



WARHAMMER
40,000

THE OMNISSIAH'S CHOSEN

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THE OMNISSIAH'S CHOSEN



PETER FEHERVARI, DAVID GUYMER,
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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.

VANGUARD

Peter Fehervari

*The pursuit of knowledge is absolutism.
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 Ommissiah 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 binaric 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's 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 Ommissiah 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 galvanizes 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 deathworld 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 explorer 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 it 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 mechafilements 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 Ommissiah, 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 Ommissiah 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 datastreams 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 omnisplex 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 skitarii. 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-like 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 Ommissiah'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: *tau*.

The long war between the Imperium and the Tau 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 anymore. 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 tau, 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: tau 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 tau continued. ‘I am authorised to facilitate a conciliation with the respected warriors of the honoured Ommissiah.’

<Xenos morale broken,> Ptoltec-IR03 chattered 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 Ommissiah 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 tau 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 tau, 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. Tau 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 post-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 tau 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 tau 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 omniscope. 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 tau 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 skitarii 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 tau snipers were targeting the Alpha Primus.

<We are the teeth of the Omnisiah,> 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: tau battlesuit. Threat level: high,> he transmitted as he dived.
<Coordinates follow...>

He rolled into a kneeling crouch behind the tau 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 onto him.

My service will terminate here, he thought, but this xenos filth will not long outlast me.

‘The Ommissiah 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 tau’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 chattered 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 tau 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 aerie 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’s insights into the tau. 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 tau 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 tau, but he had done it in the Ommissiah’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 tau 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 tau 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 tau, 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 tau 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 tau 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 half way 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 tau 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 Tau Empire is an unclean alloy of xenos filth and techno-heresy, Exoss-UR01 thought as he tried to lock on. His chosen target was fluttering 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 flier'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 carbonized 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 onto 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 tau 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 Tau 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 tau 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 power blades, 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 Ommissiah,> 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 tau 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 tau 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-smear 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 omnisplex 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 power cells and *twisted*. Arcs of electricity raced across its shell as it span 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 Ommissiah will not be mocked.>

Rho-IR02 turned to the tau 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 tau 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 tau had staked a serious claim upon the planet, but those days were long past.

A binaric 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 code 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 Ommissiah'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 tau 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. He 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's 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 tau 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 skitarii 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, tantalizing 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 tau enclave. They rose above the squalor of the human district like heretical monoliths, glimmering with a pearlescent sheen that was utterly alien.

<Contact: 1 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 tau 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 Ommissiah 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 Omniscientia,> 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 tau 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 skitarii 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's 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 tau 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 Ommissiah 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's 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's 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 than men. Their arms were fused into massive cannons that tracked the newcomers restlessly as they approached. To the Magos's 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 tau... 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's 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.

INFINITE CIRCUIT

David Guymer

Rain scalded the enamelled exterior of Borhus's 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 whir, 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 euthanized.

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 splattering 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 decayed 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 rockcrete 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 skitarii's 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 skitarii's 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's 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 rainclouds 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 legionary 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 mehadendrites?'

Borhus's 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's breastplate. That and his bare chest was 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 Ommissiah 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 enhanced oculobe 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 exploded from concealed pickups on Stygies VII did not do the tech-priest justice.

Sul’s enhanced 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, chattered, 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-browened 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's 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 blarped 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 archaeotech 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 Omnisiah 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 autonomies

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's 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's 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 back over his shoulder.

‘Do you believe in the divinity of the Ommissiah?’ 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’s 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 barechested 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's 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 tracked 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 facemask 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's 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, like a high jumper, 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's 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 upward, but Luhgarak 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 reacquaint 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 aluminium platform. It was crowded with magnetometers, field modulators, dosimeters, oscilloscopes and spectrophotometers. The dry whirl of cogitator cooling fans was like a hymnal. The altar, the focus of the Adeptus Mechanicus's 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's 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's 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's 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's 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's 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 round 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’s 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.

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 Ommissiah 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 bio-forms – 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 descent, 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 others 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 itself. 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 Ommissiah. 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 Ommissiah 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 recognized 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 Ommissiah’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-mantle 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 recognized as a Mechanicum nave – a laboratory, where Rebos would have studied, synthesized 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 of the tube. 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, explorer 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 explorer 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 Ommissiah'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 Ommissiah 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 bio-forms in evidence. Orders?>

Assault bio-forms – 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 skitarii needed to be told that. Then, after a moment of hesitation, she added, <Ommissiah 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 Mojaró, on the eve of the Xenarite Schism. We are not flesh, adept. We are but cogs in the God Machine, turning as the Ommissiah 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, sterilizing 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's holographic eye-pieces 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 aeroforms, the clouds choked and stricken through with purple, sickly veins of crackling bio-luminescence. 'Probability of priority evacuation?'

'Nil,' Vule said.

6-Friest 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. 'Ommissiah 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 inward, 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.

'Ommissiah 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 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-smearred 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's 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 Dynamicon. 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 onto 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 freightway, 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's 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 iron 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 Dynamicon 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 Dynamicon, the army of daemon engines spilling from 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 arcstreams 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 daemoniac 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 daemoniac 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 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 stopped 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 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 daemoniac 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 daemoniac war engine pushed through the wreckage of the forge, shaking off cabling, struts and sections of roof. It was unlike the daemoniac 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 daemoniac 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 Dynamicon.

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 re-charging 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 daemoniac 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 daemoniac 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 daemoniac 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.

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 engineer 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 tyrannids. 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 tyrannid 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 outward like a steel flower. The bottom petals 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 mehadendrites 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 realized 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 Ommissiah 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 Nine 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 are the weapons you've brought to defend the outpost?' Marhault asked. Procrustes' optic fixed upon him, seemingly perplexed by the question. 'The tyrannid 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 Departamento 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 minimizing 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, galvanized 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 midair, 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 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 Ommissiah 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, and 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 meters 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 tyrannids. 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 tyrannids, it was that the larger the creature the more intelligent it 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 recognized 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 fliers 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 close 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 tyrannid 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 theorized that the principle 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 Ommissiah. 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 recognize 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 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-thruster.

The low walls of the pens afforded the robots some slight protection against the tyrannids – 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 tyrannids 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 salvos 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 tyrannids, 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 tyrannid 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 tyrannids. 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 tyrannids, 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 tyrannids 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 tyranid's 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 susurrations replacing more human vocalization. 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 outward, 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 the creatures 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 had 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 over-run,’ 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 fluttering 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 paralyzed 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 disorganized, 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, it had been 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 recognized 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 cauterize 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 recognize 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 Ommissiah.’

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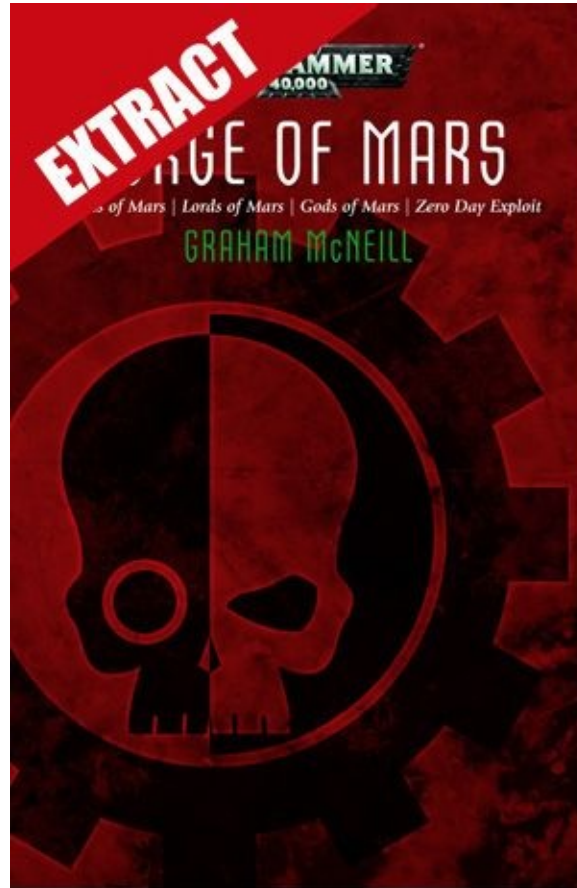
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[An extract from *Forge of Mars*.](#)



Low-orbit traffic above Joura was lousy with ships jostling for space. Queues of lifter-boats, heavy-duty bulk tenders and system monitors held station in the wash of augur-fogging electromagnetics and engine flare from the heavier vessels as system pilots manoeuvred them into position for refuelling, re-arming and supply. Musters like this happened only rarely, and for two of them to come at once wasn't just rare, it was a complete pain in the backside.

The *Renard* was a ship of respectable tonnage, but compared to the working vessels hauling their monstrously fat bodies between Joura and the fleets competing for docking space like squealing cudbear litters fighting for prime position at the teat, she was little more than an insignificant speck.

Roboute Surcouf didn't like thinking of his ship like that. No captain worthy of the rank did.

The command bridge of the *Renard* was a warmly-lit chamber of chamfered wood, bronze and glass, embellished with bygone design flourishes more commonly found on the ancient ships sailing the oceans of Macragge. Every surface was polished to a mirror shine, and though Magos Pavelka called such labours a waste of her servitors' resources, not even an adept of the Martian Priesthood would gainsay a rogue trader with a Letter of Marque stamped with Segmentum Pacificus accreditation.

Pavelka claimed it was the fragment of the Omnissiah that lived in the heart of a starship that every captain had to appease, but Roboute disagreed with Ilanna's slavish devotion to her Martian dogma when it came to ships. Roboute knew you had to love a ship, love her more than anything else in the world. Flying sub-atmospheric cutters on Iax as a youth had taught him that every ship had a *soul* that needed to be loved. And the ships who knew they weren't loved would be cantankerous mares; feisty at best, dangerous at worst.

Ilanna Pavelka was about the only member of his crew who hadn't objected to this venture. In fact she'd gotten almost giddy at the prospect of joining Archmagos Kotov's Explorator Fleet and working with fellow Mechanicus adepts once more. Perhaps giddy wasn't the right word, but she'd voiced calm

approval, which was about as close to excitement as a priest of Mars ever got in Roboute's experience.

'Update: berthing docket inloading from the *Speranza*,' Pavelka informed him, speaking from her sunken, steel-panelled command station in the forward arc of the bridge. Holographic streams of binaric data cascaded before her, manipulated by the waving mechadendrites that sprang from her shoulders like a host of snakes. 'One hundred minutes until our allotted berth is available.'

'How much margin for error in that?' asked Emil Nader, the *Renard*'s first officer, seated in a contoured inertial-harness to Roboute's left as he kept them within their assigned approach corridor with deft touches of manoeuvring jets. Pavelka could bring them in with an electromagnetic tether, but Roboute liked to give Emil a bit of freedom in the upper atmosphere. The *Renard* was going to be slaved to the *Speranza*'s course for the foreseeable future, and his cocksure first officer would appreciate this free flight time. Like most natives of Espandor, he had a wild, feral streak that made him averse to unthinking obedience to machinery.

'Clarification: none,' said Pavelka. 'The cogitators of the *Speranza* are first generation Martian logic-engines, they do not allow for error.'

'Yeah, but the pilots ahead of us aren't,' pointed out Emil. 'Factor in their presence.'

'All vessels ahead of us are tethered; as we will need to be before we enter the *Speranza*'s gravity envelope. There will be no error margin.'

'Care to wager on that?' asked Emil with a sly grin.

A soft exhalation of chemical breath escaped Pavelka's red cowl, and Roboute hid a smile at her exasperation. Emil Nader never missed a chance to pick at Mechanicus infallibility, and would never resort to automation if there was an option for human control.

'I do not wager, Mister Nader,' said Pavelka. 'You own nothing I desire, and none of my possessions would be of any use to you without extensive redesign of your ventral anatomy.'

'Leave it alone, Emil,' said Roboute, as he saw Nader about to answer Pavelka's statement with something inflammatory. 'Just concentrate on getting us up there in one piece. If we stray so much as a kilometre from our assigned path, it'll put a snarl in the orbital traffic worse than that time over Cadia when that officer on the *Gathalamor* shot up his bridge, remember?'

Emil shook his head. 'I try not to. But what did they expect, giving a ship a name like that? You might as well call it the *Horus* and be done with it.'

‘Don’t say that name!’ hissed Adara Siavash, lounging in Gideon Teivel’s vacant astropath station with a las-lock pistol spinning in one hand and a butterfly blade in the other. ‘It’s bad luck.’

Roboute wasn’t exactly sure what rank or position Adara Siavash held on the *Renard*. He’d come aboard on a cargo run between Joura and Lodan, and never left. He was lethal with a blade and could fire a rifle with a skill that would have earned him a marksman’s lanyard in the Iax Defence Auxilia. He’d saved Roboute’s life on that run, putting down a passenger who’d turned out to be an unsanctioned psyker and who’d almost killed everyone aboard when they’d translated. Yet for all that, Roboute couldn’t help but think of him as a young boy, such was his childlike innocence and constant wonder at the galaxy’s strangeness.

Sometimes Roboute almost envied him.

‘The lad’s right,’ he said, as he sensed a kink in the ship’s systems. ‘Don’t say that name.’

His first mate shrugged, but Roboute saw that Emil knew he’d crossed a line.

The crew carried on with their assigned tasks and Roboute brought the current shipboard operations up onto the inner surfaces of his retina. A mass of gold-colored cables trailed from the base of his neck to the command throne upon which he sat, feeding him real-time data from the various active bridge stations. Trajectories, approach vectors, fuel consumption and closure speeds scrolled past, together with noospheric identity tags for the hundreds of vessels in orbit.

Everything was looking good, though a number of the engineering systems were running closer to capacity than he’d like. Roboute opened a vox-link to the engineering spaces, almost two kilometres behind him.

‘Kayrn, are you seeing what I am on the coolant feed levels to the engines?’ he asked.

‘Of course I am,’ came the voice of Kayrn Sylkwood, the *Renard*’s engineeer. ‘I perform six hundred and four system checks every minute. I know more about these engines than you ever will.’

Emil leaned over and whispered, ‘You had to ask. You *always* have to ask.’

Kayrn Sylkwood was ex-Guard, a veteran engineeer of the Cadian campaigns. She’d been mustered out of the regiment after taking one too many shots to the head on Nemesis Tessera during the last spasm of invasion from the Dreaded Eye. Below Guard fitness requirements and having lost three tanks under her care, the Mechanicus didn’t want her either, but Roboute had recognised her rare skill in coaxing the best from engines that needed a sympathetic touch or a kick

in the arse.

‘Just keep an eye on it,’ he said, shutting off the link before Sylkwood could berate him again.

Despite any slight running concerns about the engines, the *Renard* was a ship like no other Roboute had known. She was fast, nimble (as far as a three-kilometre vessel could be) and carried enough cargo to make running her profitable on local-system runs. Even the odd sector run wasn’t beyond her capabilities, but Roboute never liked stretching her that far. She hadn’t let him down in the fifteen years he’d captained her, and that kind of respect had to be earned.

‘Promethium tender coming in below and behind us,’ noted Emil. ‘She’s burning hotter than I’d like, and it’s closing on an elliptical course.’

‘Probably some planetside dock overseer feeling the whips of his masters to cut the lag on his orbital deliveries,’ replied Roboute. ‘How close is she?’

‘Two thousand kilometres, but her apogee will put her within fifteen hundred if we don’t course correct.’

‘No,’ said Roboute. ‘Two thousand, fifteen hundred, what does it matter? If she goes up, all we’ll see is the flash before we’re incinerated. Conserve fuel and stay on course.’

Roboute wasn’t worried about the danger of collision – even the closest ships had gulfs of hundreds of kilometres between them – what worried the ship masters of each fleet was the threat of delay to their departure schedules. And Roboute didn’t intend to compound that delay by being late for his first face-to-face meeting with Lexell Kotov.

The archmagos had made it clear that such a breach of protocol would not be tolerated.

Of all the bright lights thronging the sky, the brightest and biggest now hove into view as Emil made a final manoeuvring burn.

Even Roboute had to admit to being mightily impressed with this ship. He’d flown the length and breadth of more than one sector, but he had yet to see anything to match this for sheer scale and grandeur.

‘Adara,’ said Roboute. ‘Go below and inform Magos Tychon that we’ll be docking with the *Speranza* soon.’

The dockers’ bar didn’t have a name; no one had ever thought to give it one. But everyone around the busy port knew it, a bunch of converted cargo containers welded together and fitted with rudimentary power and plumbing. Who really

ran it was unclear, but a steady stream of disgruntled and exhausted dock workers could always be found filling its echoing, metallic spaces.

‘*This* is where you do your off-duty drinking?’ said Ismael, his slurred tone telling Abrehem and Coyne exactly what he thought of this dive. ‘No wonder we’re usually behind schedule.’

Abrehem was already regretting taking the overseer up on his offer of drinks for the crane crew, but it was too late to back out now. They’d made their quota, for the first time in weeks, and Ismael had offered to take them out drinking in a rare moment of largesse.

‘Yeah,’ said Abrehem. ‘It’s not much, but we like it.’

‘Damn, it stinks,’ said Ismael, his face screwed up in disgust.

The loader-overseer was already drunk. The shine served at the first few bars they’d visited had almost knocked him off his feet. Ismael didn’t drink much, and it was showing in his mean temper and cruel jokes at the expense of men who didn’t dare answer back.

A nighttime crowd already thronged the bar’s bench seats, and the pungent reek of engine oil, grease, lifter-fuel, sweat and hopelessness caught in the back of his throat. Abrehem knew the aroma well, because he stank of it too.

Faces turned to stare at them as Ismael pushed his way through the crowd of dock workers to the bar, a series of planks set up on a pair of trestles, upon which sat two vats that had once been the promethium drums of a Hellhound. Some men claimed to be able to tell what kind of tanks the varieties of shine had been brewed in, that each one gave a subtly different flavour, but how anyone could taste anything after a few mouthfuls was beyond Abrehem.

Coyne took Abrehem’s arm as he set off after Ismael.

‘Thor’s balls, you shouldn’t have taken him up on that drink,’ whispered his fellow operator.

Abrehem knew that fine well, but tried to put his best face on. ‘Come on, he’s not a bad boss.’

‘No,’ agreed Coyne. ‘I’ve had worse, that’s for sure, but there’s some lines you just shouldn’t cross.’

‘And getting drunk on shine with a man that can get you thrown off shift is one of them, I know.’

‘We’ll be lucky if he gets away without a beating tonight,’ said Coyne. ‘And when he wakes up with a cracked skull, we’ll be the ones he blames. I can’t lose this assignment, Abrehem, I’ve a wife and three young’uns to support.’

‘I know that,’ said Abrehem, annoyed that Coyne always thought of his own

woes before anyone else's. Abrehem had a wife too, though she was a stranger to him now. Both their young ones had died of lung-rust before their fifth year, and the loss had broken them beyond repair. Toxic exhalations from the sprawling Mechanicus refineries fogged the hab-zones surrounding the Navy docks, and the young were particularly susceptible to the corrosive atmospherics.

'Come on,' said Coyne. 'Let's try and get this over while we still have jobs.'

'We'll have one drink and then we'll go,' promised Abrehem, threading his way through the sullen drinkers towards the bar. He could already hear Ismael's nasal voice over the simmering hubbub of gloomy conversation. Abrehem knew most of the faces, fellow grafters on the back-breaking labour shifts handling the supply needs of a busy tithe-world.

Times were busy enough normally, but with the Mechanicus fleet at high anchor needing to be furnished with supplies to last an indefinite time, the docks and their workers were being stretched to breaking point. Yes, there had been some accidents and deaths that could no doubt be traced back to excessive consumption of shine distilled in scavenged fuel drums, but the lives of a few drunk dockers mattered little in the grand scheme of things.

Hundreds of fleet tenders were making daily trips back and forth from the loading platforms, fat and groaning with weapons, ammo, food, fuel, spare uniforms, engine parts, machine parts, surgical supplies, millions of gallons of refined fluids for lubrication, drinking, anointing and who knew what else. It was hard, dangerous work, but it was work, and no man of Joura could afford to pass up a steady, reliable credit-stream.

Abrehem reached the bar to find Ismael loudly arguing with the shaven-headed barkeep at the drum. With a gene-bulked and partially augmented ogryn nearby, it was a poor fight to pick. Abrehem had seen the creature take off a man's head with the merest twist of its wrist, and knew it wasn't above a bit of casual violence when its tiny brain was fogged with shine. The filters in his eyes read the scrubbed ident-codes on the augmetics applied to the ogryn's arms and cranium.

Backstreet, fifth-gen knock-offs. Crude and cheap, but effective.

'Have you tried this?' demanded Ismael. 'This bloody idiot is trying to poison me!'

'It's a special blend,' said Abrehem, taking a glass from the barkeep and sliding an extra couple of credit wafers across the bar. 'Unique, in fact. Takes a bit of getting used to, that's all.'

The barkeep gave him a fixed stare and nodded to the exit. Abrehem

understood and took the three drinks from the bar as Coyne steered Ismael away from the glowering ogryn. With his overseer out of earshot, Abrehem leaned over the bar and said, 'We'll down these and be on our way. We're not here for trouble.'

The barkeep grunted, and Abrehem followed Coyne and Ismael to a bench seat located in the corner of the containers away from most of the bar's patrons. This part of the bar was mostly empty, located as it was next to the latrines. The stink of stale urine and excrement was pungent, and only marginally more offensive than the acrid fumes of their drinks.

'Emperor's guts,' swore Ismael. 'It stinks here.'

'Yeah, but at least we have a seat,' said Coyne. 'And after a day's shift at the docks, that's all that matters, right?'

'Sure,' agreed Abrehem. 'You get to our age and a seat's important.'

'I spend my days sitting down in a control cab,' pointed out Ismael.

'*You* do, we don't,' said Coyne, unable to keep the resentment from his voice. Fortunately Ismael was too drunk to notice, and Abrehem shot Coyne a warning glance.

'Come on, let's sink these and we'll get out of here,' said Abrehem, but Ismael wasn't listening. Abrehem followed his gaze and sighed as he saw a familiar face hunched low over a three-quarters-drunk bottle of shine.

'Is that him?' said Ismael.

'Yeah, it's him,' agreed Abrehem, putting a hand on Ismael's arm. 'Leave him alone, it's not worth it. Trust me.'

'No,' said Ismael, throwing off Abrehem's hand with an ugly sneer. 'I want to see what a real *hero* looks like.'

'He's not a hero, he's a drunk, a liar and a waste of a pair of coveralls.'

Ismael wasn't listening, and Abrehem gave Coyne a nod as their overseer made his way over to the man's table. Abrehem saw the ogryn heft a length of rebar as long as Abrehem's leg and start moving through the crowded bar, parting knots of men before it like a planetoid with its own gravitational field. A few of the more sober patrons, sensing trouble, headed for the exit, and Abrehem wished he could follow them.

He cursed and sat next to Ismael as he planted himself on a stool at the drunk's table.

'You're him,' said Ismael, but the man ignored him.

Abrehem studied the man's face. Lined with exhaustion and old before its time, a network of ruptured capillaries around his ruddy cheeks and nose spoke of a

lifetime lived in a bottle, but there was a hardness there too, reminding Abrehem that this man had once been a soldier in the Guard.

A *bad* soldier if the stories were to be believed, but a soldier nonetheless.

‘I said, “you’re him”, aren’t you?’ said Ismael.

‘Go away,’ said the man, and Abrehem heard the sadness in his voice. ‘Please.’

‘I know you’re him,’ said Ismael, leaning forwards over the table. ‘I saw you on shift last week, and heard all about you.’

‘Then you don’t need me to tell you again,’ said the man, and Abrehem realised he wasn’t drunk.

The bottle in front of him was an old one, and the drink in his hand was untouched.

‘I want to hear you tell it,’ said Ismael, his tone viperous.

‘Why bother? I’ve told it over and over, and no one believes me,’ said the man.

‘Come on, hero, tell me how you killed the Iron Warrior. Did you breathe on him and he keeled over dead?’

‘Please,’ said the man, an edge of steel in his voice. ‘I asked you nicely to leave me alone.’

‘No, not till you tell me how you took on an entire army of Traitor Space Marines,’ spat Ismael, reaching for the man’s bottle.

The man slapped Ismael’s hand away and before anyone could stop him, he had a knife at the overseer’s throat. It glinted dully in the low light. Abrehem scanned the serial number on the blade: 250371, Guard-issue, carbon steel and a killing edge that could cut deeper than a fusion-weld in the right hands.

The ogryn reached their table, the rebar slamming down and sending their drinks flying. Broken glass and splintered wood flew. Abrehem fell away from the table onto the ribbed floor. The stink was worse down here, and he rolled as the ogryn stepped in close to where Ismael was pinned against the wall by the knife-wielding man.

‘Put down knife. Put down man,’ said the ogryn in halting, child-like speech.

The man didn’t acknowledge its words, pressing the knife into Ismael’s throat with enough force to draw a thin line of blood.

‘I’d kill you if I thought it would stop anyone else asking the same damned questions over and over,’ said the man. ‘Or maybe I’ll just kill you because I feel like crap today.’

‘Put knife down. Put man down,’ repeated the ogryn.

Before the man could comply, metal shutter doors throughout the bar crashed open and a chorus of vox-amplified voices blared inside. Sodium-tinged light

flooded through the doors and from his vantage point on the floor, Abrehem saw strobing spotlights mounted on the backs of giant vehicles. Black-armoured figures poured into the bar, clubbing men to the ground with vicious blows from shock mauls and the butts of automatic shotguns. Metal-skinned hounds on chain-leashes barked with augmented anger, their polished steel fangs bared. Hungry red eyes fixed on the bar's patrons.

'Collarmen!' shouted Coyne, scrambling away from the overturned table. Abrehem struggled to his feet, suddenly sober at the sight of the impressment teams as they dragged men out to the rumbling confinement vehicles. The man with the knife stepped away from Ismael, and the overseer bolted for the nearest way out, sobbing in fear and confusion.

The bar was in uproar. Concussion sirens brayed and blinding light strobed through the bar, all designed to stun and disorientate. Abrehem's ocular cutoffs screened him from the worst of the light, but the horns were still deafening. Men encased in black leather and gleaming carapace armour with bronze, faceless helmets swept through the bar like soldiers clearing a room. Abrehem saw Ismael shot in the back by a soft round and slammed into a metal wall with the force of the impact. He slumped to the ground, unconscious, and two of the growling cyber-hounds dragged the overseer's limp body outside.

A hand grabbed his shoulder. 'We've got to get out of here!' cried Coyne.

Abrehem looked for a way out. The collarmen and their mastiffs had all the exits covered, or at least all the obvious ones. There had to be a few they didn't know about.

'This way,' said the man with the knife. 'If you don't want to get taken, follow me.'

The man ran, but the ogryn grabbed him by the scruff of the neck as it dumbly watched the methodical subduing tactics of collarmen. Soft rounds slammed the ogryn, but it hardly seemed to feel them, and Abrehem rolled behind the grunting creature as it tried to make sense of what was happening and why these men were shooting it.

The knifeman struggled in the ogryn's grip, but he was as helpless as a child against its strength.

'Let go of me, damn you!' yelled the man.

'Forget him,' said Coyne. 'There's a back way out through the latrines.'

Abrehem nodded and moved past the stupefied ogryn as a flurry of soft rounds battered the container wall next to his head. From the deformation of the sheet steel, Abrehem didn't reckon those 'soft' rounds were particularly soft.

Coyne pushed open the flimsy door to the latrines and was immediately flung back as a shock maul slammed into the side of his head. He dropped, poleaxed, to the ground. Abrehem skidded to a halt and tried to reverse his course. A crackling baton swung at his head, but he ducked and ran back the way he'd come. He heard the metallic cough of a shotgun blast and pain exploded in his lower back as his legs went numb under him. Abrehem crashed to the floor again, feeling twitching spasms of pain shooting up and down his spine.

Mesh-gauntleted hands hauled him upright and he was dragged through the shattered remains of the bar, with its former clientele pleading, threatening and bargaining with the collarmen. Abrehem tried to struggle, but was held fast. Once the collarmen had you, that was it, you were bound to life aboard a starship, but that didn't stop him from trying to beg for his freedom.

'Please,' he said. 'You can't... I have... permits. I work! I have a wife!'

He blinked away static interference as they dragged him outside, the discordant wail of the sirens making him feel sick and the constant barking of the cyberhounds setting his teeth on edge. The collarmen dumped him at the open doors of the growling volunteer-wagon, and fresh hands hauled him upright. His legs were still weak, but he was able to stand as a clicking bio-optic was shone in his eyes and overloaded his filters.

'Exosomatic augmetics,' said a voice, surprise evident even muffled by a vox-grille.

'Tertiary grade,' said another. 'We can pull a full bio-ident and service history off them.'

'Got it. Loader-technician Abrehem Locke, assigned to Lifter Rig *Savickas*.'

'A lifter-tech with tertiary grade augmetics? Got to be black market.'

'Or stolen.'

'They're not stolen,' gasped Abrehem as his filters recalibrated. Three men in glossy black armour stood before him. Two held him upright. Another consulted a data-slate. 'They were my father's.'

'He was bonded?' demanded a fourth voice, heavily augmented by vox-amplification.

Abrehem turned to see a magos of the Adeptus Mechanicus, swathed in hooded crimson vestments, only the hot coals of a tripartite optic visible in the shadows. A black and gold stole with cog-toothed edges and a host of blurred numbers hung from his neck, and a heavy generator pack was fixed to his back. A haze of chill air gusted from its vents like breath, causing a patina of frost to form on the nearest collarman's armour.

‘Yes, to Magos Xurgis of the 734th Jouran Manufactory Echelons.’

‘Then you might be useful. Bring him and do not damage his optics,’ said the magos, turning away and moving on down the ragged line of collared men and women, floating on a shimmering cushion of repulsor fields.

‘No, please! Don’t!’ he cried, but the men holding him gave his pleas no mind. A bulked-out servitor with piston-driven musculature hauled him inside the iron-hulled vehicle, where at least thirty other men were shackled in various states of disarray. Abrehem saw Coyne and Ismael trussed like livestock ready for slaughter. The ogryn sat with its back resting against the interior of the confinement compartment with a bemused smile on its face, as though this were a mild diversion from its daily routine instead of a life-changing moment of horror.

‘No!’ he screamed as the steel doors slammed shut, leaving them sealed in dim, red-lit darkness.

Abrehem wept as he felt the engine roar and the heavy vehicle moved off. He kicked out at the doors, almost breaking bone as he slammed his heels into the metalwork again and again.

‘Won’t do you any good,’ said a voice behind him.

Abrehem turned angrily to see the man who’d threatened Ismael with the knife. He no longer had his weapon, and his hands were bound before him with plastek cuffs. Like the ogryn, he seemed unnaturally calm, and Abrehem hated him for that.

‘Where are they taking us?’ he said.

‘Where do you think? To the embarkation platforms. We’ve been collared and we’re on our way to the bowels of a starship to shovel fuel, haul ammunition crates or some other shitty detail until we’re dead or crippled.’

‘You sound pretty calm about it.’

The man shrugged. ‘I reckon it’s my lot in life to get shit on from on high. I think the Emperor has a very sick sense of humour when it comes to my life. He puts me through the worst experiences a man could have, but keeps me alive. And for what? So I can go through more shit? Damn, but I wish He’d have done with me.’

Abrehem heard the depths of the man’s anguish and an echo of something so awful that it didn’t bear thinking about. It sounded like the truth.

‘Those things you told the regimental commanders really happened, didn’t they?’ said Abrehem.

The man nodded.

‘And all that stuff on Hydra Cordatus? It was all true?’

‘Yeah, I told the truth. For all the good it did me,’ said the man, holding out a cuffed hand to Abreham. ‘Guardman Julius Hawke.’

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