be unarmed the drone's mere existence was an abomination.

It is a mockery of the Omnissiah's sacred engines…

With an almost physical effort Phaestus-IR01 switched his attention from the machine to its master. The alien was motionless save for a slight billowing of its frayed, ankle-length robe. Its arms were crossed from shoulder to shoulder as if in repose, but its black eyes were open wide and seemingly staring right back at him, inscrutable and aloof. There was no mistaking its cobalt skin and the flat wedge of its cadaverous face: *t'au*.

The long war between the Imperium and the T'au Empire for Phaedra had bled out years ago, but the last of the aliens were still here, abandoned alongside their Imperial counterparts when the conflict drifted elsewhere. Bitter and desperate, neither side fought for anything beyond survival any more. Only the holy warriors of the Iron Diadem still walked a true path.

Objective Skysight… The cohort's mission designation flashed across Phaestus-IR01's awareness with the insistence of pain. He neither knew nor cared what Objective Skysight actually *was*. It was enough to know that his magos demanded it and the xenos obstructed it. The rest would become clear in time.

<Initiate protocol Aegis,> Alpha Phaestus-IR01 transmitted to the bridge. Moments later the silent alarm was broadcast across the entire convoy, alerting sentries and rousing the dormant from their meditations. Engines fell silent and the war galleys drifted to a halt. The clatter of metal feet and the hum of activating weapons from the deck below told him that the skitarii vanguard had been summoned to their posts.

As he climbed the steps to the lead vessel's prow bulwark, Alpha Viharok-TH01 felt his mind recalibrating itself to battle mode. The abstract geometries spun by his meditation shift were fading beneath a flood of diagnostics from his squad and the strategic topography calculated by the cohort's Alpha Primus. The neural cogitator fused to his brain stem collated the data, and he frowned as Squad Thorium's tactical efficiency registered at 88.42 per cent. It was an acceptable performance, but acceptable was *unacceptable* to Viharok-TH01. The unit's tactical algorithms would require refinement.

My vanguard will demand perfection, he knew. *It is our duty to the Machine-God.*

'The Omnissiah purges!' Squad Thorium chorused as Viharok-TH01 joined them. Their bulky armour was painted black and striated with dirt and corrosion, their tabards stained with promethium and threaded with oxidised metal bolts and techno-fetishes. All wore sweeping sallet helms of dark iron inlaid with

bronze and daubed with their squad rankings. Insects buzzed about them, drawn to the glow of their rad guns, only to pop or dissolve in the baleful energies that suffused the weapons.

Our presence alone brings death to the unclean, the Alpha vanguard observed with pride. *We wear the purifying fire of the Omnissiah like an invisible cloak.*

He frequently led his squad on absolution pilgrimages. They would march into the jungle chanting the Nine Canticles of Decontamination, leaving only stubborn death in their wake. The paths they walked became enduring scars across Phaedra's skin, for even her most tenacious fungi withered in their footprints. The vanguard bore a sombre blessing, yet they welcomed it despite the ravages it had wreaked upon their own flesh, for under their proud helmets the men of Thorium were cadaverous grotesques devoid of hair or teeth.

But they still had their strength. Nothing else mattered.

Catching sight of the waiting t'au, Viharok-TH01 unslung his radium carbine and thumbed the power stud, offering its spirit his fealty. Like many skitarii, he revered his weapon as his master, believing his hands were merely tools to aid its will. In his case there was some truth to it, for his rifle was a priceless relic whose spirit had been stirred to permanent wakefulness by the magos. Such 'cognis' weapons hungered to fulfil their purpose, actively compensating for small flaws in a wielder's aim.

'By thy will I ignite thee and charge thee well,' Viharok-TH01 chanted in jagged lingua-technis, leading his squad in the Seventh Litany of Liquidation.

<In thy light I smite with thee,> they reciprocated in reverent feedback.

'For thy spite I will slay or die for thee,' Thorium's Alpha concluded.

Neither fear nor doubt were functioning variables in the skitarii psyche. Where a common man might feel anxiety, the skitarii experienced only anticipation.

Phaestus-IR01's vision glitched again as the cohort's Alpha Primus joined the sensory chain to the watchtower. All Alphas could access their squad members' optics at short range, but the Primus could interface with every warrior in the force, even across great distances. Phaestus-IR01 held his breath reverently as he felt her icy assessment of the xenos.

<Positive identification: t'au water caste,> the Primus relayed over the command band. <Threat level: indeterminate.>

'I bear no weapons,' the alien called, as if in answer. Its voice projected confidence, but Phaestus-IR01 detected a tremor of tension. 'My designation is Por'ui Ybolyan,' the t'au continued. 'I am authorised to facilitate a conciliation

with the respected warriors of the honoured Omnissiah.'

<Xenos morale broken,> Ptoltec-IR03 chittered from Phaestus-IR01's left. The ancient cyborg's contempt saturated his code with static. <We will attain their stronghold in 9.25 hours. Purgation imminent.>

'The enemy is most dangerous when it is cornered,' another ranger rasped through the rebreather pipe wedged in his throat. While skitarii rebreathers didn't prohibit mundane speech they certainly *inhibited* it, making flesh-speak a labour that many shunned; Rho-IR02 clung to it with obscure stubbornness. It was rumoured that the former Guardsman hadn't embraced the Omnissiah willingly, but his brothers knew that was irrelevant now, like every echo of their past lives.

'The losses our respective forces have sustained in this conflict are without purpose,' the t'au envoy continued, extending open hands to the warships. 'The Wintertide Cadre and the Iron Diadem are the last significant forces of order on this malignant world. For the Greater Good of both our factions I urge you to cease this aggression.'

It was difficult to read the expressions of a t'au, most of which lay in the precise dilation of the mouth and nostril slits, but sickness was a universal trait and Phaestus-IR01 had no doubt that Por'ui Ybolyan was *very* sick. T'au didn't sweat, but the rash of boils and weeping lesions mottling this one's face looked like splinterskin to him. He'd lost enough brothers to Phaedra's blights to recognise the signs – xenos, human or trans-human, the flesh was always easy prey to her if left unsanctified.

'If you will communicate your grievance I shall endeavour to mediate an accord,' Por'ui Ybolyan offered. 'However…' The alien's words exploded into violent coughing and a perceptible shiver ran through its emaciated frame.

How is this creature still standing? Phaestus-IR01 wondered. *It isn't even one of their warrior caste.* He expected the retching t'au to topple from its perch, but the coughing fit passed and when it spoke again its voice was steady: 'However, be advised that further incursion into t'au territory will not be tolerated.'

<Contact: unidentified/west bank. Coordinates follow…> Rho-IR02 reported, slipping into code when precision was required.

Phaestus-IR01 switched to his comrade's viewpoint and caught a hint of movement on the riverbank. He crossed to Rho-IR02's position and squinted with a lidless eye, triggering the magnification mode of his omnispex. Was there a humanoid figure crouched in the pixelated skein of the jungle? His rifle trained on the spot as if of its own accord, but he urged it to patience as he relayed the

sighting to the ship's nexus. Another alarm pulsed silently through the cohort.

'They're watching us,' Rho-IR02 said.

There was a fanfare of encoded salutes from the vanguard as the Alpha Primus stalked from the bridge, towering over the gathered skitarii like a Space Marine amongst mortal men. Her silver carapace was devoid of ornamentation save for a flanged cog embossed into her breastplate and a vermilion tabard hanging from her waist. Both her arms terminated in broad, double-edged blades that swept over the digital eradication beamers moulded into her vambraces. In place of hands, a pair of mechadendrites sprouted from her hips, rising to sway like restive snakes over her sleek, backswept pauldrons. Every segment of her carapace had been polished to a sheen that matched the mirror finish of her visor, rendering her a gleaming, indecipherable blank.

With a hiss of servos the Primus bent her massive reverse-jointed legs and leapt to the prow rampart. Alpha Viharok-TH01 stepped aside as she took his place at the prow and faced the t'au emissary. They regarded one another in silence, each taking the other's measure without the need for words. Finally Por'ui Ybolyan released a long, rattling breath.

'You will not negotiate.' It wasn't a question.

Silence.

'Then let there be an end to it,' the alien said with unmistakable weariness.

There was roar of thrusters from above and a volley of plasma fire surged from the sky to strike the Alpha Primus. She exploded with radiance as the conversion field woven into her armour twisted the heat into a halo of coruscating light. Viharok-TH01's auto-reactive lenses dimmed before the corona could dazzle him, but the furious code-blurts of his squad told him that others had been less fortunate. Their blindness would pass in minutes, but minutes were an eternity in battle. As if to prove this bitter truth, a plasma bolt punched through the visor of the skitarius beside him and crumpled the warrior's head into a molten slag of iron and bone. More fire streaked towards them from the riverbanks on either side, and Viharok-TH01 realised his fallen comrade had been a collateral victim – the t'au snipers were targeting the Alpha Primus.

<We are the teeth of the Omnissiah,> she declared in serene code as a barrage of plasma fire burst against her conversion field. <Initiate Purgation Sequence Decensus.>

Across the entire convoy skitarii warriors opened fire in perfect synchronicity,

ranks of vanguard from the gunwales and smaller groups of rangers from the observation decks. Together they rained solid rounds and blistering arcs of electricity into the jungle, shredding vegetation and vermin in sweeping swaths of destruction as they chased down and obliterated the snipers. A bloated fungoid tower exploded into burning spore clouds that immolated a pair of lurking xenos. One of them staggered towards the river, but criss-crossing waves of electricity threw him back into the melting fungal pyre.

<War is our sacrament,> the Alpha Primus chanted, amplifying her codecast into a white noise hymnal that sent a current of fidelity through the cohort. She had been fashioned by Magos Caul personally, prised from death's grip and reassembled piece by broken piece into a perfect warrior. Many of the skitarii revered her as an avatar of the Machine-God, a belief the magos neither encouraged nor repressed. <In its absence we are but empty vessels awaiting the hallowed promethium of spite.>

The vanguard responded with a chorus of hoarse voices and serrated static, singing their praises to the Machine-God as they cleansed the xenos stain.

Something soared out of the sky and landed on the deck behind the Alpha Primus with a clang of metal. Viharok-TH01 swung round and saw a flickered silhouette outlined against the drizzle and flashes of gunfire. It was a looming, vaguely humanoid shape drawn in angular lines that rippled and tore as it moved. The invisibility that sheathed it was imperfect, oozing over its bulk in a patchy tide that revealed plates of dark, smoothly contoured armour. Bizarrely the stealth field had failed entirely around the blocky gun attached to the intruder's right arm, making it appear suspended in empty air like a phantom weapon. Viharok-TH01 threw himself from the ramparts as the nozzle of the ghostly gun spun up and spat a whirling torrent of plasma.

<Contact: t'au battlesuit. Threat level: high,> he transmitted as he dived. <Coordinates follow…>

He rolled into a kneeling crouch behind the t'au assassin and opened fire with his carbine. As the battlesuit turned towards him, Squad Thorium answered their Alpha's summons and hammered the intruder with radium rounds from the ramparts above. The sighted and the blind struck with equal precision, their aim guided by the firing vector Viharok-TH01 had relayed. The battlesuit's stealth field seethed erratically under the barrage and the Alpha saw its carapace buckling in the brief snapshots of visibility. He gritted his teeth around his rebreather in defiance as its burst cannon locked on to him.

My service will terminate here, he thought, *but this xenos filth will not long*

outlast me.

'The Omnissiah condemns!' he spat aloud, drawing upon a primal well of hatred stemming from his former life.

A silver giant jumped from the ramparts, crashing down into a feral crouch beside the battlesuit. As she rose, the Alpha Primus sliced upwards with a humming, razor-edged blade. There was a screech of tortured metal and the t'au's 'ghost' cannon clattered to the ground – along with the now visible arm that still wielded it. The damaged battlesuit leapt away with surprising grace as its jetpack flared into life, but the Primus lunged after its stuttering silhouette and rammed her blade into its breastplate, pinning the assassin as its feet rose from the deck. Struggling to break free, it clawed at her visor with its surviving arm, but found no purchase on the polished metal. The Primus thrust deep and the tip of her blade punched through the assassin's back, tearing open a wellspring of crackling electricity and steaming blood. A moment later the battlesuit was torn asunder as she fired her wrist-mounted eradication beamer within its chest cavity.

<Expurgation sequence complete,> the Alpha Primus transmitted. A ripple of electricity surged along her blade, oxidising the blood that stained it.

<Permission to land and pursue the xenos,> Viharok-TH01 chittered as he climbed to his feet.

<Negative. Irrelevant,> the Primus said. <Mission proceeds.>

Desultory volleys of gunfire could still be heard from the rear of the convoy, but there was no return fire. The attack was over. Por'ui Ybolyan had disappeared.

'It was *kauyon*,' the Alpha Primus reported later. 'Standard t'au tactical methodology: draw out and ensnare your enemy.' She paused, considering. 'Sever its head.'

She dominated the data-rich nexus of the bridge like a resplendent statue, standing rigid on the command dais as she communed with her master.

'You are not the head of the cohort,' Magos Caul replied from his eyrie in the Iron Diadem. While every skitarius was linked to the magos through its noospheric aura, only the Alpha Primus was blessed with fluid two-way communion. The neural data tether lacing her skull connected them intimately.

'The xenos underestimate our resolve,' Caul said. 'They underestimate *me*.'

'Conjecture: they did not anticipate success,' she said. 'Postulate: desperation.'

The magos never doubted the Primus' insights into the t'au. The blue-skinned

xenos were among the most subtle of the Imperium's enemies, yet they were transparent to her. She had studied his archives on the aliens obsessively, absorbing every facet of data, but he knew that wasn't the crux of her understanding. She had more reason to loathe the t'au than most, even if she only remembered it at a blood-deep, visceral level.

She is my masterwork, Caul reflected with sober pride, *an exemplar of order forged from anarchy… and ignominy.*

There had been no victory for either side in the long war for Phaedra, only a sudden and inexplicable cessation of supplies and communication; simply surviving had required considerable flexibility from those caught up in the meat grinder. During the final years Caul had been obliged to cooperate with the t'au, but he had done it in the Omnissiah's name, seizing the opportunity to study their technology. The depth of their heresy had appalled him, for their machines were diabolical contrivances imbued with thought, devoid of spirit. It was an affront to the Machine-God, yet it paled beside Phaedra's biological stain.

Compromise was a valid stratagem to secure my research, Caul reasoned. Nevertheless he would pay his penance when the last of his former associates were expunged. It was pleasing that their annihilation would fulfil a binary imperative, for the t'au held the key to his escape from this doomed world.

Dawn. A code pulsed through the cohort and the skitarii galleys surged forward at full thrust. The Alpha Primus became her ship's figurehead, riding at the prow with her mirror-mask tilted into the spray and her blades hammered into the deck like monstrous pitons. Her bodyguards flanked her on either side, their legs splayed wide for balance as their silver-trimmed robes gusted in the wind. Both were female Alpha-level rangers who had been by her side since she was inducted into the skitarii. She remembered nothing before that time, not even her own face, though it must surely be a horror beyond endurance, for her helmet was a hermetically sealed puzzle box, its visor a rigid facade.

I have been reborn as the wrath of the Machine-God incarnate, she thought. *That is the only truth that matters.*

Abruptly the river yawned into a gaping estuary that disgorged the vessels into the open seas of Dolorosa Azure. Here the continent fragmented into scattered archipelagos that thinned out as the galleys reached deeper waters.

<Enemy base sighted,> the Alpha Primus codecast as the white walls of the t'au enclave spilled from the horizon at precisely the coordinates the magos had predicted. Little escaped the web of men and machines that served as her

master's intelligence network. She knew he had seeded informers among the humans serving the t'au, nurturing traitors amongst traitors. Doubtless that was how he had identified their prize.

The Skysight… Even the Primus didn't know what their objective really was or why it was so important to her master.

As her ship hove closer, she noted the gargantuan, semi-
sentient whirlpools surrounding the island and clicked her approval. The xenos had chosen well, for their base lay at the heart of a tidal minefield. The only safe approach was a narrow channel between parallel reefs that kept the whirlpools at bay.

That is where the t'au will strike, she decided.

Suddenly the magos was with her, assessing the path ahead through her eyes, melding his intellect with her martial instincts to compute a strategy. A moment of hesitation, then previously concealed mission parameters were exloaded to her.

<Initiate formation Aversus: Maniple Epsilon advance to forward position,> they commanded in harmony. <Activate infiltration protocol Furtus.>

A skitarii speeder tore away from its mother ship, diverting sharply from the route the rest of the convoy was taking. Three more followed in its wake, each bearing a squad of rangers. The compact boats were absurdly vulnerable in the convulsing waters, but their spirits were as resolute as their pilots.

Rho-IR02 was hunched over the controls of the lead speeder. Piloting routines had been installed in every ranger's cortex, but the psych-simulators had deemed him the most capable mariner in Squad Irridio. It had been a question of latent instincts.

We will need every scrap of the Omnissiah's wisdom for this, he gauged as he sketched a path through the maze of whirlpools ahead, *but this is a good plan.*

The bulk of the cohort would pass through the sheltering reefs and strike directly at the t'au enclave, forcing the aliens into open battle. Meanwhile a small unit of infiltrators would circle round to the far side of the island to secure Objective Skysight.

<Fact: Enemy force unlikely to exceed three hundred units,> the Alpha Primus had briefed them. <Postulate: minimal numbers will be reserved for sentry routines during battle.>

If the Primus is wrong we will die, Rho-IR02 thought. He was incapable of fear, but he was one of the few skitarii who could still conceive the idea of the Primus

making an error. Then the first crosscurrents tugged at his speeder and his attention narrowed to more immediate matters.

The convoy of war galleys was halfway through the reefs when the attack came.

A sleek hover tank burst from the concealing waters in the lead vessel's path, its thrusters roaring as it rose above the waves. The Hammerhead's slime-streaked carapace was battered and one of its engine nacelles was cracked, but it manoeuvred smoothly to bring its jutting railgun to bear on the intruders. Water shrieked into steam as it spat a shell wreathed in spirals of indigo light. The slug punched through the prow of the leading skitarii ship like an iron blade through flesh, virtually disintegrating the vanguard manning the forward turret. Simultaneously its flank cannons raked the galley's deck with a barrage of plasma bolts that sent the defenders ducking for cover.

Armoured figures rose from hiding atop the reefs on either side to rain more fire down on the invaders. The lenses set into their faceplates were arranged vertically, giving them a soulless, almost robotic, look, but their nimble movements belied it.

A warrior in lighter armour guided one group, coordinating his comrades' fire with a spectral beam that marked targets with pinpoint accuracy. The marker light itself was harmless, but the concentrated volleys of plasma that followed it were lethal. Keeping low, the t'au spotter chose his victims with the judgement of a born hunter, singling out enemies that displayed notable authority or skill. The light fell upon the Alpha of Squad Kobaal as he directed his men at the starboard ramparts. A moment later a storm of plasma fire hammered into him, reducing him to a pair of smoking titanium legs.

The treacherous light drifted on.

Two rangers of Squad Uridion were marked and erased from the upper deck in quick succession. Recognising the danger, their squad brothers synchronised their targeting algorithms and hounded the spotter with a union of bullets and electricity, but the alien slipped between the deadly lattice with inhuman grace.

<Attention Uridion: aerial threat,> the magos signalled, catching sight of something through the faltering optical sensors of a dead ranger.

Uridion's Alpha, Exoss-UR01, ducked instinctively, but his surviving troops looked to the sky with weapons raised. A neutron beam struck Gelon-UR03 square in the chest, detonating his torso into a red mist of superheated viscera. Voxhul-UR05 was snagged by the shoulders and hauled into the air by a swooping insect-like monstrosity. Struggling to bring his weapon to bear, he

glimpsed row upon row of multi-faceted eyes crowning a maw of thorny mandibles. He hesitated, momentarily mistaking the alien's chittering for code, then its talons let go and he was plunging towards the sea. Before Phaedra claimed him, Voxhul-UR05 saw his killer struck by an arc of avenging electricity from the ship. He chanted a mantra of praise as its smouldering carcass plummeted after him.

Kneeling, Alpha Exoss-UR01 switched his aim to another of the bipedal insects. There were at least twenty of them circling the convoy, like thorny scavenger birds out of nightmares. They rose and dived in alternate waves, striking in concert with the fire warriors attacking from the cliffs.

The T'au Empire is an unclean alloy of xenos filth and techno-heresy, Exoss-UR01 thought as he tried to lock on. His chosen target was flittering about to confuse his aim, but his targeting systems hunted it tenaciously. Twin diamond indicators were overlaid across his optics, spinning towards convergence as he tracked the creature. They blinked red as they melded into one, and then he fired. The lash of his arc rifle charred the flyer's wings and it dropped like a stone.

Directly above…

Exoss-UR01 tried to duck away, but the unwieldy permacapacitor strapped to his back threw his balance and he stumbled, taking the full weight of the xenos across his chest. He crashed onto his back and a spike of hard chitin lanced into his abdomen, tearing through his lower spine.

<Designation: Vespid Stingwing,> the magos broadcast. <Xenos mercenary. Threat level: moderate.>

Exoss-UR01 heaved at the carcass pinning him, the carbonised chitin cracking open to reveal pallid flesh. As he thrust it aside a pulse round slammed into his left shoulder, almost tearing his arm from its socket. The pain inhibitor wired into his brain clamped down on his nervous system and flooded his senses with digital arias of fortitude.

I will endure and abjure the xenos!

Then the ship quaked as the Hammerhead tank struck again, this time punching through to the vessel's innards. A chain reaction of detonations ripped through the galley and the observation deck pitched violently, rolling Exoss-UR01 to the level below amongst a heap of the dead.

<Alpha UR01: proceed to forward observation vector,> the magos commanded.

<Acknowledged,> Exoss-UR01 confirmed as he struggled to escape the mound of corpses. The damage to his spine had turned his titanium legs into dead weights and he couldn't find any leverage–

Someone grabbed his wrists and hauled, tearing him free in an explosion of agony that brought an involuntary gasp to his lips. His eyes misted with blood and smoke leaked from his nostrils as the pain inhibitor increased its current, doing irreversible damage to keep him conscious.

<FoRtHeOmNisSiah…> his rescuer gibbered in broken code. The hulking vanguard was a dead man walking, his chest plate a mangled tangle of blood and iron. Only faith had kept the warrior on his feet, but this final effort finished him and he toppled over as Exoss-UR01 crawled past. The deck was ablaze and strewn with smouldering corpses.

I am the last of Maniple Epsilon, Exoss-UR01 realised.

The crossfire from the cliffs had moved on to target the second ship in the convoy, but Maniple Delta would prove a more formidable opponent. Exoss-UR01 felt no shame at the admission; it was simply a statistical *fact* that Delta's tactical rating was 4.27 per cent superior to Epsilon's. Nor did he resent the fact that Epsilon had been sacrificed to draw out the enemy.

The least capable are the most expendable, he thought as he crawled towards the ragged crater in the ship's prow. All the forward sensors had been destroyed so he would become the convoy's eyes. Hoisting himself up, he saw the Hammerhead backing away, matching its speed to the galley's lethargic drift. He sensed hesitation in the hover tank: its pilot knew it had killed its prey, but was uncertain how to put it down.

'Skitarii machines are forged to endure,' Exoss-UR01 croaked, unaware that he had lapsed into fleshspeak, 'even in death.'

Like the skitarii themselves…

Something tugged his attention towards the prow gun emplacement. The Hammerhead's opening attack had annihilated the gunner and dislodged the massive weapon from its mount, but the lascannon was still intact. Wheezing blood, the Alpha heaved himself over to the weapon, though with only one arm he'd be unable to adjust its firing arc more than a fraction. Reason told him it was hopeless, but faith said otherwise. As he put his eye to its cracked scope he felt the gun's spirit brush against his own and understood.

You are cognis… awake and thirsty for vengeance.

The Hammerhead was almost in his sights. He nudged the weapon and it moved with a fluidity that should have been impossible, as if his touch were merely the spur to its will. Together they locked on to the tank's cracked engine nacelle. Exoss-UR01 saw water hissing from the Hammerhead's railgun as it prepared to fire again.

He fired first.

For Epsilon and the Omnissiah!

The tank's engine housing ruptured, tearing a jagged wedge out of its carapace and spinning it out of control. Gushing flames, it careened into the reef and its railgun tore a scar through the living coral. The weapon detonated in a nova of light that stripped away the vehicle's canopy and incinerated its crew.

<Heavy armour purged,> Exoss-UR01 reported.

There was a reverberating clang as something rammed into his ship's stern – the second galley, shoving its dead brother further along the channel.

Turning Maniple Epsilon's tomb into a shield, Exoss-UR01 realised as his mind flickered out.

The Alpha Primus pounded across the upper deck of her vessel, her blades slicing the air in tandem with her strides as her quicksilver mind computed parameters of velocity, thrust and inertial drag a thousand times a second, honing her charge with every step.

Omnissiah guide my stride, she prayed.

She leapt at the last possible moment, launching herself across the gulf towards the coral escarpment on the galley's starboard side. Her twin blades lashed out to embed themselves in the lip of the cliff, and she hauled herself up and over like a silver mantis. She was moving again in seconds, racing along the narrow crest of the reef that paralleled her convoy, leaving her own vessel behind and drawing level with Maniple Beta.

There were no enemies this far back. The t'au had concentrated their ambush at the centre of the channel, where the invaders were at their least manoeuvrable, exactly as she had predicted. They were neither numerous nor well equipped so they would wield their forces like a scalpel, not a
sword.

The war for Phaedra was a sham on the part of the T'au Empire, Magos Caul had told her. *The xenos committed few of their own warriors to its prosecution and those they did were deemed mediocre or troubled. There were no ethereals or talented commanders to lead them and only a handful of battlesuits, yet impoverished as those forces were, these survivors will be their inferiors in every way. That is why they were discarded after the war.*

It was a logical deduction, but the Primus was not convinced. Her master's equations had omitted one crucial factor: desperation.

The t'au are survivors, she had demurred with frigid conviction. *Hardship will*

harden them. She occasionally wondered what torments the xenos had visited upon her to grant her such insights. *Was I their prisoner, or was I a traitor?* The insidious thought filled her with rage. *Was I a gue'vesa?*

Moments later she spotted the first squad of fire warriors. They were crouched low in a coral caldera, sniping at the ship in measured bursts. One wore a crimson-streaked helm that contrasted starkly with his white armour, marking him as a leader.

Shas'ui… the Primus remembered. *They call them shas'ui.*

The aliens didn't register her presence until she was among them. She beheaded the first and second with symmetrical slashes of her powerblades, then cleaved the arms from their shas'ui as he turned. He fell to his knees, flailing about with his bloody stumps as she stalked past. The remaining xenos attempted an orderly retreat, loosing snap shots as she followed, but their long rifles were unwieldy at close range and her conversion field devoured the few shots that found their mark. She lunged and impaled the nearest warrior, then sliced up through his chest and helmet, bisecting him as she tore her blade free. The next panicked and lost his footing on the slick coral. Flailing wildly, he crashed into the one behind and they both plummeted from the cliff.

The purgation had taken seconds.

<For the Omnissiah,> the Alpha Primus offered, ignoring the impotent curses of the mutilated shas'ui bleeding out behind her. Then she was moving again, seeking the next group of xenos.

Seeking retribution.

'We are the last,' Rho-IR02 said, turning his back on the empty expanse of water where the last of the skitarii speeders had disappeared. One by one, the other pilots had miscalculated and their boats had been swallowed by the whirlpools surrounding the island. 'Squad Irridio alone endures.'

<Confirmed,> Ptoltec-IR03 clicked. <Contact with Squad Astatine terminated seven point five seconds ago.>

<Mission proceeds,> Alpha Phaestus-IR01 commanded.

Rho-IR02 assessed the beach where Irridio had landed. It stretched towards the t'au enclave in an unbroken swath of sand and seaweed. In the distance he saw a string of bulbous watchtowers threaded by a high, white wall. There were no sentries visible, but that didn't preclude sensors.

'There is no cover,' he said.

'The xenos will not expect an attack from this quarter,' the Alpha replied. 'They

will trust the tides to ward this side of the island.'

'This is dead land,' Ixtchul-IR04 declared.

<Dead land: definition?> Phaestus-IR01 queried.

'Dead land… eats the soul,' the squat ranger slurred, as if he didn't understand the intuition himself. 'Nothing grows here.'

It's an echo, Rho-IR02 realised. Most skitarii experienced such shadows of their past lives, but for the most part they made no sense and were best ignored. Ixtchul-IR04 had been forged from local Saathlaa stock and the planet still exerted a nebulous grip on him.

<Data logged,> the Alpha said. <Tactically irrelevant. Mission proceeds.>

Since stealth wasn't an option the squad advanced at a march, spreading out in a wide arc with their rifles raised. The sediment of bloated seaweed popped beneath their tread, disturbing swarms of scuttling skrabs that gnawed at their metal legs. The air was leaden, but flashes of lightning threaded the sky, teasing out rumbles of thunder.

The xenos were careless to leave this beach unguarded, Rho-IR02 decided. Despite the whirlpools it seemed unforgivably lax… and unlike them. His memories of the long war were buried under deep strata of reprogramming, but he hadn't forgotten how fiercely the t'au could fight. *No, this is not…*

There was a clang of metal on metal as he stepped down on something hard. He froze and looked down. His right foot rested upon the seaweed-smeared dome of something buried under the sand. *A mine.* The others had halted, waiting for the inevitable killing blast, but it didn't come.

'Remain still,' Phaestus-IR01 commanded. His omnispex flashed to blue diagnostic mode as he scanned the ground. 'The detonator may have failed.'

The mine emitted a low hum and pressed up against Rho-IR02's foot – almost as if it were trying to *rise.*

'Alpha…' the rigid warrior began, then stopped as he saw a clump of seaweed stirring over the squad leader's shoulder.

Not mines…

<Drones,> Ptoltec-IR03 signalled as he opened fire.

Rho-IR02 yelled a warning as a saucer burst from the ground in a cascade of sand and skrabs behind the Alpha. Like the drone they'd encountered on the river it was small, roughly the size and shape of a tank gunner's circular hatch, but the dual carbines jutting from its undercarriage marked it as a killer. The Alpha swung round as it fired and his back erupted in a rash of burning exit

wounds as the machine carved twin trails of ruin through his chest.

<Alpha down,> Rho-IR02 reported as he opened fire. His bullet drilled through the dying Alpha's throat, ending him with merciful swiftness, and punched into the drone behind. The saucer's electronic babbling rose to a high-pitched twitter as the invading servitor bullet subverted its powercells and *twisted*. Arcs of electricity raced across its shell as it spun about on its own axis, whirling faster and faster until it tore itself apart.

More drones were rising from the sand around the squad, their domes shrouded in seaweed and barnacled with coral. Their movements were sluggish as they tracked the intruders with erratic bursts of plasma, but their chatter was growing more confident by the second, as if they were taking bearings from one another to sharpen their focus. The rangers didn't give them the chance to fully awaken. Working in data-linked communion, they designated and eliminated targets with glacial precision, always prioritising the most alert machines.

<Vector 213: Terminate… Vector 119: Terminate… Unit IR03: Evade…>

A bolt of plasma seared past Ptoltec-IR03, setting his robe alight, but the ancient cyborg ignored it, holding fast to his assigned firing vector.

How long have they been buried here? Rho-IR02 wondered as the last of the hovering machines exploded. He stamped down on the one trapped beneath him then stepped back, letting it surge up and into the squad's crossfire. It exploded with a screech of tortured electronics.

<Hostiles purged,> Ptoltec-IR03 confirmed, casting off his burning robe. The armour beneath was blackened, but the ranger's noospheric aura was radiant with battle lust. <The Omnissiah will not be mocked.>

Rho-IR02 turned to the t'au base, expecting an alarm to sound, but there was nothing. He squinted, searching for movement, but he didn't have the Alpha's advanced optics. *The Alpha…* He glanced at the ruin that had been Phaestus-IR01, feeling nothing except concern that the squad's efficiency had been compromised. Yet he lingered, uncertain why.

<Squad succession protocol initiated,> Ptoltec-IR03 said. <Rho-IR02: designation incremented to status Alpha/acting.>

The elder cyborg knelt beside Phaestus-IR01's corpse and unsheathed a serrated blade. With brutal efficiency he hacked their fallen leader's ocular omispex free. The squad didn't have the means to install the augmetic, but it would have been wasteful to discard such a precious artefact.

<Your command?> Ptoltec-IR03 said, handing the bloody omispex to his new Alpha.

<All squad designations incremented,> Alpha Rho-IR01 answered. <Mission proceeds.>

Four ships had survived the gauntlet of the reefs, though Delta's had paid heavily to break the blockade. Riding low in the water and venting flames, it limped alongside its fellow vessels as they landed on the shores of the t'au stronghold.

The aliens had fortified this vulnerable stretch of the island well, assembling the walls of their base from solid geodesic blocks buttressed with soaring, saucer-like watchtowers. Fire warriors manned the towers, while scores of lightly armoured human auxiliaries lined the parapets. The walls converged upon a forward-slanted bastion that housed a spiral portal whose maw could accommodate a heavy battle tank.

The fortifications were of incalculable value on a world where coral was the most durable material, but they were intended for an army of thousands and not the meagre hundreds that remained. The place dated back to the first years of the war, when the t'au had staked a serious claim upon the planet, but those days were long past.

A binharic fanfare howled from the Mechanicus ships as their landing ramps crashed down and disgorged the skitarii cohort. Platoons of armoured vanguard led the attack, advancing up the beach in rigid formations. The front ranks unleashed contaminated volleys of radium rounds, alternating their fire to maintain a steady fusillade against the defenders. Smaller squads of rangers followed behind, shielded by their comrades' numbers and heavier armour as they sniped at the watchtowers.

'By cog and cod we spite the xenos,' Alpha Viharok-TH01 chanted in lingua-technis, his mind ablaze with euphoric war routines.

<Purge the stain,> Squad Thorium responded in pious code.

'With iron and radium we smite the xenos.'

<Purge their strain.>

The enemy gate coiled open like a metal heart valve and a squadron of sleek hover tanks glided from the fortress. They wove across the dunes in graceful, crisscrossing arcs, churning the sand into swirling dust devils beneath them. These Devilfish were lighter than the Hammerhead that had assailed the convoy earlier, but their burst cannons were devastating against infantry. They cut an arc of ruin through the invaders, scorching away iron and flesh with indiscriminate ease, but the vanguard were remorseless in their advance. As one warrior fell another stepped forward to take his place, and soon the divine blight of their

radium weapons began to take a toll on the xenos tanks. One of the Devilfish slipped out of its evasive dance to drift aimlessly over the dunes. Another's movements grew sluggish and its fire dropped to sporadic, uncertain stutters.

They have been anointed, Viharok-TH01 thought, recognising the signs. While the tanks were impervious to the vanguard's standard rad carbines, every seventh warrior wielded an antique jezzail rifle that could pierce weakened armour. The structural damage they inflicted was negligible, but every shell was blessed with a killing aura that lingered. A single serendipitous bullet could excise an entire tank crew if it penetrated their cabin.

The xenos will die in ignorance, the Alpha reflected, *never knowing that the Omnissiah's radiance has touched them.*

On the far side of the island the only sounds were the staccato splatter of rain and the low hum of Brok-IR04's lascutter.

<Perimeter wall attained,> Alpha Rho-IR01 reported. <No hostile contacts.>

The other members of the infiltration team kept watch while Brok-IR04 worked at the t'au barrier, slicing out a man-sized portal. The wall was a threadbare assemblage of interlocking hexagonal plates that had loosened in many places, leaving gaps in its surface. Peering through the cracks, the rangers had spotted insulated cables running from the palisade towards the compound beyond, but there was no current running through them. Either the generators were down or they'd been rerouted.

The xenos were dying long before we arrived, Rho-IR01 guessed. *If we hadn't come they would have been gone within a year.*

Brok-IR04 prised out the wedge of metal he'd loosened and the squad slipped into the enemy compound.

'Take a look,' the Alpha ordered Ixtchul-IR03, indicating the nearest watchtower. He was the most agile amongst them, capable of a swiftness that belied his iron legs. Ixtchul-IR03 nodded and loped towards the watchtower.

<Xenos defensive quotient sub-optimal,> Ptoltec-IR02 said, scanning the deserted expanse of the inner walls.

'This wasn't meant for us,' Rho-IR01 said, watching as the Saathlaa ascended the watchtower's winding ramp. 'This barrier was intended to keep Phaedra out.'

But she was already inside, he sensed.

Up in the tower Ixtchul-IR03 sliced the air in a *negative* gesture. The hand signal was another echo of the warrior's past, but it communicated his message as clearly as code: he'd seen no enemies.

<Received. Return,> Rho-IR01 sent.

It was beginning to rain in earnest now, turning the coral sand to sludge. Behind the gathering storm clouds he spotted a hint of dancing colours. He'd noticed the aberration before, but only ever at night.

What is that? He found he couldn't avert his gaze from the nebulous chaos. There was something in there… something…

<Alpha?> Brok-IR04 asked.

Rho-IR01 realised the others were gathered around him, Ixtchul-IR03 included. When had the scout returned from the tower?

How long was I staring at the sky like a broken servitor? Rho-IR01 thought. His head was throbbing with the afterimage of prismatic shadows.

He went rigid as new mission data poured into his mind from the magos. The brief communion cleansed him of confusion and he cast the tainted clouds from his mind.

'A prisoner,' he said. 'Objective Skysight is a prisoner.'

The beachhead was secure and the cohort was drawing closer to the xenos fortress, leaving a trail of the dead and the dying in its wake. Wounded vanguard limped, staggered or crawled behind their intact brethren, driven by the magos' will until they expired. Scarlet-robed rangers stalked past them, sometimes crushing their fallen comrades underfoot as they sniped single-mindedly at the enemy.

<Converging on perimeter wall,> Alpha Viharok-TH01 reported. His gaze was locked on the sealed spiral gate ahead. <Breach imminent.>

Twin whorls of light lanced a pair of vanguard to his right, sundering them into ragged sludge. He traced the missiles' contrails back to their source and saw a hulking battlesuit standing on the roof of the gatehouse. Massive cannons jutted from each of its shoulders, dwarfing the moulded block of sensors that served as its head. Its white carapace was striped with red and a black snowflake adorned its breastplate, marking it as a leader.

<Broadside battlesuit,> the magos identified remotely. <Threat level: high. Priority target.>

Sniper-rounds streaked towards the battlesuit as entire squads of rangers switched their focus, but the xenos giant was sheathed in an energy shield that blunted their strikes. The few bullets that punched through shattered against its carapace, discharging in ephemeral threads of electricity. As if angered by the assault, the Broadside turned on the snipers. Its twin cannons flared with indigo

light and gouged a smoking crater out of the ground where Squad Lithios had been a moment before.

<Jezzail troopers, focus fire,> Alpha Viharok-TH01 commanded.

Throughout the vanguard every seventh warrior turned his sacred jezzail rifle upon the battlesuit, adding its wrath to the galvanic volleys of the rangers. The Broadside's shield began to pulse erratically under the sustained fire.

<Purgation imminent,> a score of skitarii predicted concurrently.

With a scream of thrusters two more battlesuits soared up to the bastion's ramparts to flank their beleaguered comrade. They were similar to the Broadside, but subtly sleeker and more compact, exchanging massive cannons for more manoeuvrable wrist-mounted guns.

<Crisis suits,> the Alpha Primus said, identifying the t'au reinforcements through Viharok-TH01's eyes. Her body stood rigid and secure in her ship while her mind shunted from warrior to warrior on the battlefield. <We must commit the ballistarii.>

<Negative. They are primary assets,> the magos replied.

<Cohort attrition status stands at sixty-one point seven per cent and rising,> she computed.

<Acceptable.>

<The battlesuits are a destabilising variable,> she pressed. <They must be negated without delay.>

Silence. The Primus understood her master's reluctance. She knew how precious – *how irreplaceable* – the ballistarii were on this forsaken world, but ultimately even they were expendable.

<Magos?>

The cohort snapped to a halt as a signal pulsed through the warriors.

<Ballistarii deployed,> the magos relayed. <Initiate Protocol Equites Priori.>

In austere harmony the skitarii widened their formations, opening pathways through their ranks. A monstrous pounding sounded behind them, growing louder by the second until it became a thunder of pistons and venting steam. Moments later a towering bipedal engine strode past Viharok-TH01, bathing him in an exhaust of incense and voltaic code-psalms. A skitarius was hunched in the machine's high saddle, manning its las-cannon while a bonded mono-servitor steered in obedience to the gunner's will. Four more Ironstriders matched its step, charging past the vanguard lines in unison.

'On iron we stride! ' Viharok-TH01 bellowed after them.

Alpha Vhaal-FE01's skull was filled with thunder as he rode into battle – the tireless clockwork thunder of his Ironstrider's hooves and the eager red thunder of his own heart. Unlike his fellow riders, the Alpha was permanently bonded to his mount, the scorched husk of his body woven into its frame like a princeps at the heart of a Titan. Only three memories of his former life lingered: first, he had been a rider, though of what and when, he was clueless. Second, his final ride had ended in fire and pain. And third… Third was just a number that he cherished without understanding: *214*. Somehow that triptych of shadows had conspired to make him the finest ballistarii rider in the cohort.

His machine swerved aside as an explosion tore through the ground ahead. He glanced up and saw the Broadside battlesuit's smoking railguns tracking him, angling for a killing shot. It had recognised him as a primary threat. The realisation sent a thrill of satisfaction through his cortex.

Fire… Pain… 214…

Both Crisis suits ignited their jetpacks and leapt from the bastion, soaring towards the ballistarii like humanoid spacecraft.

<Focus fire: Broadside battlesuit,> Vhaal-FE01 directed his squad.

The five ballistarii struck in concord, assaulting the massive battlesuit with a cannonade of heavy laser fire. Despite their headlong charge, their aim was faultless and the lasbolts pounded the Broadside in rapid succession. Its shield collapsed and its carapace ruptured, spewing fire. The vanguard roared their approval in raw fleshspeak as the burning giant toppled from the bastion.

Then the Crisis suits were upon the ballistarii. One dived across Gyrax-FE04's path, angling to strike him with its claw-hammer feet as it landed. Its weight crushed the skitarius into pulp and tipped his mount over. The fallen Ironstrider's legs continued to pump mindlessly against the sand, whirling the construct around in circles like a broken toy as the Crisis suit stomped past it.

The second battlesuit unleashed a torrent of flames from its weapon as it came down, scorching Akosh-FE03 into oxidised bones. Encased in the Ironstrider's lower recess, his mono-servitor pilot survived to enact a pre-set emergency protocol. Spinning the machine around, it raced for the ships, trampling a pair of advancing vanguard in its haste.

Prioritising the Broadside had been costly but necessary, Alpha Vhaal-FE01 decided, as he circled the second battlesuit. He swung his lascannon round to target it while his mount loped just ahead of its flamethrower's blazing arc. As he duelled with the xenos a tenebrous thought surfaced from the sludge of his past: *I have been here before.*

He opened fire, punishing the heavier war machine with a slow, but steady stream of las-bursts, allowing his cannon time to cool between every shot. There was plenty of time. His enemy had no shields, so every hit – and they were all hits – bit deep into its carapace. The xenos should have retreated, but the Vhaal-FE01 had it hooked, tantalising it by *almost* slipping into its arc of…

Fire.

He nodded unconsciously as he struck again, knowing this would be the killing shot.

Pain.

The Crisis suit buckled and erupted into flames.

214.

The infiltration team fanned out as they entered the compound's outer precincts, weaving parallel paths through a hovel of ragged plasteel shacks that appeared to be Imperial in origin.

This is where their human allies are penned, Rho-IR01 guessed.

Looming beyond the shantytown he saw the bulbous towers and cupolas of the t'au enclave. They rose above the squalor of the human district like heretical monoliths, glimmering with a pearlescent sheen that was utterly alien.

<Contact: one unit/battlesuit,> Ptoltec-IR02 transmitted from somewhere up ahead.

<Hold position,> Rho-IR01 replied, speeding his pace.

As he pressed deeper into the compound the plasteel shacks gave way to windowless geodesic spheres and bulging ovoid towers. Like the perimeter walls, the xenos structures were assembled from hexagonal plates of white alloy that seemed to shrug off rain and dirt, but even here the decay was apparent, revealing itself in missing tiles and collapsed walls. And then there was the mould… Ixtchul-IR03 hadn't been entirely correct about nothing growing on the island, for the grey blight was rampant. It mottled the smooth facade of the buildings and congealed into fuzzy slime between the tessellated plates. A heavy antiseptic stench hung about the place and there were signs of constant cleaning, but Rho-IR01 sensed the t'au were losing this battle. The sounds of distant gunfire made him wonder how they were faring in their other, more pressing battle against the cohort.

He found Ptoltec-IR02 near an enormous, sensor-studded dome. The elder cyborg was crouched behind a Hammerhead that appeared to have been abandoned in mid-repair. Acknowledging his comrade's click of caution, the

Alpha peered round the tank and spied a tall battlesuit standing beside a recessed hatch in the dome. The warrior's armour was dented and discoloured, but the weapons attached to its arms were clearly intact and its sensor lenses glowed softly.

This place is valuable to them, Rho-IR01 guessed. *Even with the cohort at their gates they left a guard. This is where the prisoners will be.*

<I have circled the structure,> Ptoltec-IR02 said. <There are no alternate entry points.>

'We have to attack together,' the Alpha whispered.

<Tactical proposition: we strike from multiple positions to diffuse our footprint,> Ptoltec-IR02 suggested.

'Agreed.' Rho-IR01 scanned the area, trying to formulate a plan. His thoughts were still occluded by the shadows he'd glimpsed in the sky.

<I have determined the optimal strike vectors,> Ptoltec-IR02 offered. <Permission to transmit, Alpha?>

'Granted.'

Rho-IR01 circled round to the coordinates his comrade had assigned him and took cover behind a stack of containers to the battlesuit's right. Ptoltec-IR02 remained by the tank, staying close to their target to compensate for his arc rifle's shorter range. First Ixtchul-IR03, then Brok-IR04 appeared, each ranger stalking silently to his designated position. The Alpha offered a silent prayer to the Omnissiah and lined up the battlesuit in his gun sights.

<Purge,> he signalled.

Squad Irridio opened fire as one.

They all aimed true, but only Ixtchul-IR03's bullet pierced the sentry's carapace, lodging deep inside its left-hand weapon. Though Ptoltec-IR02's arc rifle couldn't inflict any structural damage, its electricity wreaked havoc on the battlesuit's sensor array and shattered both its lenses. The blinded guardian reacted instantly, its weapons jerking up to spew streams of superheated plasma in wide arcs that incinerated everything in their path. The ferocity of its response caught Brok-IR04 by surprise and a plasma burst hit him square in the chest. He staggered back with a smouldering crater in his breastplate and tried to fire again, but the arc swept back and scorched away his head and shoulders.

The others reacted more swiftly, ducking as the searing enfilade lashed towards them. The hab-sphere concealing Ixtchul-IR03 was shredded, burying him under a heap of molten debris. An instant later the servitor bullet he'd planted inside the battlesuit's weapon triggered a critical overload. Both the weapon and the

arm bearing it were consumed in a white-hot eruption that splashed the sentry's chest with plasma.

'For the Omnissiah!' Rho-IR01 yelled, targeting the bubbling patch of armour.

<Purge the unclean,> Ptoltec-IR02 acknowledged, bathing the battlesuit's chest in electricity. He ducked behind the Hammerhead as return fire chased after him, but the volley tore through the damaged tank and its engine exploded, throwing him across the compound with bone-shattering force.

<IR02: Inactive…> the elder ranger reported.

This abomination is destroying us, Rho-IR01 realised as his comrade's biometric readings flatlined.

<Initiate Doctrina Omniscentia,> the magos signalled.

Rho-IR01 screamed as a hallowed war routine ignited in his brain and spread like cognitive wildfire, rewiring and quickening his neural pathways. His world liquefied into nonsense then crystallised into a vista of sudden absolutes.

I am His wrath made manifest.

His next bullet pierced the battlesuit's carapace with almost molecular precision and drilled through to the pilot's skull. An instant later reality collapsed back in on itself and Rho-IR01's mind began to shut down.

…

<… RhO… ach… I… rHoacH… I… I…>

…

An arc of bright pain lanced through Rho-IR01, jolting him back from oblivion.

<Proceed to objective,> the magos commanded.

The ranger realised his titanium legs had kept him standing while he'd blanked out. The battlesuit he'd fought was also standing, but its arms hung limply at its sides.

It's dead, Rho-IR01 decided. *As dead as Squad Irridio…*

He flicked through his fellow rangers' biometrics. Ixtchul-IR03's still showed activity, but he was trapped under a pile of fused metal. The others were gone.

I am the last. Inexplicably Rho-IR01's eyes wandered towards the siren sky.

<Proceed to objective.>

<Confirmed.> Rho-IR01 strode past the lifeless battlesuit and slammed his hand against the dome's hatch sensor. He shivered as his master's will passed through him to wrestle with the xenos door mechanism. It was a swift, unequal struggle and the hatch spiralled open. Murky blue light spilled from the space within, pulsing softly. Raising his rifle, the Alpha stepped inside.

The chamber beyond was vast, yet smaller than its outward appearance had suggested. Its inner walls were composed of some kind of variegated, gnarly stone, not the smooth metal Rho-IR01 had expected.

Coral, he realised. *The t'au built a dome around one of Phaedra's ruins. Why…?* The thought process terminated abruptly as his programming cut in. Questions were irrelevant to his function. Only facts mattered. He appraised the chamber with clinical efficiency. The aliens had transformed the ancient temple with their techno-heresies, threading the coral with flanged pipes and glowing conductor strips that connected panels of softly humming machinery. And bodies.

Rho-IR01 paused, trying to make sense of what he saw. The upper walls of the temple were lined with corpses – row upon row of them, neatly stacked and held in place by cocoons of translucent fabric. They were all human. Somewhere in Rho-IR01's mutilated mind a voice kindled by the sky-blight raged at the *horror* of this place, but he had lost the capacity to listen. Dismissing the bodies, he scanned the ground level. A cluster of bulbous power generators occupied the centre of the chamber. Insulated conduits extended from the machines to a circular platform suspended from the vault of the temple. Whatever was up there, it was devouring enormous quantities of power.

Up there… Under the sky…

<Proceed to objective,> the magos pressed. <Ascend.>

There was a metal ramp fixed to the walls. It spiralled upwards, offering access to the gallery of corpses. Rho-IR01 climbed, his tread filling the chamber with clattering reverberations.

They're not dead, he realised as he reached the first body. It was a woman, emaciated but still breathing. Intravenous tubes coiled about her form, insinuating themselves into her nostrils, mouth and wrists, feeding her just enough nutrients to withhold death.

<Negative identification,> the magos said. <Proceed.>

Rho-IR01 moved on to the next captive, a shaven-headed, tattooed apparition who might once have been a giant.

<Negative identification. Proceed.>

A copper-skinned man… <Negative…> A scarred Saathlaa native … <Negative…>

So it went until he stopped in front of a man with the sunken, brittle features of a living corpse. Even by the standards of the sleepers he was hideously atrophied, his skin stretched to parchment across an oddly distended skull. A

metal circlet was clamped around his head, widening at the front to cover his high forehead.

<Positive identification. Secure Objective Skysight.>

The sleeper's eyes opened as Rho-IR01 cut him free. They were feverish. *Enraged.*

'Give it back!' the prisoner hissed, clawing at his rescuer with palsied hands. His feeding tubes tore free as he lunged forward, spattering them both with dark blood. 'It's all I have…' He shrieked as Rho-IR01 hauled him from his cocoon, then a spasm rippled through his body and his eyes fluttered white. The skitarius caught him before he could fall.

<Objective Skysight secured,> Rho-IR01 reported. As he threw the sleeper across his shoulders he noticed a snapped cable trailing from the back of the man's skull. The other end protruded from the coral wall.

The xenos have wired them all into the temple, he realised. *Into Phaedra…*

There was a whisper-thin sigh from above, like the last breath of a living body as it became a corpse. Rho-IR01 glanced up at the shadowed platform in the vault of the temple. Everything terminated there: the conduits from the plasma generators… The web of skull cables… The truth of this profane xenos experiment…

<Secure priority asset,> the magos commanded.

Incapable of disobeying his master, the Alpha turned his back on the mystery. Like questions, answers were irrelevant.

As he descended his thoughts turned to the sky.

The battle for the gates was over. Alpha Vhaal-IR01's Ironstrider stepped over the smoking wreckage of the last Crisis suit. Its pilot had fought with skill, claiming another of his squadron before it died, but the sheer weight of the skitarii numbers had compromised it, allowing Vhaal-IR01 to make the killing shot.

214… and counting… he thought fleetingly.

There was a roar of triumph from the vanguard gathered outside the fortress as the gates finally relented to the magos' will and spiralled open. The warriors surged inside and Vhaal-IR01 heard gunfire from within, but it was sporadic – merely the dregs of a defence. This battle was done, but the xenos had not died easily. Five hundred skitarii had set out from the Iron Diadem, but fewer than a hundred would return.

<Alpha FE01: proceed,> the magos commanded. <Secure extraction point.>

Vhaal-IR01 rode forward, following his brethren through the gatehouse and into the hexagonal, multi-tiered expanse of the fortress beyond. The vanguard filled the cavernous chamber with jagged battle hymns as they exchanged fire with scattered bands of defenders. Most of the surviving enemy were human traitors. All were extraneous to the ballistarii's current mission.

Responding to the neural lash of Vhaal-IR01's will, his servitor quickened their mount and they loped across the tessellated hall, ignoring the desultory fire that came their way. The inner gates of the fortress fell to the Alpha's third shot and they burst through to the compound beyond. As they raced through the abstract geometry of the t'au enclave, passing pale clusters of spheres and domes, the Alpha spun about in his saddle, alert for hidden enemies. He expected none, but the vile xenos structures unsettled him despite the dictates of his programming.

Fire… Pain… 214… It was Vhaal-IR01's personal mantra to the Omnissiah and he chanted it over and over as he forged deeper into the unclean territory.

He found the lone ranger standing beside a vast dome. A scrawny figure was slumped beside his metal legs, evidently unconscious.

<Objective Skysight located,> Vhaal-IR01 reported.

<Confirmed: extraction shuttle in transit,> the magos replied. <Estimated arrival quotient: seven point two five hours.>

The ranger didn't acknowledge Vhaal-IR01's coded salute. He was staring at the sky and his noospheric aura had dimmed to a somnolent smog. The ballistarii rider followed the silent warrior's gaze and caught sight of something swirling behind the clouds. *Something…* He averted his eyes sharply. *Nothing. There was nothing there.* Evidently the ranger had been damaged during the final phase of his mission.

Vhaal-IR01 switched to sentry mode and waited for reinforcements.

The shuttle swept over the dome precisely seven point two six hours later. The same journey had taken the cohort almost two weeks by river, but there had been no alternative, for the craft could carry no more than a dozen troops. Most of the skitarii would be returning to the Iron Diadem as they had come.

<Objective Skysight secured,> Alpha Vhaal-IR01 reported as their fragile prize was carried aboard the shuttle.

By the magos' decree the cohort did not linger on the island. There was a storm coming and the skitarii were required back at the Iron Diadem. In the haste of their departure the shadow-haunted dome at the heart of the xenos enclave was forgotten, along with the broken ranger who stood beside it with his eyes fixed

upon the sky. Long after his brothers were gone, Rho-IR01 was still looking.

And in time the sky looked back.

<Shuttle circling for descent,> the Alpha Primus reported.

<Confirmed,> Magos Caul said. <Deliver the asset to the Nexus Chamber.> He returned his attention to the diagnostics of his re-engineered bastion, hunting for errors in the adaptations he had made. Since the warp anomaly's first appearance in the sky he had laboured to restore the Iron Diadem to its original, space-faring configuration. Its dormant engines had been purged, sanctified and ignited many times and its machine-spirit had been unchained from the rituals of the refinery. It was as eager to be gone from this world as its master.

'Together we possess the heart and the mind,' Caul cajoled the ancient ship. 'Now we only await the eye.'

I was a fool to let myself be blinded to the stars, he admitted.

Losing his Navigator had been a grave error. He had guarded her from the planet's perils fastidiously, but she had simply worn out with the passage of time. Distracted by his research, Caul had forgotten that mortals were so vulnerable. Without a Navigator his ship would have been lost in the immaterium, so he had been trapped on this world, biding his time until a replacement could be found. But once again his work had consumed him and the urgency of escape had faded, until the coming warp storm forced his hand.

It is a sign from the Omnissiah, he decided. *A push. It is time that I returned to the Mechanicus.*

With renewed focus he had directed his intelligence network to scour the planet for a replacement Navigator. Countless Imperial and rogue factions had spiralled down to Phaedra during the long war. Perhaps one of the precious mutants could be found among their detritus? And with perfect, almost ironic concordance, he had found his prize in the enclave of his former associates, obliging him to expunge his shame in order to escape.

Yes, the Machine-God's iron hand was undoubtedly at work here.

The Alpha Primus escorted the prisoner alone, for only she and the Diadem's consecrated cyborg guardians had access to the magos' sanctuary.

They are a wretched breed, she thought, regarding the wizened creature limping ahead of her, *yet the Imperium would collapse without their gift.*

Her prisoner hadn't spoken, but she could read the fury coiled up inside his puny frame, though its focus was unclear.

'If you attempt harm upon the magos, you will suffer,' she warned in sibilant

fleshspeak. Despite his fragility she knew her charge was potentially lethal, for it was certain death to gaze upon the thing locked away behind his metal circlet.

The xenos were wise to bind this creature's void eye, she thought.

<Approach,> Caul commanded as they entered the nexus chamber. He floated above his data throne in his customary spider-lotus position, flanked by a pair of heavily armoured cyborgs that had more in common with tanks then men. Their arms were fused into massive cannons that tracked the newcomers restlessly as they approached. To the magos' bodyguards even the Primus was a barely tolerable intruder. She appeased them with a coded psalm of identification and thrust her captive to his knees before her master's throne.

'I have a ship,' the magos informed the withered mutant without preamble. 'You will guide it through the immaterium.'

The prisoner was silent.

'Repeat: I have a ship and I require a Navigator.'

A harsh laugh burst from the Navigator's lips. A moment later the sound became a low, almost feral whine. And then he was giggling. It was a wild, hopeless sound that had nothing whatsoever to do with humour.

He is dead to fear, the Alpha Primus realised. *Dead to everything*... With a flash of blood-deep insight she sensed the truth of things: their prize was quite insane.

'They stole it,' the mutant snickered. 'The t'au… They stole my eye… you see…' He trailed off uncertainly and his gaze slithered to the Primus, fixing her with sudden calculation. 'Can you get it back, do you think?'

With a howl of white noise the magos lashed out with his mechadendrites, snaring the creature and hauling him into the air to hang suspended above his data throne. His noospheric aura blazed and delicate arcs of electricity played about his form as centuries of self-control fractured.

'You lie,' he said. His flesh voice was the rasp of a desiccated corpse. A swarm of mechafilaments surged from his cowl and wrapped around the prisoner's skull, insinuating needle-sharp points into his flesh.

'I'm blind,' his captive said solemnly. Delicate rivulets of blood were leaking from his torn scalp, but he was as dead to pain as he was to fear.

'You lie,' the magos repeated, but under his denial the Primus sensed a gnawing *dread*.

'They said my eye was too dangerous,' snickered the prisoner. 'They said it had to go… for the Greater Good.'

<Unacceptable,> Caul chittered. <I will not be denied.> His mechafilaments

tightened in reflexive rage and the prisoner's circlet snapped apart.

<I wilL nOtTtT…> The magos' words distorted into a jagged howl of null-code as he gazed upon the terrible truth the mutant had been hiding. His noospheric aura flared into a brief, bright nova then imploded in nothingness.

Silence.

<Magos?> the Primus asked. There was no answer. Her master and the Navigator in his embrace had become a frozen tableau. Then she saw the scrawny mutant's form begin to tremble. At first she thought it was pain that wracked him, then she realised it was mirth.

'I lied,' he said. And then he was laughing again.

THE ENIGMA OF FLESH

C L WERNER

The transport shrieked across Thain's amber sky, slicing through the clouds with the savagery of a chainsword. Scraggly shreds of mist were sucked into the aircraft's wake, dragged after it like some phantasmal escort. When the ship's counter-thrusters activated and arrested its forward momentum, the captured wisps swept across it, obscuring it in a foggy mantle.

Captain Xander Marhault of the 32nd Cadian Regiment's Fifth Company craned his neck back, squinting as the downdraught of the descending transport kicked up dust and dirt from the parched ground. The landing aircraft was a harsh, graceless sort of thing, utterly devoid of the charisma of a Lightning or any of the atmospheric fighter craft he had seen streaking across the sky. There was none of the warmth and camaraderie the military aircraft evoked. It was cold and cheerless, as engaging and dramatic as an old spanner or a box of rivets. The only thing about it that provoked any feeling was the cog-and-skull iconography etched upon its fuselage. The symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Tech-priests.

Marhault was still uncomfortable with the orders he had been given by regimental command. He didn't see the rationale for putting a glorified enginseer in charge. Outpost Nymue was an Astra Militarum installation; it was Fifth Company's deployment. He had been ordered to defend the ridge between the savannah and Prantis River in an effort to prevent the advance elements of the xenos invasion from dispersing into the winding canyons and ravines of the valley. It was proving difficult enough to fight the aliens out on the plains, and to allow them the natural cover of the river valley would render the bombing campaign against them completely futile.

It was an intimidating prospect, and almost as formidable as the enemy itself – the abominable tyranids. When the Imperial Navy had loosed its Marauders

against the main xenos swarms across Thain's surface, thousands of splinters had broken away from the bigger hordes. The larger tyranid beasts might be absent, but that didn't make these smaller swarms any less lethal for the men and women of the 32nd Cadian. A small alien could kill just as quickly as a larger one. Marhault's company were already discovering that for themselves. The transport's engines might have drowned out the sounds of battle for the moment, but he knew that the advance pickets were beset by slinking xenos creatures, forward scouts of a larger group.

A shudder rolled through the earth as the transport landed, the hydraulics of its massive legs venting vapour as they groaned beneath the machine's immense weight. The ship had barely settled upon its supports when a huge metal gate set into the hull shrieked open, the petals of its iris fanning outwards like a steel flower. The bottom sections folded against each other, bonding together in an electrostatic embrace to form a broad walkway from the ship to the surface.

'Honour guard, salute!'

The command was delivered in the stiff, clipped tone of Lieutenant Balduin, commander of Third Platoon. With almost machine-like precision, the squad that had been pulled from the line snapped to attention, lasguns held across their chests. Only the stained condition of their uniforms spoiled the parade-ground display of drill and discipline. A combat zone wasn't the place for such niceties. Even Nazhir, the company commissar, had abandoned the futile effort to keep his uniform immaculate.

Marhault shook his head. This wasn't some formal visit by superior officers. This was a cabal of tech-priests dropping down on his embattled command like scavenging vultures. That he extended any formal courtesy to them at all was due entirely to the 32nd's traditions and simple military protocol. However much the situation disturbed him, he wouldn't allow it to break his observation of discipline. He wouldn't let it make him or his command forget that they were soldiers.

The sharp, grating crackle of static rose from within the transport. Out of the darkness of the interior there now emerged a file of tech-priests. From head to foot they were bundled in bulky robes adorned with the cog wheel of the Machine Cult. Marhault could see cybernetic attachments protruding from beneath their raiment, disrupting the humanoid outlines of the entourage with a riotous display of pipes, wires and vents. One of the tech-priests had an array of mechadendrites erupting from his back and arching over his shoulders, while another had an insectoid proboscis of steel and wire snaking down from the folds

of his hood. Two of the tech-priests bore wide-mouthed vox-blasters that seemed to be riveted directly to their forearms, blasting the static screech of a binary psalm with each step of their descent. Another carried a great cylindrical device that ended in a wide funnel from which he projected a greasy, viscous incense as he marched towards the surface.

Amidst the entourage was a shape that was prominent in its ghastliness. Swathed in robes that seemed to be spun from threads of gold was the mocking remnant of a human form. The face that leered out from beneath the gilded hood was lost beneath a confusion of tubes and conduit, and wires were stitched across one cheek while the other connected to a grisly hose. The mouth was closed with sutures and a purity seal flapped against the withered lips. One eye had been replaced by a mesh of copper wire, while the other was a bulbous red optic that glared balefully at the world around it. The hands and arms were human enough in shape where they protruded from the robe's sleeves, though bound in some sort of chrome gauze as if mummified. Below the waist, the tech-priest's body had been removed and his torso mounted onto a tracked servo-carriage.

The monstrosity trundled down the ramp, flanked by the other tech-priests. He passed through the file of honour guard, making directly for the officers without sparing any attention for the soldiers. At a gesture, the vox-blasters terminated their binary chant and the sprayer stopped spilling incense into the air.

'You are Captain Marhault.' The statement issued disconcertingly from the gold-robed tech-priest's left eye. Marhault felt his gorge rise when he realised that the mesh of wire stretched across the socket was a speaker. He quickly forced himself to regain his composure.

'Fifth Company welcomes you to Outpost Nymue,' Marhault said. 'You are Magos Procrustes?'

The tech-priest ignored the question. Instead his torso pivoted around on its carriage, the bulbous right eye scanning the surroundings. Servo-motors buried within the carriage whined and moaned as the tech-priest's body rotated back and forth. 'This position will serve admirably. The orbital survey may have even underestimated the success to failure ratio.' The torso spun back around, the red optic narrowing its iris as it focused upon Marhault. 'It is the human factor, of course. That is the most worrying variable.'

Marhault stiffened at the cold, mechanistic speech, devoid of humanity. He repressed the twinges of uneasiness that crawled through him. 'I have been told to receive Magos Procrustes. Are you Magos Procrustes?'

The torso reared back on its tracked chassis. ‘Logic and probability should have informed you of as much, captain. It is the failing of flesh if you must question the obvious and remain oblivious to the deeper mysteries. Be thankful that the Omnissiah has granted mankind ways to transcend these failings. The data I have been issued with informs me that you have established your headquarters in the old processing plant on this site. You will conduct me there.’

Marhault waved his hand down the slope. ‘I had thought you might want to inspect the defences first. If you are staying here you might want to know how things lie. Our pickets have already engaged tyranid scouts. The main swarm…’

‘I have already processed the deployment of your company, captain,’ Procrustes stated. ‘The positions they occupy are adequate according to my calculations. They will serve their purpose.’

‘Where will you be deploying your forces?’ Marhault asked. ‘If I am to coordinate with you then I need to know where you are positioning your own assets.’

Procrustes extended his arms, gesturing at the tech-priests who had followed him from the transport. ‘My disciples will require the facilities in your headquarters. I have calculated that we can utilise them with minimal disruption to your own personnel.’

Marhault shook his head. ‘I wasn’t talking about your staff,’ he explained. ‘I meant the assets you’ve brought to augment this position. Where can we expect your skitarii and combat servitors?’

The tech-priest’s head dipped in the vaguest echo of a shrug. ‘I understand. You have made an erroneous inference from your limited data. I have brought no such materiel. It would have been superfluous to the task at hand.’

Marhault felt his stomach turn. If the magos hadn’t brought any tech-guard or combat servitors, then what was he doing in a combat zone? Why had regimental command permitted the Adeptus Mechanicus to come to the outpost?

Suddenly, gasps of alarm rose from the honour guard. Lieutenant Balduin’s eyes expanded so wide that Marhault thought they would pop out of his skull. Commissar Nazhir’s face turned a pale grey as his hands made the sign of the aquila. Marhault turned away from Procrustes to see what had so provoked his unit.

‘Blood of the primarchs!’ the captain muttered as he stared up at the transport.

Framed in the doorway was a gigantic figure, a colossus with massive claws of steel at the end of each of its armoured arms. The body was equally massive, a broad hull covered in armour plate and festooned with purity seals and the

iconography of the Machine Cult. A pelvis of pistons and gears connected two hulking legs, their interior servo-motors growling with each step as the giant marched down the ramp. An ovoid head stared down from the bulky shoulders with a faceless expanse of metal.

Marhault had once been blessed enough to see the Adeptus Astartes in battle, present when the Emperor's Warbringers cleansed Ixar IX of its rebels. The Space Marines had seemed to him to be almost godlike in their superhuman dimensions – physical manifestations of the Emperor's might. What he gazed upon now was bigger than any Space Marine, bigger even than the ork warboss he had seen on Diocles. Watching it stride down to Thain's surface was like seeing some primordial behemoth, some prehistoric terror emerge from the mists of time. An eerie atmosphere, not only of power but of nigh-incomprehensible antiquity, surrounded the giant.

As the behemoth reached the surface, a second armoured colossus appeared in the doorway and began to make its descent. A tech-priest in red robes marched behind it, looking like a dwarf beside the hulking monster.

'Golden Throne, what are they? Servitors?' Nazhir asked.

'They are the sacred relics of ancient knowledge,' Procrustes explained. 'Nothing so crude as a servitor. They are purity, devoid of tainted organics and decaying biology. They are vessels for the most noble and complex machine-spirits, endowed with a holiness that mortality can only aspire to emulate.'

Marhault felt his flesh turn cold as he listened to the magos. Robots: machines invested with a horrible semblance of life. The servitors that laboured throughout the Imperium were at least formed from genuine life, either crafted from human debris of some sort or else employing vat-grown organics. These, however, were beings devoid of even that connection to nature. They were entirely synthetic, artificial creations deployed as a result of the Machine Cult's obsession with arcane technologies.

'Are these the weapons you've brought to defend the outpost?' Marhault asked. Procrustes' optic fixed upon him, seemingly perplexed by the question. 'The tyranid swarm might reach this position at any time. These machines need to be committed to the defence…'

A grating crackle rippled from Procrustes' speaker. 'Yes, captain. The Kastelans will be committed where and when they are required. Their custodian, Datasmith Livia, will make that determination. It would be inefficient to allow such decisions to be entrusted to less logical mentalities.'

The magos pivoted his torso, turning towards the ferrocrete walls of the

processing plant. As the tech-priest trundled off towards the building, Marhault heard the same crackling sound from his speaker.

Somehow, the captain couldn't escape the impression that Procrustes was laughing at him.

The hulking Kastelans marched down the slope away from the landing pad and the old processing plant that Magos Procrustes had taken for use by the Adeptus Mechanicus. Captain Marhault hurried to keep pace with Datasmith Livia as she followed the robots. The augmentation she had undergone left little that was human about her. Except for her eyes, her face was completely lost in a nest of cybernetics. She seemed almost as inhuman as the robots themselves.

The Kastelans' sleek red-black frames were oily, taking on an almost mirror-like sheen. Prayers etched upon sheets of foil had been painstakingly fastened to each of the giants' motivators, waxen seals stamped with the aquila and the cog wheel pressed upon each metallic page. Weapon batteries were mounted to the backs of the robots, arching up over the right shoulder of each machine. One robot sported what looked like an oversized flamer, scorched and smelling of promethium vapours, and a pair of massive claws. The other boasted a sleeker, trimmer weapon that resembled an autocannon, though with a strangely notched barrel. Ammunition was belt-fed into the gun from a hopper welded to its side, but from where he stood, Marhault didn't recognise the cartridges as anything issued by the Departmento Munitorum. This robot also had cylindrical weapon pods at the end of each of its arms, and the muzzle on each of these protrusions suggested some kinship of design and function to the strange weapon mounted to the robot's back.

Whatever misgivings he might have had about these soulless, lifeless automatons, Marhault was far more worried about the crackle of guns sounding from the perimeter. The reports were growing more frequent, taking on an almost frantic quality. The crump of mortars began to sound across the outpost. Hearing that provoked a feeling of dread inside him. Wary of their supply of shells, he had given orders that the mortars were to restrict their fire unless the pickets looked like they might be overrun.

'The tyranids have reached the pickets,' Marhault told Livia. 'I request that you deploy your machines between Second and Third Platoons, where they can support the line most efficiently.'

The datasmith didn't look at him, nor did she divert the immense Kastelans towards the position Marhault had suggested. The robots continued their march

down the slope, indifferent to the growing sounds of battle. ‘Your assessment of the situation will be evaluated and processed. If the probabilities look favourable, I will consider the action you have requested.’

Marhault scowled at the datasmith. Even without magnoculars he could see the scuttling shapes of tyranid creatures emerging from the savannah’s tall grass, spilling across several of the advance weapon pits. Mortar shells were slamming down into the beasts, but for every cluster they destroyed another rushed out of the grass to take its place. The Guardsmen who had abandoned the pits and tried to make their way back to the trench were being pulled down by the charging xenos.

Lieutenant Balduin and the squad he had withdrawn to receive the tech-priests came running past Marhault, determined to rejoin Third Platoon before the trench itself was assaulted. The soldiers nearly collided with Sergeant Rhegeb, Marhault’s aide, as the stocky Cadian came sprinting up to report to the captain.

‘The weapon pits are cut off,’ Rhegeb said. ‘And the ones still operational won’t be for long.’

Marhault felt a stab of guilt when he heard the report. There had been no minimising the hazards of the picket duty; the men and women he had ordered into the advance positions had known that. Their task had been to kill tyranids for as long as they could, but after that, they stood little chance of survival.

‘Signal the mortar teams,’ Marhault ordered. ‘They need to target their barrage on the pits. Exterminate the tyranids concentrated there.’

Rhegeb drew his plasma pistol. Pointing it away at an angle, he discharged the weapon, sending a burst of blazing energy into the air. The bright flash could be seen from anywhere in the outpost. The mortar crews, waiting for just such a signal, would already be adjusting their fire. Their next barrage would be dropped directly on the weapon pits and the alien beasts around them.

Anguished screams erupted from nearby. Marhault swung around, galvanised by the shrieks. Drawing his laspistol, he hurried towards the howls of pain and terror. Rhegeb was beside him, cursing lividly at his plasma pistol as the mechanism slowly recharged its destructive energies.

The screams had come from one of the mortar squads, deployed in the shelter of a stone-walled grox pen. As the captain raced towards the scene, he found the ground littered with grisly debris. One artillery man was lying several metres away, his left arm shorn off at the shoulder and the side of his head stripped down to the bone. Another soldier hung in mid-air, thrashing as blood streamed from his mangled body, locked in the claws of an abominable monstrosity.

Towering at well over four metres in height, the tyranid was a lethal assemblage of claws and talons, great hooked barbs and crushing pincers. From the underside of its insectoid head a riot of ropy tendrils dripped, lashing away at the mortar man still flailing in its grip. Marhault felt his gorge rise as the tentacles continued to flay the skin from their victim. He could see the man's uniform and the flesh beneath being peeled away, stripped like it was the peel of a fruit.

Marhault fired at the mangled Guardsman, sending an energy bolt through the man's head. It was mercy, not murder, but the captain still felt his blood freeze at what he had been compelled to do.

Sergeant Rhegeb sent a blast of plasma streaking from the barrel of his pistol. Where it struck, patches of scorched chitin and burned meat dripped from the alien's body.

Some kind of tyranid infiltrator: a creature that could cloak itself like a chameleon to steal through their defences unseen. Marhault glared at the monster. It was easily twice the size of a human and covered in a thick shell. The plasma pistol had hurt it, but it would take time for the weapon to build up another charge. All he had to buy time for Rhegeb was his laspistol.

Taking aim, Marhault sent his next shot straight into one of the tiny eyes lurking just behind the tyranid's tentacles. The eye exploded in a burst of purplish filth, spraying across the alien's carapace. The thing reared back, tentacles whipping at the sky as a pained croak sounded from it. The alien flung the mangled Guardsman down and lunged towards the captain.

Before the beast's charge had carried it even a few metres, it was struck by a blinding assault of fiery energy. The tyranid was hurled back, chitin and foul ichor dripping from the grisly wound. Marhault saw the steaming residue of an organ slop out from the beast's body to the ground. Incredibly, it tried to rally its mutilated form for another attack, lurching back onto its feet and stumbling forwards. This time its attentions weren't directed towards Marhault and Rhegeb, but rather the mammoth machine that towered behind them. Steam rose from the muzzle of one of the Kastelan's gun-pods, the barrel still glowing from the destructive energy it had focused on the tyranid. The machine aimed its second gun-pod at the alien.

The blast of radiant light sheared through the alien's head, bursting it into a spray of ichor and molten flesh. This time, the alien's fierce vitality deserted it and it crashed to the ground in a twitching heap.

'The Emperor protects,' Rhegeb swore as he looked from the slaughtered tyranid to the towering robot. Marhault silently agreed, though he wondered if it

wasn't the Omnissiah aspect of their God-Emperor they should be thanking.

The sounds of battle rang out from the other side of the fort. Marhault could see another of his mortar sections beset by a tyranid infiltrator. The other Kastelan was confronting the brute, immolating it with a torrent of burning promethium from the projector mounted to its back. He could see Datasmith Livia near the robot, her red robes reflecting the infernal glow of the robot's weapon. The tech-priest aimed a bulky pistol at the alien, then sent a searing pulse of light shearing into the tyranid's leg. Alien chitin and flesh vanished in the fury of the flashing energy, reduced to a scum of blackened ash.

The mutilated tyranid collapsed. For an instant it struggled upon the ground, trying to force its burning body towards its attackers. With a few strides, the Kastelan reached it. Standing above the crippled monster, the robot brought its immense foot stomping down. The full weight of the giant machine pressed upon the infiltrator's head, then slammed down again to pulp the organic residue its assault had left behind. Before it could bring its foot down again, Livia was beside it, gesturing for the Kastelan to desist. She turned back towards the other robot. At her gesture, the robot that had saved Marhault lumbered over to its custodian.

The captain had no opportunity to thank Livia for the intervention of her Kastelans. The shouts of his lieutenants barked out from the forward trenches. From his position, he could see even more clearly than the Cadians in the line. The tyranids were circling back across the savannah. They weren't pressing their attack any further than the gun nests.

'The filth are retreating?' Rhegeb muttered, incredulous at the thought.

Marhault had a different idea, but it seemed just as impossible. 'A probing attack,' he said. 'This was a probing attack. The xenos were just taking our measure.'

Looking through his magnoculars, Captain Marhault watched the xenos as they scurried about the plain. Only a hundred metres below the ridgeline stretched a vast swathe of savannah, a sea of tall brown grass swaying in Thain's warm breeze. Before the tyranid invasion, this region had been used as grazing land for the grox herds that formed the basis of the planet's industry. The facility Magos Procrustes occupied was once employed to process the reptiles' dung as a cheap, albeit smelly, combustible to power Thain's other industries.

The grox were gone now, of course, culled from the air by Imperial bombers to deny resources to the advancing tyranids. The tall grass had persisted however,

returning with grotesque fecundity in the wake of the bombing. After only a few weeks it had spread back to engulf most of its former range. Marhault had considered burning it, but natives of Thain had warned such efforts were futile as the plants often sank ten metres beneath the soil. To get rid of it, the roots had to be destroyed.

Now the tall grass harboured something far more fearsome than any grox. Skittering around the savannah were grisly xenos creatures, lean predatory monsters encased in chitinous shells, their spindly arms tipped in long hooked claws. The mottled black and brown colouring of their shells made the aliens difficult to spot when they were still, and even when they were in motion it was hard to make out their exact outlines. They seemed roughly man-sized, which gave Marhault some comfort. If there was one thing that the Guardsmen knew about the tyranids, it was that the larger the creature, the more intelligent it would be. The ghastly infiltrators were proof of that.

What are they waiting for? It was a question that had been nagging at his nerves and that of every man and woman under his command. It was bad enough to be confronted by a virtually endless swarm of vicious alien predators, but to credit them with strategy? The xenos had recognised the mortars as a threat and formulated a deliberate plan to eliminate them in advance. They had initiated a probing attack and then withdrawn after testing the outer defences. Now the creatures were waiting, but waiting for what?

The angry shouts of Commissar Nazhir caused Marhault to hurriedly return the magnoculars to Sergeant Rhegeb and climb from the trench, heading up towards the grox pens and the source of the commotion.

When he arrived, the datasmith and her robots were arguing with the commissar. The Kastelans were like megaliths of metal that loomed above the stone walls. Captain Marhault stared up at the towering robots. It was impossible for Marhault not to feel a sensation of awe as he gazed at them.

'These shall you hold in abhorrence, they shall be an abomination unto you: knowledge without understanding, strength without duty, accomplishment without sacrifice and intelligence without soul. For it is by these obscenities that the Children of Iron were given shape and form…'

Nazhir brandished his copy of the Imperial Creed overhead as though it were the company standard. His eyes blazed with the outrage and fury of an ecclesiarch, glaring poison at the Kastelans and their red-robed administrator.

'I was unaware you'd taken up recitation, commissar,' Marhault admonished Nazhir as he marched towards the grox pens. 'You've picked a rather eccentric

audience to perform for.'

Nazhir swung around, turning his glower on the captain. Marhault winced when he saw the fury in his gaze. As a commissar, Nazhir wasn't subordinate to his command and was fully empowered to summarily execute the captain should he feel Marhault had betrayed his duty to the Astra Militarum and the Imperium.

'These things are an abomination,' Nazhir snarled.

Marhault looked towards Datasmith Livia for support, but her composure was as cold and mechanistic as the robots themselves. Somehow that disturbed him more than Nazhir's bombastic zealotry.

'They're what we need,' Marhault told the commissar. 'If we're going to hold this position and perform our duty, then we need more firepower. We're too far from the regiment's artillery and the Navy flyers have too much on their plate already. Unless you know of a tank company that can get here in the next day or two, I think it would be prudent to thank the Emperor for these machines and question their sanctity after.'

Nazhir thumbed through his copy of the Imperial Creed, stabbing his finger triumphantly at a passage he had marked there. 'Children of Iron! Abominations from the Age of Strife! The very existence of these… atrocities… is an affront to the Emperor! They should be…'

Something the commissar said managed to pierce the stoic detachment of the datasmith. Striding forwards, she addressed Nazhir.

'These are revered relics of the Omnissiah, not the obscenities of the Silica Animus,' Livia preached in a metallic monotone. 'The robotic automata of the Legio Cybernetica represent the purity of the Omnissiah. It is blasphemous to speak of them in the same breath as the creations of technoheresy.'

'They are without souls or the Emperor's light,' Nazhir retorted. 'Their minds are shapes of metal, indecent and profane!'

Livia's hand emerged from her robe's sleeve. She pointed one of her metallic talons towards the bolt pistol holstered at Nazhir's side. 'Does your weapon have a soul, commissar? Does it reflect the Emperor's light and serve the needs of the Imperium and mankind? It is a tool, a gift from the Omnissiah, one of the many blessings the Machine-God has bestowed upon us. So too are the Kastelans. Their machine-spirits are shaped by the wisdom entrusted to us by the Omnissiah. Your limited perceptions of flesh and faith cannot encompass the wonder of their construction. In your ignorance, you fear what is too complex for you to understand.'

Nazhir glared at the datasmith. Angrily he snapped his copy of the Imperial

Creed closed and shook it at her. ‘In your perversion you mistake righteous hate for fear.’

Marhault stepped between Nazhir and Livia.

‘Enough,’ he snapped. ‘Pick a place that isn’t immediately in the path of a tyranid swarm for your philosophical arguments. There isn’t time for this bickering.’

The commissar shifted his fiery gaze to Marhault. For a moment it looked like he would continue the argument, but instead he simply turned and stalked down to the trenches. Marhault pitied the first Guardsman that Nazhir encountered.

‘That went better than I might have expected,’ he said, turning towards Livia. ‘He might have drawn his pistol.’

‘It would have been detrimental to the efficiency of this operation to indulge such excessive illogic,’ Livia stated. ‘Deprived of a commissar’s discipline…’

Marhault shook his head. ‘He could have shot you,’ he explained.

‘That was within the region of probability,’ Livia conceded. ‘Then I would have been compelled to determine that his hostility was no longer in balance with his utility. He would have needed to be eliminated.’

A chill swept down Marhault’s back as he heard the datasmith declare in cold, passionless terms her readiness to kill Nazhir. She spoke of disposing of an officer from the Commissariat as indifferently as someone might mention throwing out an old boot. Even generals of the Imperial Guard didn’t contemplate such a thing.

Quickly, Marhault turned away, gesturing to the fortifications that stretched down the slope. ‘The perimeter around Second Platoon is where the line is at its weakest,’ he said. ‘If you would direct the firepower of your maniple there…’

‘Such a determination would be inefficient until the disposition of the xenos has been ascertained,’ Livia responded. ‘It would increase the probability of operational success to monitor the situation and then respond with appropriate measures.’ She raised her head, gazing up into Thain’s sky. ‘Magos Procrustes has theorised that the principal xenos assault will begin when the solar cycle enters its transitional phase.’

Marhault smiled despite the horror of the situation and the horde of ravenous aliens just beyond the perimeter.

‘Twilight,’ he told Livia. ‘You tech-priests are so focused on your theories and calculations that you can’t *feel* the things you study.’

‘You speak of imaginative impression, primitive emotion,’ Livia retorted. ‘To divest such corruption from the intellect is the first blessing of the Omnissiah.

Emotion pollutes logic. It encourages distraction and provokes heresy.' She looked down the slope at Nazhir's black-uniformed figure. 'If the Commissariat truly appreciated the meaning behind the words they recite, they would embrace the Machine-God as the shield of the Imperium. Only stalwart constructs such as the Kastelans can be fully depended upon to guard mankind. Organics reject such a conclusion because to acknowledge the perfection of the machine is to recognise the weakness of flesh. It is one of the paradoxes of existence that a biological brain can conceive and construct mechanisms superior to itself, yet that same fleshy organ refuses to accept the meaning of what it has built.'

Marhault shook his head. He was even less inclined to debate with the datasmith than he had been with Nazhir.

'Magos Procrustes has made an error,' he told Livia, changing the subject. 'Thain orbits two suns. The planet has neither twilight or dawn.'

There was a sudden eruption of gunfire from the trenches below, and Marhault heard the shouts of officers and sergeants directing their soldiers, and the violent whine of First Platoon's lascannon as it sent searing lances of laser energy into the enemy. Above the din came the maddened shrieks of tyranids.

'The primary sun recedes as the secondary sun rises,' Livia stated. 'That transition may not *feel* like twilight, but it is sufficient for the purposes of the xenos.'

Marhault rushed towards the trenches. Livia's steely rejoinder dented his pride even as the roars of the tyranids turned his blood cold.

How do we begin to stop them? Marhault thought to himself as he looked out at the savannah. Whenever the wind rippled through the grass it exposed a skittering tide of aliens crawling across the plain. The shadows lengthened as the erratic orbit of Thain's secondary sun drew closer to the western horizon, making it increasingly difficult to pick out the creatures. There wasn't a true night on Thain, only quasi-twilight as the secondary sun slithered along the horizon. The creatures couldn't be waiting for darkness. It had to be something else.

'Blood of the primarchs,' Marhault swore.

'They're coming!' a voice shouted from the trench. A second later the pseudo-night erupted in a renewed cadence of lasguns, heavy bolters, missiles and grenades. From the grox pens behind him, the Kastelan armed with the weapon pods sent blasts of disintegrating energy into the oncoming horde, while its companion stood idle until the xenos came within range of its promethium-

thrower.

The low walls of the pens afforded the robots some slight protection against the tyranids – at least at this stage of the assault. Marhault had seen his comms trooper dropped by one of the hideous bio-weapons the xenos carried; the soldier's chest had been torn to shreds by something that was more carnivorous beetle than it was bullet. In the wake of the leaping creatures that swarmed towards the trenches were squat aliens carrying bony rifles. Their sporadic fire wasn't precise, but when their grisly bio-organic projectiles struck, the destruction they inflicted was horrific.

Marhault saw the savannah vanish beneath the surging rush of the aliens. The tyranids weren't hiding in the grass now; they were charging towards the ridge in skittering leaps, a rolling surge of wicked talons and snapping jaws.

The noise of the mortars provided some small measure of relief to the hard-pressed Guardsmen holding the line. Each concentration exploded in a shower of chitinous limbs and burning grass. Marhault had the mortar squads stagger their salvoes in a checkerboard pattern, raking the savannah across a hundred-metre front. One burst would be twenty metres forward of the line, the next would be only ten metres, and so on. Anything to make it hard for the aliens to predict where the next salvo would fall. After the incident with the infiltrators, Marhault wasn't going to underestimate the cunning of their enemy.

The foremost of the aliens struck the minefield laid in front of Outpost Nymue's perimeter. Fragments of chitin and fibrous meat pelted down into the trench as creatures were ripped to bloody tatters by the buried explosives. In their frantic determination to hold the xenos at bay, the soldiers paid scant attention to the gory debris.

Balduin's platoon was doing its utmost to send a continuous barrage into the charging creatures. Marhault could see the lieutenant signalling his soldiers with hand gestures, directing their fire to different points along the line. Further along the perimeter, Lieutenants Peredur and Drystan were doing their best to get their platoons to match the fury of Balduin's position. Above it all there came the blasts of energy from Livia's robot, immolating clutches of xenos brutes with each barrage, leaving the residue twitching in the scorched earth until fresh waves of invaders ground them beneath hoof and claw.

Mines, mortars, Kastelans and guns continued to batter the tyranids, but still the beasts came. The approach to the ridge was carpeted in xenos fragments and twitching carcasses, yet their charge lost none of its impetus. The attack seemed mindless, devoid of the unsettling sense of strategy that had guided the

monstrous infiltrators. Then Marhault noticed something curious. He saw a clutch of the spindly, claw-armed aliens reach the base of the ridge. Through his magnoculars he could distinctly see them hesitate for a moment. Instead of trying to climb the ridge and force their way through the saw-wire in front of the trench, the creatures turned. They scurried back into the minefield, deliberately picking a different path from the one that had seen them through to the ridge. One after another, the aliens were destroyed by mines they had missed in their initial charge.

'By the saints, what are they doing?' Rhegeb wondered. 'Even an ork isn't stupid enough to dance through a minefield twice.'

Marhault glanced at the stocky sergeant, catching his unease. 'They're clearing the minefield. The little ones are making things safe so bigger ones can pay us a visit.' He handed his magnoculars to Rhegeb. 'Five hundred metres out, stomping along behind another mixed swarm of shooters and stabbers.'

He had spotted them only a moment before, lumbering out from the gloom of Thain's quasi-twilight: three trios of massive tyranid creatures, each as tall as the ghastly infiltrators had been. There was no deceptive chameleon quality about these, however. They were hideous: terrifyingly solid, immense brutes with fanged faces and spiked heads. Four arms erupted from their armoured bodies, each clawed hand wrapped about the haft of some weird bio-organic weapon. Some bore what looked like colossal swords, while others carried cannons made of bone, or polypus sacks of quivering flesh. One of the brutes wielded a long segmented whip, the bladed tip coiled around its forearm.

'Not so sure a lasgun will keep those bugs from taking the trench once they get up here,' Rhegeb snarled. 'Maybe they'd be obliging enough to eat a grenade if we ask them nicely.'

'The mortars might be enough,' Marhault said. 'If we could catch them in a good concentration…'

The captain shifted his attention back to the Third Platoon's perimeter. It was here that the xenos assault was making the most headway. The mines had been cleared and the rest of the brown-shelled alien vanguard was now scurrying up the ridge. Marhault was horrified to see the broad leaps the beasts were capable of. A single spring could have got them clear over the saw-wire, but the monsters dropped right into the wire instead and drove their bodies into the circular blades fastened along the obstacle. The saws whirred into action the instant pressure was put on them, tearing into the xenos bodies. Metal teeth that had been engineered to saw through more fleshy foes had a much tougher time ripping

away at the shells of the tyranids. After a few hundred rotations, the span of only a few seconds, the saws faltered and sputtered, their mechanisms fouled by the fibrous tissues and splintered chitin of their victims.

Marhault grimaced at the vile sight. Just as they had with the minefield, the aliens were slaughtering themselves to clear the wire for the main assault swarm coming after them. The sight indicated to Marhault that there was nothing else they could do here; the enemy just wouldn't be defeated, wouldn't be driven off, wouldn't retreat. They had to be exterminated, annihilated. Anything less and they would just keep coming. The only hope of holding the outpost was to pray the briefing that regimental command had given was right and that the swarm needed the bigger creatures to provide them with direction; otherwise, they would lose their cohesion. Fighting a thousand individual monsters was better than fighting a single unified swarm.

Even as Marhault was formulating a plan to concentrate his remaining mortars against the bigger tyranids, the ground beneath his feet trembled. Dust and loose bits of rock clattered down the sides of the trench. His first thought was that a shell had fallen short and crashed down somewhere within the perimeter. Then the tremor was repeated, swiftly followed by another and another. Had the tyranids brought some sort of artillery of their own to bear against the outpost?

'Captain!' Rhegeb shouted, his voice barely audible as a cheer rose from the Guardsmen in the trench around him. Heedless of the threat posed by the weaponry of the alien shooters, the sergeant stood and pointed towards the grox pens. 'Did you order the robots to advance to our positions? Because that's what they're doing!'

Marhault heard the words, but could hardly believe them. After holding the grox pens and providing support for all three platoons, the giant Kastelans were climbing down from the ridge and moving towards the Third Platoon's deployment. A ragged cheer rose from the soldiers on the line, relieved to find that the awesome combat automata were coming to help them. They didn't seem to appreciate that if the Kastelans concentrated their power here, then they would be leaving the rest of the perimeter more vulnerable than it already was.

Apparently Datasmith Livia was also unaware of that fact. Cursing, Marhault rose from the trench and scrambled up the slope towards the advancing robots and their red-robed custodian. She could put the claw-handed robot on the line, if she was so determined, but he wanted the one with the weapon pods back up where it acted as artillery for the whole company.

The datasmith waved aside Marhault's complaints when he confronted her.

Without breaking stride, she issued her own orders. ‘You will reserve your mortars only for those xenos organisms withdrawing from the battlefield.’ Livia had an obsidian box inlaid with blocks of circuitry tucked beneath one of her arms. The datasmith paused in her pursuit of the marching Kastelans. ‘You will not direct fire at any of the larger specimens,’ she commanded. Her cold, monotone voice was too emotionless to carry a vocal nuance as subtle as that of a threat, but Marhault caught it just the same.

‘I’ve got thousands of alien monsters waiting to strip the meat off my…’ Marhault cursed, but she was already walking off.

Livia had clearly taken it for granted that he would obey her orders. He looked aside as his aide came running towards him.

‘Have the mortars maintain their sweep across the front,’ he told Rhegeb. ‘I’m going to get some answers from that cog-head!’

By the time he caught up to Livia, the datasmith had joined the Kastelans in the shadow of a ferrocrete pillbox just above the trenches. Ignoring the gnawing beetles and acidic spores that the tyranids were firing into the outpost, Livia stood before the robot with the claws. It bowed towards her. The scene reminded Marhault of nothing so much as a lord-general’s steward kow-towing to his master.

Nearby, one of Balduin’s troopers shrieked, thrown back as something long and worm-like speared through his chest. One of the tyranid gun-organisms had vomited at him, and a ropy, serpentine maggot flailed about in the wreck of the man’s chest for a moment, breaking ribs and rupturing organs, before its heinous vitality was expended and it sagged limp and dead across the body of its victim.

‘Datasmith!’ Marhault cried in warning to Livia. He worried what the loss of their keeper would do to the Kastelans, and what the loss of the robots would do to the Cadians. ‘Get under cover!’

Livia’s metal fingers slid across the Kastelan’s chest, disrupting a magnetic seal and causing a hatch to slide back. She reached into the space behind the hatch, carefully withdrawing a thin square of transparent silicon that was lined with exposed circuitry. Reverently, she brought the slender object to a narrow slit in the side of the box she had been carrying. The crackle of a binharic orison droned from her throat, the mechanical susurration replacing more human vocalisation. She slid the card into the opening, then pressed one of her metal fingers against a different side of the box. A second card emerged from another narrow opening in the surface. To Marhault’s eye, it didn’t seem any different than the one she had removed from the Kastelan.

More screams rose from the trenches. The chatter of heavy bolters and the crack of lasguns became more hurried and desperate. Marhault knew the tyranids were ramping up their attack. It might be a matter of minutes before they clawed their way into the outpost.

'We don't have time for this!' Marhault snarled at Livia. 'You have to get the robots back into the fight! They have to give my Guardsmen support!'

'The imperatives assigned to the Kastelans have already been calculated,' Livia said as she pushed the second card into the robot and slid the hatch closed. The metal giant rose from its bow, towering above the trenches as it lumbered towards the line. 'Magos Procrustes has evaluated their objectives. Their purpose here was determined before they were even brought into the system.'

The pungent stink of promethium struck Marhault's nose even as his ears were assailed by the whoosh of jetting chemicals and the simultaneous death-shrieks of dozens of the smaller tyranid creatures. The weapon jutting over the Kastelan's shoulder was spraying streams of fire onto the aliens, searing their chitinous bodies and boiling the ichor running through their bulging veins. The chemical flames broiled a score of the clawed stabbers in the first blast. The smoking muzzle of the Kastelan's weapon tilted slightly upwards, adjusting its angle with the whine of servo-motors. A heartbeat later, the robot was tossing another stream of flame across the tyranids, projecting it further back amongst the aliens and catching several of the armed shooter tyranids with a dozen more of the quick-moving stabbers.

The second Kastelan lumbered towards the trench, following its fire-spitting comrade. It took position at the first robot's right flank. A deep, steely groan rose from within the machine as it thrust one of its arms outwards, pointing the barrel of its gun-pod towards the tyranids. Purity scrolls and prayer beads fluttered in the exhaust fumes that boiled out from vents at the back of the armoured weapon. A glowing light flickered within the weapon pod, sending little flashes of blue phosphorescence bleeding from the seams and joins of the armoured casing.

Then the glowing light transferred itself to the barrel of the weapon. It lingered there for the blink of an eye before it dispelled from the Kastelan's weapon and sizzled into the alien horde. The unleashed ball of energy was blinding, but when it struck one of the xenos creatures, the true magnitude of its wrath was displayed. The white-hot sphere splashed across its victim when it struck the creature's shell. Instead of dissipating, the glowing energy held firm, blazing against the alien's body with volcanic savagery. The tyranid shrieked and

thrashed as the energy orb burned through its shell, burrowing into the softer tissues within. Marhault had seen this weapon in action against the tyranid infiltrator, but against these smaller creatures its destructive power seemed apocalyptic.

The Kastelan lowered the discharged blaster and raised its other arm, sending a second glowing sphere into the foe's midst. The exotic gun projecting over its shoulder shuddered into life, pumping more of the destructive orbs into the bestial xenos. Some of the troops on the line shouted in vengeful satisfaction as they watched mangled tyranids twitching and writhing in agony. Neither the promethium projector nor the energy blasts killed the creatures quickly; rather they burned and melted them into a mess of charred wreckage.

The immense robot continued its march, crashing through the perimeter. Two soldiers, slower than their comrades, were smashed beneath the advancing machine. An instant later, the robot was climbing the opposite side and propelling itself through the saw-wire and out onto the savannah below. The giant's huge claws flung the wire aside as if it were nothing more than string, sending metres of steel cable and support rods tumbling down the ridge. At every step, its flame-projector played a sheet of fire across the path of the oncoming xenos, cooking them as they tried to reach the robot.

Marhault watched the scene as the Kastelan waded down into the teeming alien horde. He thought it had to be a mistake, some ghastly error that had deranged the Kastelan's machine-spirit. He started to demand an explanation from Livia, only to find that the tech-priest was gone. She had left the cover afforded by the pillbox. Maybe she had feared giving him an explanation, but when the second robot followed the first in a lumbering march across the perimeter, he knew it couldn't be a mistake. The Kastelans had been ordered to charge the tyranids.

The captain looked in shock at the gap the Kastelans had ripped in their own perimeter. The xenos could swarm right through the hole in their defences!

'If those things can think, then they're crazy!' Sergeant Rhegeb declared. Marhault was surprised to see his aide standing nearby with the rest of the command section. After giving orders to the mortars, Rhegeb had reasoned that their place was with their captain.

'The robots aren't doing this, it's the maniacs who gave them their commands,' Marhault cursed. He pointed at the company runners. 'Get to Balduin and Peredur! Tell them to get some of their people to cover the gap in the perimeter!' The captain didn't need to emphasise his point. The Cadians could see for themselves the threat posed by the hole in their lines.

Marhault turned and stared back up the slope, looking for any sign of Livia slinking up to join Magos Procrustes in the command post. ‘Where’s that damn datasmith?’

Rhegeb caught Marhault by the arm and turned him back around, pointing at a small, red-robed figure following in the shadow of the advancing robots. It seemed a suicidal spectacle. The Kastelans were burning down scores of tyranids, but there were many more of the creatures. They couldn’t possibly kill each and every one. Some of the xenos were bound to slip through and when they did, the datasmith was going to discover a very sudden and very messy kind of death. He would almost be prepared to accept that as the price of Livia’s madness if it didn’t mean they would lose the Kastelans as well.

‘You’re not thinking of going down there?’ Rhegeb sasked grimly. A man who had once killed a kroot with his bare hands wasn’t someone who was easily frightened, but the look on his face now was as close to fear as Marhault had ever seen.

‘Without those robots, this position will be overrun,’ Marhault said. ‘We either die down there or up here. Either way, we *die*.’ He spoke loudly enough for his voice to carry to the rest of his command section. ‘Form up on me. The objective is the datasmith and getting her back behind the perimeter. If the Emperor is with us, the robots will follow her.’ There was no time to wait and see how many of his soldiers would follow him. Balduin and Peredur would need all of their Guardsmen to hold the gap in the line. It was up to his section to retrieve the tech-priest. Any moment might see a tyranid kill Livia.

Marhault and his unit sprinted down the ridge, leaping across a narrow bend in the trench before plunging out into the broken terrain where the saw-wire had been. The captain fired his laspistol into the face of a tyranid trying to pull its body through the tangled wire. He didn’t pause to see if his shot finished the creature or not, but kept running through the path the Kastelans had cleared. He could feel the heat boiling off the grass of the savannah as the robots’ weapons immolated great swathes of the vegetation. His ears rang with the whoosh and whine of their guns as they continued to press their advance into the swarm. Like walking war-idols, the Kastelans loomed over the plain.

The captain snapped off a shot at a tyranid stabber that came bounding out from the burning grass. The laser scored a patch of the thing’s breast, cutting through its already seared shell. The creature flopped against the ground, its legs kicking and clawing at the air. Two of his soldiers’ lasguns cracked from behind Marhault, their beams piercing the alien’s head and killing it. Other weapons

sounded from nearby, dropping more xenos stragglers as they rushed out from the smoke.

The Kastelans and their administrator were nearby. The robots' paint was chipped and scratched, their legs black and purple with a patina of burned tyranid and alien ichor. Otherwise the immense machines seemed unfazed by their rampage through the swarm, and their invulnerability seemed to extend to Datasmith Livia. Marhault could see her still following close behind the maniple.

'The Emperor smiles on us!' Marhault shouted to the Cadians. 'The datasmith lives!'

That good fortune, however, seemed about spent. A snake-like xenos erupted from the ground a few metres from where Livia stood. It lunged at her, its segmented jaws stretched wide and scythe-like claws poised to rend and mangle. Marhault heard Rhegeb shout a warning to the datasmith.

Exhibiting uncanny speed, the datasmith swung around. A stumpy, wide-barrelled pistol was in her hand. Without a second of hesitation, Livia discharged her gun into the tyranid serpent. Marhault's soldiers were dazzled by the blinding beam of light from her pistol as she shot at the alien. When they could see again, the beast was strewn across the grass, cut in half by the strange pistol. The severed ends of the creature were scorched black, and between them lay a small pile of ash.

Sergeant Rhegeb screamed suddenly as another of the tyranid burrowers erupted from the ground. Others from the command group added their own cries to the tumult as more of the serpentine diggers emerged up from the earth. Marhault turned back to help his aide, but one look told him it was too late to do anything but end his pain. The tyranid had punctured Rhegeb's gut with one of its claws and the man's left leg had been cut clean away. A spike-like tongue kept shooting out from the beast's mouth, punching holes in Rhegeb's back.

Marhault put a shot into Rhegeb's forehead. He felt a brief flash of sorrow for his aide. A quick glance revealed to him that the rest of the Cadians were no better off than the sergeant. Before any of the burrowers could toss aside their victims and charge at him, he did the only thing that offered any hope of survival. He raced towards Livia and the robots.

The datasmith aimed her gun towards him as he approached. Coldly, she peeled off a shot. As the flash of light blotted out his vision, he expected to feel the burn of the energy blast searing through him. Instead, he heard something heavy slam against the earth behind him. Blinking through the spots flittering across his

eyes, he could see another of the tyranid serpents sprawled in the grass, its entire head reduced to an ashy stain on the ground.

'Datasmith!' Marhault cried out to the tech-priest. 'The outpost will be overwhelmed if you don't withdraw your machines back within the perimeter!'

Livia fired another blinding blast of energy at a third serpentine tyranid, slaughtering it as she had the others. 'Your presence here is fortuitous, captain,' she said. 'You may increase the efficiency of this operation. Dividing my attention between the maniple and the xenos is… perturbing.' She turned her back to Marhault, focusing on the Kastelans as they continued to fend off wave upon wave of the smaller aliens. 'You will warn me if the enemy makes any effort to flank the maniple.'

'Forget this madness!' Marhault snapped. 'You have to bring the Kastelans back to the outpost. We need them to hold the position!'

Again, the datasmith ignored him. She was focused instead upon a clutch of larger tyranids a few dozen metres away. The beasts were stealing towards the Kastelans, availing themselves of a screen of the smaller creatures to draw near. The robots didn't wait for the aliens to attack. Instead, the gun-armed Kastelan focused all of its weapons against the surge. Scores of the smaller ones were ripped apart by the phosphorescent spheres, while a larger creature had its entire left side melted away.

As its fellow loosed a fusillade into the mass of aliens, the claw-armed Kastelan stormed forwards. Fiery promethium consumed any small creatures the glowing orbs had failed to burn and melt. One of the larger creatures trained its weapon at the advancing robot, firing what looked like maggots from the fanged end. The strange missiles failed to strike their target. Just as it seemed the shots would land, a skein of crackling green energy pulsed into life around the Kastelan. The power field repulsed the tyranid projectiles, reflecting the bio-organic missiles back at the creature that had fired them. They struck the big brute in its midsection and splattered into a caustic slime that ate away at the tyranid's organs.

The last of the larger tyranids refrained from firing the long, thorn-like weapon it gripped in its secondary arms. Hissing, the beast lunged, driving the weapon like a lance into the robot. The power field crackled and sizzled as the huge thorn breached its protective energies. A ghastly tearing sound rose from the out-thrust bio-weapon as it slammed into the Kastelan. Marhault expected to see the robot impaled upon the alien spear, to see its metal body pierced by the fury of the tyranid's attack. The robot's thick armour was stronger than the alien's

weapon. A spider-web of cracks and fissures snaked across the length of the spear. A moment later it disintegrated into a cascade of fragments, destroyed by the shock of its own impact against the Kastelan's impenetrable hull.

The tyranid didn't retreat, and nor did the destruction of its bio-weapon seem to faze it. Shrieking in bestial savagery, the creature swung a massive, sword-like length of bone at the Kastelan's head while the segmented lash it carried whipped at the machine's leg. The blade flashed through the power field, scraping against the Kastelan's cranium and digging an ugly groove into the metal. The lash flared through the protective energies with such violence that the defensive mechanism was overwhelmed. A sickening howl rose from what Marhault judged to be the field generator. With a last flare of light, the field dissipated into a sputtering haze that stank of ozone and burned copper.

Snarling, the tyranid pressed its attack, lashing out with sword and whip. Without the field to blunt their impact, the full force of the alien's ferocity struck the Kastelan. Each swing of the sword tore the robot's armour, each crack of the whip ripping a new gouge into its hull. Slowly, the hulking machine was being forced back, staggering away from its xenos tormentor.

Then the Kastelan's promethium projector seared across the tyranid's sword arm, boiling every fluid flowing within it. The arm sagged uselessly against the alien's side, the sword frozen in its paralysed hand. The segmented lash fared better, coiling about the robot's leg and grinding away at the armour plate. As the whip bit into its frame, the Kastelan reached out with its claws and took hold of the tyranid's secondary arms. There was a sickening crunch and a revolting pop before the Kastelan ripped one of the alien's limbs from its body.

The creature struggled to free its other limb from the steely grip, but its efforts were as vain as those of the smaller xenos that scurried from the grass to rescue it. Phosphorescent spheres from the other Kastelan burned the aliens in droves while the other robot's claws adjusted to hold the creature immobile. It lowered the alien to a level where Livia could reach it. From beneath the sleeve of her robe, the datasmith produced a taser goad, shocking the creature with blasts of crackling energy. The more damage inflicted against the tyranid, the less concerted the attacks of the smaller creatures became. Instead they became disorganised, losing the focus that had compelled them to ferociously charge the maniple again and again. Even the snake-like burrowers lost their initiative, withdrawing back into the earth without completing their encirclement of the Kastelans and their master. When the creature was stunned senseless, the robot began to carry it back towards the outpost.

Marhault glared at the captured creature as the enormous robot lumbered past. Was this the leader of the swarm that had come to attack Outpost Nymue? Coldly, he aimed his pistol at the mangled tyranid.

'If you kill it now, it will all have been for nothing,' Livia's cold voice warned him. The datasmith was aiming her own weapon, but not at the tyranid. Behind her, the other Kastelan was slowly falling back, its guns continuing to melt elements of the xenos horde.

Expecting to feel the disintegrating energies of Livia's gun scorching through his body at any instant, Marhault lowered his pistol.

'What does this mean?' he asked.

Livia stared at him, her eyes as cold as the rest of her transcended body. Then, with shocking abruptness, her gun sent a blast of searing energy hurtling towards the captain. Marhault clenched his eyes tight against the blinding flare from the datasmith's pistol. He expected it to be the last thing he ever saw.

Marhault was stunned when a powerful grip seized him by the shoulder. Blinking, he saw that he was being dragged back towards the perimeter. Blood was streaming down his leg; the burned stump of a tyranid claw was embedded in his hip. He glanced aside; he was being half-carried by Livia. The shot she had fired had not been for him, but for a lurking stabber tyranid that had pounced on him.

'Curiosity is what lends human existence its purpose,' Livia said when she noticed the captain looking at her. She was following the two Kastelans as they lumbered back towards the perimeter. The claw-handed robot was carrying the still-living remainder of the tyranid it had injured and captured. 'It is not within my discipline to explain. You must speak with Magos Procrustes.'

Around them, the attacks of the smaller tyranids had collapsed. The creatures had lost none of their ferocity – the Kastelans were still compelled to burn the beasts back. What the aliens had lost was their cohesion, their sense of unified purpose. By eliminating the bigger monsters, Marhault dared to wonder if the robots had saved the entire outpost. When he asked as much of Livia, the datasmith's answer was discouraging.

'A respite,' she said. 'Time to accomplish the objective. There is no salvation for Outpost Nymue. The xenos will come again. Eventually they will overwhelm this position.'

'Then what is the objective?' Marhault gasped. The shock of his injury was beginning to dissipate and he was feeling the pain of his wound. The Kastelans were at the saw-wire now. A few metres beyond would be the trenches. Balduin

and Peredur had reinforced the breached section and brought whatever resources they could scavenge to hold the line. Marhault almost dared to anticipate one of his medics rushing out to assist him.

What he saw instead was the black-clad Nazhir. The commissar had his bolt pistol drawn. Marhault couldn't make out what Nazhir was shouting, but he did catch the words 'traitor' and 'Children of Iron' in his tirade. Suddenly Datasmith Livia stumbled as a shell from Nazhir's gun slammed into her. Marhault cried out as she dropped him and he slammed into a barbed strand of wire lying on the ground. Lubricants jetted from a smouldering hole in the datasmith's chest, sparks crackling up and down her right arm.

Before Nazhir could fire again, the commissar vanished in a burst of burning phosphorescence. The gun-handed Kastelan marched through his charred husk, scattering fiery fragments of the officer in every direction. A stunned silence gripped the men and women in the trenches, awed by the suddenness and completeness of Nazhir's destruction.

Livia struggled back to her feet, moving with a jerky, awkward shift of her body. Some internal components were fused by Nazhir's shot, but she still stooped and lifted Marhault from the ground with a mechanical gracelessness. She glanced down at him as she carried him once more.

'It is regrettable that was necessary,' she said. 'The loss of the commissar will decrease the performance of your soldiers. You must survive, captain, otherwise their efficiency will degenerate further.'

Marhault had an answer for the datasmith's cold, analytical pragmatism. But the pain from his hip made it impossible to put the thought into words.

Servitors relieved the claw-handed Kastelan of the hissing tyranid it carried. The nearly mindless man-machines emerged from the old processing plant, seized the creature in their metal claws, then disappeared back into the building. It was eerie watching the precise, emotionless procedure. As soon as the xenos was removed, the robot turned and lumbered back towards the grox pens to rejoin the other member of the maniple in defending the perimeter. Already, the alien attacks were picking up again. Marhault thought perhaps other 'command tyranids' were moving to join this swarm and assume control over it.

Livia carried the captain into the building, her steel feet ringing as she marched across the stone floor. The hallway hadn't changed since Marhault had used the place as his command post, but when they reached the factory itself, he was struck by how rapidly and completely the Adeptus Mechanicus had transformed

the place. Everywhere he looked he saw banks of machinery. Some he recognised as cogitators, while others looked to be communication relays, although on far greater scale than the one that kept him in touch with the colonel. Much of the factory's industrial machinery looked as though it had been moved and altered, repurposed to perform whatever new functions the tech-priests had requested from their machine-spirits.

As they advanced into the factory, Marhault saw the crippled tyranid set down on the flat surface of a hydraulic press that had once been employed to smash grox dung into cakes for easier transport. While the servitors held the alien in place, robed acolytes secured it to the slab with heavy chains. Once the xenos was secured, the servitors withdrew, filing back across the factory floor.

Marhault's eyes gaped wide in shock as he saw the servitors walk to one of the vats that had once been used to provide a chemical preservative to the cakes of dung. Now an entirely different mixture filled the vats: a terrible acid that, as he watched, consumed the flesh of each servitor as it threw itself into the bath. Even though the servitors didn't possess anything like genuine life, it still made for a sickening tableau.

'Their function has been fulfilled. Resources must be denied to the enemy.' The words issued from the vox-caster set into the body of Magos Procrustes. The tech-priest trundled towards Marhault. There was a laser scalpel in one of his hands. As he drew close, the optic set into his face narrowed and focused upon the chitinous claw embedded in the captain's hip. 'You are still essential. At least for a few more hours.'

Before Marhault knew what was happening, Procrustes activated the scalpel and drew it across his wound. With a deftness impossible to merely organic hands, he used the instrument at its maximum setting to saw through the claw while employing its softer energies to cauterise torn veins and arteries.

'This will stop the bleeding,' Procrustes declared. 'Your medics will have the stimulants on hand to maintain your functionality in the little time that is left.' The magos shifted his attention away from Marhault to Livia. 'The Kastelans have been issued their final orders?'

Livia bowed her head. 'They have been given their commands.' She hesitated for an instant. 'Do you think it will be possible they might be recovered afterwards?'

'Possible but not feasible,' Procrustes declared. 'The lower orders of tyranids might not recognise them as a threat once they enter hibernation. Any of the higher organisms will destroy them.' A slight touch of empathy entered the tech-

priest's voice. 'Know that the objective has been worthy of the sacrifice.'

Marhault pulled away from Livia's grip. 'Sacrifice?' he growled. 'You're worried about a few machines when my soldiers are being killed?'

'All of us were brought here to facilitate this objective,' Magos Procrustes stated. The tracks on the left side of his carriage rotated, turning him so that he could gesture towards the press where the tyranid was chained. Half a dozen tech-priests were surrounding it, cutting into it with a deranged assortment of tools and instruments. 'That creature is what has been designated as a tyranid prime, a recently observed evolution of the common tyranid warrior. It is the lowest order of tyranid organism that has exhibited advanced neurology. Vivisection of its brain and nervous system may offer a clearer understanding of the hive synapse that guides their species.'

'You are sacrificing my people for that?' Marhault gasped. 'They are dying for… for this?'

'From the moment the hive fleet arrived in orbit around Thain, all who set foot upon the planet were doomed,' Procrustes explained. 'But disaster sometimes heralds opportunity. What we can learn from that specimen may be the first step towards eradicating that foul xenos breed! What does the termination of you or me matter compared to that, captain? Already a tech-adept with a neural imprint of my brain has been prepared. He will use the transmissions of this vivisection to continue my work. We will perish on Thain, but the work will live on.'

Marhault could see some of the acolytes leaving the vivisection. Their roles in the study completed, they were following the example set by the servitors and dumping themselves into the acid bath. His body shook with horror and revulsion.

'Their purpose is fulfilled,' Livia said, noting the direction of Marhault's gaze. 'Now all that is left is to deny their essential proteins to the xenos.'

Procrustes waved one of his metal talons. 'Not possible, I fear. A residue is always left behind, but these chemicals ensure that what remains is difficult for the tyranids to assimilate.' The magos considered Marhault for a moment. 'Why does that solution offend you? It is the enigma of flesh that the individual promotes its own survival before that of the species as a whole. It is a failing that humanity must overcome if we are to thrive. The irrational and the obsolete must be discarded.'

'I… am not ready… to be discarded,' Marhault shivered, unable to take his eyes from the vats of acid. It was infernal. Obscene. Inhuman.

'No, you aren't,' Livia said. The datasmith's arm closed around him. Despite

the damage from Nazhir's shot, she had no problem drawing Marhault away from the command post and the macabre labours of the Adeptus Mechanicus. 'You still have purpose. You must rally the Guardsmen. You must give them the motivation to endure long enough for the study to be completed.'

Marhault stared at her, incredulous. 'You'll die too?' he asked. 'You'll dive into Procrustes' acid?'

Livia gazed back at him, and for once there was something approaching compassion in her eyes. 'Flesh is transient. It is metal that endures – metal and the knowledge that endows it with shape and purpose. All else is but a distraction from the purity of the Omnissiah.'

INFINITE CIRCUIT

DAVID GUYMER

Rain scalded the enamelled exterior of Borhus' battleplate, raising a senfgas hiss from the bridging organics between his gorget's soft seals and the gleaming gunmetal alloy that plated fifty-two per cent of the Space Marine's cephalic structure. He brought his magnoculars to his eyes with a soft whirr, followed by a *click* as the left eyepiece interfaced with his bionics. As always there was a reflex instinct to blink. His eyelid was a ghost, exorcised in successive rebuilds, but neural wiring was more plastic. The mind remembered, an organic irritation akin to an itch in an amputated limb.

With a thought, his vision zoomed across the potholed terrain. Old trenches, sutured shut with razorwire, and craters. Peels of armour plating were scattered over them, energy-lashed, too small even for the scrap trawlers roving up behind the Saltern Front. Hazard signifiers alerted him to sub-toxic atmospheric accumulations of lyddite, fycelin, and a string of complex nitro-compounds that his armour's sensorium suite lacked the capacity to tackle.

The land had been beaten and then chemically euthanised.

And it had worked. The necrons were being ground back.

A rail track cut a straight line across the murdered landscape and his gaze followed it to an outpost, walled and ferric-red. The magnoculars' auto-focus over-adjusted and Borhus dialled it back.

Men in protective all-weather coveralls with their hoods up rose into focus through a flood of steam, slapping shipping tags onto the sides of munitions crates as they were driven onto the rail platform. Tracked Kataphron-class heavy armament platforms equipped with lifting tines took up massive stacks, millions of rounds, enough to wage war for – his estimate – eighteen minutes, and manoeuvred them trackside. There, long lines of mono-task loading servitors integrated into rotating platforms engaged in an articulated peristalsis of hooks

and cranes to winch the armament loads onto waiting carriages.

Every few minutes, armoured trains hundreds of compartments in length drew in or pulled away. Quad-linked autocannons tracked the yellow-brown eddies in the clouds from the roofs of flak carriages, their jerking movements governed by a complex Fourier system to affect randomness.

Borhus checked the distance gauge on his magnoculars.

Nine-point-one kilometres.

Even from here, his enhanced hearing could detect the hiss of coolant and the squeal of marginally misaligned magnetic brakes.

Slowly, he moved his view across the platform to the station exit. A pair of visored skitarii in dense black robes stood guard at a checkpoint. A being's choice of armament said more about them and their culture than all the accumulated works of art or technology they produced. That the skitarii would poison their bodies with radiation in exchange for the stopping power of their radium carbines spoke volumes.

There was no higher praise than that offered with overwhelming firepower.

Motionless under the caustic rain, the skitarii stood patiently as a monstrous Luna-pattern bulk loader backed towards the checkpoint laden with arms and munitions fresh from the outpost fabricatories. The road crunched under massive solid rubber tyres, rain weaving through the treads and spattering the cab. Wipers squeaked back and forth, intermittently revealing a pair of Departmento Munitorum troopers in dust-grey fatigues, smiling, sharing a lho-stick and watching the rain with the radiator on full. Vertical exhaust stacks spluttered a petrochemical blackness into the air. On the road behind the massive vehicle, squads of skitarii ran escort for open-topped personnel carriers driving grim-looking workers to the manufactories.

Borhus panned right, too fast for the magnoculars' autofocus, the image blurring over prefabricated industrial units and vehicle silos until it fixed on a tall, pyramidal structure. A basilica. An obvious place to secure an article of rogue tech. And with all the respect that Borhus held for the adepts of Mars, they rarely deviated far from the obvious.

The structure's walls were plascrete, painted red in homage to the Red Planet. Its sloped sides were riveted with plates of a dark, energy-conducting metal that Borhus could not identify, and decaled with intercalated sequences of cogwheel motifs. In shape and ornamentation the structure looked the part of a place of worship, but that pyramidal shape owed as much to geometric symbolism as did the sloping glacis plate of a main-line battle tank. It presented maximum armour

thickness for minimum material expenditure, calculated to the trillionth decimal. It was a fortress, built to withstand anything short of a sustained artillery barrage or a determined aerial strike.

Fire superiority servitors integrated directly into crenellated casemates presented overlapping fields of fire onto the street-level approaches. At the top of the flight of rockcrete steps that climbed from the outpost, two full squads of skitarii with tripod-mounted transuranic arquebuses stood sentry by the main gate.

As Borhus studied the defences, an energy wash rippled down the structure. He followed it down the steep rockrete steps, to where groups of gaunt pilgrims ascended, a number climbing with the aid of long copper-clad staves.

The image suddenly became snowed by static.

Borhus withdrew the magnoculars from his eyes and thumped the plastek casing, uttering the ritual cant used by the Iron Fathers, but the distortion effect remained. Most likely its uncomplicated machine-spirit had been corrupted by the powerful electromagnetic field emanating from the basilica, a field strong enough to be picked up on passive auspex sweeps from orbit.

'It almost makes me want to know what he is keeping in there myself,' he said, dropping the magnoculars into the stowage basket under his seat and turning to the Space Marine sat beside him. 'He is definitely inside?'

'I marked his entry, captain,' said Jaggai, lightly gripping on the controls of the stripped down Land Speeder Storm. He looked over. Like Borhus, the Space Marine was unhelmed. His topknot lay across his pauldrons and looped about his thick neck. His grin was savage. 'I have not seen him leave.'

'In his own compound.' Luhgarak sat in the passenger compartment, rearward facing, scraping out the mechanism of his stalker-pattern boltgun with a scythe blade in pursuance of some subatomic particle of grit. He sighed. 'Regale us again, son of the Khan, with a tale of your prowess in the hunt.'

Beside him, Aetius shook his head but said nothing, a deliberate statement of coded disapproval when he would much rather have ignored his companions' very un-Codex one-upmanship more completely. The Novamarine shifted very slightly in his seat, then returned his attention to the inscriptions along the barrel of his boltgun, and his own orisons of battle.

Borhus accepted his subordinates' weaknesses with more grace.

The strong would shine, like metal implanted in flesh, and no word or deed from another would uplift the weak, even if Inquisitorial decree had made them brothers.

‘Brother Salvu?’ Borhus called back, hooking his arm behind his headrest and twisting to look back across the passenger compartment.

The Space Marine was standing at the back of the Land Speeder with one hand on the shoulder-height handrail and the other holding his own pair of magnoculars to his helmet visor. Rain beaded on the moulded ceramite plates of his power armour, gathering and then rushing for the soft seals around the joints and spiralling down to the deck to pool like moats of acid-yellow around the rivets. Salvu muttered to himself, mentally codifying the myriad features of the basilica into a checklist of weaknesses, strengths and dangerous unknowns. Salvu knew fortresses. He knew how to build them, how to hold them and, more pertinently, how to break them. The reticular cross of the Hospitallers smouldered acidly from his white pauldron. The rest of his armour was black.

Deathwatch black.

‘And,’ Borhus said, ‘do you see a way in?’

Salvu lowered his magnoculars. Somehow, despite his helm, Borhus could always tell when the Hospitaller was smiling. Jaggai grinned eagerly and thumbed the ignition. The Land Speeder shuddered, rising from the ground as the vehicle’s ramjets flared and full power was routed to the anti-gravitic plates.

‘I can see one.’

There were twenty skitarii on the gate.

Two were on a raised platform set to one side of the top steps with the heavy weapons, crouched behind a barricade of wire boxes filled with shell casings and rubble, and strung with razorwire. Low tech, but effective. Three more were set back into the tunnel that passed through the basilica’s thick walls. That left fifteen. The augmented soldiers were spread out over the steps, trading bursts of data-dense binharic and marshalling the flow of pilgrims through the gate.

Borhus disregarded the pilgrims. They were unarmed and thus inconsequential to his projections. He returned his attention to the main body of skitarii.

The five soldiers stationed furthest down the steps and thus closest to his approach brought their weapons to bear. An Imperial Guardsman or a planetary militiaman would have been sufficiently impressed by the approach of a squad of battle-brothers to drop their guard – or at least shake it – but not the skitarii. They had protocols to conform to, and they would conform.

They did not fire.

And why should they, unless the tech-priest dominus had reason to feel threatened?

At point-blank range there would barely be enough time between pulling the trigger of his bolt pistol and the bolt striking the nearest skitarius' thoracic carapace for the bolt's propellant to ignite. The impact would be low velocity, probably insufficient to fully penetrate the armour, but enough to detonate the mass-reactive round. The explosion would liquefy the skitarius' soft tissue, the resultant pressure front and blast shrapnel disabling the two soldiers either side.

That would leave thirteen. They were too close for the heavy weapons, and the gate guards lacked line of sight; the five could be effectively discounted.

The skitarii's enhanced neural systems and combat training would respond to the attack almost instantaneously. Radium carbines would rise. Enhanced optics would initialise combat protocols, squad-level algorithms disseminating targets for massed retaliation. Efficient.

But no bionic could rival the reaction time of a Space Marine.

Salvu, Aetius and Luhgarak would act first, pumping the loosely spaced skitarii with rounds while Jaggai fired his bolt pistol and charged towards Borhus' side, chainsword revving hungrily.

Casualties amongst the pilgrims would be high, but acceptable. Borhus projected ninety-seven per cent. Collateral damage to the outpost in the ensuing panic and rushed skitarii counter-deployments would be unavoidable.

And unacceptable.

The inquisitor had been adamant on that. First and foremost, there was a world to be won, and the Adeptus Mechanicus forces were vital to that.

Borhus terminated his projection.

A wing of Marauder fighter-bombers roared overhead, escorted by several squadrons of Thunderbolts flying in arrowhead formation. The sickly yellow rain clouds churned up in their wake rumbled with their sonic booms.

His thumb rolled off the activation rune of his thunder hammer.

'How may we be of assistance, Space Marine?' blurted the skitarii Alpha in command of the gate cohort. His voice came like a magnetic recording, warped, chewed and mangled by static and emerging from a vox-caster set into his throat. His mouth was a palpating grille of oxygen scrubbers and rebreather tubes, part of a steel faceplate that left only a pair of red-glowing slits for the eyes. He was, on surface appraisal of the facial and digital enhancements visible outside of his dark robes, only residually human.

'I wish to speak with Tech-Priest Dominus Rygel Sul,' said Borhus. 'You may escort us to him or…' He moved his gauntleted fingers to form a cogwheel over his breastplate, and nodded respectfully to the Mechanicus's sanctified basilica.

Inquisitor Laurelline was not an idiot. She had not randomly selected an Iron Hands warrior to command this delegation. ‘Or you may dispatch a man to bring him here.’

The Alpha stood stock still, processing. His personality was intact, but could be suppressed by his tech-priest masters when required. In combat, he could be almost without fear, but Borhus nevertheless sensed a split-second hesitation in response to his demand.

Jaggai growled. ‘He’s asking politely. Do we need to drag your master out by the mechadendrites?’

Borhus’ fingers strayed to the mag-holster on his hip and the bolt pistol it contained. The Alpha offered no overt hostility, but that could change. He was just awaiting the order. Borhus replayed his combat projections and allowed himself a smile. There was no likely variable that would enable two squads of skitarii to overcome a Deathwatch kill-team at close quarters.

A touch on his arm shocked him from his projections.

It actually shocked him.

Suit sensors reported a low amperage electrical shock discharged against the elbow joint. The bulk of the voltage was turned by his power armour’s non-conductive ceramite, but the jolt retained power enough to jerk his elbow out. He looked down, unable to mask the revulsion that spread across the organic residual of his face.

One of the pilgrims stood beside him, touching his armour like a war orphan begging the blessing of a crusader saint. The man was garbed in rough old robes, torn in several places to reveal a body that was both impressively muscular and unhealthily cyanotic. Beneath the robes he wore rubber boots and a strange copper torso cage. It barely warranted the term ‘augmetic,’ but resembled some ancient medicae technology for the bracing of broken ribs. The man’s bald head came level with the ivory aquila on Borhus’ breastplate. That and his bare chest were hatched with strange-looking tattoos that glowed with an electric light. Most disconcerting of all, however, were his eyes. They had not been replaced with improved bionics.

The man had no eyes.

It looked as though each socket had simply been subjected to a melta torch, then left to cool and reset in whatever unnerving form the Omnissiah willed. The stare of those black, melted eyes gave Borhus an itch he could not relieve, and he could not shake the sense – the weak, illogical feeling – that those charred discs perceived him more completely than his own genhanced occulobe and

advanced bionics could provide him in return.

The irrational conclusion that it was in fact the pilgrim with blessings to bestow on the orphaned ignorant hovered over him like a faulty hazard rune.

'What are you?' asked Aetius.

The pilgrim ignored the question, and stared blindly up at Borhus. 'Are you here to experience the Motive Force?'

Cursing his momentary weakness, Borhus pulled his arm from the pilgrim's grasp and backed away.

Any servant of the Imperium who came into contact with the technologies of Mars – the vast majority of countless trillions – would have at one time formulated a prayer to the Machine-God or to the Omnissiah, ignorant as they doubtless were to the theological distinction between them. The Motive Force was the completion of the divine Martian trinity. It was the fundamental that allowed the others to exist. It charged mankind's weapons, powered its warships across the void and gave the universe its laws. Perhaps it was because of that cold, cosmological constancy that few ever spared it their prayers.

'Yes,' Salvu answered, calmly. 'I believe we are.'

'*Ave Motriceum*,' the pilgrim smiled, opening his bare palms in blessing to reveal the copper-wired gauntlet array that had delivered the earlier shock. He lowered his hands as he turned away towards the basilica, the skitarii guards reluctantly standing down rather than obstructing his path.

Luhgarak sighted back down the line of pilgrims with his long-barrelled stalker boltgun, then lowered the weapon in thought. There were hundreds of the humans.

Borhus rotated his shocked elbow joint. His gauntlet's grip felt unresponsive, and he suspected that the pilgrim's touch had depolarised some of the neural connections. That his suit was not providing him with damage indicators suggested its internal diagnostic sensors had been similarly haywired.

That ninety-seven per cent figure would require amendment.

'*Ave Omnissiah*,' he muttered with rather more than the usual feeling, and strode after the pilgrim past the waiting skitarii.

Tech-Priest Dominus Rygel Sul awaited them inside.

The pict-captures that the inquisitor had exloaded from concealed pickups on Stygies VII did not do the tech-priest justice.

Sul's enchanced form boasted defensive systems equivalent to a Space Marine Dreadnought, and came in greater than the squad's Land Speeder Storm in raw

mass. His heavy armature was enveloped by a swarm of multiply articulated servo-limbs that clicked, chittered, whirred, buzzed and blinked – a cold, insectile amalgam of scalpel blades and microlasers. The core build remained roughly humanoid – an affectation that even the most ancient tech-priests stubbornly clung to – but locomotion was delivered not by human-model limbs but a semi-rigid pseudopod studded with tiny mechatendrils. His upper torso was integrated into that metallic chassis, flesh of patchwork colour and decomposition surgically stapled onto a steel matrix. His cranium extended back, not dissimilar to an eldar war helm, and was encased in what looked like adamantium, a material more conventionally employed in the construction of voidship hulls.

Borhus raised his hand from his weapons. The others withdrew to the antechamber's modular plate-steel walls. Jaggai and Aetius took flanking positions, while Salvu held back with half an eye on the gate where they had entered, a rectangle of acid-browned sunlight colouring his right pauldron and brightening the side of his helm. Luhgarak had slipped into the gloom altogether, the giant Death Spectres Space Marine blending so perfectly with the coolant cisterns and slow-respiring oxygen pumps that he had become a part of the chamber.

They were here to talk, but also prepared for battle.

The tech-priest glided forwards on gleaming cilia, and something flickered around him that left an ozone taste in Borhus' mouth and an ache in his brain. Pincers and callipers scissored about the tech-priest's head. 'Time wasted is blessed gun batteries lying idle, Space Marine. Whatever you are here for, I assure you I have been granted broad authorisation by Admiral Dreyfuss and my work is sanctioned by the subsector fabricatum herself.'

'I would advise you not to enter into a competition with us over who is backed by the greater authority, dominus,' Aetius warned.

A squeal of binharic derision blarted from the tech-priest's flaccid lips. 'Does the Inquisition believe I will be intimidated by its *killclade*? My work here is too important. You will achieve nothing here by force. Nothing that the xenos would not achieve for themselves if they could.'

The tech-priest's tendrils flickered, threatening.

'Inquisitor Laurelline has given me leave to… negotiate for transfer of the xenos technology,' said Borhus, the unfamiliar phrase forming with difficulty, like a crudely organic attempt at binharic.

'Xenos technology?' The dominus glided back coyly. 'You are surely aware

that the study of such alien archeotech is strictly proscribed.'

'It is detectable from orbit,' Aetius growled. 'So just surrender it or we will be forced to take it. And some of us will enjoy doing so.'

'If an artefact unearthed from this world is indeed in my possession then it could predate *Homo sapiens* by millions of years. Think what we could learn! Then again, the resources of the Inquisition are said to rival those of Mars… What can your mistress offer to make something so unique and valuable… go quietly away?'

'You are entertaining this, dominus?'

The strange pilgrim who had guided them through the gates stepped out from amongst the Space Marines and approached the vast armature of Dominus Rygel Sul.

'You brought them here, Valtohm,' Rygel Sul countered.

'To experience the Motive Force. The Hybernaculum is a miracle, and the Electro-Priesthood will not tolerate its surrender.'

'You speak of the xenos device?' asked Borhus.

Rygel Sul's mechadendrites dipped in what might have been a nod.

'*Xenos device*?' The electro-priest sneered. His tattoos flickered like ghosts. 'The Machine-God and the Omnissiah proscribe, but the Motive Force is universal. Do mass and energy lose equivalence the further one travels from Terra? No. Does gravity care what species orbits a star? It does not. And nor do the faithful.'

'Be silent, Valtohm,' Rygel Sul hissed. It was difficult to tell, but he looked nervous, as though uncertain who it was best to placate. 'I will deal with this.'

'The Motive Force is for all,' said Valtohm, reaching forward to lay a gauntlet upon the angrily twitching tech-priest. 'Its truth hides within the light.'

Too late, Borhus perceived the threat.

The electro-priest's hand was fifteen centimetres from Rygel Sul's metal armature when a bolt of current leapt from the man's palm.

'No–'

There was a bang, like a sonic boom, a sudden superheating and expansion of air that would have been shocking enough observed through three kilometres of atmosphere and which, zeroed down to a terrestrial scale, buckled the antechamber's plate-steel walls and flung the Space Marines back.

Lightning arced through the tech-priest's frame. His electricals flared, shorted, and then burst into flame. His flesh simply cooked. Threat-reflex autonomics caused his crippled armature to writhe, squealing out a high-pitched distress cry.

Then, with a final spasmodic jerk of mechadendrites, Dominus Rygel Sul collapsed into a steaming heap of still-screaming metal.

Borhus slammed a bolt-round through the tech-priest's radio-frequency emitter bulb, shutting off the death scream permanently.

Dazed, he saw the electro-priest, Valtohm, fleeing for the single, downward-sloping, passageway into the basilica's interior. He guessed that was where he would find the so-called Hybernaculum.

Jaggai, who had been partially shielded from the concussion wave by the dominus' body, was already giving chase, squeezing off rounds that ripped through the walls and ceiling. The White Scar disappeared down the passage.

Borhus shook his head, his Lyman's ear struggling to compensate for the shock, but all he could hear was that ghost-vox screech. Blood trickled from his ear between his gauntleted fingers, with a repeating signal.

The flesh is weak. The flesh is weak.

He looked around for the rest of the squad. Salvu had been hit. For a moment Borhus assumed that the force with which the Hospitaller had been hurled into the wall had cracked his backplate, but then he saw the ugly radium burn that marred the fractured ceramite. Gunfire blistered the Iron Hand's wounded eardrums, rad-rounds spanking off the metallic surfaces. A lumen bulb shattered above them. Pressurised air bled from a perforated oxygen pump. Another round punched out Salvu's hip and spun him to the ground.

The skitarii from the gate were pouring into the antechamber, timed volleys of sequential fire driving the Space Marines behind the only piece of genuine cover to hand: the corpse of Rygel Sul.

Dull impacts rang through the tech-priest's broken armature. Keeping low, Borhus drew in Salvu by the ankles while Aetius rose from cover to spray the door with fire. The mass-reactive rounds tore the skitarii vanguard to pieces. They were blood blooms, opening for the storm of explosive rounds as real flowers would for the sun. Petal imprints pasted walls, ceiling and floor, as mangled bits of high-end augmetic cut through the enclosed space.

In effect, it was like dropping a frag grenade under the cupola hatch of a tank and watching the aftermath.

'Stand down!' Borhus yelled, after he had pulled Salvu into cover and sat him up.

Aetius' boltgun continued to spit and bark. The Novamarine was picking his shots now, the sporadic few coming back his way beating against the body of the dominus.

‘Salvu,’ said Borhus, running his fingers over the break in the Hospitaller’s backplate and the bad one in his leg. His gauntlet came away dry. The Space Marine’s Larraman cells had already clotted the wound. Whether his system could cope as well with the radiation dose was another matter, and one for later. ‘I believe you will fight another day, brother, though on an augmetic limb I suspect.’

‘Lucky me,’ Salvu wheezed.

The drum of rad-rounds played in an audible energy build-up. Aetius ducked back into cover as a massive plasma discharge cracked out and pushed the dominus back half a metre. The Space Marine pushed back against the force and fired one-handed over his shoulder.

‘Do you believe in the divinity of the Omnissiah?’ Salvu asked, seriously.

‘Do you believe in the divinity of the Emperor?’ Borhus returned.

‘Less than most, more than some.’

Borhus chuckled. ‘I will use that one day.’

‘Go after the priest, secure the target. I’ll hold the skitarii here.’

‘You are not ready for a last stand yet, brother.’

‘Then hurry back, and you and Aetius can carry me to the Land Speeder.’

Borhus nodded and motioned for Aetius. Between them they lifted the Hospitaller up and propped him against the dominus. There, Salvu squeezed off a round that detonated under the collar of a black-robed skitarii, blasting the soldier’s brain and upper torso across the wall. Nodal sub-processors kept its body in action for a moment more before it collapsed.

‘Aetius, with me,’ said Borhus, backing up and laying down a blanket of suppressive fire. The Novamarine did the same, driving the relentless skitarii back up to the door.

This was a fortress. It was built for defence, and Salvu had been built to defend it.

‘Emperor be with you, brothers,’ the Hospitaller called over his shoulder as Borhus and Aetius turned, his own boltgun taking up the slack.

The passage sloped in and down, deep into the core of the basilica complex. Branch corridors split off to other chambers. From them, the sounds of weapons fire warred with the deep grind of manufactories, the restless breath of air filtration systems. The two Space Marines charged on, following the electro-priest’s ozone trail.

‘Captain,’ Aetius barked, honouring his Iron Hands brother for the first time with proper recognition of his rank. He pointed his boltgun down.

Running up in the opposite direction was a group of pilgrims, a dozen or so, the ground sparking under the butts of their long-hafted staves. Most likely they were innocent pilgrims, fleeing the rampage of a rogue electro-priest. They were blind and infirm. It was utterly implausible that a band of such men could have made it past Jaggai were they hostile. Borhus had a moment to consider.

All his preconceived variables were currently suspect.

'Kill them.'

Aetius opened fire. The first pilgrim went down, chest explosively parting from his ribs. Around the second, some kind of voltaic field flashed into life and stung the bolt from the air, then again around the third – a sequential energy blossom like a void shield puckering under a barrage of solid rounds. They wore no armour, no bulky power pack, nothing at all besides a metal harness and a stick. How were they generating an energy field powerful enough to turn a bolt-round? Aetius opened up on full auto, tearing the fourth pilgrim apart in a welter of bloody matter.

The rest were still coming. Impossibly, they were still coming. The range closed and Borhus' pistol added its fire to the fusillade. Then the charging bodies met.

Two priests went down under a crunch of ceramite versus bone and weak flesh. Borhus barged through their broken remains and didn't slow.

Aetius dropped back, spun, mashed a tattooed face between the wall and the stock of his boltgun, then swung his weapon up and resumed firing. Bolts lashed past Borhus to pick off stragglers.

More stave-wielding electro-priests filled the passage ahead, surrounding a floundering giant in black power armour. Jaggai. The priests had him, the way a pack of scavenger creatures could bring down a larger beast. The Space Marine's wild lunges were spun aside by whirling staves that then cracked against knee, groin and elbow seals, and across Jaggai's unarmoured face. Each blow sent a spasm of unresponsiveness through the White Scar's armour, as though it were being drained of power.

As Borhus approached, the priests peeled off from their wounded prey and rushed him. Borhus met their counter-
charge with a swing of his thunder hammer. It was a tank killer. Against a bare-chested electro-priest it was a sheer, glorious overkill.

The priest's body burst open, as though a high-yield microexplosive had been implanted inside his chest and set off. His blended constituents flew apart at the blast front of a sonic boom, plastering Borhus' battleplate and breaking the

remaining electro-priests against the walls. He stamped through what little was left, trusting Aetius to finish any survivors and tend to Jaggai.

It took him a few seconds to reacquire Valtohm's ozone trail. He drove a fresh clip into his bolt pistol and broke into a run.

The passage continued down for several hundred metres more to a large chamber, tall but relatively narrow, a hollow, acute-angled version of the exterior pyramid that surrounded it. The chamber was dominated by a high metal gantry, sterilely lit by banks of ultraviolet lamps directed inwards from plastek-walled observation rigs mounted on the sloping walls.

Skitarii were already there, piling into the chamber from secondary access corridors in the other three walls, and fanning out to find cover amongst the bulky instrumentation that dotted the edges and amongst the outlying stanchions of the scaffold itself.

They would be trying to secure the Hybernaculum. Or possibly contain it.

Borhus pushed himself to a flat-out sprint for the central structure, radium rounds burning up the surrounding consoles and deck plates at his heels. On the opposite side of the gantry, a Kataphron Destroyer growled into the chamber on armoured tracks, escorted by a unit of skitarii firing from the hip. Borhus rang off half a clip to discourage them and veered right. A bolt ricocheted from the hardened plating of the Destroyer, but none of the skitarii were hit. They vectored their approach to match his, taking up staggered positions within the scaffolding and resumed firing.

Even now data uplinks would be tethering the disparate skitarii elements into a single combat algorithm. Once that happened he was dead. Even now–

A dark-robed skitarii with a black titanium face mask rose from cover three metres in front of him and aimed, though at that range he scarcely needed to.

There was a loud *boom* and the console that the skitarii had been using as cover exploded in his face. That hadn't been a rad carbine. It had been a boltgun.

Borhus glimpsed Luhgarak on the walkway high up in the scaffold. The Space Marine ducked behind the safety rail as return fire from the ground raked his position. Valtohm was several levels higher still and, as Borhus watched, scrambling up a ladder towards the summit.

A wild cry pulled Borhus' attention back. A pilgrim in singed rags vaulted the smouldering console, whirling his stave overhead. Another followed. Electricity balled his gauntlet apparatus and arced violently, dragging across the gantry walls and splitting back and forth with his brother's stave, like two poles of a battery. A charging battery.

Firing off to the side, Borhus ran for the gantry's lowest walkway and leapt. It was four metres from the ground. An impossible jump for a man. But he was more than a man: he was a Space Marine. His body twisted mid-air, his line of fire stitched upwards, chewing up the stave-wielding pilgrim from waist to neck and blowing the shoulder off his gauntleted brother. His back struck the walkway, aluminium planking rattling under his weight as his pistol clicked empty. He vaulted to his feet, spun around and looked up.

Valtohm was sprinting across Borhus' diagonal, torn robes flapping about his ankles as he took the final, short, stretch before the top. The spectre of death was right behind. Luhgarak took the steps behind the fleeing electro-priest in a single bound, landing in a firing crouch with his boltgun sweeping up for the finishing shot. Almost mirroring the weapon's movement, Valtohm swept around, electricity bunched in his fists, and before Luhgarak could pull the trigger the electro-priest thrust his open palms forward.

A savage ribbon of lightning plucked the Space Marine from his feet and pushed him from the gantry. The lightning flickered back and Luhgarak fell. His flailing arms caught around a hanging chain and he swung down, smashing bodily into the bulk of the scaffold. Smoke coiled from the powered seals of his armour's joints. If not for the insulating properties of his ceramite battleplate, the Space Marine would surely be dead rather than merely maimed. A group of skitarii closed in on his position from below, carbines trained upwards, but Lugharak was going nowhere.

A rad-round banged the underside of the walkway where Borhus stood. He drew in to the inside edge, cutting down the shooters' angles, and crouched for good measure. He looked up, seeing several levels of slightly sloped aluminium walkways that worked their way around the gantry to the top, where the structure narrowed. There, high above, he saw Valtohm gesture a still-coruscant hand over Luhgarak as if in blessing, then turn with a smile and move more calmly for the summit.

Borhus snarled. Overconfidence. It would ever be the downfall of the weak.

Springing from his crouch, he leapt across the stanchion-filled interior of the scaffold, bypassing two ladders and a walkway, and clamped his gauntleted fingers over an aluminium plank. The light metal bent under his grip, its properties making it impossible even to establish a mag-lock. One-handed, he swayed. Binharic blurts of astonishment issued from the skitarii below. He ignored them as, with a heave of bionic strength, he threw the rest of his body up and landed on the deformed walkway with a thump.

He dropped again into a crouch long enough to mark Valtohm's progress and reaquire his bearings, then sprang again. Two more ape-like leaps and swings carried him within arm's length of the summit, each successive jump carrying him a little higher than the last as the gantry's pyramidal structure narrowed.

He caught the edges of the final walkway in both hands, hanging beneath. Then, with a grunt and a whine of servos, he swung himself like a pendulum until he could hook a heel over the lip of the platform and drag himself up onto all fours. He panted, mildly exerted. Two bootprints of molecularly soldered ceramite were burned into the aluminium beneath his face, where Luhgarak had stood. It was astonishing that one man with so rudimentary an apparatus could generate such force. What was the upper power limit of Valtohm's weapon? What was its carrying capacity? How quickly could it be recharged between shots? Borhus had no answers.

Standing, he slid a fresh clip into his pistol and strode forwards. The electro-priest's ozone trail was intense now. At the walkway's end, Borhus set his boot onto an aluminium rung and, one handed, climbed to the summit.

Ultraviolet banks shone down upon the small platform. It was crowded with magnetometers, field modulators, dosimeters, oscilloscales and spectrophotometers. The dry whirr of cogitator cooling fans was like a hymnal. The altar, the focus of the Adeptus Mechanicus' curiosity and devotion, was a humanoid object, preserved like a relic of an ancient saint within the throbbing halo of a networked suspensor grid. The figure seemed to glow under the attention, but that glow was simply the static effect of the suspensor field.

That was the literal explanation, the *logical* explanation, but the entity within the field exuded a soulless malevolence that defied Borhus' conceptions of logic.

It was some manner of xenos being, though specifics of race were impossible to be sure of given the field effects distorting Borhus' view. Given the nature of this world, Borhus could posit an informed guess. *Necron*. He shivered before an inexplicable chill. The entity appeared to be in some kind stasis, and if his guess was accurate, and the being was indeed a necron, then it had likely been in this state for millions of years. This was what Rygel Sul had unearthed here after the xenos had been pushed back, and what had since captivated Valtohm and his followers. The Hybernaculum.

Startled from positions of prayer, electro-priests armed with staves and gauntlets hurried out of Borhus' way and moved protectively in front of the Hybernaculum. Valtohm turned towards him with hands raised.

Surrender? Or a threat?

Borhus took a step forward and tightened his aim on the electro-priest's forehead. 'You should have held back on Luhgarak. I doubt you have another shot like that left in you.'

Valtohm's flesh-melted lips parted into a mortis grin.

'I will not allow you to awaken this… thing,' growled Borhus.

'I don't want to awaken it,' said Valtohm sharply, sounding genuinely appalled. 'Alive it is just one more material being, but here…' The priest turned to look upon the entity, gleaming dully ultraviolet within the hazing cocoon of the suspensor grid. 'Do you understand what this is, Space Marine? There is no power source for this. A self-perpetuating stasis. Not a single electronvolt expended in waste. The fundamental forces of the universe in balance.'

'I understand. It is a perfect abomination.'

'It is a *miracle*,' Valtohm breathed.

Borhus' finger strengthened on the trigger, and he shifted his aim from Valtohm to the entity within the Hybernaculum itself.

'No!' screamed the priests in ragged unison as they rushed forward, unwittingly clearing Borhus' shot.

'The flesh is weak,' he sneered.

Then he fired.

Mass-reactive bolts blazed across the suspensor field. Some were deflected, spraying out in all directions. Consoles exploded. Bulky diagnostic arrays went up in sparks. Electro-priests fell, scythed down by shrapnel, stray rounds or simply thrown onto their faces by the force of exploding terminals, enveloped in guttering voltaic fields.

Some punched through, however. Enough.

Enough.

As soon as he thought it, he knew there could never be enough.

As the bolts encountered the stasis field, they stopped, frozen in time as absolutely as the xenos entity itself. Even their liquid hydrogen propellant tails remained fixed behind them, tiny cones of perfectly captivated light.

Although clearly impossible, the entity appeared to mock him from inside its prison. Borhus threw aside his pistol with a snarl and hefted his thunder hammer.

'Never let it be said that an Iron Hand failed to bring a big enough weapon,' he said.

'You are right, iron brother,' said Valtohm, tilting back his head to meet Borhus face-to-face and raising his gauntlets. Electricity vaulted between them with a succession of air-burning cracks. 'Flesh *is* weak, but the Motive Force is power.'

Lightning flared from Valtohm's hands, dragging through the circuit of staves and upraised gauntlets of his surviving acolytes, even lancing across the glowing body of the Hybernaculum itself. It crackled across Borhus' optics. The Deathwatch captain drew back his thunder hammer and charged.

Too late.

He felt the miracle of the Motive Force course through his body. The insulating properties of ceramite were irrelevant now; the lightning was too powerful for that, less an assault than an exalted state of being. His suit connections haywired, and short electrical pulses caused his body to spasm. His bionic eye exploded in its socket, its flesh counterpart simply melting, dribbling down his face before the jelly steamed from his boiling skin. Somewhere in amongst the flurry of impulses shorting through his brain, he remembered to scream. He felt agony, bloody rapture, but through it all he could *see*. The lightning connected him to the infinite circuit that was the universe, and opened his eyes to the truth that Valtohm did indeed have a blessing to bestow.

The flesh *was* weak.

Matter was weak.

And in a deliverance of rampant energy, Borhus of the Iron Hands finally saw the truth inside the light.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Clark has written the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Kingsblade*, *Knightsblade* and *Shroud of Night*, as well as the novella *Crusade* and the short story 'Whiteout'. He has also written the short story 'Gorechosen' for Warhammer Age of Sigmar, and the Warhammer Quest Silver Tower novella *Labyrinth of the Lost*. Andy works as a background writer for Games Workshop, crafting the worlds of Warhammer Age of Sigmar and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in Nottingham, UK.

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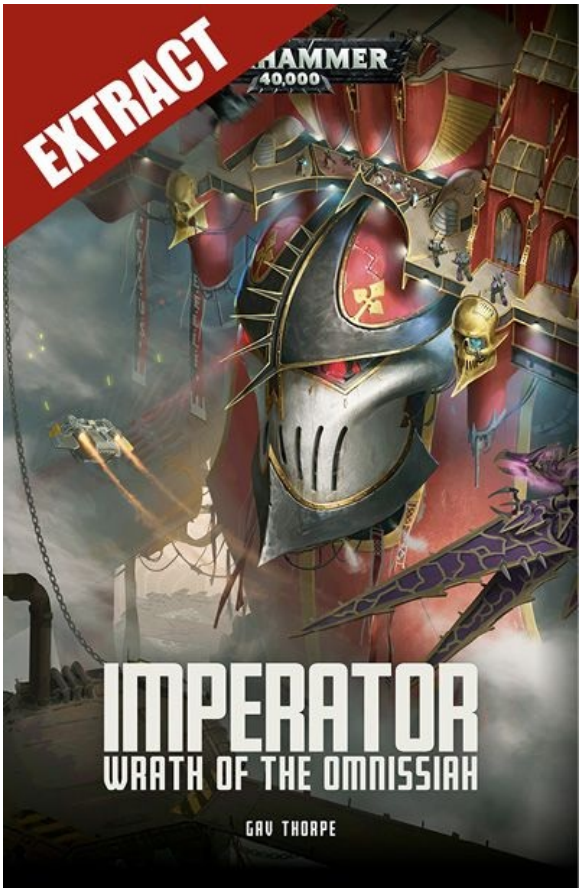
C L Werner's Black Library credits include the Age of Sigmar novels *The Tainted Heart* and *Overlords of the Iron Dragon*, the novella 'Scion of the Storm' in Hammers of Sigmar, the Warhammer novels *Deathblade*, *Mathias Thulmann: Witch Hunter*, *Runefang* and *Brunner the Bounty Hunter*, the Thanquol and Boneripper series and Time of Legends: The Black Plague series. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Marine Battles novel *The Siege of Castellax*. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the Warhammer worlds.

David Guymer wrote the Primarchs novel *Ferrus Manus: Gorgon of Medusa*, and for Warhammer 40,000 *The Eye of Medusa*, *The Voice of Mars* and the two The Beast Arises novels *Echoes of the Long War* and *The Last Son of Dorn*. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he wrote the audio dramas *The Beasts of Cartha*, *Fist of Mork*, *Fist of Gork*, *Great Red* and *Only the Faithful*. He is also the author of the Gotrek & Felix novels *Slayer*, *Kinslayer* and *City of the Damned*. He is a freelance writer and occasional scientist based in the East Riding, and was a finalist in the 2014 David Gemmell Awards for his novel *Headtaker*.

An extract from *Imperator: Wrath of the Omnissiah*.



‘Almighty Machine-God whose data binds the universe, look upon your humble servant and let the tangents of your intersection be beneficent.’

As ve spoke the ritual lines, Magos Dominus Militaris Xaiozanus Skitara Xilliarkis Exasas dilated the dorsal spiracles of vis intertracular lymphoid to release a cloud of bacteriophagic incense. The vapour billowed as a purple cloud, cleansing the air of biological contaminants that might infect the implant connection points in the few remaining parts of vis flesh.

Vis sense of smell had been replaced by far more complex molecular sensors when vis face had been removed, yet vis sensory system still latched on to the old memories and interpreted the smell as forge exhaust and hot metal. It was an aroma that ve had known since vis first moments in the incense-sterilised hatcheries of Metalica.

Lifting up one of four multi-jointed gripping limbs, Exasas let three drops of blessed lubricant spill from the slender bottle in vis grip. Flexible optical lenses capable of microscopic vision tracked the trio of liquid spheres as they fell past the gantry on which Exasas stood with the other senior tech-priests of *Casus Belli*. Ve followed their fall for several metres until they hit the gilded crest of the Titan’s head below.

From this vantage point the Imperator continued down into the brightly illuminated main deck of the Legio Metalica landing barge. Arrayed about the feet-citadels of the *Casus Belli* were lines of white-clad skitarii waiting for the command to board, arranged by squad and platoon, the precision of their ranks pleasing to Exasas.

Ve extended a link through the noosphere that connected to the skitarii alphas far below. At vis invisible command the squad leaders became surrogates for vis physical presence, an extension of vis communication system. Even as ve framed the thoughts, the words were announced by the mouths of the dozen alphas, ringing from across the Titan dock.

‘Tech-guard of the *Casus Belli*, the perambulations of destiny have again brought us to holy war. Our great Imperator is to be unleashed against the heretek darkness that has befallen Nicomedua. The servants of the Omnissiah have turned from their duties and we shall be the punishment unleashed against them in the name of the Machine-God. The Legio Metalica are blessed to be chosen as the executioners of this sacred task. With our companion-engines we shall see Nicomedua delivered back to the light of diligent service.

‘I stand before you as magos dominus, incarnation of the martial precision of the Cult Metalica. We are one, indivisible, favoured in the working of the Machine-God, for we have been given this sacred duty and in its completion shall move closer to the perfection of the Omnissiah’s design.’

Another noospheric pulse sent the embarkation order into the alphas, who disseminated the command to their squads. In unison, the skitarii offered their weapons in salute and then turned towards the gates of the Imperator’s citadel-like lower legs.

‘I still do not comprehend why you insist upon this ceremony. One might as well expend energy boosting the morale of a circuit breaker.’

Recognising the voice of Zerkei Metalis Gevren, the dominus turned vis centipede-like body to face the moderatus prime. Along with the other moderati, Gevren approached along the docking gantry, passing from the light of the vast chamber into the shadow of the *Casus Belli*’s akropoliz carapace superstructure.

Unlike the magos and the other tech-priests, the moderatus prime and his companions mostly retained their human anatomy. It was partly in honour of the humanoid form of the Titan, and partly because when they interfaced with the *Casus Belli*’s mind impulse units it remained more natural for them if they shared the same number of limbs and basic shape. Even the hint of a phantom limb reaction could prove devastating when spiritually connected to a forty-metre-tall war engine.

They wore bulky piloting uniforms rather than robes, though in the same white as the Metalican tech-priests, and each carried their interface helm under their arm.

Gevren himself was a solid figure, broad at the waist and shoulder, with a similarly slab-like face and flat nose. The glitter of implants behind his eyes and a few stud-points in the sides of his neck indicated the presence of the mind impulse unit connections inserted into his flesh.

‘It is not as if your warriors will contribute anything meaningful to this battle,’ added Moderatus Secundus Haili. Her smile was one of patient contempt as the

group stopped on the other side of the gantry line, leaving a path to the command module entry ramp. ‘We shall leave them only ruins to guard.’

‘There are some duties beyond even the wrath of the *Casus Belli*, Zerkei,’ argued Exasas. ‘Tasks that are beneath the dignity of an Imperator Titan, but nonetheless vital to victory. If the ruins need to be guarded, my skitarii will be equal to the challenge.’

‘They are simply martial lubrication, Xaiozanus,’ said Gevren. ‘Human grease for the gears of battle. It is a pity that you waste your intellect with such a dull subject.’

The last moderatus, Rasdia, said nothing, but his expression was one of condescension. The coterie of moderati fell silent at the approach of the princeps senioris. Like them, she did not wear the robes of office, but her single-piece protective suit was more elaborate, decorated with gilded piping and ruby-studded fasteners. Her face was lined with age – and the toll of melding with the psychometric circuits of the *Casus Belli*. Slender black lines beneath the skin of her neck and throat and in the backs of the hands that held the interface helm betrayed the presence of life-prolonging inserts. She walked with the aid of a cane fashioned from the bone of a Titan-sized tyranid beast they had destroyed on Durasa Four.

‘You are looking at my stick again, magos dominus,’ Princeps Senioris Iealona said. ‘Even with your five independent visual detectors, I can tell when you are looking at my cane.’

‘Your perception is infallible as ever, princeps senioris.’ Exasas constricted vis body segments to shorten verself, bringing vis theoretical eyeline to the same level as the princeps senioris’. ‘It seems an unnecessary peripheral assistance.’

‘And I must remind you again that I cannot risk my harmony with the *Casus Belli* with further changes to my physiology or chemical balances. So, I must limp.’

She stopped between the two groups, tech-priests of all shapes and sizes to the left, human moderati on her right. As with the Imperator itself, she was the fulcrum upon which the alliance turned, the mechanical and the organic fused within her when she interfaced with the Titan.

‘You wish to test Liberik’s Fourth Theorem during our engagement?’ she said, looking at Exasas.

‘I do,’ the magos replied. Ve caught Gevren shaking his head scornfully. ‘I have proposed a corollary that I wish to enact with my troops, if it is possible.’

‘I will see what can be done, but I think it unlikely there will be any infantry

engagement today.'

Despite the life-extension surgeries and cerebral enhancements ve had undergone, the dominus was still capable of disappointment. Ve remained still, containing any display of the emotion before the princeps senioris.

'I am your honoured servant, princeps senioris. We shall do as the Machine-God moves us.'

'That we shall,' said Iealona. She glanced at her moderati and waved her cane towards the zigzagging ramp that led into the open gate in the side of the Imperator's head. 'Time to get started. We are due to rendezvous with the rest of our battle group in forty-seven minutes and begin the assault in sixty. Six Warlords, three Reavers, three Warhounds and a pair of Warriors shall be accompanying us. And a whole skitarii support echelon. We shall not keep them waiting.'

They advanced as a group along the gantry. It made Exasas uncomfortable, seeing their individual stride patterns, making no effort to harmonise their movements. Their humanity was meant to be key to their success with the mind impulse unit, but to the magos it seemed like a terrible inefficiency.

Ve spurted an audible packet of binaric at the other tech-priests and together they followed the humans into the *Casus Belli*.

Each of them in turn briefly approached the small shrine alcove in the docking vestibule, laying a hand or tentacle-like mechadendrite on the twelve-toothed cog symbol rendered in gleaming platinum upon the devotional stand. Exasas placed the tip of a tendril against the symbol and felt a pulse of recognition from the Titan's dormant spirit.

'Benevolent *Casus Belli*, I commend my body to your protection and dedicate my mind to your service.'

An archway led to a corridor that descended into the command module proper, cleansing incense falling curtain-like across the opening. Exasas moved through, inhaling deeply of the strong fragrance, neuroreceptors firing swiftly under the influence of the stimulating agents contained within the mist.

'Almighty Machine-God whose data binds the universe, look upon your humble servant and let the tangents of your intersection be beneficent.'

The callipers of Ghelsa's augmetic phalanges clicked as her dark-skinned fingers closed around six meticulously inscribed steel polyhedrons. She lifted them from the polished offering plate and touched them to the breast of her off-white coverall.

Ghelsa kissed her steel-wrapped fist and held the shapes to her brow. Her metal-capped knuckles clinked against the silver twelve-toothed cog set into the flesh of her forehead before she threw her hand down.

Cast from her fingers, the twelve-sided dice clattered into the concave bowl, skittering around the raised lip. Shadows and light played over the spinning, skipping shapes as the silent watchers crowded closer, peering over Ghelsa's and Adrina's shoulders as they waited for the dice to come a halt.

The duluz of the downdecks wore a mixture of tabards, half-robes, kilts and coveralls depending on station and expertise. Many showed signs of crude augmentation – either gifted by a patron in the upper echelons of the priesthood or made in one of the basic workshops of the lower spaces. Like Ghelsa's, their clothes were uniformly off-white, the colours of their hegemaarkhus, the forge world of Metalica. Their formal allegiance colours were augmented with an array of tattoos, piercings, brand marks and other decorations to identify home world, sect membership, personal relationships and other sundry information. Most had not seen the metal-sheathed planet, but were natives of various vassal systems or the detritus of conquest and liberation swept up by the *Casus Belli* on one of its many campaigns. Ghelsa was one such tributai, sent to serve in the Legio Metalica as part of an ancient pact between the tech-priests and her world of Zakhinta.

The gaming pieces belonged to Ghelsa, who was proud to tell anyone who asked that she had made them herself from bearings that had once been part of the *Casus Belli*'s starboard hip main rotator. She had salvaged them two years earlier during a rededication to the Machine-God and spent half of that time diligently filing the flat surfaces with a handrasp and autopolish. She had used an acid stylus to etch the twelve sacred symbols, each one of the Perfections of Form as listed in the holy books of Metalica.

A red flare of light played over the settled dodecahedrons – the signal beam from Adrina's artificial left eye. Ghelsa was quicker to count the revealed symbols than her opponent's scan-mechanism.

'Four iambic crucibae,' she groaned, throwing up her hands in despair.

'Militus Martia!' her opponent cried in triumph, reverting to crude Gothic in his excitement.

There was a mix of cheers and moans from the onlookers as various side bets were won and lost.

Adrina held out a pudgy, oil-stained hand, his smile not unkind. Half a tattoo was just visible where his wrist entered the tattered white cuff of his overseer's

robe, depicting the iron skull of the Legio icon. He was epilekhtoz, Metalican-born, hence his higher station.

He beckoned with fingers tipped with broken nails, their golden enamel chipped and scratched.

‘Hand it over, vin Jaint. Everyone saw you swear the wager before the Omnissiah’s oracular.’

She delved a hand into one of her coverall’s many pockets and produced a thin sliver of circuit-covered plastek. Adrina leered as he made to snatch it from her fingers. Ghelsa pulled it out of reach.

‘One downshift only,’ she warned, glancing to the others as witnesses. ‘And if you’re caught, you didn’t get it from me.’

Adrina nodded, his fingers twitching in excitement.

‘Come on, come on, my downshift starts soon.’

Eyes narrowed, Ghelsa handed over the forged datachip. The overseer thrust it into an inner pocket of his robe, hiked his chain of office more comfortably around his neck and gave a smile. He stood, head bent to one side to avoid the condensation-dappled coolant pipe that ran through the small chamber.

‘Always a pleasure, vin Jaint. Luckily for all of us you’re a better spindle-wrangler than you are a player of Omnissekh.’ The crowd parted to let Adrina pass and they filed away, ducking beneath the various cables, pipes and other impediments between them and the small hatch that led back into maintenance duct S-11.

Notasa lingered for a moment after the others had left, his gaze suggestive, which was impressive considering his eyes had been mirror-sheathed, the orbs like pure quicksilver.

‘You can’t win at everything, Ghelsa,’ said the diminutive duct-runner. He leaned back against the bulkhead, arching his neck like a contented feline. ‘But no need to be sad for long.’

‘The lower port manifold array is coming loose,’ Ghelsa said with a grimace of lost opportunity. ‘I really should go and fix it.’

‘Always so dutiful,’ snapped Notasa, his anger fuelled by rejection. He flicked stained blond hair from his face, revealing skin pocked with tiny scars from errant welder sparks. ‘You know they’ll never make you epilekhtoz, no matter how hard you work. You’ll always be tributai like the rest of us.’

‘You’ve got it all wrong, berth-friend,’ Ghelsa said, stepping forward. She picked up the metre-long multi-tool she had left beside the door. Its considerable weight was nothing in her grasp, her own significant musculature assisted by a

tracery of exo-skeletal cable sealed into her flesh.

'How about on the downshift?' Ghelsa asked, feeling the urge to reconcile even though, rationally, she knew she had done nothing wrong.

'Just go and fix that manifold array,' muttered Notasa, stepping away from the hatch. 'Maybe we'll see each other later.'

Already anxious about the time she had spent playing Omnissekh, Ghelsa aimed a kiss towards Notasa's cheek, but he retreated, scowling. The spindle-wrangler ducked out into the corridor, stepping out from the relative cool and quiet of the coolant exchange access.

The sound had always been there, of course, and most of the time Ghelsa barely registered it. For three and a half years – Martian-adjusted standard – she had lived on or around the *Casus Belli*. Since achieving adulthood her existence had been dedicated to the services of the Machine-God, as dictated and directed by the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Yet there were times, like now, when she moved from one part of the downdecks to another and listened again, her attention drawn back to the nuances of her home. There was the obvious noise, the clatter and clank, the grinding of the massive gears, the low pulsing of the reactor links. Any neophyte could identify them within a matter of days. It was the deeper, quieter sounds that were the most welcoming. The hiss of coolant as a spin-off drained heat down from the main reactor exchanges. The ever-present gurgle of waste water falling through the cisterns beneath the starboard decks. The thrum of the pumps inside the capillary towers that took lubricant up to the immense hellstorm cannon.

She stepped into a pass-niche as a trio of sweat-slicked mattokhai labourers dashed past, the uncoupled pieces of their thrum-hammer over their shoulders, power cables swishing like monkey tails. Droplets of perspiration trickled down her cheek and the side of her nose, the heat and humidity of the core-ways as oppressive as the first-hour labour-sermons of the tech-priests. Ghelsa made her way along the corridor, the metal dappled by the pale yellow glow of lumens behind wire cages, in places splashed by the green or amber of a system registry lamp through a grimy inspection plate.

Through the mechanical din she detected organic sounds. The hacking cough of Merkadoa, who was still waiting on a promised new lung after an incident with the trash conflagrator's secondary exhaust. Chatter. Ceaseless, unintelligible sounds occasionally punctuated by a spurt of screeching, clicking binaric from a passing enginseer, and ever so occasionally the artificially modulated tones of a

higher-ranking tech-priest descended from the God-decks to conduct an inspection or investigate a delayed report.

Just as her constitution had adapted to the clammy conditions, and her ears were attuned to the sonic flexes of the internal society of the downdecks, so her eyes were well accustomed to the gloom. With her other senses guiding her unconsciously to her destination, Ghelsa was free to wander almost at will, knowing instinctively where to step around open hatches, dodge across ladder holes and duck beneath intervening cables and piping. It was mid-shift and most of the others were at their stations, the narrow walkways and transit-bridges populated only by occasional movement.

Through the doors and arches she passed she saw other tributai at their work, blotches of white through clouds of vapour. She saw smears of paleness in dark maintenance bays or clustered around the fully robed enginseers as some fundamental duty was enacted or a Principle of Conduct passed on for the appeasement of an itinerant fragment of *Casus Belli*'s all-encompassing machine-spirit.

Thoughts fixed on her job in the lowest decks, Ghelsa moved on.

The command module dominated the inside of the Imperator Titan's head. Two massive eye-like screens relayed realtime feeds from thousands of augurs across the war engine, creating a complex representation of the surroundings in both visual and noospheric frameworks. Exasas not only saw the doors of the barge's hangar as a human would, but knew exactly the composition of the metal and the weight and torsion values, as well as a welter of data on atmospheric pressure, temperature and other tertiary readings. It was the closest ve could come to feeling as the Titan felt without the benefit of the mind impulse units to organically share the sensation.

The princeps senioris' main command throne sat on a dais towards the back of the chamber, looking down at the three moderati positions. Each was a reclining chair beneath a tangle of cables that would connect to the incumbent's MIU systems. On the left, Moderatus Haili controlled the energies of the plasma annihilator; the twinned position on the right for the hellstorm cannon was the seat of Moderatus Rasdia. The two of them made for their couches, handing their interface helms to the tech-priests attending each station.

Moderatus Gevren was stationed between them, responsible for the activation and monitoring of the rest of the *Casus Belli*'s considerable arsenal – main battery, defence laser, anti-aircraft systems and point defence weaponry.

In most Titans the moderati were in sole control of their armaments, but the guns of the *Casus Belli* were too large for a single moderatus to control – or in the case of Gevren, too numerous. They were aided by gunnery teams with the weapons themselves, mostly slaved servitors that acted as extensions of the moderatus' will, each team overseen by a trio of tech-priests to ensure their continued operation.

Between the princeps senioris' throne and the moderati, and along the outer walls of the chamber to either side, the tech-priests addressed their panels and interfaces. The noosphere crackled with their intent, linking their minds even as dataports and mechadendrites connected them physically with the Omnissiah's greatest warrior.

Exasas' position was just behind the moderatus prime, from which ve could link into the noosphere signals related to the skitarii systems and personnel. Connecting to the cogitators, ve felt the company of warriors settling into their barracks chambers within the two leg-citadels, and several more platoons likewise preparing for departure in the battle stations of the akropoliz.

Ve could feel the skitarii as a homogeneous force, or relay part of vis strategic consciousness into one of a hundred and forty-two separate organisms via their noospheric cortical weaves. In a split second the magos dominus could switch to the individual view of a particular warrior – ve picked one on a whim and watched the faces of the three soldiers opposite through vis chosen receptacle's eyes. At the same time, cyclical simulators tracked other battle-pertinent datafeeds, for the moment semi-dormant and reliant on the last orbital data uploads ve had taken just before boarding.

Little had changed and the princeps senioris' assessment that there was only a small probability of infantry engagement remained accurate. Their mission was to break the heretek lines defending a citadel and break into the mountain passes, spearheading the full battle group. It was an overwhelming use of force, mounted not only to sweep aside the barriers to the advances of the Astra Militarum and other skitarii armies, but also to demonstrate the folly of further resistance to the will of the Omnissiah.

Exasas played back vis memory-store of the prime dominus' instruction, passing it through vis thoughts and into the minds of vis subordinates.

Exasas [broad trans/concept/loop]: <Az Khalak will burn by nightfall.>

A tremor ran through the noosphere, a throb of intent that channelled into every datafeed. Exasas turned one of vis sensory inputs to the princeps senioris and saw that she wore her helm, its MIU cables linking her to the essence of the

behemoth she would guide into battle.

Sharing her thoughts, made whole by the metaphorical sacrifice of her consciousness, *Casus Belli* started to rise from its slumber. The leading edge of a powerful wave of awareness touched upon the noosphere and digital systems flickered into wakefulness, caressing Exasas' sensory inputs. Ve heard a sigh from Iealona's parted lips, grunts and murmurs emanating from the moderati as they were joined to the machine-spirit.

Exasas could not comprehend how it might feel to be one with the god-machine. Ve could interpret the millions of data-signals and extrapolate sensory curves for eternity and still not *know* what it was like to share physicality with the might of the Imperator. Only Iealona and her predecessors had shared that singular, glorious experience.

A visual feed highlighted a glint of amber light on the head of the bone cane leaning against the side of the command throne. While monitoring the other developments, Exasas allowed a portion of vis thoughts to consider the implications. Princeps senioris, and to a lesser extent moderati, had shortened lifespans due to their connections with the immortal spirits of the Titans. For the Machine-God's warriors to live, their mortal components had to shed a little of their span. Even as her frail body was failing, the princeps senioris was able to clad her thoughts in the armour and power of the Imperator. She could not escape her mortality – in fact she hastened it – but in the time she had, she could share the body and thoughts of an immortal.

As an exchange, it was not without merit.

The noosphere flared with reports and counter-signals, confirming the readings of the plasma reactor, the online status of motivation and balance systems and the networking of the mind impulse units with the moderati and princeps senioris.

Exasas sent vis own confirmations, having spared a moment to check that all skitarii personnel were aboard and at their stations.

Awoken, the spirit of *Casus Belli* yearned to be free of the confines of the barge. With a final flurry of data exchanges, the tech-priests allowed the reactor to come to full power and the MIU to flow unhindered between the circuits of the Imperator and the synapses of its princeps senioris.

Casus Belli lived.

In semi-aware fashion, Ghelsa traversed the main lateral passages of the Imperator Titan's downdecks, coming upon the third service shaft from the rear.

The mechanism was nothing more than an old autoloader, repurposed by the engine crew for human cargo. Two shafts contained a continuously slow-moving chain, every few metre-long links interspersed with a metal platform just large enough for a foot.

Ghelsa waited at the drop-shaft until the next platform rattled into view and then quickly stepped out, bare foot on the plate, one arm wrapping through a chain link. The descent carried her past the wall of heat that emanated from the sealed reactor decks into the comparative gloom and cool of the motivator and traction assembly. So much quicker than negotiating the monkey-ladders.

She deftly jumped off at the main actuator array – a huge gearing system that powered the left hip joint of the forty-metre-tall war engine. Artificial fibre bundles each thicker than her waist vibrated with latent power while the hiss of immense pneumatics punctuated a steady grinding of metal on metal. The entire compartment shook, a constant tremor that pulsed through the nervous system. Just a few metres away, immense cog teeth that could crush her in moments knitted together, the piercing screech of their contact setting her teeth on edge.

She immediately saw the dysfunction, her experienced eye drawn to the ever-so-slight wobble of a tertiary drive shaft linking in to the main coupling. Here, close to the fulcrum of the hip's movement, there was little sense of vertical motion compared to the upper downdecks or the heights of the templedecks. The floor rose and lowered laboriously like a ship on a lazy ocean swell. The turn of the gears was a far better indication of the Titan's stride. At the moment it was at a comfortable cruising pace, perhaps four strides per minute, each step covering some fifteen metres of ground. They had been in motion for a while – since before the dice game had started – and she reckoned the landing barge was now several kilometres behind them.

There was a pause of three and a half seconds at the apogee of the stride during which cantilevers and secondary gyros compensated for the shift of weight from one system to the other. Ghelsa waited, bobbing lightly on the balls of her feet, adjusting the wrench head of the multi-tool to the required bite.

Just as the drop-gear shifted into place, some twenty metres below her the Titan's massive foot settled into the ground. Ghelsa sprang into action. She pulled herself up onto the box of the main drive train and latched the head of the multi-tool around the errant fitting. Her exo-muscles creaked as she pulled back, one foot braced against a cross-stanchion. One turn. Two… The second pull seized at the halfway mark, fully tightened.

Ghelsa loosened the tool, pulled it free and jumped back to the deck with half a

second to spare. She watched the drive system engage again, and listened for an erroneous clatter. The wheel spun smoothly, its low growl testament to a job completed.

'The Machine-God blesses,' she intoned, lifting the multi-tool to touch the godplate upon her brow. 'In praise of the Omnissiah our duty is done.'

She cast her eye around for any other small fixes that might be performed while she was there, but all seemed to be running well. The tributai took a deep breath. The air was thick with lubricant and incense, a mix she had come to know and adore in her time aboard the *Casus Belli*. Those of different homes might long for the scent of fresh bread or the animals in their pens, but for Ghelsa it was the machine smells that made her feel safe.

By the rattle of the lifter chain she knew a platform was coming around. She stepped back into the alcove without looking, her foot coming upon the plate just as it passed the level of the floor.

Taken up once more, she wondered what other tasks awaited her and started to hum a slow inkanta in her contentment.

Two decks up, just below the reactor exchanges, movement and alien sound caught her attention. Through the grille of the deck above she saw a huddle of people wearing the red-lined cloaks of the hyperezia, the tech-priests' enforcers in the downdecks. Their grunts and shouts were audible above the noise, and Ghelsa could clearly see fists and short staves rising and falling – they were beating someone.

She was not one to interfere in the disciplining of another, but that it took place here in the dark rather than before the peers of the offender struck her as odd. Ghelsa alighted on the deck a few metres away from the gaggle, noting the blood on their knuckles and mauls.

'What's happening here?' she called out.

One of the hyperezia cast a glance over his shoulder, bearded face half shrouded in shadow.

'Get gone, oil-rat,' snarled the henchman.

In moving, he revealed something of the victim. Ghelsa glimpsed a blood-spattered hand and a white sleeve, but saw no mark upon the wrist.

'Ho there, that's a tributai!' she shouted, taking another step.

'He's a heretek, is what he is,' one of the others spat back, her face contorted in anger. 'By word of the moderatus prime.'

Invoking the rank of their superior only worsened their case. It all seemed out of place.

‘You’re killing him.’

‘Want some as well?’ growled the first of the watchmen, lifting his baton towards her.

Ghelsa covered the distance in three strides, the last of which was accompanied by the upswing of the multi-tool. Powered by momentum, thick muscle and reinforced armature, the heavy metal implement struck the hyperezia’s chin at full speed.

Bone splintered and the guard toppled back, blood spraying from his ruined mouth.

Ghelsa was no warrior, but her augmented body gave her strength enough to compensate for a lack of skill. Her next blow shattered the baton raised to ward it away and smashed into the chest of the man holding it, hurling him backwards with a broken breastbone. A fist glanced off her cheek – nothing worse than she had suffered in one of her spats with Notasa or a fight in the narc-hide. Her return blow to the woman’s gut lifted the hyperezia off her feet, the air exploding from her lungs in a hoarse whistle. The guard crumpled, gasping, while the remaining three backed off, their rods held warily before them.

The spindle-wrangler glanced down at their victim. He was caked in blood and garbed in the robe of a tributai clerical worker – one of the log keepers, perhaps. He rolled to his back with a groan, revealing a face swollen about the eyes and mouth, his cool beige complexion looking jaundiced in the poor light. She didn’t recognise him.

Ghelsa hefted the stranger up onto her shoulder, thrusting the multi-tool threateningly at the others.

‘Leave it be. Tell Gevren the deed is done and no more need be said.’

The hyperezia did not look convinced, but they made no further effort to molest her as she backtracked towards the clanking chain of the ascender shaft.

With a quiet groan, the man roused as she lowered him, holding his body close to hers while she waited for the next platform to come around. He peered at her through the slit of a bloodshot grey eye, child-like against her mass.

‘Danger,’ he croaked.

‘No, you’re safe now,’ she assured him, moving her arm protectively around his shoulder as she darted a glare at the guards, who were tending to their own injured. ‘Well, relatively safe.’

‘All of us,’ whispered the man. ‘Hereteks.’

The platform rattled past and Ghelsa missed it, distracted by this statement.

‘The princeps is a traitor,’ the man continued wheezily, every word a clear

effort through the pain. Whoever he was, Ghelsa admired the sheer will it must have taken for him to remain conscious. ‘Will doom… us all.’

‘Says who?’ Ghelsa was startled, but she had enough presence of mind to drag her companion into the lift when the next platform appeared.

The man said something else, but it was lost in the noise of the conveyance.

‘What was that?’ Ghelsa said, raising her voice. He pushed closer and she bent an ear towards his bloodied lips.

‘I… I am an inquisitor.’

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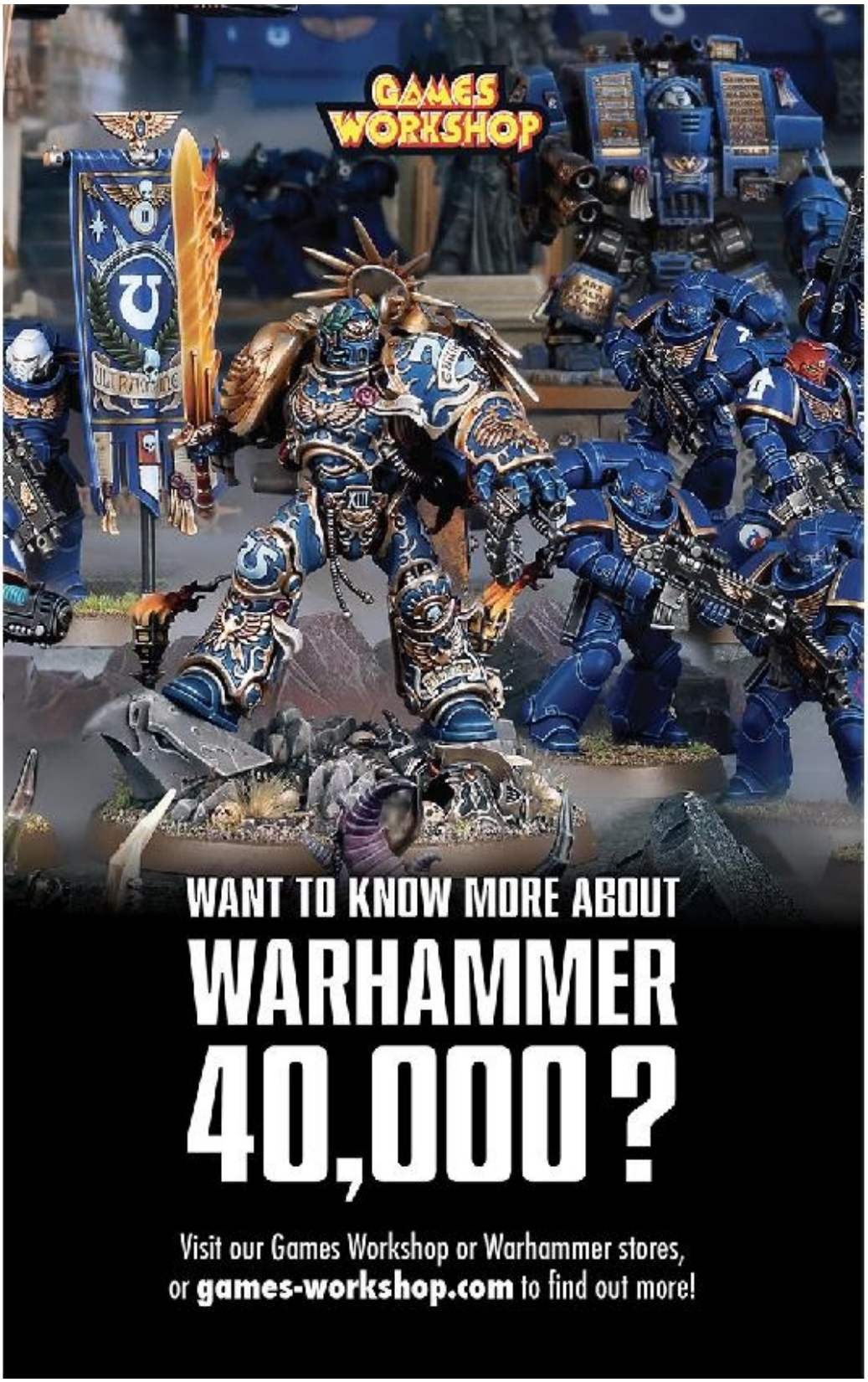
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