

THE HORUS HERESY

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KRYPTOS

The voice of Chaos



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Atomic skies burned with violent electromagnetic flares, arcing up from ruined tesla-coil energy stacks as the dying machines of Cavor Sarta screamed in terror. The air was filled with the static burr of unimaginably complex mechanisms being tortured, a planet-wide screeching of noospheric dissolution.

Sprawling ore-fields ran molten and mountainous refineries slumped as the volcanic hearts that had empowered their industry now destroyed them. Continent-sized assembly yards and manufactoria were reduced to scrap metal in the blink of an eye by nuclear detonations, and construction hangars that once rang with the relentless hammering of worthy endeavour now echoed to the beat of a far darker drum.

Loyal forges that had once helped build the Imperium of Man were now enslaved to monstrous, inhuman masters who sought to tear it down. Thoroughfares of hard-won knowledge wrested from Old Night now echoed with yells of shouting soldiers, random barks of gunfire and the pounding tread of hybrid creatures wrought from wormflesh and iron.

The Venomous Thorns Chapter of the Word Bearers had brought war to Cavor Sarta, a war the fief-world of the Mechanicum had lost before the first shots were fired. A nameless, unseen foe that struck without warning and left only carnage in its wake had isolated Cavor Sarta from the Imperial strongholds of Heroldar and Thramas. Striking from the shadows of the great asteroid belt around Tsagualsa, this nameless enemy had crippled Cavor Sarta even before the Word Bearers and their billions-strong armies of mortals had dropped through the nuclear firestorms burning the sky.

No fear is as great as the fear of the unknown, and the panic that held Cavor Sarta tight in its grip had already done more than any orbital barrage in weakening the defenders' resolve to fight. The forge world fell in six days, its

limitless resources perverted to serve strange alchemy and nightmarish purpose. Forbidden vaults were reopened and buried sciences from the age of Iron and Gold were dragged from dusty tombs to rush hideous war-machines of warp sorcery into production.

Cavor Sarta screamed as it was reborn in a hideous new form.

It would go on screaming until its towering stacks burned out and the fiery core at its heart was cold and lifeless.

The Imperial world was dying, but its death did not go unobserved.

The creature moved with a rolling, mechanised gait that was at once graceful and unnatural. It had an odd number of legs, which offended Nykona Sharrowkyn's sensibilities. Concealed in the shadows of a collapsed smelting tower, his body was utterly immobile, his armour's emissions and the vents of his compact jump pack kept below the threshold of detection by custom-designed stealth systems.

He was as invisible as it was possible for one of Corax's sons to be.

Sharrowkyn scanned the ruins of the wrecked forge for more of the creatures, even though he knew it was alone. The forge was little more than smouldering scrap metal, blasted brickwork and unbendable girders twisted around like steel wool. Magnetic squalls swirled like miniature dust devils, and the atmospheric were lousy with echoing machine screams and random detonations of discarded munitions. Violet light spilled down through the skeletal steelwork of the roof, and drifts of radioactive shavings fogged his visor.

The creature paused by the wreckage of a pressing machine, its burn-scar face twisting on a neck of metallic tendons and wet gristle. Implanted ocular orbs glowed in a triangular pattern, pulsing briefly as a bray of sound bellowed from the cavernous vox-lungs buried in the flesh of its chest. Vaguely simian, its upper body was massively muscled with cultured slabs of meat and pistons, coiled magnetic enhancers and heaving chem-shunts. Its head was a pyramid-shaped horror of steel tumours and bloated flesh. Its broad back bristled with a number of missile pods, though Sharrowkyn had never seen anything quite like the warheads that jutted from the launch tubes. Each forearm carried a wide-bore weapon, one a hissing flame-lance, the other some form of harpoon-cannon.

It moved by means of three over-articulated limbs that writhed like tentacles, and Wayland had christened these monsters ferrovores, thanks to their habit of devouring mouthfuls of scrap metal to excrete as exo-armour plates. They were fast, faster than anything else they had encountered in the three days since their stealthy insertion onto the planet's surface.

Penetrating the ruins of Cavor Sarta had been child's play. Even a novice Raven Guard could have evaded detection. The armies that had taken this planet were rough and unprofessional, dancing around revel fires of vast promethium lakes. Mushroom clouds of exploding ordnance shook the ground on an hourly basis, and Sharrowkyn's greatest fear had not been capture, but getting caught in the blast of an accidental detonation.

Both Sharrowkyn and Wayland had cause to hate the foe that had conquered Cavor Sarta, but too many lives were at stake to risk the mission for hate's sake. Since his youth as a freedom fighter in the tunnels of Deliverance, Sharrowkyn had learned to use hatred, to keep every breath of it bottled up ready for release, but Wayland's legion wasn't like the Raven Guard. Sabik Wayland was a warrior of heart, and that thought almost made Sharrowkyn smile at the irony.

He itched to bring his needle-carbine to bear, but Wayland had elected to take the shot.

A cascade of scorched metal and a billow of irradiated dust billowed around the tentacle-limbs of the ferrovore, and it screeched with abominable satisfaction as it inhaled great lungfuls of metallic debris. It moved onwards, stomping through the forge temple with a grotesque, peristaltic motion. The creature was almost at the edge of the manufactory, and Wayland had yet to shoot.

'Is something wrong?' he said over the encrypted vox-link. 'Shall I take the shot?'

'Can you compensate for the radioactive cross-wind, or the flux variables inherent in the magnetocline layers?' asked Wayland. 'Is your weapon linked to your nervous system to better compensate for biological variance?'

'Just take the damn shot.'

'When I'm good and ready,' said Wayland, and Sharrowkyn heard a hiss of augmented machine exhalation.

A bloom of burning violet fire shot skywards behind the far wall of the manufactory, and a rolling wash of hot wind surged through the ruins. Sharrowkyn tasted strontium and potassium chloride in the fallout, a chem-silo's destruction or a buried reactor stack reaching critical mass.

Sharrowkyn's armour registered lethal levels of radioactivity, but nothing to trouble him. Though his armour was a patchwork creation that would either horrify the shadow masters of the Ravenspire or earn him a commendation, it was proof against such toxicity.

The echo of Wayland's pulse round was lost in the crackling rush of air sucked into the vortex of combusting gases and radioactive meltdown, but Sharrowkyn

heard it as clearly as an ice-drill on a frozen promethium face. The ferrovore slumped to the ground as its sinuous legs folded beneath it. The furnace light of its eyes faded and it let out a long wheeze of chemical breath.

Even as Sharrowkyn heard the clatter of a ratcheting bolt action, he was moving.

He ghosted from cover, vaulting onto a tumbled mass of twisted metal. His practised eye knew exactly where to place his weight, and he leapt from solid ground to solid ground, finally springing onto an angled roof girder. He landed lightly and sprinted up the flattened edge of the fallen beam.

‘Four seconds,’ said Wayland.

Sharrowkyn didn’t answer and triggered the jets of his jump pack, powering over the wide vent chute of a pulverised milling machine in a fiery arc.

‘Two seconds.’

Sharrowkyn unclipped a fist-sized device the size of a melta charge from his belt before he slammed down onto the broad shoulders of the ferrovore. The red glow of its eyes swelled, but before it could do more than twitch its limbs, he clamped the device to the base of its neck. Injector needles pistoned into the creature’s neck, and the device gave out a piercing binaric whine.

‘One.’

The ferrovore reared up and Sharrowkyn was thrown from its back. He turned his fall into a controlled descent, twisting his body and spinning his carbine around himself. He landed lightly, with the weapon’s hand-crafted stock pulled into his shoulder. His finger put pressure on the trigger, but trained reflexes kept him from tightening too far.

The ferrovore’s red eyes burned into him, but its missile pods remained sheathed and its weaponised arms hung limp at its sides.

Sharrowkyn let out a breath.

Wayland emerged from his position, hidden in the wide air vent that cut through the forge’s one remaining wall. His heavily augmented bolter was slung casually over one shoulder, as though he’d just brought down a grazing herbivore and not an enemy battle servitor.

‘You cut that one fine,’ said Wayland.

‘If you hadn’t waited so long to shoot, I wouldn’t have had to travel so far.’

Wayland shrugged. His battle plate was black like Sharrowkyn’s, but where the Raven Guard’s was stripped down and compact, Wayland’s was bulky and enhanced with multiple augmetics. Where Sharrowkyn’s shoulder bore the white raven of his legion – albeit obscured by ionised particles of dust – Wayland’s

bore the silvered gauntlet of the Iron Hands. One of Wayland's arms was a bionic replacement, and much of his internal biology had been replaced in the wake of injuries suffered at the hand of the Phoenician himself.

'I anticipated that detonation of chemical and radioactive elements, and reasoned I could use the thermal and electromagnetic wash to cover my shot,' said Wayland. 'I calculated that you could still reach the ferrovore in time.'

'I wish you'd stop calling them that,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Giving things like this names reeks of permanence.'

'How little you know,' said Wayland, shouldering his rifle and clambering onto the immobile form of the ferrovore. 'Bestowing a name upon a machine allows me to know it. If I know it, I can understand it. If I can understand it I can overcome it. Now, hurry up and get on before the creature's cognitive architecture burns through the spinal block inhibitor.'

Sharrowkyn swallowed his distaste and climbed onto the ferrovore's back alongside Wayland, using the growths of excreted armour plating to haul himself into the oozing cavity between its missile pods and rotten-meat back. Wayland's gauntlet extruded a long spike of silvered metal, and Sharrowkyn instinctively winced at the reflections it gave off.

Wayland rammed the spike into the base of the ferrovore's spine, and though Sharrowkyn could see nothing outwardly different, he felt the tremors wracking the cybernetic creature's body as it fought to retain dominance over its control functions.

Wayland nodded and said, 'It's ours.'

It had been a plan of desperation to pair Sharrowkyn with Wayland, but so far the Iron Hand had acquitted himself well. His stealth abilities were sorely lacking, but he more than made up for that with his more specialised skills. Sharrowkyn and Wayland were as different in expertise and outlook as it was possible to imagine, but they had one shared experience that united them with a bond that would only ever be appreciated by a handful of Legion Astartes.

They were survivors of Isstvan V.

Cut off from his primarch and his battle-brothers, Sharrowkyn escaped the Dropsite Massacre in an Iron Hands Stormbird, one of only a handful that had blasted its way through the firestorm of rockets. Sharrowkyn was near death, torn up by traitor bolter shells that had penetrated his war plate with sickening ease. Sabik Wayland had dragged his wounded body onto the Stormbird and screamed at the pilot to lift off. Even a hair's breadth from death, Sharrowkyn

had felt the hammering impacts on the armoured skin of the Stormbird as it fought to escape the disaster.

Months of healing followed, though Sharrowkyn remembered little save blurred memories of a gravel-voiced form looming over him in the apothecarion.

‘You will not die, Raven Guard,’ the voice had said. ‘Do not let the weakness of flesh betray you, not when you have survived so much. I took a blow from the Phoenician, yet I live. You will live too.’

He remembered the authority of the voice, and Sharrowkyn hadn’t dared disobey. He heard the bitterness, but hadn’t understood it until he learned that Ferrus Manus was dead, slain by the same hand that had wounded Sabik Wayland.

In the wake of the disastrous counter-attack against the Warmaster, the Iron Hands sought a way to retaliate. Despite the devastating loss of their primarch, the sons of Medusa were combat-ready within a day of rendezvousing with following forces that had managed to evade the Warmaster’s trap.

Over the next six months, the fragmented Iron Hands task force harried enemy fleets in a manner that would have made Corax proud. Attacking, withdrawing and attacking again, they struck wherever an opportunity presented itself. Like a punch-drunk pugilist who just won’t stay down, the Iron Hands kept coming back to the fight.

And now they had a worthy target for their rage.

By the time the Imperial forces regrouped to face the threat in the Thramas sector, it was already too late for Cavor Sarta. Its vast resources were already in enemy hands, and the traitors were already co-ordinating their considerable assets to pluck the remaining forge worlds from the Martian priesthood’s grip. Imperial commanders were horrified at the masterful co-ordination displayed, and sought to break intercepted astropathic transmissions flowing between captured worlds and the traitor fleets.

Such methods were a tried and tested means of thwarting enemy plans, but something was very wrong. The transmissions were encrypted of course, but the Thramas Mechanicum boasted the finest cipher-breakers, and the carrier-codes were quickly unravelled. But instead of transmissions revealing fleet movements, dispositions and strengths, the revealed text was a garbled hash of corrupt binary woven into an unidentified strain of linguistic communication that conformed to no known language family that could be translated.

Only after the capture of a traitor flagship did further information come to

light. The vessel's warp engines had failed as it fled an aborted ambush, and warriors from the First Legion had boarded it and killed everyone on board. One of the discovered bodies was that of a heavily modified hybrid creature that bore the hallmarks of genetic manipulation and augmetic surgery of a kind never before seen. Though the creature's brain had been liquefied and its communication organs ripped out, a detailed post-mortem had led the Adepts of Mars to an inescapable conclusion.

The creature was an artificially-engineered, hybridised life form with a language set of its own and a method of articulation that could only ever be interpreted by one of its own kind. It was the perfect code carrier, one whose ciphers the Mechanicum could never hope to break unless they were somehow able to take possession of a living specimen.

Mechanicum adepts codified them as Unlingual Cipher Hosts.

Wayland called them the Kryptos.

They squatted in the ruins of an ore refinery, a bubbling quagmire of hissing petrochemicals and toxic fumes. Located amid a towering collection of relay towers that crackled with fizzing bursts of electricity, the refinery was as close as the ferrovore could take them. It had carried them through the layered defences around the forge temple, past corpse-hung habitation towers and fire-gutted manufactories that echoed with sourceless machine-cant burbling into static as it was corrupted. They saw machine shops ringing with the hammers of re-tasked construction engines, and a landscape changing from soaring silver and gold to scorched iron and altars of bloodstained bronze.

Dozens of ferrovores had come close, but none had so much as looked in their direction thanks to Wayland's manipulation of their creature's power output. Mortal patrols and vehicles gave them a wide berth, for the ferrovores were capricious things and were as likely turn their hunger upon friend as foe. It knew the safe routes through the razor mines, the blind spots of motion detectors, and had the locomotive dexterity to negotiate the fields of laser trips.

Beyond the relay towers was the walled heart of a forge temple, a blocky arrangement of cubes, pyramids and spheres. Strange symbols and arcane equations were daubed on the domed roofs with unguents of blood and oil, the sacred architecture of the Ommissiah corrupted by non-Euclidian geometries and distorting Escherite algebra.

The ferrovore squatted behind them, its brutal mechanical growling swallowed by the penetrating bass thrum of the towers in which they were concealed. At

least fifty similar creatures stalked the battered wasteland of sabotaged industry around the temple, moving in overlapping patrol circuits and augmented by several hundred armed soldiers equipped with modified skitarii auspex gear.

‘Defence towers, pict-scanners, motion sensors, pressure differentials, interlocking fields of fire. And a single entrance,’ said Sharrowkyn, noting one defensive measure after another. He lay on his belly in the shadows, peering through shielded magnoculars. ‘From the security around this place, I’d say our sources were right. The Kryptos is in there.’

‘And you know a way we can defeat that level of security?’ asked Wayland, kneeling behind a giant ceramite insulating dish that had fallen from a wrecked tower. He had his bolter clicked into place at his shoulder, though the barrel and sights were retracted.

‘Think you can take out fifty ferrovores?’ asked Sharrowkyn.

‘No, but if we had a company of Iron Hands we could fight our way inside.’

‘Getting what we want out of there isn’t about battering rams and guns. Charge through those gates, and the Kryptos will be lying on the floor with its brain melting out of its skull.’

‘So how do you propose we gain entry?’

‘We don’t,’ said Sharrowkyn. ‘There’s no way to get in there without being detected.’

‘So has this mission been a waste of time?’ hissed Wayland. ‘I thought you Raven Guard were experts at this sort of thing; covert intrusions and operating around enemy defences.’

‘We are, but there are some insertions you just can’t make. Some defences are so tight that no tactical approach is going to get you past them.’

‘Meaning what?’

‘Meaning that if we can’t get inside, we get the enemy to bring the Kryptos out.’

Given the devastation wrought around the forge temple, it was a simple matter to locate exposed data trunking that linked the temple to the planetary network. Much of the wiring was damaged or melted beyond repair, but a few bundles of oily cable still functioned, and it was upon these that Wayland directed his efforts. Numerous wiring clips and clicking devices extruded from his scrimshawed gauntlet, and even the tiny sparks of corposant arcing between his tools were making Sharrowkyn nervous.

‘They won’t detect this, will they?’

‘Only if you keep distracting me,’ answered Wayland, running a cable from the tangle of wiring to a boxy device clipped to his belt. The Mechanicum cipher engine whirred as it chewed through high-level encryption with a touch soft enough to avoid detection.

‘I’m in,’ said Wayland, as a blurt of coded binary hissed from the cipher engine. ‘High-grade noospheric intercommunications. Only the best for the Kryptos...’

‘Keep it light,’ said Sharrowkyn. ‘If the traitors so much as *think* we’re out here, this mission is over.’

‘Just because I am Iron Hand does not mean I cannot be subtle when the occasion demands it, Nykona,’ said Wayland, deliberately using his first name. ‘I trained on Mars and Adept Zeth’s innovation in noospheric networks is not unknown to me.’

‘So you’ve interfaced with this kind of system before?’

‘I have studied it extensively,’ said Wayland.

‘*Studied* it?’ said Sharrowkyn, spotting the deflection. ‘You mean you’ve never actually used something like this?’

‘Not as such, but I am confident I will be able to interface successfully,’ said Wayland, lifting a connector plug and sliding it home in the base of his modified gorget.

‘I’ll remind you of that if we have to run for our lives,’ said Sharrowkyn.

Wayland didn’t answer, stiffening as a flood of information surged from the golden cables into his augmented cortical implants.

The Iron Hand moved his gauntlets through the air, manipulating operating systems, power and data flow only he could see. Haptically-enabled fingertips sifted reams of noospheric data with each blink of an eye lens as the barrage of information filled him.

Sharrowkyn left Wayland to his infiltration of the forge temple’s data systems, and returned his attention to its defences, looking for any sign their intrusion had been detected.

‘It helps me...’ whispered Wayland, and Sharrowkyn inclined his head to listen.

‘What?’

‘The forge,’ said Wayland, his voice sounding distant and strained. ‘It hates what it has become, and wishes me to end its suffering. Its systems are overwriting my data footprints.’

Sharrowkyn shifted uncomfortably at the idea of the forge temple exhibiting

anything that might be construed as sentience. Though the Mechanicum were an invaluable part of the Imperium, their belief in a divine force behind the machines they maintained and built was at odds with the Imperial Truth.

But as with most useful things, expediency and utility outweighed conviction.

‘I have it,’ said Wayland, twisting one hand and punching in what looked like an access code on an invisible panel. ‘Expect to see some activity soon.’

Sharrowkyn returned his attention to the temple as a number of warning sirens blared throughout the complex. Emergency lights flashed and barking announcements in gurgling cant brayed from klaxons mounted on defence towers. Streams of armed men poured from the iron structures, a mix of feral skitarii cohorts and panicked Army units.

‘I don’t know what you did,’ said Sharrowkyn. ‘But it’s got them running scared.’

‘With the temple’s consent, I disengaged the control rods from the atomic core of its reactor and altered the composition of the catalysing elements to bring the isotopes to critical mass at an exponential rate. When that happens, everything within a hundred kilometres is going to be vaporised.’

‘Including us?’

‘No,’ said Wayland, tapping another Mechanicum device attached to his belt. ‘Not us.’

The enemy troops converged on a point just outside the main gates of the temple, assuming a defensive formation as they stood waiting. A palpable sense of fear gripped the enemy, and when an opponent was off balance was the perfect moment to strike.

‘There,’ said Wayland. ‘That’s got to be it.’

Sharrowkyn looked to where Wayland was indicating. A warrior in burnished red plate, awash with fluttering, wax-sealed scrolls, escorted a nondescript adept in a flowing black robe. Bereft of the reticulated machine arms and augmentation common to most tech-priests, there was nothing to outwardly mark this adept as special.

‘Word Bearer,’ said Sharrowkyn, his voice tight with controlled hatred.

‘The magnetic discharge will block vox-traffic,’ said Wayland. ‘But we have less than five minutes to take possession of the Kryptos.’

‘Then let’s move,’ replied Sharrowkyn, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. ‘Is it ready?’

Wayland engaged the slave mechanism of their captured ferrovore.

‘Oh, it’s more than ready,’ he said.

Booming geysers of superheated, radioactive steam blew out domes and walls of the forge temple, and burning trceries of inverted lightning arced through the volatile atmosphere. As the atomic core of the temple boiled itself to destruction, venting systems and dispersal protocols were wilfully deactivated or simply failed to function. The few adepts that remained at their stations found their efforts to avert the temple's impending destruction thwarted at every turn.

Nor was the chaos of the temple's doom confined to its structural elements as Sabik Wayland and its dying machine-heart took their vengeance. Automated gunfire blitzed from defence turrets to strafe traitor positions with armour-penetrating shells. Trip-switches designed to detonate buried mines when certain parameters were met blew out in a rolling series of thunderous explosions that shook the earth and toppled nearby structures in roaring fireballs. The ferrovores convulsed as their cortical implants received contradictory orders, opening fire and scooping up swathes of skitarii to devour their metal-sheathed bodies.

Sharrowkyn and Wayland ran through the strobing hell of explosions and gunfire with the cool precision of hunters.

Wayland moved with his implanted rifle barking out deafening sub-sonic rounds. Each shell detonated explosively within the carapace armour of a skitarii warlord or discipline master, each target carefully chosen to hinder the command structure of the enemy from regaining control. He moved in mechanical precision with the bellowing ferrovore as its guns unleashed arcs of searing fire and electrified harpoons to cut a path through those few traitors that recognised them as enemies.

The launchers on its back sent salvos of air-bursting rockets into the gathered traitors, multiple shells exploding and showering the ground with hundreds of plasma bomblets. Searing bursts of blue-hot fire crackled among the traitorous Army units, fusing metal and flesh and bone with a grotesque hissing sound.

Sharrowkyn's carbine was lighter than Wayland's, but no less deadly in the hands of a master marksman. Each pull of the trigger shattered an enemy skull or tore out an exposed throat; kill shots that took a target's life before they were even aware there was a danger.

'He's running,' said Sharrowkyn, as the Word Bearer threw the robed adept over his shoulder and bolted for a low-roofed structure at the corner of the temple compound.

'Can you catch him?' asked Wayland, pumping a bolt-round through the chest of a screaming skitarii warrior with a bloodied animal pelt draped over his fanged shoulder guards.

‘Please,’ said Sharrowkyn.

‘Find me in sixty seconds or you won’t make it off this world.’

Sharrowkyn nodded and triggered his jump jets, soaring away from Wayland and the berserk ferrovore. The Word Bearer was too distant to reach in one jump, and Sharrowkyn slammed down on the run, firing on full-auto as he built speed for his next leap. The jets blazed and as he arced up into the air Sharrowkyn saw the Word Bearer had reached the structure, its roof irising open to reveal a silver-bodied flyer with enormous engine nacelles.

‘It’s not the enemy you see that gets you,’ hissed Sharrowkyn. *‘It’s the one you don’t.’*

His carbine blazed and the Word Bearer staggered as high-velocity needles punched into the side of his helm and shoulder. Mangled metal and ceramite flew from the impacts, and Sharrowkyn slid the weapon around his shoulder as he landed with a crack of stone in a billow of heated smoke.

Sharrowkyn drew two black-bladed gladiuses from shoulder-sheaths and threw himself at the Word Bearer. The traitor tossed his ruined helmet aside, and Sharrowkyn saw his face was grey and ashen, covered in a writhing mass of tattoos that slithered beneath his skin like worms of sentient ink.

The Word Bearer dropped the Kryptos and brought his bolter to bear. Sharrowkyn hacked through the barrel with his first gladius and buried his second in the centre of the Word Bearers’s plastron. The warrior grunted in pain and fell back as the shell in the breech of his weapon exploded. He lashed out with a clubbing fist, but Sharrowkyn was already moving. He spun around the Word Bearer and drove the monomolecular tip of his gladius down through the warrior’s neck.

Sharrowkyn’s blade clove the Word Bearer’s spinal column. He wrenched the sword up, and his foe’s head lolled to the side as it tore free. Even before the body fell, Sharrowkyn turned and lifted the black-robed adept from the ground. Its hood had fallen back, and he flinched as he saw the creature’s horrific face. Its flesh was as pale as his own, the lower half of its face a nightmarish arrangement of moving parts, augmitters, vox-grilles and sound-producing elements that bore no relation to anything Sharrowkyn had ever seen. What remained of its skull was like the punch-interface of a cogitator, a brass and flesh arrangement of alien anatomy meshed with glass compartments that left portions of an augmented brain visible.

The Kryptos brayed with a sound that screeched like iron nails on slate, and a stream of garbled machine noise grated from a mouth that moved with

abominable mechanised clicking and a wetly animal gurgle.

‘Just what I was thinking,’ said Sharrowkyn, hauling the Kryptos onto his shoulder and calling up the icon that displayed Wayland’s location. The Iron Hand was in the thick of the fighting, keeping in the shadow of the ferrovore as it tore into its erstwhile allies. Sharrowkyn leapt through the air on a trail of fire, landing in the crater of a sonic mine’s detonation. A second leap carried him over a group of cowering mortals and his third landed him beside Wayland.

‘Cutting it fine as usual,’ said Wayland. ‘The core is at critical mass.’

‘How long?’ asked Sharrowkyn, pulling the Kryptos from his shoulder.

Wayland unclipped the second device the Mechanicum adepts had given him and placed it on the ground between them. He flipped up the trigger mechanism, his thumb hovering over the activation stud.

‘Ready?’ he said.

‘Do it,’ said Sharrowkyn as the sky flashed impossibly bright, and furious radiance wiped the forge temple from the face of the planet in a bellow of nuclear fire.

Time ceased to have meaning.

An age or the blink of an eye passed for Sharrowkyn, a span of time impossible to gauge. Light and shadow billowed and faded, the world beyond the shimmering bubble of unreality that sheltered them from atomic annihilation moving like a picter reel in overdrive. He couldn’t move, he couldn’t think, and – for all intents and purposes – he didn’t exist.

And then the world snapped back into focus as the timer on the stasis field generator reached zero. Hot winds surged around them, irradiated and laden with toxic poisons that would render this region of Cavor Sarta uninhabitable for millennia. Nothing remained of the forge temple, only a glassy plain and a deep gouge in the earth where its molten core had sunk deep into the rock of the planet. A kilometres-high mushroom cloud seethed with fire, and the hammer-blow pressure waves of its power rumbled through the atmosphere. Caustic tornadoes of heavy metals twisted in the nightmarish ruins of the atomic explosion, and lightning storms surged and roared in electromagnetic melees.

Wayland still knelt beside the stasis field generator, but stood and shook off its lingering aftereffects. Sharrowkyn swept his gaze around the devastation, amazed they had survived ground zero of a nuclear holocaust.

‘I think that went satisfactorily,’ said Wayland.

‘We’re alive and we have the Kryptos,’ agreed Sharrowkyn, watching as the

cringing adept creature curled into a foetal ball, babbling in its unnatural, inexplicable cipher-language as the radiation worked upon its frail body.

‘And the traitors will be none the wiser to our involvement. As far as anyone will know, this was simply an accidental meltdown.’

‘Do you think the enemy will believe that?’

‘Given the lack of cohesion and mechanical expertise among the occupying forces, such events are far from uncommon,’ said Wayland. ‘I believe our involvement will go undetected.’

Sharrokyn nodded and activated the integral teleport homer of his armour to signal the Iron Hands vessel concealed in the orbital debris surrounding Cavor Sarta. The electromagnetic storms would cover any trace of the teleport beam, and they would be gone before any enemy forces arrived to search the ruined site.

‘Good work, Sabik Wayland,’ said Sharrokyn.

‘Good work indeed, Nykona Sharrokyn,’ answered Wayland.

All in all, thought Sharrokyn, it was a bad day to be a traitor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hailing from Scotland, GRAHAM MCNEILL worked for over six years as a Games Developer in Games Workshop's Design Studio before taking the plunge to become a full-time writer. Graham's written a host of SF and Fantasy novels and comics, as well as a number of side projects that keep him busy and (mostly) out of trouble. His Horus Heresy novel, *A Thousand Sons*, was a New York Times bestseller and his Time of Legends novel, *Empire*, won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award. Graham lives and works in Nottingham and you can keep up to date with where he'll be and what he's working on by visiting his website.

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