

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000



**ADEPTUS MECHANICUS**  
**INFINITE CIRCUIT**

DAVID GUYMER

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# INFINITE CIRCUIT

David Guymer

Rain scalded the enamelled exterior of Borhus's battleplate, raising a senfgas hiss from the bridging organics between his gorget's soft seals and the gleaming gunmetal alloy that plated fifty-two per cent of the Space Marine's cephalic structure. He brought his magnoculars to his eyes with a soft whir, followed by a *click* as the left eyepiece interfaced with his bionics. As always there was a reflex instinct to blink. His eyelid was a ghost, exorcised in successive rebuilds, but neural wiring was more plastic. The mind remembered, an organic irritation akin to an itch in an amputated limb.

With a thought, his vision zoomed across the potholed terrain. Old trenches, sutured shut with razorwire, and craters. Peels of armour plating were scattered over them, energy-lashed, too small even for the scrap trawlers roving up behind the Saltern Front. Hazard signifiers alerted him to sub-toxic atmospheric accumulations of lyddite, fycelin, and a string of complex nitro-compounds that his armour's sensorium suite lacked the capacity to tackle.

The land had been beaten and then chemically euthanized.

And it had worked. The necrons were being ground back.

A rail track cut a straight line across the murdered landscape and his gaze followed it to an outpost, walled and ferric-red. The magnoculars' auto-focus over-adjusted and Borhus dialled it back.

Men in protective all-weather coveralls with their hoods up rose into focus through a flood of steam, slapping shipping tags onto the sides of munitions crates as they were driven onto the rail platform. Tracked Kataphron-class heavy armament platforms equipped with lifting tines took up massive stacks, millions of rounds, enough to wage war for – his estimate – eighteen minutes, and manoeuvred them trackside. There, long lines of mono-task loading servitors

integrated into rotating platforms engaged in an articulated peristalsis of hooks and cranes to winch the armament loads onto waiting carriages.

Every few minutes, armoured trains hundreds of compartments in length drew in or pulled away. Quad-linked autocannons tracked the yellow-brown eddies in the clouds from the roofs of flak carriages, their jerking movements governed by a complex Fourier system to affect randomness.

Borhus checked the distance gauge on his magnoculars.

Nine-point-one kilometres.

Even from here, his enhanced hearing could detect the hiss of coolant and the squeal of marginally misaligned magnetic brakes.

Slowly, he moved his view across the platform to the station exit. A pair of visored skitarii in dense black robes stood guard at a checkpoint. A being's choice of armament said more about them and their culture than all the accumulated works of art or technology they produced. That the skitarii would poison their bodies with radiation in exchange for the stopping power of their radium carbines spoke volumes.

There was no higher praise than that offered with overwhelming firepower.

Motionless under the caustic rain, the skitarii stood patiently as a monstrous Luna-pattern bulk loader backed towards the checkpoint laden with arms and munitions fresh from the outpost fabricatories. The road crunched under massive solid rubber tyres, rain weaving through the treads and splattering the cab. Wipers squeaked back and forth, intermittently revealing a pair of Departmento Munitorum troopers in dust-grey fatigues, smiling, sharing a lho-stick and watching the rain with the radiator on full. Vertical exhaust stacks spluttered a petrochemical blackness into the air. On the road behind the massive vehicle, squads of skitarii ran escort for open-topped personnel carriers driving grim-looking workers to the manufactories.

Borhus panned right, too fast for the magnoculars' autofocus, the image blurring over prefabricated industrial units and vehicle silos until it fixed on a tall, pyramidal structure. A basilica. An obvious place to secure an article of rogue tech. And with all the respect that Borhus held for the adepts of Mars, they rarely deviated far from the obvious.

The structure's walls were plascrete, painted red in homage to the Red Planet. Its sloped sides were riveted with plates of a dark, energy-conducting metal that Borhus could not identify, and decayed with intercalated sequences of cogwheel motifs. In shape and ornamentation the structure looked the part of a place of worship, but that pyramidal shape owed as much to geometric symbolism as did

the sloping glacis plate of a main-line battle tank. It presented maximum armour thickness for minimum material expenditure, calculated to the trillionth decimal. It was a fortress, built to withstand anything short of a sustained artillery barrage or a determined aerial strike.

Fire superiority servitors integrated directly into crenellated casemates presented overlapping fields of fire onto the street-level approaches. At the top of the flight of rockcrete steps that climbed from the outpost two full squads of skitarii with tripod-mounted transuranic arquebuses stood sentry by the main gate.

As Borhus studied the defences, an energy wash rippled down the structure. He followed it down the steep rockcrete steps, to where groups of gaunt pilgrims ascended, a number climbing with the aid of long copper-clad staves.

The image suddenly became snowed by static.

Borhus withdrew the magnoculars from his eyes and thumped the plastek casing, uttering the ritual cant used by the Iron Fathers, but the distortion effect remained. Most likely its uncomplicated machine-spirit had been corrupted by the powerful electromagnetic field emanating from the basilica, a field strong enough to be picked up on passive auspex sweeps from orbit.

‘It almost makes me want to know what he is keeping in there myself,’ he said, dropping the magnoculars into the stowage basket under his seat and turning to the Space Marine sat beside him. ‘He is definitely inside?’

‘I marked his entry, captain,’ said Jaggai, lightly gripping on the controls of the stripped down Land Speeder Storm. He looked over. Like Borhus, the Space Marine was unhelmed. His topknot lay across his pauldrons and looped about his thick neck. His grin was savage. ‘I have not seen him leave.’

‘In his own compound.’ Luhgarak sat in the passenger compartment, rearward facing, scraping out the mechanism of his stalker-pattern boltgun with a scythe blade in pursuance of some subatomic particle of grit. He sighed. ‘Regale us again, son of the Khan, with a tale of your prowess in the hunt.’

Beside him, Aetius shook his head but said nothing, a deliberate statement of coded disapproval when he would much rather have ignored his companions’ very un-Codex one-upmanship more completely. The Novamarine shifted very slightly in his seat, then returned his attention to the inscriptions along the barrel of his boltgun, and his own orisons of battle.

Borhus accepted his subordinates’ weaknesses with more grace.

The strong would shine, like metal implanted in flesh, and no word or deed from another would uplift the weak, even if Inquisitorial decree had made them

brothers.

‘Brother Salvu?’ Borhus called back, hooking his arm behind his headrest and twisting to look back across the passenger compartment.

The Space Marine was standing at the back of the Land Speeder with one hand on the shoulder height handrail and the other holding his own pair of magnoculars to his helmet visor. Rain beaded on the moulded ceramite plates of his power armour, gathering and then rushing for the soft seals around the joints and spiralling down to the deck to pool like moats of acid-yellow around the rivets. Salvu muttered to himself, mentally codifying the myriad features of the basilica into a checklist of weaknesses, strengths and dangerous unknowns. Salvu knew fortresses. He knew how to build them, how to hold them and, more pertinently, how to break them. The reticular cross of the Hospitallers smouldered acidly from his white pauldron. The rest of his armour was black.

Deathwatch black.

‘And,’ Borhus said, ‘do you see a way in?’

Salvu lowered his magnoculars. Somehow, despite his helm, Borhus could always tell when the Hospitaller was smiling. Jaggai grinned eagerly and thumbed the ignition. The Land Speeder shuddered, rising from the ground as the vehicle’s ramjets flared and full power was routed to the anti-gravitic plates.

‘I can see one.’

There were twenty skitarii on the gate.

Two were on a raised platform set to one side of the top steps with the heavy weapons, crouched behind a barricade of wire boxes filled with shell casings and rubble and strung with razorwire. Low tech, but effective. Three more were set back into the tunnel that passed through the basilica’s thick walls. That left fifteen. The augmented soldiers were spread out over the steps, trading bursts of data-dense binharic and marshalling the flow of pilgrims through the gate.

Borhus disregarded the pilgrims. They were unarmed and thus inconsequential to his projections. He returned his attention to the main body of skitarii.

The five soldiers stationed furthest down the steps and thus closest to his approach brought their weapons to bear. An Imperial Guardsman or a planetary militiaman would have been sufficiently impressed by the approach of a squad of battle-brothers to drop their guard – or at least shake it – but not the skitarii. They had protocols to conform to, and they would conform.

They did not fire.

And why should they, unless the tech-priest dominus had reason to feel

threatened?

At point-blank range there would barely be enough time between pulling the trigger of his bolt pistol and the bolt striking the nearest skitarii's thoracic carapace for the bolt's propellant to ignite. The impact would be low velocity, probably insufficient to fully penetrate the armour, but enough to detonate the mass-reactive round. The explosion would liquefy the skitarii's soft tissue, the resultant pressure front and blast shrapnel disabling the two soldiers either side.

That would leave thirteen. They were too close for the heavy weapons, and the gate guards lacked line of sight; the five could be effectively discounted.

The skitarii's enhanced neural systems and combat training would respond to the attack almost instantaneously. Radium carbines would rise. Enhanced optics would initialise combat protocols, squad-level algorithms disseminating targets for massed retaliation. Efficient.

But no bionic could rival the reaction time of a Space Marine.

Salvu, Aetius, and Luhgarak would act first, pumping the loosely spaced skitarii with rounds while Jaggai fired his bolt pistol and charged towards Borhus's side, chainsword revving hungrily.

Casualties amongst the pilgrims would be high, but acceptable. Borhus projected ninety-seven per cent. Collateral damage to the outpost in the ensuing panic and rushed skitarii counter-deployments would be unavoidable.

And unacceptable.

The inquisitor had been adamant on that. First and foremost, there was a world to be won, and the Adeptus Mechanicus forces were vital to that.

Borhus terminated his projection.

A wing of Marauder fighter-bombers roared overhead, escorted by several squadrons of Thunderbolts flying in arrowhead formation. The sickly yellow rainclouds churned up in their wake rumbled with their sonic booms.

His thumb rolled off the activation rune of his thunder hammer.

'How may we be of assistance, Space Marine?' blurted the skitarii alpha in command of the gate cohort. His voice came like a magnetic recording, warped, chewed and mangled by static and emerging from a vox-caster set into his throat. His mouth was a palpating grille of oxygen scrubbers and rebreather tubes, part of a steel faceplate that left only a pair of red-glowing slits for the eyes. He was, on surface appraisal of the facial and digital enhancements visible outside of his dark robes, only residually human.

'I wish to speak with Tech-Priest Dominus Rygel Sul,' said Borhus. 'You may escort us to him or... ' he moved his gauntleted fingers to form a cogwheel over

his breastplate, and nodded respectfully to the Mechanicus's sanctified basilica. Inquisitor Laurelline was not an idiot. She had not randomly selected an Iron Hands legionary to command this delegation. 'Or you may dispatch a man to bring him here.'

The alpha stood stock still, processing. His personality was intact, but could be suppressed by his tech-priest masters when required. In combat, he could be almost without fear, but Borhus nevertheless sensed a split-second hesitation in response to his demand.

Jaggai growled. 'He's asking politely. Do we need to drag your master out by the mechadendrites?'

Borhus's fingers strayed to the mag-holster on his hip and the bolt pistol it contained. The alpha offered no overt hostility, but that could change. He was just awaiting the order. Borhus replayed his combat projections and allowed himself a smile. There was no likely variable that would enable two squads of skitarii to overcome a Deathwatch kill-team at close quarters.

A touch on his arm shocked him from his projections.

It actually shocked him.

Suit sensors reported a low amperage electrical shock discharged against the elbow joint. The bulk of the voltage was turned by his power armour's non-conductive ceramite, but the jolt retained power enough to jerk his elbow out. He looked down, unable to mask the revulsion that spread across the organic residual of his face.

One of the pilgrims stood beside him, touching his armour like a war orphan begging the blessing of a crusader saint. The man was garbed in rough old robes, torn in several places to reveal a body that was both impressively muscular and unhealthily cyanotic. Beneath the robes he wore rubber boots and a strange copper torso cage. It barely warranted the term 'augmetic,' but resembled some ancient medicae technology for the bracing of broken ribs. The man's bald head came level with the ivory aquila on Borhus's breastplate. That and his bare chest was hatched with strange-looking tattoos that glowed with an electric light. Most disconcerting of all, however, were his eyes. They had not been replaced with improved bionics.

The man had no eyes.

It looked as though each socket had simply been subjected to a melta torch, then left to cool and reset in whatever unnerving form the Ommissiah willed. The stare of those black, melted eyes gave Borhus an itch he could not relieve, and he could not shake the sense – the weak, illogical feeling – that those charred

discs perceived him more completely than his own enhanced oculobe and advanced bionics could provide him in return.

The irrational conclusion that it was in fact the pilgrim with blessings to bestow on the orphaned ignorant hovered over him like a faulty hazard rune.

‘What are you?’ asked Aetius.

The pilgrim ignored the question, and stared blindly up at Borhus. ‘Are you here to experience the Motive Force?’

Cursing his momentary weakness, Borhus pulled his arm from the pilgrim’s grasp and backed away.

Any servant of the Imperium who came into contact with the technologies of Mars – the vast majority of countless trillions – would have at one time formulated a prayer to the Machine-God or to the Omnissiah, ignorant as they doubtless were to the theological distinction between them. The Motive Force was the completion of the divine Martian trinity. It was the fundamental that allowed the others to exist. It charged mankind’s weapons, powered its warships across the void and gave the universe its laws. Perhaps it was because of that cold, cosmological constancy that few ever spared it their prayers.

‘Yes,’ Salvu answered, calmly. ‘I believe we are.’

‘*Ave Motriceum*,’ the pilgrim smiled, opening his bare palms in blessing to reveal the copper-wired gauntlet array that had delivered the earlier shock. He lowered his hands as he turned away towards the basilica, the skitarii guards reluctantly standing down rather than obstructing his path.

Luhgarak sighted back down the line of pilgrims with his long-barrelled stalker boltgun, then lowered the weapon in thought. There were hundreds of the humans.

Borhus rotated his shocked elbow joint. His gauntlet’s grip felt unresponsive, and he suspected that the pilgrim’s touch had depolarised some of the neural connections. That his suit was not providing him with damage indicators suggested its internal diagnostic sensors had been similarly haywired.

That ninety-seven per cent figure would require amendment.

‘*Ave Omnissiah*,’ he muttered with rather more than the usual feeling, and strode after the pilgrim past the waiting skitarii.

Tech-Priest Dominus Rygel Sul awaited them inside.

The pict-captures that the inquisitor had exploded from concealed pickups on Stygies VII did not do the tech-priest justice.

Sul’s enhanced form boasted defensive systems equivalent to a Space Marine

Dreadnought, and came in greater than the squad's Land Speeder Storm in raw mass. His heavy armature was enveloped by a swarm of multiply-articulated servo-limbs that clicked, chattered, whirred, buzzed and blinked – a cold, insectile amalgam of scalpel blades and microlasers. The core build remained roughly humanoid – an affectation that even the most ancient tech-priests stubbornly clung to – but locomotion was delivered not by human-model limbs but a semi-rigid pseudopod studded with tiny mechatendrils. His upper torso was integrated into that metallic chassis, flesh of patchwork colour and decomposition surgically stapled onto a steel matrix. His cranium extended back, not dissimilar to an eldar war helm, and was encased in what looked like adamantium, a material more conventionally employed in the construction of voidship hulls.

Borhus raised his hand from his weapons. The others withdrew to the antechamber's modular plate-steel walls. Jaggai and Aetius took flanking positions, while Salvu held back with half an eye on the gate where they had entered, a rectangle of acid-browened sunlight colouring his right pauldron and brightening the side of his helm. Luhgarak had slipped into the gloom altogether, the giant Death Spectres Space Marine blending so perfectly with the coolant cisterns and slow-respiring oxygen pumps that he had become a part of the chamber.

They were here to talk, but also prepared for battle.

The tech-priest glided forwards on gleaming cilia, and something flickered around him that left an ozone taste in Borhus's mouth and an ache in his brain. Pincers and callipers scissored about the tech-priest's head. 'Time wasted is blessed gun batteries lying idle, Space Marine. Whatever you are here for, I assure you I have been granted broad authorisation by Admiral Dreyfuss and my work is sanctioned by the subsector fabricatum herself.'

'I would advise you not to enter into a competition with us over who is backed by the greater authority, dominus,' Aetius warned.

A squeal of binharic derision blarped from the tech-priest's flaccid lips. 'Does the Inquisition believe I will be intimidated by its *killclade*? My work here is too important. You will achieve nothing here by force. Nothing that the xenos would not achieve for themselves if they could.'

The tech-priest's tendrils flickered, threatening.

'Inquisitor Laurelline has given me leave to... negotiate for transfer of the xenos technology,' said Borhus, the unfamiliar phrase forming with difficulty, like a crudely organic attempt at binharic.

‘Xenos technology?’ The dominus glided back coyly. ‘You are surely aware that the study of such alien archaeotech is strictly proscribed.’

‘It is detectable from orbit,’ Aetius growled. ‘So just surrender it or we will be forced to take it. And some of us will enjoy doing so.’

‘If an artefact unearthed from this world is indeed in my possession then it could predate *Homo sapiens* by millions of years. Think what we could learn! Then again, the resources of the Inquisition are said to rival those of Mars... What can your mistress offer to make something so unique and valuable... go quietly away?’

‘You are entertaining this, dominus?’

The strange pilgrim who had guided them through the gates stepped out from amongst the Space Marines and approached the vast armature of Dominus Rygel Sul.

‘You brought them here, Valtohm,’ Rygel Sul countered.

‘To experience the Motive Force. The Hybernaculum is a miracle, and the Electro-Priesthood will not tolerate its surrender.’

‘You speak of the xenos device?’ asked Borhus.

Rygel Sul’s mehadendrites dipped in what might have been a nod.

‘*Xenos device?*’ The electro-priest sneered. His tattoos flickered like ghosts. ‘The Machine-God and the Omnisiah proscribe, but the Motive Force is universal. Do mass and energy lose equivalence the further one travels from Terra? No. Does gravity care what species orbits a star? It does not. And nor do the faithful.’

‘Be silent, Valtohm,’ Rygel Sul hissed. It was difficult to tell, but he looked nervous, as though uncertain who it was best to placate. ‘I will deal with this.’

‘The Motive Force is for all,’ said Valtohm, reaching forward to lay a gauntlet upon the angrily twitching tech-priest. ‘Its truth hides within the light.’

Too late, Borhus perceived the threat.

The electro-priest’s hand was fifteen centimetres from Rygel Sul’s metal armature when a bolt of current leapt from the man’s palm.

‘No—’

There was a bang, like a sonic boom, a sudden superheating and expansion of air that would have been shocking enough observed through three kilometres of atmosphere and which, zeroed down to a terrestrial scale, buckled the antechamber’s plate-steel walls and flung the Space Marines back.

Lightning arced through the tech-priest’s frame. His electricals flared, shorted, and then burst into flame. His flesh simply cooked. Threat-reflex autonomies

caused his crippled armature to writhe, squealing out a high-pitched distress cry. Then, with a final spasmodic jerk of mechadendrites, Dominus Rygel Sul collapsed into a steaming heap of still-screaming metal.

Borhus slammed a bolt-round through the tech-priest's radio-frequency emitter bulb, shutting off the death scream permanently.

Dazed, he saw the electro-priest, Valtohm, fleeing for the single, downward-sloping, passageway into the basilica's interior. He guessed that was where he would find the so-called Hybernaculum.

Jaggai, who had been partially shielded from the concussion wave by the dominus's body, was already giving chase, squeezing off rounds that ripped through the walls and ceiling. The White Scar disappeared down the passage.

Borhus shook his head, his Lyman's ear struggling to compensate for the shock, but all he could hear was that ghost-vox screech. Blood trickled from his ear between his gauntleted fingers, with a repeating signal.

*The flesh is weak. The flesh is weak.*

He looked around for the rest of the squad. Salvu had been hit. For a moment Borhus assumed that the force with which the Hospitaller had been hurled into the wall had cracked his backplate, but then he saw the ugly radium burn that marred the fractured ceramite. Gunfire blistered the Iron Hand's wounded eardrums, rad-rounds spanking off the metallic surfaces. A lumen bulb shattered above them. Pressurised air bled from a perforated oxygen pump. Another round punched out Salvu's hip and spun him to the ground.

The skitarii from the gate were pouring into the antechamber, timed volleys of sequential fire driving the Space Marines behind the only piece of genuine cover to hand: the corpse of Rygel Sul.

Dull impacts rang through the tech-priest's broken armature. Keeping low, Borhus drew in Salvu by the ankles while Aetius rose from cover to spray the door with fire. The mass-reactive rounds tore the skitarii vanguard to pieces. They were blood blooms, opening for the storm of explosive rounds as real flowers would for the sun. Petal imprints pasted walls, ceiling and floor, as mangled bits of high-end augmetic cut through the enclosed space.

In effect, it was like dropping a frag grenade under the cupola hatch of a tank and watching the aftermath.

'Stand down!' Borhus yelled, after he had pulled Salvu into cover and sat him up.

Aetius's boltgun continued to spit and bark. The Novamarine was picking his shots now, the sporadic few coming back his way beating against the body of the

dominus.

‘Salvu,’ said Borhus, running his fingers over the break in the Hospitaller’s backplate and the bad one in his leg. His gauntlet came away dry. The Space Marine’s Larraman cells had already clotted the wound. Whether his system could cope as well with the radiation dose was another matter, and one for later. ‘I believe you will fight another day, brother, though on an augmented limb I suspect.’

‘Lucky me,’ Salvu wheezed.

The drum of rad-rounds played in an audible energy build-up. Aetius ducked back into cover as a massive plasma discharge cracked out and pushed the dominus back half a metre. The Space Marine pushed back against the force and fired one-handed back over his shoulder.

‘Do you believe in the divinity of the Ommissiah?’ Salvu asked, seriously.

‘Do you believe in the divinity of the Emperor?’ Borhus returned.

‘Less than most, more than some.’

Borhus chuckled. ‘I will use that one day.’

‘Go after the priest, secure the target. I’ll hold the skitarii here.’

‘You are not ready for a last stand yet, brother.’

‘Then hurry back, and you and Aetius can carry me to the Land Speeder.’

Borhus nodded and motioned for Aetius. Between them they lifted the Hospitaller up and propped him against the dominus. There, Salvu squeezed off a round that detonated under the collar of a black-robed skitarii, blasting the soldier’s brain and upper torso across the wall. Nodal sub-processors kept its body in action for a moment more before it collapsed.

‘Aetius, with me,’ said Borhus, backing up and laying down a blanket of suppressive fire. The Novamarine did the same, driving the relentless skitarii back up to the door.

This was a fortress. It was built for defence, and Salvu had been built to defend it.

‘Emperor be with you, brothers,’ the Hospitaller called over his shoulder as Borhus and Aetius turned, his own boltgun taking up the slack.

The passage sloped in and down, deep into the core of the basilica complex. Branch corridors split off to other chambers. From them, the sounds of weapons fire warred with the deep grind of manufactories, the restless breath of air filtration systems. The two Space Marines charged on, following the electro-priest’s ozone trail.

‘Captain,’ Aetius barked, honouring his Iron Hands brother for the first time

with proper recognition of his rank. He pointed his boltgun down.

Running up in the opposite direction was a group of pilgrims, a dozen or so, the ground sparking under the butts of their long-hafted staves. Most likely they were innocent pilgrims, fleeing the rampage of a rogue electro-priest. They were blind and infirm. It was utterly implausible that a band of such men could have made it past Jaggai were they hostile. Borhus had a moment to consider.

All his preconceived variables were currently suspect.

‘Kill them.’

Aetius opened fire. The first pilgrim went down, chest explosively parting from his ribs. Around the second, some kind of voltaic field flashed into life and stung the bolt from the air, then again around the third – a sequential energy blossom like a void shield puckering under a barrage of solid rounds. They wore no armour, no bulky power pack, nothing at all besides a metal harness and a stick. How were they generating an energy field powerful enough to turn a bolt-round? Aetius opened up on full auto, tearing the fourth pilgrim apart in a welter of bloody matter.

The rest were still coming. Impossibly, they were still coming. The range closed and Borhus’s pistol added its fire to the fusillade. Then the charging bodies met.

Two priests went down under a crunch of ceramite versus bone and weak flesh. Borhus barged through their broken remains and didn’t slow.

Aetius dropped back, spun, mashed a tattooed face between the wall and the stock of his boltgun, then swung his weapon up and resumed firing. Bolts lashed past Borhus to pick off stragglers.

More stave-wielding electro-priests filled the passage ahead, surrounding a floundering giant in black power armour. Jaggai. The priests had him, the way a pack of scavenger creatures could bring down a larger beast. The Space Marine’s wild lunges were spun aside by whirling staves that then cracked against knee, groin and elbow seals, and across Jaggai’s unarmoured face. Each blow sent a spasm of unresponsiveness through the White Scar’s armour, as though it were being drained of power.

As Borhus approached, the priests peeled off from their wounded prey and rushed him. Borhus met their counter-charge with a swing of his thunder hammer. It was a tank killer. Against a barechested electro-priest it was a sheer, glorious overkill.

The priest’s body burst open, as though a high-yield microexplosive had been implanted inside his chest and set off. His blended constituents flew apart at the

blast front of a sonic boom, plastering Borhus's battleplate and breaking the remaining electro-priests against the walls. He stamped through what little was left, trusting Aetius to finish any survivors and tend to Jaggai.

It took him a few seconds to reacquire Valtohm's ozone trail. He drove a fresh clip into his bolt pistol and broke into a run.

The passage continued down for several hundred metres more to a large chamber, tall but relatively narrow, a hollow, acute-angled version of the exterior pyramid that surrounded it. The chamber was dominated by a high metal gantry, sterilely lit by banks of ultraviolet lamps directed inwards from plastek-walled observation rigs mounted on the sloping walls.

Skitarii were already there, piling into the chamber from secondary access corridors in the other three walls, and fanning out to find cover amongst the bulky instrumentation that dotted the edges and amongst the outlying stanchions of the scaffold itself.

They would be trying to secure the Hybernaculum. Or possibly contain it.

Borhus pushed himself to a flat-out sprint for the central structure, radium rounds burning up the surrounding consoles and deck plates at his heels. On the opposite side of the gantry, a tracked Kataphron Destroyer growled into the chamber on armoured tracks, escorted by a unit of skitarii firing from the hip. Borhus rang off half a clip to discourage them and veered right. A bolt ricocheted from the hardened plating of the Destroyer, but none of the skitarii were hit. They vectored their approach to match his, taking up staggered positions within the scaffolding and resumed firing.

Even now data uplinks would be tethering the disparate skitarii elements into a single combat algorithm. Once that happened he was dead. Even now—

A dark-robed skitarii with a black titanium facemask rose from cover three metres in front of him and aimed, though at that range he scarcely needed to.

There was a loud *boom* and the console that the skitarii had been using as cover exploded in his face. That hadn't been a rad carbine. It had been a boltgun.

Borhus glimpsed Luhgarak on the walkway high up in the scaffold. The Space Marine ducked behind the safety rail as return fire from the ground raked his position. Valtohm was several levels higher still and, as Borhus watched, scrambling up a ladder towards the summit.

A wild cry pulled Borhus's attention back. A pilgrim in singed rags vaulted the smouldering console, whirling his stave overhead. Another followed. Electricity balled his gauntlet apparatus and arced violently, dragging across the gantry walls and splitting back and forth with his brother's stave, like two poles of a

battery. A charging battery.

Firing off to the side, Borhus ran for the gantry's lowest walkway and leapt. It was four metres from the ground. An impossible jump for a man. But he was more than a man: he was a Space Marine. His body twisted, like a high jumper, his line of fire stitched upwards, chewing up the stave-wielding pilgrim from waist to neck and blowing the shoulder off his gauntleted brother. His back struck the walkway, aluminium planking rattling under his weight as his pistol clicked empty. He vaulted to his feet, spun around and looked up.

Valtohm was sprinting across Borhus's diagonal, torn robes flapping about his ankles as he took the final, short, stretch before the top. The spectre of death was right behind. Luhgarak took the steps behind the fleeing electro-priest in a single bound, landing in a firing crouch with his boltgun sweeping up for the finishing shot. Almost mirroring the weapon's movement, Valtohm swept around, electricity bunched in his fists, and before Luhgarak could pull the trigger the electro-priest thrust his open palms forward.

A savage ribbon of lightning plucked the Space Marine from his feet and pushed him from the gantry. The lightning flickered back and Luhgarak fell. His flailing arms caught around a hanging chain and he swung down, smashing bodily into the bulk of the scaffold. Smoke coiled from the powered seals of his armour's joints. If not for the insulating properties of his ceramite battleplate, the Space Marine would surely be dead rather than merely maimed. A group of skitarii closed in on his position from below, carbines trained upward, but Luhgarak was going nowhere.

A rad-round banged the underside of the walkway where Borhus stood. He drew in to the inside edge, cutting down the shooters' angles, and crouched for good measure. He looked up, seeing several levels of slightly sloped aluminium walkways that worked their way around the gantry to the top where the structure narrowed. There, high above, he saw Valtohm gesture a still-coruscant hand over Luhgarak as if in blessing, then turn with a smile and move more calmly for the summit.

Borhus snarled. Overconfidence. It would ever be the downfall of the weak.

Springing from his crouch, he leapt across the stanchion-filled interior of the scaffold, bypassing two ladders and a walkway, and clamped his gauntleted fingers over an aluminium plank. The light metal bent under his grip, its properties making it impossible even to establish a mag-lock. One-handed, he swayed. Binharic blurts of astonishment issued from the skitarii below. He ignored them as, with a heave of bionic strength, he threw the rest of his body up

and landed on the deformed walkway with a thump.

He dropped again into a crouch long enough to mark Valtohm's progress and reacquaint his bearings, then sprang again. Two more ape-like leaps and swings carried him within arm's length of the summit, each successive jump carrying him a little higher than the last as the gantry's pyramidal structure narrowed.

He caught the edges of the final walkway in both hands, hanging beneath. Then, with a grunt and a whine of servos, he swung himself like a pendulum until he could hook a heel over the lip of the platform and drag himself up onto all fours. He panted, mildly exerted. Two bootprints of molecularly soldered ceramite were burned into the aluminium beneath his face, where Luhgarak had stood. It was astonishing that one man with so rudimentary an apparatus could generate such force. What was the upper power limit of Valtohm's weapon? What was its carrying capacity? How quickly could it be recharged between shots? Borhus had no answers.

Standing, he slid a fresh clip into his pistol and strode forwards. The electro-priest's ozone trail was intense now. At the walkway's end, Borhus set his boot onto an aluminium rung and, one handed, climbed to the summit.

Ultraviolet banks shone down upon the small aluminium platform. It was crowded with magnetometers, field modulators, dosimeters, oscilloscopes and spectrophotometers. The dry whirl of cogitator cooling fans was like a hymnal. The altar, the focus of the Adeptus Mechanicus's curiosity and devotion, was a humanoid object, preserved like a relic of an ancient saint within the throbbing halo of a networked suspensor grid. The figure seemed to glow under the attention, but that glow was simply the static effect of the suspensor field.

That was the literal explanation, the *logical* explanation, but the entity within the field exuded a soulless malevolence that defied Borhus's conceptions of logic.

It was some manner of xenos being, though specifics of race were impossible to be sure of given the field effects distorting Borhus's view. Given the nature of this world, Borhus could posit an informed guess. *Necron*. He shivered before an inexplicable chill. The entity appeared to be in some kind stasis, and if his guess was accurate, and the being was indeed a necron, then it had likely been in this state for millions of years. This was what Rygel Sul had unearthed here after the xenos had been pushed back, and what had since captivated Valtohm and his followers. The Hybernaculum.

Startled from positions of prayer, electro-priests armed with staves and gauntlets hurried out of Borhus's way and moved protectively in front of the

Hybernaculum. Valtohm turned towards him with hands raised.

Surrender? Or a threat?

Borhus took a step forward and tightened his aim on the electro-priest's forehead. 'You should have held back on Luhgarak. I doubt you have another shot like that left in you.'

Valtohm's flesh-melted lips parted into a mortis grin.

'I will not allow you to awaken this... thing,' growled Borhus.

'I don't want to awaken it,' said Valtohm sharply, sounding genuinely appalled. 'Alive it is just one more material being, but here—' the priest turned to look upon the entity, gleaming dully ultraviolet within the hazing cocoon of the suspensor grid. 'Do you understand what this is, Space Marine? There is no power source for this. A self-perpetuating stasis. Not a single electronvolt expended in waste. The fundamental forces of the universe in balance.'

'I understand. It is a perfect abomination.'

'It is a *miracle*,' Valtohm breathed.

Borhus's finger strengthened on the trigger, and he shifted his aim from Valtohm to the entity within the Hybernaculum itself.

'No!' screamed the priests in ragged unison as they rushed forward, unwittingly clearing Borhus's shot.

'The flesh is weak,' he sneered.

Then he fired.

Mass-reactive bolts blazed across the suspensor field. Some were deflected, spraying out in all directions. Consoles exploded. Bulky diagnostic arrays went up in sparks. Electro-priests fell, scythed down by shrapnel, stray round or simply thrown onto their faces by the force of exploding terminals, enveloped in guttering voltaic fields.

Some punched through, however. Enough.

*Enough.*

As soon as he thought it, he knew there could never be enough.

As the bolts encountered the stasis field, they stopped, frozen in time as absolutely as the xenos entity itself. Even their liquid hydrogen propellant tails remained fixed behind them, tiny cones of perfectly captivated light.

Although clearly impossible, the entity appeared to mock him from inside its prison. Borhus threw aside his pistol with a snarl and hefted his thunder hammer.

'Never let it be said that an Iron Hand failed to bring a big enough weapon,' he said.

'You are right, iron brother,' said Valtohm, tilting back his head to meet Borhus

face to face and raising his gauntlets. Electricity vaulted between them with a succession of air-burning *cracks*. ‘Flesh *is* weak, but the Motive Force is power.’

Lightning flared from Valtohm’s hands, dragging through the circuit of staves and upraised gauntlets of his surviving acolytes, even lancing across the glowing body of the Hybernaculum itself. It crackled across Borhus’s optics. The Deathwatch captain drew back his thunder hammer and charged.

Too late.

He felt the miracle of the Motive Force course through his body. The insulating properties of ceramite were irrelevant now; the lightning was too powerful for that, less an assault than an exalted state of being. His suit connections haywired, and short electrical pulses caused his body to spasm. His bionic eye exploded in its socket, its flesh counterpart simply melting, dribbling down his face before the jelly steamed from his boiling skin. Somewhere in amongst the flurry of impulses shorting through his brain, he remembered to scream. He felt agony, bloody rapture, but through it all he could *see*. The lightning connected him to the infinite circuit that was the universe, and opened his eyes to the truth that Valtohm did indeed have a blessing to bestow.

The flesh *was* weak.

*Matter* was weak.

And in a deliverance of rampant energy, Borhus of the Iron Hands finally saw the truth inside the light.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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