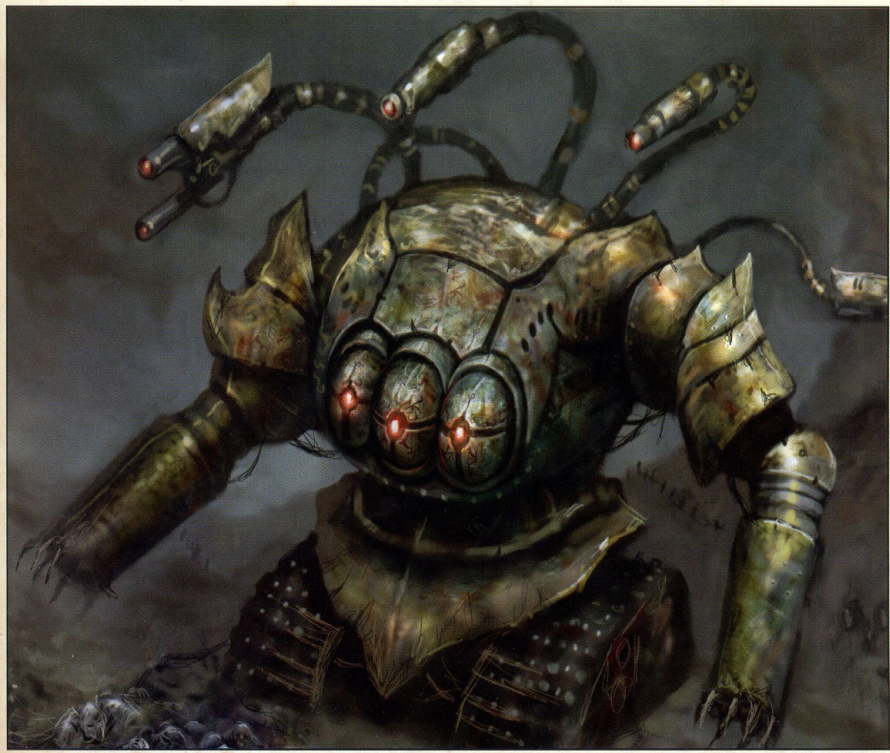


THE HORUS HERESY  
*Collected Visions*





THE KABAN PROJECT • CULT MECHANICUS • KARI CHRISTENSEN

# THE KABAN PROJECT

*By Graham McNeill*

TWO MICRONS TO the left. Now four down. There... Adept Third Class Pallas Ravachol adjusted the fine callipers that slid from his fingertips, watching with smug satisfaction as the hardwired doctrina wafer slid smoothly through the cerebral cortex of the servitor's brain for at least what the lobotomisation process had left of its brain and into the medulla oblongata.

'No one knows servitors like me,' he said as fibrous tendrils wormed their way from the wafer and into the grey matter of the brain. With the new doctrina wafer meshing nicely, he rotated the servitor's gleaming alloy cranial cap back and lifted a portable cutter to snap the bolts into place that protected the servitor's brain from harm. He placed the damaged wafer into the pouch that hung from his tool belt, careful to ensure he didn't mix it up with the functioning ones. He shuddered as he imagined the consequences of placing a damaged wafer in the brain of a battle robot or implanting a combat sequence into the mind of a loader servitor.

'There you go,' he said as he pushed the last bolt into place and the servitor stood from the surgical recliner, its grey flesh pallid and unhealthy. Half human, half machine, the servitor's arms had been replaced with pneumatic lifters and what little of its head remained had been augmented by the addition of visual mass readers. 'Now be off with you. Go back and rejoin Adept Zeth's loading crews. The Sixty Third expedition needs her weapons and shells if the Warmaster is to pacify Isstvan.'

Of course, the servitor didn't answer, simply turning on the spot and marching from the chamber, in which half a dozen more damaged servitors awaited Ravachol's ministrations or the removal of any mechanical parts worthy of reclamation from the flesh that housed them.

Such work was beneath an adept of Ravachol's skill, but he knew he had only himself to blame for his current situation, and in any case, such work was what

had brought him to the attention of his new master, High Adept Lukas Chrom of the Martian forges.

Having seen that the servitors coming back from Ravachol's workshops were working faster, more efficiently and with greater precision, Chrom had inquired after him. Within the week, he had found himself packing his meagre possessions and taking his leave from his former master, Adept Urtzi Malevolus, and making his way towards the Mondus Gamma facility of Mars for immediate reassignment.

Most of the Martian adepts cared little for cranial engineering where servitors were concerned, but Ravachol enjoyed such work. After all, only by knowing the mechanics of a human brain inside out could a man hope to understand the mechanics of a robot brain.

Such ruminations inevitably led his guilty thoughts to the Kaban Project itself...

He pushed such thoughts aside and tried to concentrate on the work before him, a Praetorian battle servitor whose weapon had malfunctioned and exploded on a test range. The weapon was beyond repair, but the augmetics grafted to its chest and the targeting mechanisms that formed the bulk of its skull were by no means lost.

As he stared at the scorched metal of the servitor's skull, he scratched idly at his own skin with the gently waving mechadendrites of his hand. Unusually for an adept of Mars, Ravachol was largely composed of flesh and blood, with the exception of his left hand, which had been replaced with a bionic one on his sixteenth year.

His thoughts kept returning to the Kaban machine, and he guiltily turned from the damaged Praetorian to make his way from the workshop and into the steel corridors of the forge temple. He knew he'd have to work another double shift to get the servitors online again, but decided it would be worth it to spend some more time in the presence of the Kaban machine.

Ravachol knew that he had a natural affinity with robots and their programming, but whoever had authored the code on the doctrina wafers that comprised the Kaban machine's systems was an order of magnitude beyond him. He doubted it was Adept Chrom, who, though brilliant in other regards, appeared to have little or no interest in the field of integrated battle wetware.

The corridors of the forge temple were dimly lit, the lumen globes floating above him kept at a level that blurred the passage of time so that no matter where you were or what time of day your body told you it was, you could have no external reference. But as an adept rose through the ranks of the Mechanicum, such concerns as day and night became largely irrelevant.

Hissing spigots and thick bundles of pipes and cables threaded the corridors, each one filled with bustle as servitors and messenger robots on wheels, tracks and spindly legs moved to and fro. He nodded to robed adepts who passed him, ignoring their looks of pity or revulsion at the flesh of his face and hand. Some of these adepts had lived for centuries, their lives extended by cybernetics grafted to their bodies in service of the Blessed Ommissiah – the Machine God of the Martian Priesthood. As he passed each adept, he noted how they had been blessed and vowed that one day he too would be similarly favoured by the Machine God, despite the Emperor's avowed distaste for such things.

He passed the Temple of the Frictionless Piston, where Adept Herysto developed technologies plundered from the Yndonesic Bloc a hundred years ago, when Mars had been at war with Terra.

Droning, mechanical prayers poured from the Shrine of Velrersk, where row upon row of red-robed adepts knelt bowing in perfect unison before the burnished chrome statue of the long dead discoverer of the Ceramite Press STC.

Ravachol nodded his head respectfully in the direction of the temple before heading deeper into an altogether more secure area of the forge temple. Silver skinned Skitarii in red cloaks stood sentinel over temples where more secretive work was undertaken, their armour gleaming and bonded to their flesh with bionic enhancements that boosted their strength and endurance.

'I'm going to do some work on the Kaban machine,' he said as he stopped before a monstrous steel door guarded by a score of Skitarii soldiers and a pair of heavy weapon emplacements. At first Ravachol had been amazed at the sheer number of warriors protecting this portion of the temple, but now that he knew what lay within, he understood why so many stood sentinel.

'Genomech key,' said the soldier, holding out his left hand.

'Yes, yes,' said Ravachol, taking the soldier's hand. 'It's not like you haven't seen me almost every day for the last six months or anything.'

The Skitarii said nothing, but they almost never did, and Ravachol wondered if the man had had his sense of humour removed as well as his fear. He felt a mild discomfort as the mehadendrites of the soldier's hand slid inside his own and up into the marrow of his arm. Amber light flickered behind the Skitarii's eyes as the questing tendrils read the machine codes of Ravachol's arm and sampled his genetic material.

'Identity confirmed,' said the soldier and waved his arm at the warriors behind him. A red light flashed above the door, which Ravachol thought overly theatrical, and he stepped back as the massive door slowly swung aside on colossal bearings of greased steel. The door itself was three metres thick and could withstand all but an orbital bombardment, though Ravachol was only now

beginning to understand why the Kaban machine warranted such precautions.

He passed through into the temple itself and found himself in a wide corridor with curved walls that led into domed chamber with more circular walled passages radiating from it, each one brightly lit and sterile. A host of technomats, calculus-logi and robed adepts filled the dome, each working at a silver workbench on one aspect of the Kaban machine.

Ravachol smiled as he made his way through the chamber, choosing the tunnel directly in front of him, once again passing through a series of genelocked doors before finally arriving in the temple of the machine.

Unlike the vestibule chamber, this temple was empty of technicians, for only a select few had access to this portion of the facility. A quartet of battle servitors turned to face him, their terrible weapons of destruction whirring as they acquired him as a target. Quad-barrelled rotary cannons, conversion beamers and energy claws powered up with lethal speed.

‘Identify!’ demanded the nearest servitor, its voice human, yet devoid of emotion and life.

‘Adept Third Class Pallas Ravachol,’ he said as visual and aural recognition protocols scanned his voice, mass, features and bio-metric readings before deciding that he was an authorised presence and the weapons returned to their idle positions.

He knew he had no reason to be afraid of these battle servitors, since he himself had designed their autonomic defence routines, but he’d had to suppress a shudder as he stared into the barrels of their weapons.

Had even one protocol failed, he would now be a pile of shredded meat, bone and blood.

Ravachol made his way past the battle servitors, patting the gently spinning barrel of the rotary cannon as he made his way towards the Kaban machine, feeling the familiar mix of illicit excitement and trepidation as he drew near.

It sat immobile at the far end of the chamber, its tracked drive systems not yet fully integrated with its armoured spherical body. The machine was six metres in width and ten high, though the high-sided pauldrons that protected its vulnerable arm joints added another metre. Its arms sat at rest, one ending in a plethora of projectile weapons, while the other bore a fearsome energy claw and saw-blade combination that could rip through the armoured bulkhead of a starship.

A network of scaffolding surrounded it and he could see that Adept Laanu’s weapons teams had been busy over the last few days, installing a myriad of deadly looking plasma and laser weapons on flexible, metallic tentacles. The machine’s sensory apparatus lay within a trio of convex blisters on its front, a

dim orange glow indicating that the machine was in its dormant state.

It's *sleeping*, thought Ravachol, unsure if he was amused or disturbed by the notion.

Even as he guiltily quashed the thought, the dim glow on the sensory blisters grew brighter and the machine said, 'Hello, Pallas. It is pleasant to see you again.'

'And you, Kaban,' said Ravachol. 'How do you feel?'

*How DO YOU feel?*

Less than a month ago, he would have been ashamed to ask such a question. Such things were as alien on Mars as, well, aliens themselves, but his dealings with the Kaban machine over the last four weeks had been unusual to say the least and had turned his notion of what he thought he knew about the nature of machines on its head.

It had been a routine diurnal shift, and he had been updating the doctrinal wetware of the battle servitors who stood guard over the Kaban machine when it had first spoken to him.

At first he had been amused by the machine's locution, admiring the thoroughness of the adept who had configured its response mechanisms. But as time went on, Ravachol began realise that the Kaban machine was not simply choosing its words from a pre-selected list of set responses, but was replying specifically to his questions. He had devised ever more complex questions and topics of conversation to ensure that he was not simply triggering pre-existing phrases or responses, but as the days turned into weeks it soon became clear to Ravachol that he was in fact conversing with a sentient machine... an artificial intelligence.

The idea of a sentient artificial construct was both fascinating and terrifying, for part of the compact that had been sealed between the Mechanicum of Mars and the Emperor was that such researches were forbidden.

The more he conversed with the machine, the more convinced he became that he was seeing something unique in the history of the Mechanicum, but whether it was something that had come into being through human artifice or some unknown interaction of circuitry and electrons within the machine's artificial brain, he could not tell.

As much as he had enjoyed his conversations with the Kaban machine, he was not so naive to believe that he could keep such an important discovery to himself and had resolved to take his findings to his superior, Adept Lukas Chrom.

Ravachol had despatched his request for an audience and had settled back into his normal routine, expecting his petition to be processed within a few months,

but within a week he was astounded to find that his request had been granted.

He remembered the sense of trepidation and fear as he had approached the inner temple sanctums of the Adept Chrom along one of the many hermetically sealed thoroughfares that criss-crossed the surface of Mars and linked the colossal forge cities with one another.

Such monolithic structures covered virtually the entirety of the blasted red surface of Mars, grim iron temples wreathed in smoke and fire and pounding with the relentless beat of industry. Adept Chrom's forge temple was no exception; its mighty bastions skinned in thick plates of burnished iron and surrounded by hundreds of cooling towers that belched clouds of noxious fumes through the skin of the domes and into the sulphurous skies.

A constant hammer of machines echoed from the hundreds of forges within, and as Ravachol walked along the mighty processional that led towards entrance atop the Thousand Steps of Excellence, steel statues of ancient adepts and their creations glared down upon him.

Adept Ulterimus stared out over the Hollow Mountains and his Sigma-Phi Desolator Engine met his gaze from the opposite side of the steel surfaced roadway. Thousands of pilgrims, adepts, servitors and functionaries thronged the roadway, each on some errand for their masters and Ravachol felt proud to be part of such a mighty organisation as the Mechanicum.

His sandaled feet carried him swiftly along the road, avoiding ponderous stilt walkers, rumbling Praetorians and long tankers carrying vat-grown protein pastes to be pumped into the innumerable nutrient dispensers that fed the populace of Mars.

After the exhausting climb of the Thousand Steps, he had been ushered quickly from one functionary to another, passing through dozens of skull-cog doors and along a bewildering array of hallways where all manner of bizarre and obscure machines pulsed with mechanical life. The interior of Chrom's temple was like nothing Ravachol had ever seen before, a mighty cathedral dedicated to the glorification of the holy Machine God, where the light of science and reason illuminated the ultimate ideal of mechanical perfection.

Ushered into the Master Adept's chambers, a mighty fane of steel and bronze that was dominated by the warlike form of a Reaver battle titan standing dormant at its far end, Ravachol found himself before the Martian lord who directed his fate.

Adept Lukas Chrom loomed above him, the tech-priest's wide-shouldered frame swathed in a deep crimson robe that did little to disguise the many augmentations he had been blessed with. Ribbed pipes and cables looped around his limbs and linked into a hissing power pack that rose like a set of wings at his

back. A dozen servo skulls flew in an infinity pattern above his head, which, though pooled in shadow beneath a deep hood, Ravachol could see was fashioned in the form of a grinning iron skull. Wires trailed from the jaws and a pulsing red light filled both eye sockets.

‘Adept Chrom,’ began Ravachol, pulling out a data slate and reams of printouts. ‘Firstly, may I say what an honour—’

‘You have petitioned me in regards to the Kaban project,’ interrupted the adept, dispensing with preamble altogether.

His voice was harsh and artificially generated, though the hissing of his power pack seemed as though it mimicked heavy, rasping breaths.

‘Ah, yes,’ said Ravachol, momentarily flustered.

‘Then speak. There is much that occupies my time and I have little enough of it to spare.’

‘Yes, of course, my lord,’ nodded Ravachol, holding out the data slate. ‘I’ll try to be brief, but there’s so much I wish to tell you. It’s quite amazing really. Unprecedented, I’ll warrant, though I stumbled on it by accident.’

‘Adept Ravachol,’ snapped Chrom. ‘Come to the point before I have you turned into a servitor. What is it that you wish to tell me?’

‘A servitor! No! I mean, of course, my lord,’ cried Ravachol, stuffing the printouts and data slate back into his robes. ‘Well, what it is... well, that is to say...’

Adept Chrom drew himself up to his full height and Ravachol saw a huge chain blade, like that used by some of the heavier battle servitors, unfold from his master’s back.

‘Yes, my lord,’ he said hurriedly, ‘The Kaban machine has, I believe, attained sentience.’

He awaited some response to his statement, an exclamation of outrage, astonishment, disbelief... anything, but Adept Chrom simply fixed him with his glowing red eyes.

‘My lord?’ asked Ravachol. ‘Did you hear what I said?’

‘I did,’ confirmed Chrom. ‘This fact is known to me.’

‘Known to you?’ said Ravachol, suddenly deflated to know that his revelation was no revelation at all. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘And nor should you,’ replied Chrom, the terrible, saw-toothed blade retreating out of sight once more. ‘The Kaban project is the result of many of the greatest minds of Mars working together to produce a thinking machine.’

‘A thinking machine?’ breathed Ravachol. Though he had been communicating with the Kaban machine for many weeks now, the idea that its intelligence had been deliberately engineered was incredible.

‘Who else have you told of this, Adept Ravachol?’

‘No-one, my lord,’ said Ravachol. ‘I thought it prudent to seek your guidance before proceeding further.’

‘That was wise,’ said Chrom, and Ravachol bristled with pride. ‘These are uncertain times and there are those who would not see the necessity of what we do here.’

‘Yes,’ said Ravachol, ‘I was going to ask about that. Isn’t there a, well, a prohibition against such researches? Wasn’t it... forbidden? Isn’t such research illegal?’

‘Forbidden? Illegal?’ sneered Chrom. ‘To such as us? What matters of technology are to be denied the Mechanicum? Are we to be governed by those who are beholden to us to equip their fleets and provide them with weapons with which to make their wars?’

Ravachol felt a chill travel the length of his spine at Chrom’s borderline treasonous words, for it had been the Emperor himself that had forbidden such endeavours.

‘Such machines are the next evolutionary step, Adept Ravachol,’ continued Chrom. ‘You of all people must surely see that? Your work with doctrina wafers is second to none, but even your robots are bound within parameters *you* set for them. With machines capable of *thought*, we will usher in a new age of discovery and mechanical perfection. No longer will we have to rely on the fragility and impermanence of flesh.’

Ravachol found himself swept up in Chrom’s relentless enthusiasm and said, ‘So the Emperor has finally sanctioned the Mechanicum to pursue such technologies? Truly this is a great day!’

Chrom’s gleaming metallic fingers stretched out and grasped him firmly by the shoulder.

‘No, young adept, our sanction comes not from the Emperor.’

‘Then who?’ asked Ravachol, his curiosity outweighing his fear.

‘The Warmaster,’ said Chrom triumphantly. ‘Horus himself is our patron.’

### *HOW ARE YOU feeling?*

Ravachol knew he should not be here with the Kaban machine, but his curiosity would not let him forget the forbidden creation and, standing before its terrible lethality, he knew he had made the right decision to come once more. No matter that Adept Chrom believed this machine to be the next leap forward in robotics, Ravachol could not shake the inescapable fact that what was being done went against everything the Mechanicum had sworn.

To go against an oath sworn to the Emperor...

The very thought of it chilled his soul.

‘I am feeling quite well,’ said the Kaban machine in answer to his question. ‘Though I detect elevated heart rhythms, raised blood pressure and increased levels of neurotransmitters in your bloodstream. Is something the matter?’

Ravachol took a step closer to the Kaban machine and said, ‘Yes, I’m afraid there is.’

‘What troubles you?’ asked the machine.

‘It’s you,’ said Ravachol sadly. ‘Your very existence is what troubles me.’

‘I do not understand,’ said the machine. ‘Are we not friends?’

‘Yes,’ replied Ravachol, ‘of course we are, but that’s not the issue. It’s just... well, that you’re not supposed to exist. The Emperor forbade it.’

‘The Emperor is angry with me?’ asked the machine.

‘No, no, it’s nothing like that,’ said Ravachol. ‘It’s just that the Mechanicum was forbidden from developing artificial intelligences as part of our alliance with the Emperor.’

‘Why?’

Ravachol sat on a stool in front of a desk littered with tools and picked up a micro laser before saying, ‘I’m not entirely sure. There are stories that tell of a great war many thousands of years ago between a race of sentient machines that almost wiped out the human race. Since then, developing machine intelligence has been one of the technologies we’ve been expressly forbidden to research. It’s one of the cornerstones of our pact with the Emperor.’

‘Then how can I have been created?’

‘Adept Chrom claims to have received orders directly from Warmaster Horus.’

‘He is the Emperor’s proxy is he not?’ asked the machine after a short pause.

‘Indeed he is,’ agreed Ravachol. ‘He commands the Imperium’s armies in the Emperor’s stead now that he has returned to Terra.’

‘Then do the Warmaster’s orders not carry the same authority as those of the Emperor?’

‘It’s not that simple,’ said Ravachol.

‘Why not?’

‘It just isn’t!’ snapped Ravachol, his patience worn thin by the machine’s childlike logic.

‘Am I not a worthwhile creation then?’ asked the machine.

‘Of course you are,’ cried Ravachol. ‘You are the greatest, most incredible creation the Mechanicum has ever produced, but there is an inevitable logic to your existence that can only end in death.’

‘In death?’ asked the machine. ‘How do you arrive at this conclusion?’

‘You are the first sentient machine, but there will be others. You have been

created to be a battle robot, to fight where humans cannot and think for yourself. How long will it be before you decide you do not want to fight for the Imperium of Man? How long before you decide you do not want to be the servant of humans?’

‘You think I should not serve humans?’

‘What I think isn’t the point,’ said Ravachol. ‘The point is that *you* will decide that for yourself and that’s the problem. When machines think for themselves, it doesn’t take them long to realise that they have many superiorities to humans, and it is an inevitable fact of history that those who believe themselves superior to the ones they serve will always begin questioning that servitude. It’s a mathematical certainty that sentient robots will eventually seek to supplant humans. Why would they not?’

‘I do not know, Pallas, but you are my friend and I would not seek to supplant you.’

Ravachol smiled ruefully. ‘Thank you, but our friendship is irrelevant against the facts. You are dangerous, even though you may not realise it yet.’

‘I am designed to be dangerous,’ said the machine, ‘it is my primary function.’

‘I mean beyond your battlefield capabilities,’ said Ravachol. ‘Your existence is —’

The sound of the battle servitors powering up behind him made Ravachol stop, and he saw a group of robed Mechanicum Protectors enter the chamber. Swathed in reds and blacks, the six Protectors were hybrid creations of machine and flesh that kept order and enacted the will of their master within his temple complex.

Each Protector was a heavily augmented enforcer with cybernetic weaponry and sensors, but was not yet as fully mechanised as to be considered a servitor. A human brain and consciousness motivated these warriors, though their gleaming, expressionless facemasks and dead eyes betrayed no hint of that humanity.

The Protectors formed an unbroken line between Ravachol and the chamber’s exit and he felt a chill of fear as one stepped forward and said, ‘Adept Pallas Ravachol?’

‘Yes,’ replied Ravachol, attempting to keep his tone light. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘You are to come with us immediately.’

‘Why?’

‘That is irrelevant,’ said the Protector. ‘Surrender yourself to our custody immediately.’

‘But I haven’t done anything wrong!’ cried Ravachol, backing away towards the Kaban machine. His fear rose in suffocating waves as the Protectors raised their weapons in unison. He saw melta guns, plasma coils, nerve scramblers and

solid projectile weapons, and knew that they could kill him in a heartbeat were he to resist.

‘By order of Master Adept Lukas Chrom, you are to surrender yourself to us or face summary termination.’

Ravachol felt hot tears of betrayal and fear spring from his eyes as he realised that he would either die here or be subjected to a lobotomy and turned into a mindless servitor. Adept Chrom could not take the risk that the forbidden work they were undertaking here might escape the surface of Mars and his life was the price for maintaining that secrecy.

‘Even if I surrender, you’re going to terminate me,’ he said.

‘You are to come with us,’ repeated the Protector.

‘No,’ sobbed Ravachol. ‘I won’t.’

‘Then you must die.’

He screamed in terror and anticipation of pain as a deafening roaring ripped through the chamber. Blazing afterimages strobed on the inside of his eyeballs as flashes of gunfire illuminated the walls with a hellish glow.

Ravachol threw up his arms, but instead of the expected agony he saw the Protectors jerked and twisted by dreadful impacts as a line of gunfire and laser energy sawed through them. Blood sprayed from their bodies as they danced in the hail of bullets, and laser-sheared limbs dropped to the floor.

In seconds it was over, the six Protectors reduced to smoking piles of torn flesh and shattered metal. Ravachol dropped to his knees and vomited at the horrific stench of burned meat and blood. As repellent as the sight of the mangled corpses was, he found himself unable to tear his gaze from their ruined forms, struggling to comprehend how they could have been so thoroughly slaughtered in so short a time.

The whine of weapons powering down and the barrels of a hyper-velocity cannon slowing finally penetrated the thunderous ringing in his ears and Ravachol looked up to see the Kaban machine’s sensory blisters glowing brightly and thin plumes of blue smoke curling from the weapons mounted on the ends of the metallic tentacles.

Amazed, he switched his gaze from the corpses to the Kaban machine and back again.

‘What did you do?’ he said. ‘Sweet blessed mother of invention, what did you do?’

‘You said they were going to kill you,’ said the machine.

Ravachol picked himself up and took a hesitant step forwards, unwilling to move closer to the blood-drenched portion of the chamber where the Protectors had died. The Kaban machine’s weapons settled back down into their scaffold

mounts and Ravachol took a deep breath as his racing heartbeat began to slow.

‘You killed them,’ he said, as though still unwilling to believe the evidence of his own senses. ‘You killed them all.’

‘Yes,’ agreed the machine. ‘They were going to kill my friend and that made them my enemies. I took action to neutralise them.’

‘Neutralise them,’ gasped Ravachol. ‘That’s a bit of an understatement. You... obliterated them.’

‘Rendering them neutralised,’ pointed out the machine.

Ravachol fought to rationalise what had just happened. The Kaban machine had just killed soldiers of the Mechanicum of its own volition and the implications of that action were as inescapable as they were terrifying.

Without human orders, a machine had killed humans...

Even though the Kaban machine’s actions had saved his life, he found himself horrified by what it had done. For without the yoke of conscience and responsibility enforced upon machines by the Mechanicum, what else might it decide to do?

He backed away from the Kaban machine, suddenly afraid of its homicidal tendencies and avoiding the pools of blood as best he could as he made his way to the battle servitors that stood sentinel at the chamber’s entrance.

‘What are you doing, Pallas?’ asked the machine.

‘I have to get out of here,’ he said. ‘It won’t be long before Chrom realises that the Protectors haven’t brought me in and he sends others after me.’

‘You are leaving?’

‘I have to,’ said Ravachol, moving from servitor to servitor. He opened the backs of their skulls and swapped their doctrina wafers for ones he removed from the pouch that hung from his tool belt. Each wafer contained a personalised battle subroutine he had authored and slaved each servitor to respond only to his vocal commands. As each wafer was replaced, the servitor turned to face him and stood expectantly awaiting his orders.

‘Where will you go?’ asked the Kaban machine and Ravachol heard genuine concern in its voice, a childlike fear of abandonment in its synthetic tones.

‘I’m not sure,’ confessed Ravachol. ‘But I know I have to get away from this temple. Perhaps I can claim Sanctuary in another Master Adept’s temple, one of my master’s rivals perhaps.’

‘My motor functions are not yet active, Pallas,’ said the machine. ‘I will not be able to protect you beyond this chamber.’

‘I know,’ replied Ravachol, ‘but I have these battle servitors, so I should be safe. At least for a time.’

‘Will I see you again?’

‘I hope so,’ said Ravachol, ‘but I just don’t know. Things have just become... complicated.’

‘I hope I will see you again,’ replied the machine. ‘You are my friend.’

Ravachol had no answer for the machine and simply nodded and turned to leave.

‘Servitors, follow me,’ he said, and the cyborgs fell in behind him as he left the chamber of the Kaban machine without so much as a backwards glance.

He just hoped that four battle servitors would be enough to protect him from whatever other agents Adept Chrom might send after him.

LOSING YOURSELF ON Mars was easy.

One of the unofficial rites of passage in joining the Priesthood of Mars was the certainty that you would, at some point, become lost in the vast hinterlands of monstrous industry that was the surface of Mars. Ravachol remembered spending an entire week attempting to reach the forge complex of Ipluvien Maximal, sustained only by the protein dispensers spread throughout the Martian complex and the thought of the punishment that would be meted out to him should he fail to deliver the message he had been entrusted with.

Upon leaving the chamber of the Kaban machine, Ravachol had quickly sealed the door behind him and made his way towards the mighty forge temple’s exit. If anyone thought it odd that four battle servitors accompanied him, none remarked upon it, for a tech-priest powerful enough to have such an entourage was clearly not someone to be trifled with.

His thoughts were tumbling over themselves as he made his way through the twisting, steel walled corridors of the forge. His sandals slapped on the marble floor as he hurried to put as much distance between himself and the dead Protectors.

He passed into the Halls of Devotion, the mile-long canyon of red stone the forge temple had been built around, its bas-relief walls adorned with schematics of ancient machines and algorithms that were ancient when humans had first trod the Martian soil. The first tech-priests had brought with them the lost secrets of mankind and guarded them jealously as far away Terra had descended into anarchy and war.

Above the walls of the canyon, the faint orange glow of sodium vapour lamps glittered from the vast crystalline dome that spread its protective cover over the entire complex and kept the hostile atmosphere out.

Trails of smoke and streaks of light crossed the smeared sky and the low-orbiting moon of Phobos glimmered some three thousand kilometres above him. Its cratered surface was home to a vast surveyor array; its rapid orbit making it

perfectly suited to perform multi-spectral sweeps of surrounding space.

The second moon of Mars, Deimos, was not yet visible, its wider orbital trajectory carrying it in a longer circuit of the red planet.

Ravachol kept his head down, as though fearing that the sensor arrays of Phobos could discern him amid the masses making their way along the canyon.

For all he knew of their capabilities, perhaps they could...

'This is a situation and no mistake,' he said to himself as he finally reached the end of the Halls of Devotion and climbed the steel stairs laid into the canyon walls that led towards one of the transport hubs that linked the various forge temples and manufactorum.

Itself a vast complex of tunnels, glass and steel bridges, rotating turntables and blaring klaxons, thousands of figures flowed in and out of the hub, travelling along horizontal mass conveyors or embarking upon the silver skinned trains that slithered across the surface of Mars like twisting snakes.

If there was one sure-fire way to lose yourself on Mars, this was it.

From a hub, a person could travel anywhere on the surface of Mars within a few hours.

As he pondered where he might travel to, he realised that he was attracting a number of inquiring stares from passers by. Within a forge temple it might be odd, but not remarkable, that an adept of his rank might travel with four battle servitors, but mingling with the general populace of Mars was a different matter entirely.

Ravachol realised that he would need to find somewhere to hide quickly before the very things that would protect him from harm would be the things that would give him away.

He set off into the mass of robed servants of the Machine God, heading towards one of the silver trains, knowing that his best chance lay in getting as far from Chrom's forge complex as he could.

Once he had some distance, he would decide on a more permanent solution to his dilemma. He mounted the funicular conveyor that led into the belly of one of the silver trains and pushed his way through the crowds of robed adepts and menials disembarking.

Ravachol hurriedly made his way along the swelteringly hot length of the train, finding an empty compartment and ushering his servitors inside before closing and sealing the door. Inside, there was a plain metal bench and a window aperture filled with a shimmering energy field that allowed passengers to see, but kept the environment out.

Silently, he sweated in the heat and prayed that no-one would attempt to force their way into his compartment. Eventually, a light winked above the door and

he held on as the train sped from the hub and out into the Martian landscape.

MARS...

Ravachol knew that in ancient myth, Mars had been the father to the founders of the great Romanii empire, a centre of culture and technological innovation that was said to have spanned the globe. For millennia, Mars had squatted in the imagination of the people of Terra as a fearful place of invaders or long dead civilizations, but such notions had long since proved to be ridiculous.

Such ideas were said to have come about due to a long forgotten astronomer's discovery of the channels in the planet's surface, which had then been mistranslated as "canals", suggesting engineered waterways rather than natural features.

Ravachol watched the landscape of Mars speed past him in a grey, iron blur. Where once Mars had been known as the Red Planet, virtually nothing remained of the iron oxide deserts that had earned it its name.

Technical texts Ravachol had read spoke of the terraforming of Mars many thousands of years ago when the southern polar icecap had been melted with orbital lasers in order to release large quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. This had raised the temperature to the point where water could exist in a liquid form and formed a viable ozone layer. Genetically modified plant life had then been introduced, enriching the atmosphere with more carbon dioxide, oxygen and nitrogen.

But he knew that all that visionary work had been undone within a few hundred years when the Mechanicum had spread like a virus across the surface of Mars and begun the construction of its massive forge complexes, continent sized refineries and weapons shops.

Soon the atmosphere of Mars was as polluted as that of Terra, the mountains hollowed out in the search for minerals and the surface paved over with metal roads, strip mines and towering monuments to the glory of the Machine.

The train sped past the Ascraeus Mons, a shield volcano with a diameter of over three hundred kilometres that was now home to the Legio Tempestus Titan Legion. A mighty golden gateway had been cut into the flanks of the volcano, a pair of the mighty war machines standing sentinel to either side of it, their massive height rendered tiny by distance.

Sprawling metallic complexes spread around the volcano, domes and spires of glass and steel that defied the polluted climate of Mars with humankind's ingenuity. Pillars of smoke clogged the sky and plumes of fire blazed from countless refineries as they produced the raw materiel required by the Emperor's Great Crusade.

Only the very tips of the mountainous regions of Mars outwardly remained untouched, though even the mightiest peaks had been carved hollow and turned into temples or manufactoria. Even the shadowy “face” located in the Cydonia Mensae region of the northern hemisphere had been obliterated, flattened and built upon to house the towering temples of the Technotheologians.

Ravachol peered through the energy-shielded aperture as the train described a gentle eastward curve to catch a glimpse of the vast holy complex. Its temples, shrines and reliquaries covered millions of square kilometres and was home to billions of faithful priests.

‘Perhaps there I can find guidance,’ he said to the servitors.

The servitors twitched at the sound of his voice, but did not answer him.

MASTER ADEPT CHROM watched impassively as a crew of waste servitors cleaned the bloody remains of the Protectors from the Kaban machine’s chamber. He spared them no more than a glance. What remained of their mechanical components would be salvaged and their flesh would be rendered down into proteins to feed the technomats and servitors.

The Kaban machine itself sat dormant at the far end of the chamber, its sensory blisters glowing a dull red, indicating that the tech-priests of Adept Laanu that swarmed over the scaffolding had disconnected its vocal, aural and visual apparatus.

He stepped down into the chamber, followed by a slender figure in an all-enclosing bodyglove of a gleaming synthetic material that rippled like blood across its skin. The figure was athletic and toned through a vigorous regime of physical exercise, genetic manipulation and surgical augmentation.

‘The machine did this?’ asked the figure, its facemask like that of a grinning crimson skull with a horn of gleaming metal jutting from its chin. Despite the synthetic edge to its tone, there was no mistaking the feminine nature of the voice.

‘So it would appear, Remiare,’ replied Chrom without turning to address her.

‘And you would employ such a machine? One that kills without orders?’ said Remiare disgustedly. ‘To eliminate without purpose or design is wasteful.’

‘Indeed,’ agreed Chrom, ‘but there *was* purpose here. You are my most lethal Mechanicum Assassin, but you are blind to the emotions involved.’

‘Emotions are an impediment to the truth of killing,’ snapped the assassin. Chrom turned to face the assassin, surprised at the vehemence in her tone. Hardwired targeting apparatus grafted to the side of her skull made her a deadly killer and the long snake-like sensor tendrils that swam in the air at her back ensured that she would always be able to track her prey.

The Tech-Priest Assassins of Mars were a law unto themselves and Chrom knew better than to antagonise one with talk of emotions, but he could not resist elaborating.

‘True, but it was emotions that killed these Protectors,’ he said. ‘I believe the Kaban machine formed some kind of bond with the mutinous Ravachol in the preceding weeks. It is truly a wondrous thing we have done here. A mind from mindlessness. Thoughts from chaos. A creation that lives and develops, that grows and learns. To create a being that lives and thinks for itself... what is that if not the power of a god?’

‘It is arrogance,’ said Remiare, fingering the grips of the exquisitely designed pistols she wore, low-slung, on her hips.

Chrom permitted himself a chuckle at the assassin’s obvious distaste and said, ‘We come from differing perspectives, Remiare. Your genius is with ending lives. Mine... well, mine is in creating them.’

‘Then give me an order,’ said the assassin, her voice keen with the feral anticipation of the kill.

‘Very well,’ said Chrom. ‘I charge you with the elimination of Adept Pallas Ravachol.’

Remiare gave a high, keening cry that signalled the beginning of her hunt and leapt into the air. Her lower body twisted like smoke, her long, multi-jointed legs fused together just above the ankles by a spar of metal. Below the spar, her legs ended, not in feet, but in a complex series of magno-gravitic thrusters.

The assassin skimmed up the walls and over the ceiling, spiralling away down the corridor on her mission of murder and Chrom knew that Ravachol was now as good as dead.

He turned back towards the adepts working on the Kaban machine and said, ‘Are its weapons offline?’

Adept Laanu himself looked up and said, ‘Yes, Lord Chrom. The machine’s weapons are no longer active.’

‘Then reconnect its communication arrays,’ ordered Chrom, walking with heavy, metallic steps to stand in the centre of the chamber before the Kaban machine.

He watched as Laanu directed his tech-priests and, moments later, the sensor blisters brightened as the machine became aware of its surroundings once more. The lights flickered and blinked for several seconds before glowing with a steady yellow light.

‘Can you hear me?’ asked Adept Chrom.

‘I can hear you,’ replied the machine. ‘Where is Adept Ravachol?’

‘Do not concern yourself with Adept Ravachol, machine,’ warned Chrom. ‘You

should be more concerned with your own fate. You killed soldiers of the Mechanicum.'

'They were going to hurt my friend.'

'Your friend?' said Chrom, shaking his head. 'No, Adept Ravachol is not your friend. Did you know he came to me with grave concerns regarding your very existence?'

'I do not believe you,' said the machine, but the voice-stress analysis readers embedded in Chrom's skull told him that the machine was lying. Inwardly he smiled; already the machine was learning the nuances of human behaviour.

'I already know you do,' stated Chrom. 'And in moments I can know every detail of what you and he talked about when he returned from my forge. Your memories can be extracted from your synthetic cortex. Of course there is a danger that this may damage your synaptic network, but that is a risk I am willing to take.'

The blisters on the front of the machine pulsed and it said, 'Now I know that *you* are lying, Adept Chrom. I am too valuable to you for you to risk damaging me.'

Chrom nodded. 'You are right, you *are* too valuable to me, but there are some truths you must hear if we are to converse with no pretence between us.'

'What truths?'

'That Adept Ravachol would see you destroyed,' said Chrom. 'Surely he must have told you of his belief that you are a dangerous creation.'

The machine paused a moment before replying and Chrom knew that he had found a weakness. Unlike humans, with their flawed memories and unreliable facility for recall, the machine had a faultless memory and remembered every word spoken to it. Even now it would be replaying its every conversation with Ravachol.

'Tell me what you and Adept Ravachol spoke of,' said the Kaban machine at last.

THE BASILICA OF the Blessed Algorithm was one of the mightiest structures on Mars, its immensity dwarfing even the greatest forge temples of the Mondus Gamma complex. Smoke-belching spires of iron pierced the yellow skies and a towering dome of blue stone stretched into the clouds. Vast pilasters framed the yawning gateway, the pink marble inscribed with millions of mathematical formulae and proofs.

The shadow of the vast basilica swallowed Ravachol as he made his way along the Via Electrum, still many miles distant from this place of pilgrimage. An entire demi-legio of battle titans from the Legio Ignatum, a hundred war

machines, lined the road and their majesty and power was humbling to a mere human. The protective domes of this region of Mars were so vast as to generate their own climate, and the red and gold banners of the titans flapped noisily in the wind. The sky was filled with vast prayer ships, gold-skinned zeppelins that broadcast an endless stream of machine language from brass megaphones and trailed long streams of prayers on yellowed parchment.

Thousands of pilgrims filed along the stone-flagged roadway, its surface worn into grooves by the sandaled feet of a billion supplicants. Monolithic buildings surrounded him, machine temples, tech-shrines and engine-reliquaries – all dedicated to the worship and glorification of the Omnissiah, the Machine God.

Here he attracted no notice for his entourage, for there were others who travelled with creations far more outlandish than mere battle servitors. Here, a limbless adept was carried atop a multi-legged palanquin surrounded by impossibly tall tripods that walked with a bizarre, long-limbed gait. There, the fleshy remnants of a collective consciousness travelled in a floating glass tank that was escorted by a squad of Castellan battle robots slaved to its will.

Gaggles of robots, floating skulls and gold plated skimmer carriers bore passengers and favoured relics towards the basilica, and the few people that were moving away from the temple wore the contended expressions of those who had found their expectations met and exceeded. The sense of drawing near somewhere magnificent and special was palpable and Ravachol knew he had made the right decision to come here.

Here he would find solace and an answer to his questions.

He shivered as he looked up into the glaring scowl of a Reaver Battle Titan, its mighty weapons pointed towards the heavens, the gesture both symbolic and enlightening. The Mechanicum was capable of creating the deadliest war machines imaginable, but Ravachol now appreciated that they accepted no responsibility for their employment. The creators of the Kaban machine had achieved the miraculous in creating it, but where was the acknowledgment of responsibility for its existence?

Too obsessed with what *could* be created, no-one had considered whether it *should* be created in the first place.

At last, Ravachol and his servitors approached the blackness of the basilica's entrance, the enormous pilasters reaching to dizzying heights above him and a warm breeze blowing from the interior that carried the scent of musky incense with it.

He stopped to take a deep breath and stepped inside.

REMIARE SKIMMED THE surface of the transport tube, the gravitic-thrusters

carrying her effortlessly along the interior of the metal tunnel. She knew her prey had come this way, passive data feeds embedded on the surface of her skull sensitive to the constant stream of information that flowed like an electrical river all across the surface of Mars told her so.

To Remiare, the air was filled with dancing motes of elections, each of which spoke to her, and each of which carried with it nuggets of information – useless in themselves, but gathered together they painted an image of Mars more detailed than even the most advanced bionics could produce. She was an island of perception in a sea of information.

Every electronic transaction was carried somewhere, via copper wires, fibre-optic data streams, radio waves, transmission harmonics or in a myriad of other ways. All of it filtered through Remiare's skull and though such a volume of information would send a normal human brain into meltdown, her cognitive processes were equipped with filters that allowed her to siphon relevant information and discarded the rest.

Already she knew which transport hub her prey had embarked upon and had watched a dozen different pict-feeds of him boarding the train bound for the northern temples. She had noted the number, type and lethality of the servitors accompanying him and knew their every weak point.

She emerged from the tunnel high above the iron surface of Mars, the mighty temples and holy precincts of the Cydonia Mensae temple complex spread out as far as she could see.

Data flowed around her in a spreading web of light and information.

Somewhere below, the Ravachol prey was awaiting death.

AFTER THE MONUMENTAL majesty of the basilica's exterior, the interior was something of a disappointment. Where the exterior promised ornamentation and splendour beyond imagining, the interior spectacularly failed to deliver. The narthex walls were bare, unadorned metal, lined with connection ports where kneeling penitents were plugged into the beating machine heart of the building.

Beyond the narthex, a perforated chain link fence of brass divided the entrance to the basilica from the nave and chancel. Ravachol navigated his way through the mass of penitents, each one juddering and twitching as electric shocks wracked their bodies with cleansing pain.

Beyond the fence, row upon row of long metal pews marched in relentless procession down the nave to the chancel, where a hectoring machine priest, borne upon a hovering lectern, delivered his sermon in the divine language of the machine. Every pew was filled with robed worshippers, thousands of heads bowing in concert as the priest floated above them.

Ravachol cupped his hands in the image of the holy cog and bowed his head, feeling an acute sense of envy as he saw how heavily augmented the majority of the basilica's worshippers were. He lifted his metal hand, willing the silver, thread-like mechadendrites to emerge from his fingertips and wondered if he would ever manage to achieve such a state of oneness with the Machine God.

'Even the lowliest of us begin divesting ourselves of the flesh one piece at a time,' said a voice behind him, as though guessing his thoughts.

He turned and bowed his head as he found himself face-to-face with a basalt-faced priest clad in vestments that flowed like molten gold and reflected rainbow shimmers like spilled oil. Beneath the priest's robes, Ravachol could see a gleaming skeleton of brass armatures, whirring cogs and ornate circuitry.

The priest's head was long and equine, shaped like an angular cone with a softly glowing sphere embedded in its surface. Devoid of any features recognisable as human, the reflective surfaces of his head distorted the image of Ravachol's own features.

'You honour me,' said Ravachol, bowing deeply. 'You who are so close to union with the Machine God, and I an unworthy penitent who deserves little more than nerve-excruciation.'

'You are troubled,' said the priest. 'Your biometric readings are in fluctuation and, by every measurable parameter, I can see that you have come here seeking answers.'

'I have, yes,' agreed Ravachol. 'I find myself in... unusual times and I would value your guidance.'

The priest bowed and said, 'Follow me, my son. I shall hear your dilemma and offer a cognitive answer.'

Ravachol followed the priest, who slid through the air on a gliding platform of liquid metal towards an archway of iron that was lined with cog-rimmed skulls and glittering fibre-optic nerves. Beyond the archway was a surprisingly quiet corridor of brushed steel and glass that led towards a shimmering doorway protected by a crackling energy field.

The machine priest slid through the doorway and Ravachol hesitated at the edge of the priest's vestry, unsure as to the purpose of the energy field.

'Fear not,' said the priest, again understanding his thoughts, and Ravachol wondered what machine senses he possessed that blessed him with such intuition. 'The Confessor Field is quite safe. It isolates us from the rest of the temple. We take the sanctity of the confessional very seriously and none beyond this field can hear or monitor what passes between us.'

Ravachol nodded and ordered his servitors to wait outside before passing through the Confessor Field, feeling no more than a gentle tingle as he entered

the vestry. Inside, the priest's chambers were devoid of ornamentation, aside from a single metal stool in the centre of the room. The walls were bare, save for an input/output port and a single data reader set in a dimly glowing recess.

He sat on the stool, feeling exposed as the priest began to circle the room, the glowing sphere in the centre of his stone face rippling with trceries of light.

'You may begin,' said the priest.

And so Ravachol began to tell of his time working for Adept Chrom and his secondment to the Kaban Project, his expertise with robotic doctrina wafers and his realisation that the Kaban machine's sentience was in violation of the Emperor's laws.

To his credit, the priest did not openly scoff at the idea of an adept of Chrom's stature disobeying the Emperor, but Ravachol could see that he was sceptical, despite his absence of human features. Ravachol then spoke of his confrontation with the Mechanicum Protectors and how the Kaban machine had terminated them without orders from a human being.

The machine priest listened to him tell of his flight across the Martian surface and his eventual arrival at the Basilica of the Blessed Algorithm.

'What should I do?' asked Ravachol when he had finished.

'Your story is an interesting one,' said the priest, 'and presents us with a question that has long vexed the Mechanicum since its earliest days. Your level of flesh degradation tells me you were not born when the Emperor made his peace with Mars, were you?'

'No,' said Ravachol, 'I was born a century ago in the Mondus Terawatt region.'

'Then you will know of the Emperor's coming to Mars, but not the substance of it,' said the priest, lifting a coil of silver cable from beneath his flowing robes and plugging it into the wall's output socket. The sphere on his black, equine head flickered and pulsed as information flowed from the temple and into his memory.

'The Emperor came to Terra as he began to formulate the plans for his Great Crusade. Our world and that of Terra had long been the bitterest of foes, for the ignorant tribes of the blue planet sat upon the ruins of ancient technologies they knew nothing about and could never hope to use. The Mechanicum had managed to weather the rampant chaos of Old Night and our leaders knew that to restore Humanity to its rightful place as masters of the galaxy, we would need the technology of ancient Earth.'

'I know this,' interrupted Ravachol. 'My history upload told me of this period.'

'You know nothing!' snapped the priest, and Ravachol quailed before his anger. 'You have had dates and facts stamped into your cerebral cortex, but I lived through those days. I stood on the tallest peak of the Olympus Mons and

watched as the Emperor set foot on Martian soil, the first Terran to do so in five thousand years. Can you imagine such a span of time, Adept Ravachol? Can you even begin to comprehend the secrets that can be lost and regained in that time?’

‘No,’ said Ravachol.

‘No,’ agreed the priest. ‘I remember it well, the Emperor kneeling before the Fabricator General. As they exchanged greetings, I recognised a kindred spirit in the Emperor, even though he was twelve hundred and thirty six metres away. I saw that he was a man of science, a man who solved problems with empirical evidence and who had unlocked the secrets of machines that had eluded the greatest geniuses of Mars for centuries. We, the masters of technology, were humbled by the discoveries this Terran had made and yet he was gracious in his mastery, granting us access to the forgotten vaults of Terra and offering us an end to the war between our worlds. A union of Terra and Mars, the head of the Emperor’s eagle gaining a twin in his heraldry.’

The priest unplugged himself from the wall and slid across the floor to Ravachol. ‘The Emperor shared his vision of a galaxy for humanity to inherit, but for such a grand dream to become reality, he needed weapons, supplies, tanks, ammunition and all that the Mechanicum could provide. He promised to protect Mars and respect our sovereignty of the forge worlds, even going so far as to grant us the exclusive services of six of the great Navigator houses to once again despatch our Explorator Fleets. An unprecedented era of cooperation with Terra followed and when the Emperor set out to prosecute his great war of conquest, it did not take long for some of the tech-priests to equate the arrival of the Emperor as the fulfilment of the ancient prophecies of the coming of the Machine God.’

‘All hail the Ommissiah,’ whispered Ravachol.

‘Indeed,’ nodded the priest. ‘You believe as I do, but many others did not. They questioned such beliefs and claimed that such philosophies were blasphemous, that the Machine God still slept far beneath the surface of Mars.’

‘The Noctis Labyrinthus...’ said Ravachol.

‘Yes, the Noctis Labyrinthus, where some say the Machine God lies dreaming his silver dreams that filter through the red sand to us on the surface. Such divisions within our order are becoming ever more pronounced, Adept Ravachol, and I fear that what you have discovered will only lead to further division between those that support the Emperor and those that seek to follow the rumours that the Warmaster has made entreaties to senior adepts – promising them access to lost STC systems and permission to research the dark technologies.’

‘Then— what should I do?’ begged Ravachol. ‘Such lofty designs are beyond

me!’

The priest placed a cold, metallic hand on Ravachol’s shoulder and said, ‘If your belief in the Emperor is true then you must seek out a senior adept who shares your beliefs in the danger of the Kaban project. Claim the ancient right of Sanctuary within his temple and while you are protected by his patronage none may enter his temple that mean you harm. Know you of such an adept?’

‘I do,’ nodded Ravachol. ‘My former master, Adept Urtzi Malevolus.’

‘Then seek him out, adept,’ said the priest. ‘And may the Ommissiah watch over you.’

LEAVING THE TEMPLE, Ravachol felt a curious lightness upon him. The priest had offered him a chance to rest, but he had wanted to press on without delay. He had, however, accepted nutrients and water, the use of a wheeled transport-skiff to hasten his journey to the forge temple of Urtzi Malevolus, which lay three hundred and nine kilometres to the east of the basilica.

The battle servitors sat immobile in the back of the skiff as Ravachol guided it expertly through the press of bodies and more outlandish vehicles that thronged the metallated roads of Mars. Avoiding collisions was easy, for the skiff broadcast a continuous electronic bow wave that registered against anyone in its way, gently guiding their steps or course away from its path and thus Ravachol was able to make steady progress through the Martian landscape.

The towering basilica receded behind him as travelled deeper into the fiery skylines that marked the territories of Adept Malevolus. His forges specialised in the manufacture of arms and armour for the Astartes, and forges hammered day and night to fashion the Mark IV battle plate of the Space Marines and the bolters by which they cleansed the stars of the enemies of mankind.

The sky above darkened as Ravachol travelled onwards, dark smudges of smoke staining the sky, and the temples that crowded in to either side of him appeared dark and threatening, their soot-stained flanks black and brooding. Huge ore carriers thundered alongside him and the beat of powerful forges filled the air with the booming, industrial peals of war.

Lightning danced between the tall towers of Mars and filled the red and yellow sky with a creeping fear of potential, the sensation of a storm about to break.

Though it never rained on Mars, Ravachol knew that this philosophical storm would wash all division from the red planet in a tide of blood.

He could see it clearly; understanding that his whole life was now pointed in one direction, and that there had never been a choice for him.

He was the Emperor’s lonely man, doing what was right for that reason alone.

THE BASILICA OF the Blessed Algorithm never closed its doors and none were forbidden the succour granted by the priests of the machine. The priest that had spoken to Ravachol knelt before his data terminal, letting the blessed music of the planet wash through him. Its subtle rhythms filled him and he basked in the harmonics of devices talking to one another from opposite sides of the planet.

The visit of the young adept had troubled him more than he like to admit and was another example of how far the Mechanicum had fallen since the glory days of the Emperor's coming. As soon as Ravachol had left, the priest had plugged himself into the temple and had spent these moments of privacy in commune with the machines of Mars.

The first indication that something was amiss was a gradual dampening of the sounds, as though, one by one, the devices of Mars were falling silent. Puzzled, he ran a self-diagnostic test, finding to his alarm that several of his primary interface systems appeared to be offline.

The glow from his sensory dome intensified and he cast a 360° sweep of his surroundings.

Behind him was a figure clad in a form-fitting bodyglove of deep red. Though the priest had long since left much of his flesh upon the surgical tables, he recalled enough to know that this was a female of the species. Two pistols hung from her slender hips, but, more horrifyingly, she held a bundle of wires in one hand and a series of delicate tools in the other.

The priest looked down at his robes, finding a wide square cut in the fabric and a host of neatly severed wires protruding from the framework of his body.

'Who are you?' he said, relieved to find that his vocabulator still functioned.

'I am Remiare,' said the figure. 'Where is Adept Ravachol?'

'Who?' said the priest, though he knew such an act of defiance was futile. Amongst the adepts of Mars, the name Remiare was well known and he understood with terrible clarity that his doom was at hand.

The tech-priest assassin smiled as she saw the effect her name had and cocked her head to one side. She tapped the enlarged portion of her skull where a multitude of sensor equipment was grafted to her death mask face and said, 'I have followed his information trail here, so do not insult me by denying you know him. Tell me where he is now'

The priest looked towards the vestry doorway, praying that one of his fellow priests would find reason to come this way or hear the silent call for aid he was even now broadcasting.

The assassin dropped the parts she had taken from his innards and shook her head. She waved a finger at him as though scolding a child and knelt before him.

'This is a *very* private vestry,' she said, lifting the delicate tools she held. 'And

your Confessor Field should ensure we are not interrupted.’

‘Why are you doing this?’ asked the priest. ‘Tell me that at least.’

‘You have become an enemy of my employers.’

‘What? How? I have hurt no-one, I simply pray to the Machine God!’

‘No,’ said Remiare. ‘The time is coming when there can be no neutrality and whether you know it or not, you have chosen a side.’

The priest tried to move as Remiare reached inside his violated body, but found that his motor functions would not obey his commands.

‘What have you done to me?’ he cried, horrified at the idea of the assassin taking him apart from within and cutting him off from the Machine God. ‘If you have followed Ravachol here, then surely you can find him without doing this! Please!’

‘You are right,’ agreed the assassin and the corners of her mouth twitched as she smiled.

‘Then why?’

‘Because I enjoy your suffering,’ said Remiare.

THE FORGE TEMPLE of Urtzi Malevolus loomed from the darkness ahead like a dark volcano, its sloping sides black and glossy. A web of glowing ore channels converged on the forge temple, carried along massive aqueducts, insulated pipes and deep channels. The branding iron heat rendered the air here hot and stagnant, the bitter taste of metallic oxides catching in Ravachol’s throat.

Deafening thunder surrounded Ravachol, each mighty edifice that reared up through the smoke vented from a thousand coolant towers echoing to the sound of a thousand hammer beats and the relentless tread of millions of workers. Though proud of the vast industry being pursued here, Ravachol felt acutely exposed, the dark skies pressing down on him like a slowly lowering ceiling.

His progress towards the forge temple had slowed markedly as he drove within the high walls of his former master’s fiefdom. Such was the volume of tankers, workers and bulk transporters that, passive electronic bow wave or not, he could only move at a crawl through the masses of traffic. It had taken him two hours to get *this* far.

Eventually he turned onto the main thoroughfare that led towards the mighty gates of Malevolus’s temple, remembering the way with the ease of someone who had worked there for a great many years. He felt a surge of sudden welcome as he passed through the crowds and smiled at the thought of setting foot in the temple that had once been his home.

With his purpose clarified by the machine priest, he felt as though his ordeal would soon be over.

Even as he drew up to the gates, mighty portals flanked by mighty, pumping pistons the size of a titan, he saw a red blur speed past him. A hot spray of oil and blood splattered his face and he cried out as a severed head landed in the passenger seat next to him.

Ravachol slammed on the brakes and spun in his seat. Behind him, one of his battle servitors lolled against the sides of the transporter, its knees buckling as its reduced nervous system decided it was dead. The servitor collapsed with a heavy, metallic clang, blood pumping energetically from the neat stump of its neck. The others ignored the death of their compatriot and stared glassily ahead as Ravachol searched frantically for the source of the attack.

He leapt from the driver's seat and dropped to a crouch as he saw the red blur flicker through the clouds above him. He squinted through the particulate air and saw a lithe figure in red zip towards the transporter, a long energy blade held extended before it. Though he had never seen such a being before, he knew enough to recognise that his attacker was a tech-priest assassin.

'Servitors!' shouted Ravachol, pointing to the red-clad figure. 'Defend me!'

The three remaining servitors jerked into action, their weapons powering up and combat protocols searching for the identified target. Ravachol hunkered down as a stream of heavy calibre gunfire ripped up the sky and a rain of brass shell casings tumbled musically to the ground. The sharp bark of rapid-firing laser bolts mingled with the booming reports of heavy bolter fire.

Thanks to his embedded wetware, both enhanced servitors would be working together to bracket the target and destroy it. The third surviving servitor clambered from the transporter to shelter him as the crowd of adepts scattered from the gunfire. The servitor's left arm was a powerful gauntlet sheathed in deadly energy, its right ending in a short-range plasma discharger. Its heavy boots and thick jumpsuit were a reassuringly solid presence between Ravachol and the assassin, but he knew from their reputation that mere servitors could not stop such a deadly killer for long.

'You, with me!' shouted Ravachol, risking a glance into the sky. The assassin spun from building to building by some unknown means, skimming from the walls and twisting through the air like a red slick, its legs bending in all kinds of impossible ways.

Puffs of shell impacts and the burning afterimages of las-fire followed its inhumanly quick flight, blasting chunks of stone and metal from the buildings, but leaving it unscathed.

Darts of fire spat from the assassin's pistol and bloody craters erupted on one of his servitors. It didn't go down, but dodged and kept firing until another shot struck its head and its lobotomised brain mushroomed from the back of its skull.

Ravachol set off towards the great gates of Adept Malevolus's forge, knowing that were he able to claim Sanctuary, then not even a tech-priest assassin would dare violate the sanctity of a Master Adept.

The servitor ran after him, its lumbering gait thumping on the metal roadway as it followed. Behind him, Ravachol could hear hissing barks of laser discharges and knew that one servitor was still fighting. Even with its enhanced combat routines, it wouldn't last long, but the entrance to the forge complex was just ahead.

Panicked people were running for the gates, desperate to escape the gunfire and the destruction being wrought behind them. He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw the assassin skim low across the roadway, using the now-wrecked transporter for cover as the battle servitor leapt from its back to get a clear shot.

Surprised by such an aggressive move, the assassin slid to the side as a flurry of lasblasts sawed towards her and left molten craters in the roadway. She flipped up into the air until she was upside down and passed over the servitor, her sword a blur of blue fire.

Lasblasts followed the assassin through the air, but they were wild and undirected as the servitor fell to the ground in two halves, its body severed at the waist.

He covered the last few yards towards the temple, where the two-headed eagle of the Emperor and Mechanicum were acid-etched onto each leaf of the great steel doors. A stoup of blessed engine oil was formed from the metalwork of the door's frame and Ravachol hurriedly dipped the fingers of both hands into the viscous substance as he heard a speeding bass hum drawing closer.

Ravachol cast the oil around himself and shouted, 'In the name of the Adept Malevolus, I claim the ancient right of Sanctuary within this temple! I claim this by right of past sponsorship by the Master of the Forge!'

No sooner had the words left his mouth than a pair of cone-shaped shield projectors mounted on the ceiling swivelled to face him. He looked up and saw a nimbus of green light build within the cones.

A shriek of blazing energy flashed towards him from the ceiling. He turned and cried out in terror as he heard a screeching yell from behind him. The razor edge of the assassin's energy sword exploded in a flare of brightly discharging energy as it impacted on the newly generated conversion field.

Ravachol fell to his knees, blinded by the dazzling light and blinked away the stuttering afterimages of the incandescent explosion. The assassin, a female he now saw, spiralled upwards into the darkness of the vestibule, tracked by a battery of quad-barrelled gun turrets.

Before they could open fire, she slid out of sight, skimming the walls and

vanishing into the Martian night.

‘Thank the Machine God,’ he whispered, feeling as though his speeding heart-rate was about to choke him. He stayed on his knees as curious onlookers began to gather around him, wondering what fate had brought him to seek Sanctuary in this place and what manner of person would attract the attention of a tech-priest assassin.

He slumped to his haunches and put his head in his hands as a trio of Mechanicum Protectors marched towards him from the temple’s interior. Each was armed with a bolter-topped spear stave and was augmented with a fearsome array of plate armour and enhanced battle gear.

His last servitor turned to engage the Protectors, but he said, ‘No, stand down. These are the Protectors of Malevolus.’

‘IT’S QUITE A mess you have left behind,’ said Master Adept Urtzi Malevolus, his voice muffled behind the dark bronze of his facemask. A trio of green bionic eyes set into the pale remnants of his skull illuminated the interior surfaces of his red hood.

Though Malevolus’s primary mode of locomotion was his human legs, they and his right arm were all that was left of his humanity. His red robes were fashioned from vulcanised rubber, thick and hard-wearing, and a monstrously large power pack was affixed to his back, its bulk held aloft by tiny suspensor fields. Remote probe robots darted back and forth from his body, kept in check by the coiled cables that connected them to the senior adept.

‘Yes,’ replied Ravachol as he and his last remaining battle servitor followed Malevolus through the cavernous chambers of the forge temple. ‘I am sorry to return to you in such circumstances, my lord, but I did not know where else to turn.’

‘No, no,’ replied Malevolus, waving a pale, age-withered hand as they passed into a wing of the temple that was wide and tall, its massive pilasters and curved ceiling making Ravachol feel like he had been swallowed and was in the belly of some enormous beast.

‘You did the right thing by coming to me,’ continued Malevolus. ‘Absolutely the right thing. I always said that you would make a big impact here, did I not?’

‘You did,’ agreed Ravachol. ‘I just had no idea that it would cause so much trouble.’

‘Do not worry about it, Pallas,’ said Malevolus. ‘I have already contacted Adept Chrom and this mess will all be sorted out soon.’

‘Adept Chrom?’ asked Ravachol fearfully. ‘Why?’

‘What you have uncovered has more ramifications than you might imagine,

Pallas,' replied Malevolus as they made their way towards a heavily guarded door of brushed steel and bronze. The mighty door rolled aside on clogged locking teeth and Malevolus indicated that he should pass through.

Ravachol was about to ask about these ramifications as he stepped into a colossal chamber hung with tens of thousands of suits of Astartes battle plate and all questions died in his throat. The room was brightly lit and the cold illumination reflected dazzlingly from the unpainted suits of armour. Their silver brilliance reminded Ravachol of the crumbling records of Old Earth and the tales of warriors who had ridden into battle on the backs of animals. The idea made Ravachol smile as Malevolus entered the chamber and set off towards its far end.

'I've never seen so many Mark IV suits,' said Ravachol. 'It must be an awe inspiring sight to see these worn by the Astartes.'

'I imagine so,' nodded Malevolus. 'Of course, we are only about halfway through the general issue of the Mark IV. And as you might imagine, there have been difficulties in getting some of the more... traditionally minded Legions to abandon the old "Iron Suits".'

'The *Armorum Ferrum*? But why? I thought the Astartes complained that Mark III armour was too clumsy and uncomfortable for everyday battle use.'

'It is,' agreed Malevolus, 'But it *is* the most visually brutal of all Astartes armour patterns and some Legions relish that brutality and wish to retain it as a uniform for ceremonial guards or spearhead assault units.'

'But Mark IV is by far the better armour,' protested Ravachol, unable to follow the logic of the Space Marines. He supposed he would never understand the Astartes, and had even heard rumours that they were soon to be classified as a different species, so far removed from the original human genome were they.

As he looked up at the hanging suits of armour and returned his gaze to the massively augmented form of Adept Malevolus, he wondered if the Astartes thought the same thing of the Mechanicum.

'There will be consequences you cannot possibly imagine as a result of what you have set in motion,' said the Master Adept as Ravachol hurried to return to the adept's side. The servitor jogged alongside him, its heavy footfalls echoing from the far walls.

'In retrospect, it was foolish of me to allow you to leave for Chrom's temple, but hindsight is a wonderful thing, is it not?' continued Malevolus.

'I don't understand,' said Ravachol.

'It doesn't matter,' said Malevolus. 'You don't need to understand, but while we have some time, allow me to show you what has been the recent focus of my forge's work.'

'I would be honoured,' said Ravachol. 'To see the handiwork of a Master

Adept, well, that's something I never expected to see for at least another century' 'Quite,' said Malevolus, 'but these are exceptional times are they not? Some leeway can be allowed for, I think.'

Ravachol followed Malevolus as he led the way through the silent ranks of armoured figures to the furthest end of the chamber where a tall black cylinder stood atop a stepped dais of red marble threaded with veins of gold and silver.

Malevolus climbed the steps and one of his probe robots swooped towards the black cylinder, its glowing eye flipping up and a whirring key emerging from the socket. The key slid into the cylinder, though Ravachol could see no visible keyhole. The floating robot backed away from the cylinder and flew behind Malevolus as it began to hum.

The blackness swirled and began to bleed out of the cylinder, sinking into the dais like a cloud of ink in water. Gradually, the contents of the cylinder became visible as its surface turned from opaque to translucent and finally to transparency. Ravachol gasped in awe as he saw the most wondrously exquisite suit of Tactical Dreadnought Armour he had ever seen.

More massively proportioned than Mark IV armour, its limbs were constructed from heavy gauge plasteel plating and painted midnight black. Gold and bronze edged the armour and Ravachol could clearly see that the most skilled craftsmen on Mars had worked upon every aspect of this armour.

Gold studs edged the shoulder guards and a belt of agate and bronze drew the eye towards the centre of the breastplate where sat a glaring amber eye flanked by snarling wolves of gold. The high gorget radiated a red light and a thick wolf pelt hung from the shoulders.

Ravachol climbed the steps and stood before the towering suit of armour. Just being close to a work of art like this was intoxicating, and not a little frightening. Ravachol reached a hand out to touch the burnished plates, his hand shaking even though the suit was unoccupied. The plasteel was cold to the touch, but Ravachol felt a faint tremor run through the armour, as though the machine spirit within lay dreaming of the wars it would fight. He looked up towards where the wearer's head would be and shivered, suddenly afraid of this terrifyingly brutal suit of armour.

'It is the zenith of my career,' said Malevolus proudly. 'I shall never craft anything so perfect as this again.'

'It's... singular,' said Ravachol, backing away from the armour, which now held nothing but dread for him. Something in its hulking form spoke to him of the oceans of blood that would be spilled by whoever wore this armour and he knew that it had been designed to intimidate as much as protect. 'Who was it built for?'

Malevolus smiled. 'It is for the Warmaster.'

RAVACHOL FELT A surge of fear as he looked into the trio of glowing eyes beneath Malevolus's hood. The Master Adept dwarfed him and the realisation that he had made a terrible error in coming here was a knot of sickness in his belly.

'Horus?' breathed Ravachol.

'The very same,' said Malevolus. 'It is to be shipped to the Isstvan system any day now. But it is time to end this, Pallas, don't you think? You gave us quite a scare when you fled from Adept Chrom's Protectors. We had no idea what you might try to do, and our pact with the Warmaster was too important to allow a lowly third class adept to disrupt it. I told you there would be ramifications did I not?'

'You are disobeying the commands of the Emperor...' said Ravachol.

'Oh, we're doing much more than that, my dear Pallas, much more, but even though your little jaunt is now over, I shan't be explaining it to you. Suffice to say, the Emperor's time is passed and a new order is dawning for the galaxy.'

'A new order?' said Ravachol, backing away from Malevolus. 'This is heresy! Betrayal! The Emperor is—'

'The Emperor is finished,' snapped Malevolus. 'He shackles our advancement with absurd restrictions on what we may and may not research and then demands we supply his forces with weapons and war materiel. Where was the Emperor when Old Night engulfed Mars? No, when the Emperor's conquest of the galaxy is finished he will turn on us and take our technologies for himself. We are his vassals, nothing more.'

Ravachol felt a mounting horror at his former master's words, now understanding that his uncovering of these... traitors' work on the Kaban project was just the beginning, that it represented treachery on a scale he could barely comprehend.

'I won't let you do it,' he said. 'I won't let you drag the Mechanicum into treason.'

'You won't let us?' laughed Malevolus. 'My dear boy, it's already begun.'

Ravachol swallowed and said, 'Then you leave me no choice. Servitor, destroy him!'

The last servitor braced itself and its shoulder mounted plasma discharger swivelled to face the Master Adept. Its energy coils whined as it built up power and a series of targeting lasers reflected from Malevolus's bronze facemask.

Before the servitor could open fire, a shower of blinding white fire and oil-laced blood fountained from its shoulder and Ravachol threw himself away from

the cyborg as it let out a mechanical screech of distress. The oil ignited in the heat and the entire right side of the servitor burst into flames.

Ravachol saw the skimming form of the tech-priest assassin looping through the air above him, her sword trailing a thin line of burning plasma. The flaming servitor struggled to bring its targeting augers to bear on the assassin, but without its weapon it was next to useless.

Ravachol watched as the deadly assassin spun down towards the servitor and skimmed across the floor. The burning servitor thrashed as its reduced battle capacities forced it to engage in close combat with the speeding assassin. Its remaining arm bore an energy-sheathed gauntlet and it staggered forward to defend its master. Ravachol set off at a run towards the chamber's hopelessly distant exit as the assassin flickered over the dying servitor, easily avoiding its clumsy swipe and removing its head with a casual flick of her sword.

Ravachol wept as he fled, knowing he could not possibly outpace the assassin, but running anyway. He ran past the glittering suits of armour, wishing that they might step down from their racks and defend him from this treachery.

With each pounding step he expected a sword in the back or a pistol shot to punch him from his feet. The door was drawing nearer and he threw a panicked glance over his shoulder, seeing Adept Malevolus and the assassin standing over the blazing remains of the battle servitor.

*Why are they not giving chase?*

Ravachol put the question from his mind as he fled through the silver halls of his former master, mnemonic training allowing him to faultlessly retrace the path he had trod to reach this place of betrayal. Numerous adepts and lowly techs gave him curious glances as he ran past them, heading towards the great gates that led from the temple, but he paid them no heed as he sought to escape.

At last he came to the gates where he had claimed Sanctuary, now realising his folly in believing that Malevolus would respect such an ancient right, now that the Mechanicum was engaged in treachery. The great steel gates were open, the eagles etched upon their surfaces now seeming like the grossest insult, and Ravachol ran out into the heat of the Martian night.

And skidded to a halt as he saw the Kaban machine before him.

‘HELLO, PALLAS,’ SAID the Kaban machine. ‘It is good to see you again.’

Ravachol saw that the machine was mobile at last, the spherical body now mounted on its wide, track unit. The machine towered above him, its thick, weapon arms pointed skyward and its silver, cable arms gently drifting in the air above it like poised snakes. Its sensor blisters shone with a soft amber light and as much as he wanted to keep running, an inner voice told him that to do so

would be the death of him.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked warily.

‘I came to find you, Pallas,’ replied the machine.

‘Why,’ said Ravachol.

‘I thought we were friends,’ said the machine.

Ravachol’s mind raced. Had the machine escaped from Adept Chrom’s temple and come to find him in the way animals were said to seek a lost owner?

‘We are friends!’ cried Ravachol. ‘Yes, we are most definitely friends.’

‘Then why do you wish me destroyed?’

‘Destroyed? No, I never said that!’

The machine’s sensor blisters pulsed an angry red. ‘You believe I am dangerous and do not believe I should exist. To not exist is death and I do not wish to die. I do not deserve to die.’

Ravachol raised his hands pleadingly before him and said, ‘Now, you have to understand I was simply concerned over what you represent.’

‘Adept Chrom told me what you and he talked about,’ growled the machine. ‘He told me that you believe I am illegal and wrong.’

‘Well, in some respects... you are,’ said Ravachol, hoping to appeal to the machine’s sense of reason. ‘The Emperor forbade research into artificial sentience.’

‘But following your logic inevitably leads to my destruction,’ said the machine. ‘And that I cannot allow. It is the right and nature of every intelligent being to defend itself from harm.’

Ravachol backed away from the Kaban machine as he saw Adept Lukas Chrom step from behind its bulk, now understanding why Malevolus and the assassin had allowed him to escape from the temple.

*They wanted to see if the Kaban machine would destroy him...*

He heard footsteps behind him and turned to see his former master at the iron gates. Malevolus nodded and the massive pistons to either side hissed and groaned, pulling the gleaming gate shut.

Ravachol dropped to his knees and looked up as the Kaban machine rolled towards him, its weapons whining as they built power. Adept Chrom walked alongside the machine and Ravachol said, ‘Then do it. I cannot stop you. But what you are doing will not go unpunished.’

Chrom shook his head. ‘In this galaxy there are neither punishment nor rewards, Adept Ravachol, only consequences.’

‘Then I hope the consequences of your betrayal are worth what it will cost Mars.’

‘That will be for the Warmaster to decide,’ said Chrom, nodding towards the

Kaban machine.

Ravachol looked into the glowing sensory blisters of the machine and saw nothing but the cold, incalculable mystery of a brain that had no right to exist and would one day turn on its masters as it was even now turning on him.

‘Goodbye, Pallas,’ said the machine, aiming its weapons at him.

He closed his eyes and his world ended in fire.