

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a battle scene. In the center, a large, heavily armored Adeptus Mechanicus warrior, likely a Terminator, is shown in a dynamic, forward-leaning pose. He wears a helmet with a large, dark visor and has intricate mechanical details on his armor, including rivets and plates. His right arm is raised, holding a large, red, claw-like weapon. In the foreground, a dark, spiny hand reaches up towards the center figure. The background is filled with other soldiers in similar armor, some holding weapons, set against a hazy, orange-tinted environment that suggests a battlefield at dawn or dusk. The overall style is highly detailed and atmospheric.

WARHAMMER
40,000

ADEPTUS MECHANICUS
THE ENIGMA OF FLESH
C L WERNER

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THE ENIGMA OF FLESH

C L Werner

The transport shrieked across Thain's amber sky, slicing through the clouds with the savagery of a chainsword. Scraggly shreds of mist were sucked into the aircraft's wake, dragged after it like some phantasmal escort. When the ship's counter-thrusters activated and arrested its forward momentum, the captured wisps swept across it, obscuring it in a foggy mantle.

Captain Xander Marhault of the 32nd Cadian Regiment's Fifth Company craned his neck back, squinting as the downdraught of the descending transport kicked up dust and dirt from the parched ground. The landing aircraft was a harsh, graceless sort of thing, utterly devoid of the charisma of a Lightning or any of the atmospheric fighter craft he had seen streaking across the sky. There was none of the warmth and camaraderie the military aircraft evoked. It was cold and cheerless, as engaging and dramatic as an old spanner or a box of rivets. The only thing about it that provoked any feeling was the cog-and-skull iconography etched upon its fuselage. The symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Tech-priests.

Marhault was still uncomfortable with the orders he had been given by regimental command. He didn't see the rationale for putting a glorified engineer in charge. Outpost Nymue was an Astra Militarum installation; it was Fifth Company's deployment. He had been ordered to defend the ridge between the savannah and Prantis River in an effort to prevent the advance elements of the xenos invasion from dispersing into the winding canyons and ravines of the valley. It was proving difficult enough to fight the aliens out on the plains, and to allow them the natural cover of the river valley would render the bombing campaign against them completely futile.

It was an intimidating prospect, and almost as formidable as the enemy itself –

the abominable tyranids. When the Imperial Navy had loosed its Marauders against the main xenos swarms across Thain's surface, thousands of splinters had broken away from the bigger hordes. The larger tyranid beasts might be absent, but that didn't make these smaller swarms any less lethal for the men and women of the 32nd Cadian. A small alien could kill just as quickly as a larger one. Marhault's company were already discovering that for themselves. The transport's engines might have drowned out the sounds of battle for the moment, but he knew that the advance pickets were beset by slinking xenos creatures, forward scouts of a larger group.

A shudder rolled through the earth as the transport landed, the hydraulics of its massive legs venting vapour as they groaned beneath the machine's immense weight. The ship had barely settled upon its supports when a huge metal gate set into the hull shrieked open, the petals of its iris fanning outward like a steel flower. The bottom petals folded against each other, bonding together in an electrostatic embrace to form a broad walkway from the ship to the surface.

'Honour guard, salute!'

The command was delivered in the stiff, clipped tone of Lieutenant Balduin, commander of Third Platoon. With almost machine-like precision, the squad that had been pulled from the line snapped to attention, lasguns held across their chests. Only the stained condition of their uniforms spoiled the parade-ground display of drill and discipline. A combat zone wasn't the place for such niceties. Even Nazhir, the company commissar, had abandoned the futile effort to keep his uniform immaculate.

Marhault shook his head. This wasn't some formal visit by superior officers. This was a cabal of tech-priests dropping down on his embattled command like scavenging vultures. That he extended any formal courtesy to them at all was due entirely to the 32nd's traditions and simple military protocol. However much the situation disturbed him, he wouldn't allow it to break his observation of discipline. He wouldn't let it make him or his command forget that they were soldiers.

The sharp, grating crackle of static rose from within the transport. Out of the darkness of the interior there now emerged a file of tech-priests. From head to foot they were bundled in bulky robes adorned with the cog-wheel of the Machine Cult. Marhault could see cybernetic attachments protruding from beneath their raiment, disrupting the humanoid outlines of the entourage with a riotous display of pipes, wires and vents. One of the tech-priests had an array of mehadendrites erupting from his back and arching over his shoulders, while

another had an insectoid proboscis of steel and wire snaking down from the folds of his hood. Two of the tech-priests bore wide-mouthed vox-blasters that seemed to be riveted directly to their forearms, blasting the static screech of a binary psalm with each step of their descent. Another carried a great cylindrical device that ended in a wide funnel from which he projected a greasy, viscous incense as he marched towards the surface.

Amidst the entourage was a shape that was prominent in its ghastliness. Swathed in robes that seemed to be spun from threads of gold was the mocking remnant of a human form. The face that leered out from beneath the gilded hood was lost beneath a confusion of tubes and conduit, and wires were stitched across one cheek while the other connected to a grisly hose. The mouth was closed with sutures and a purity seal flapped against the withered lips. One eye had been replaced by a mesh of copper wire, while the other was a bulbous red optic that glared balefully at the world around it. The hands and arms were human enough in shape where they protruded from the robe's sleeves, though bound in some sort of chrome gauze as if mummified. Below the waist, the tech-priest's body had been removed and his torso mounted onto a tracked servo-carriage.

The monstrosity trundled down the ramp, flanked by the other tech-priests. He passed through the file of honour guard, making directly for the officers without sparing any attention for the soldiers. At a gesture, the vox-blasters terminated their binary chant and the sprayer stopped spilling incense into the air.

'You are Captain Marhault.' The statement issued disconcertingly from the gold-robed tech-priest's left eye. Marhault felt his gorge rise when he realized that the mesh of wire stretched across the socket was a speaker. He quickly forced himself to regain his composure.

'Fifth Company welcomes you to Outpost Nymue,' Marhault said. 'You are Magos Procrustes?'

The tech-priest ignored the question. Instead his torso pivoted around on its carriage, the bulbous right eye scanning the surroundings. Servo-motors buried within the carriage whined and moaned as the tech-priest's body rotated back and forth. 'This position will serve admirably. The orbital survey may have even underestimated the success to failure ratio.' The torso spun back around, the red optic narrowing its iris as it focused upon Marhault. 'It is the human factor, of course. That is the most worrying variable.'

Marhault stiffened at the cold, mechanistic speech, devoid of humanity. He repressed the twinges of uneasiness that crawled through him. 'I have been told

to receive Magos Procrustes. Are you Magos Procrustes?’

The torso reared back on its tracked chassis. ‘Logic and probability should have informed you of as much, captain. It is the failing of flesh if you must question the obvious and remain oblivious to the deeper mysteries. Be thankful that the Ommissiah has granted mankind ways to transcend these failings. The data I have been issued with informs me that you have established your headquarters in the old processing plant on this site. You will conduct me there.’

Marhault waved his hand down the slope. ‘I had thought you might want to inspect the defences first. If you are staying here you might want to know how things lie. Our pickets have already engaged tyranid scouts. The main swarm...’

‘I have already processed the deployment of your company, captain,’ Procrustes stated. ‘The positions they occupy are adequate according to my calculations. They will serve their purpose.’

‘Where will you be deploying your forces?’ Marhault asked. ‘If I am to coordinate with you then I need to know where you are positioning your own assets.’

Procrustes extended his arms, gesturing at the tech-priests who had followed him from the transport. ‘My disciples will require the facilities in your headquarters. I have calculated that we can utilise them with minimal disruption to your own personnel.’

Marhault shook his head. ‘I wasn’t talking about your staff,’ he explained. ‘I meant the assets you’ve brought to augment this position. Where can we expect your skitarii and combat servitors?’

The tech-priest’s head dipped in the vaguest echo of a shrug. ‘I understand. You have made an erroneous inference from your limited data. I have brought no such materiel. It would have been superfluous to the task at hand.’

Marhault felt his stomach turn. If the magos hadn’t brought any tech-guard or combat servitors, then what was he doing in a combat zone? Why had regimental command permitted the Adeptus Mechanicus to come to the outpost?

Suddenly, gasps of alarm rose from the honour guard. Lieutenant Balduin’s eyes expanded so wide that Marhault thought they would pop out of his skull. Commissar Nazhir’s face turned a pale grey as his hands made the sign of the aquila. Marhault turned away from Procrustes to see what had so provoked his unit.

‘Blood of the primarchs!’ the captain muttered as he stared up at the transport.

Framed in the doorway was a gigantic figure, a colossus with massive claws of steel at the end of each of its armoured arms. The body was equally massive, a

broad hull covered in armour plate and festooned with purity seals and the iconography of the Machine Cult. A pelvis of pistons and gears connected two hulking legs, their interior servo-motors growling with each step as the giant marched down the ramp. An ovoid head stared down from the bulky shoulders with a faceless expanse of metal.

Marhault had once been blessed enough to see the Adeptus Astartes in battle, present when the Emperor's Warbringers cleansed Ixar Nine of its rebels. The Space Marines had seemed to him to be almost godlike in their superhuman dimensions – physical manifestations of the Emperor's might. What he gazed upon now was bigger than any Space Marine, bigger even than the ork warboss he had seen on Diocles. Watching it stride down to Thain's surface was like seeing some primordial behemoth, some prehistoric terror emerge from the mists of time. An eerie atmosphere, not only of power but of nigh-incomprehensible antiquity, surrounded the giant.

As the behemoth reached the surface, a second armoured colossus appeared in the doorway and began to make its descent. A tech-priest in red robes marched behind it, looking like a dwarf beside the hulking monster.

'Golden Throne, what are they? Servitors?' Nazhir asked.

'They are the sacred relics of ancient knowledge,' Procrustes explained.

'Nothing so crude as a servitor. They are purity, devoid of tainted organics and decaying biology. They are vessels for the most noble and complex machine-spirits, endowed with a holiness that mortality can only aspire to emulate.'

Marhault felt his flesh turn cold as he listened to the magos. Robots: machines invested with a horrible semblance of life. The servitors that laboured throughout the Imperium were at least formed from genuine life, either crafted from human debris of some sort or else employing vat-grown organics. These, however, were beings devoid of even that connection to nature. They were entirely synthetic, artificial creations deployed as a result of the Machine Cult's obsession with arcane technologies.

'Are these are the weapons you've brought to defend the outpost?' Marhault asked. Procrustes' optic fixed upon him, seemingly perplexed by the question. 'The tyrannid swarm might reach this position at any time. These machines need to be committed to the defence...'

A grating crackle rippled from Procrustes' speaker. 'Yes, captain. The Kastelans will be committed where and when they are required. Their custodian, Datasmith Livia, will make that determination. It would be inefficient to allow such decisions to be entrusted to less logical mentalities.'

The magos pivoted his torso, turning towards the ferrocrete walls of the processing plant. As the tech-priest trundled off towards the building, Marhault heard the same crackling sound from his speaker.

Somehow, the captain couldn't escape the impression that Procrustes was laughing at him.

The hulking Kastelans marched down the slope away from the landing pad and the old processing plant that Magos Procrustes had taken for use by the Adeptus Mechanicus. Captain Marhault hurried to keep pace with Datasmith Livia as she followed the robots. The augmentation she had undergone left little that was human about her. Except for her eyes, her face was completely lost in a nest of cybernetics. She seemed almost as inhuman as the robots themselves.

The Kastelans' sleek red-black frames were oily, taking on an almost mirror-like sheen. Prayers etched upon sheets of foil had been painstakingly fastened to each of the giants' motivators, waxen seals stamped with the aquila and the cog-wheel pressed upon each metallic page. Weapon batteries were mounted to the backs of the robots, arching up over the right shoulder of each machine. One robot sported what looked like an oversized flamer, scorched and smelling of promethium vapours, and a pair of massive claws. The other boasted a sleeker, trimmer weapon that resembled an autocannon, though with a strangely notched barrel. Ammunition was belt-fed into the gun from a hopper welded to its side, but from where he stood, Marhault didn't recognise the cartridges as anything issued by the Departamento Munitorum. This robot also had cylindrical weapon pods at the end of each of its arms, and the muzzle on each of these protrusions suggested some kinship of design and function to the strange weapon mounted to the robot's back.

Whatever misgivings he might have had about these soulless, lifeless automatons, Marhault was far more worried about the crackle of guns sounding from the perimeter. The reports were growing more frequent, taking on an almost frantic quality. The crump of mortars began to sound across the outpost. Hearing that provoked a feeling of dread inside him. Wary of their supply of shells, he had given orders that the mortars were to restrict their fire unless the pickets looked like they might be overrun.

'The tyranids have reached the pickets,' Marhault told Livia. 'I request that you deploy your machines between Second and Third Platoons, where they can support the line most efficiently.'

The datasmith didn't look at him, nor did she divert the immense Kastelans

towards the position Marhault had suggested. The robots continued their march down the slope, indifferent to the growing sounds of battle. 'Your assessment of the situation will be evaluated and processed. If the probabilities look favourable, I will consider the action you have requested.'

Marhault scowled at the datasmith. Even without magnoculars he could see the scuttling shapes of tyranid creatures emerging from the savannah's tall grass, spilling across several of the advance weapon pits. Mortar shells were slamming down into the beasts, but for every cluster they destroyed another rushed out of the grass to take its place. The Guardsmen who had abandoned the pits and tried to make their way back to the trench were being pulled down by the charging xenos.

Lieutenant Balduin and the squad he had withdrawn to receive the tech-priests came running past Marhault, determined to rejoin Third Platoon before the trench itself was assaulted. The soldiers nearly collided with Sergeant Rhegeb, Marhault's aide, as the stocky Cadian came sprinting up to report to the captain.

'The weapon pits are cut off,' Rhegeb said. 'And the ones still operational won't be for long.'

Marhault felt a stab of guilt when he heard the report. There had been no minimizing the hazards of the picket duty; the men and women he had ordered into the advance positions had known that. Their task had been to kill tyranids for as long as they could, but after that, they stood little chance of survival.

'Signal the mortar teams,' Marhault ordered. 'They need to target their barrage on the pits. Exterminate the tyranids concentrated there.'

Rhegeb drew his plasma pistol. Pointing it away at an angle, he discharged the weapon, sending a burst of blazing energy into the air. The bright flash could be seen from anywhere in the outpost. The mortar crews, waiting for just such a signal, would already be adjusting their fire. Their next barrage would be dropped directly on the weapon pits and the alien beasts around them.

Anguished screams erupted from nearby. Marhault swung around, galvanized by the shrieks. Drawing his laspistol, he hurried towards the howls of pain and terror. Rhegeb was beside him, cursing lividly at his plasma pistol as the mechanism slowly recharged its destructive energies.

The screams had come from one of the mortar squads, deployed in the shelter of a stone-walled grox pen. As the captain raced towards the scene, he found the ground littered with grisly debris. One artillery man was lying several metres away, his left arm shorn off at the shoulder and the side of his head stripped down to the bone. Another soldier hung in midair, thrashing as blood streamed

from his mangled body, locked in the claws of an abominable monstrosity.

Towering at well over four metres in height, the tyranid was a lethal assemblage of claws and talons, great hooked barbs and crushing pincers. From the underside of its insectoid head a riot of ropy tendrils dripped, lashing away at the mortar man still flailing in its grip. Marhault felt his gorge rise as the tentacles continued to flay the skin from their victim. He could see the man's uniform and the flesh beneath being peeled away, stripped like it was the peel of a fruit.

Marhault fired at the mangled Guardsman, sending an energy bolt through the man's head. It was mercy, not murder, but the captain still felt his blood freeze at what he had been compelled to do.

Sergeant Rhegeb sent a blast of plasma streaking from the barrel of his pistol. Where it struck, patches of scorched chitin and burned meat dripped from the alien's body.

Some kind of tyranid infiltrator: a creature that could cloak itself like a chameleon to steal through their defences unseen. Marhault glared at the monster. It was easily twice the size of a human and covered in a thick shell. The plasma pistol had hurt it, but it would take time for the weapon to build up another charge. All he had to buy time for Rhegeb was his laspistol.

Taking aim, Marhault sent his next shot straight into one of the tiny eyes lurking just behind the tyranid's tentacles. The eye exploded in a burst of purplish filth, spraying across the alien's carapace. The thing reared back, tentacles whipping at the sky as a pained croak sounded from it. The alien flung the mangled Guardsman down and lunged towards the captain.

Before the beast's charge had carried it even a few metres, it was struck by a blinding assault of fiery energy. The tyranid was hurled back, chitin and foul ichor dripping from the grisly wound. Marhault saw the steaming residue of an organ slop out from the beast's body to the ground. Incredibly, it tried to rally its mutilated form for another attack, lurching back onto its feet and stumbling forwards. This time its attentions weren't directed towards Marhault and Rhegeb, but rather the mammoth machine that towered behind them. Steam rose from the muzzle of one of the Kastelan's gun-pods, the barrel still glowing from the destructive energy it had focused on the tyranid. The machine aimed its second gun-pod at the alien.

The blast of radiant light sheared through the alien's head, bursting it into a spray of ichor and molten flesh. This time, the alien's fierce vitality deserted it and crashed to the ground in a twitching heap.

'The Emperor protects,' Rhegeb swore as he looked from the slaughtered

tyranid to the towering robot. Marhault silently agreed, though he wondered if it wasn't the Ommissiah aspect of their God-Emperor they should be thanking.

The sounds of battle rang out from the other side of the fort. Marhault could see another of his mortar sections beset by a tyranid infiltrator. The other Kastelan was confronting the brute, immolating it with a torrent of burning promethium from the projector mounted to its back. He could see Datasmith Livia near the robot, her red robes reflecting the infernal glow of the robot's weapon. The tech-priest aimed a bulky pistol at the alien, then sent a searing pulse of light shearing into the tyranid's leg. Alien chitin and flesh vanished in the fury of the flashing energy, reduced to a scum of blackened ash.

The mutilated tyranid collapsed. For an instant it struggled upon the ground, trying to force its burning body towards its attackers. With a few strides, the Kastelan reached it. Standing above the crippled monster, the robot brought its immense foot stomping down. The full weight of the giant machine pressed upon the infiltrator's head, then slammed down again to pulp the organic residue its assault had left behind. Before it could bring its foot down again, Livia was beside it, gesturing for the Kastelan to desist. She turned back towards the other robot. At her gesture, and the robot that had saved Marhault lumbered over to its custodian.

The captain had no opportunity to thank Livia for the intervention of her Kastelans. The shouts of his lieutenants barked out from the forward trenches. From his position, he could see even more clearly than the Cadians in the line. The tyranids were circling back across the savannah. They weren't pressing their attack any further than the gun nests.

'The filth are retreating?' Rhegeb muttered, incredulous at the thought.

Marhault had a different idea, but it seemed just as impossible. 'A probing attack,' he said. 'This was a probing attack. The xenos were just taking our measure.'

Looking through his magnoculars, Captain Marhault watched the xenos as they scurried about the plain. Only a hundred meters below the ridgeline stretched a vast swathe of savannah, a sea of tall brown grass swaying in Thain's warm breeze. Before the tyranid invasion, this region had been used as grazing land for the grox herds that formed the basis of the planet's industry. The facility Magos Procrustes occupied was once employed to process the reptiles' dung as a cheap, albeit smelly, combustible to power Thain's other industries.

The grox were gone now, of course, culled from the air by Imperial bombers to

deny resources to the advancing tyrannids. The tall grass had persisted however, returning with grotesque fecundity in the wake of the bombing. After only a few weeks it had spread back to engulf most of its former range. Marhault had considered burning it, but natives of Thain had warned such efforts were futile as the plants often sank ten metres beneath the soil. To get rid of it, the roots had to be destroyed.

Now the tall grass harboured something far more fearsome than any grox. Skittering around the savannah were grisly xenos creatures, lean predatory monsters encased in chitinous shells, their spindly arms tipped in long hooked claws. The mottled black and brown colouring of their shells made the aliens difficult to spot when they were still, and even when they were in motion it was hard to make out their exact outlines. They seemed roughly man-sized, which gave Marhault some comfort. If there was one thing that the Guardsmen knew about the tyrannids, it was that the larger the creature the more intelligent it be. The ghastly infiltrators were proof of that.

What are they waiting for? It was a question that had been nagging at his nerves and that of every man and woman under his command. It was bad enough to be confronted by a virtually endless swarm of vicious alien predators, but to credit them with strategy? The xenos had recognized the mortars as a threat and formulated a deliberate plan to eliminate them in advance. They had initiated a probing attack and then withdrawn after testing the outer defences. Now the creatures were waiting, but waiting for what?

The angry shouts of Commissar Nazhir caused Marhault to hurriedly return the magnoculars to Sergeant Rhegeb and climb from the trench, heading up towards the grox pens and the source of the commotion.

When he arrived, the datasmith and her robots were arguing with the commissar. The Kastelans were like megaliths of metal that loomed above the stone walls. Captain Marhault stared up at the towering robots. It was impossible for Marhault not to feel a sensation of awe as he gazed at them.

'These shall you hold in abhorrence, they shall be an abomination unto you: knowledge without understanding, strength without duty, accomplishment without sacrifice and intelligence without soul. For it is by these obscenities that the Children of Iron were given shape and form...'

Nazhir brandished his copy of the Imperial Creed overhead as though it were the company standard. His eyes blazed with the outrage and fury of an Ecclesiarch, glaring poison at the Kastelans and their red-robed administrator.

'I was unaware you'd taken up recitation, commissar,' Marhault admonished

Nazhir as he marched towards the grox pens. ‘You’ve picked a rather eccentric audience to perform for.’

Nazhir swung around, turning his glower on the captain. Marhault winced when he saw the fury in his gaze. As a commissar, Nazhir wasn’t subordinate to his command and was fully empowered to summarily execute the captain should he feel Marhault had betrayed his duty to the Astra Militarum and the Imperium.

‘These things are an abomination,’ Nazhir snarled.

Marhault looked towards Datasmith Livia for support, but her composure was as cold and mechanistic as the robots themselves. Somehow that disturbed him more than Nazhir’s bombastic zealotry.

‘They’re what we need,’ Marhault told the commissar. ‘If we’re going to hold this position and perform our duty, then we need more firepower. We’re too far from the regiment’s artillery and the Navy fliers have too much on their plate already. Unless you know of a tank company that can get here in the next day or two, I think it would be prudent to thank the Emperor for these machines and question their sanctity after.’

Nazhir thumbed through his copy of the Imperial Creed, stabbing his finger triumphantly at a passage he had marked there. ‘Children of Iron! Abominations from the Age of Strife! The very existence of these... atrocities... is an affront to the Emperor! They should be...’

Something the commissar said managed to pierce the stoic detachment of the datasmith. Striding forwards, she addressed Nazhir.

‘These are revered relics of the Omnissiah, not the obscenities of the Silica Animus,’ Livia preached in a metallic monotone. ‘The robotic automata of the Legio Cybernetica represent the purity of the Omnissiah. It is blasphemous to speak of them in the same breath as the creations of technoheresy.’

‘They are without souls or the Emperor’s light,’ Nazhir retorted. ‘Their minds are shapes of metal, indecent and profane!’

Livia’s hand emerged from her robe’s sleeve. She pointed one of her metallic talons towards the bolt pistol holstered at Nazhir’s side. ‘Does your weapon have a soul, commissar? Does it reflect the Emperor’s light and serve the needs of the Imperium and mankind? It is a tool, a gift from the Omnissiah, one of the many blessings the Machine-God has bestowed upon us. So too are the Kastelans. Their machine-spirits are shaped by the wisdom entrusted to us by the Omnissiah. Your limited perceptions of flesh and faith cannot encompass the wonder of their construction. In your ignorance, you fear what is too complex for you to understand.’

Nazhir glared at the datasmith. Angrily he snapped his copy of the Imperial Creed close and shook it at her. ‘In your perversion you mistake righteous hate for fear.’

Marhault stepped between Nazhir and Livia.

‘Enough,’ he snapped. ‘Pick a place that isn’t immediately in the path of a tyrannid swarm for your philosophical arguments. There isn’t time for this bickering.’

The commissar shifted his fiery gaze to Marhault. For a moment it looked like he would continue the argument, but instead he simply turned and stalked down to the trenches. Marhault pitied the first Guardsman that Nazhir encountered.

‘That went better than I might have expected,’ he said, turning towards Livia. ‘He might have drawn his pistol.’

‘It would have been detrimental to the efficiency of this operation to indulge such excessive illogic,’ Livia stated. ‘Deprived of a commissar’s discipline...’

Marhault shook his head. ‘He could have shot you,’ he explained.

‘That was within the region of probability,’ Livia conceded. ‘Then I would have been compelled to determine that his hostility was no longer in balance with his utility. He would have needed to be eliminated.’

A chill swept down Marhault’s back as he heard the datasmith declare in cold, passionless terms her readiness to kill Nazhir. She spoke of disposing of an officer from the Commissariat as indifferently as someone might mention throwing out an old boot. Even generals of the Imperial Guard didn’t contemplate such a thing.

Quickly, Marhault turned away, gesturing to the fortifications that stretched down the slope. ‘The perimeter around Second Platoon is where the line is at its weakest,’ he said. ‘If you would direct the firepower of your maniple there...’

‘Such a determination would be inefficient until the disposition of the xenos has been ascertained,’ Livia responded. ‘It would increase the probability of operational success to monitor the situation and then respond with appropriate measures.’ She raised her head, gazing up into Thain’s sky. ‘Magos Procrustes has theorized that the principle xenos assault will begin when the solar cycle enters its transitional phase.’

Marhault smiled despite the horror of the situation and the horde of ravenous aliens just beyond the perimeter.

‘Twilight,’ he told Livia. ‘You tech-priests are so focused on your theories and calculations that you can’t *feel* the things you study.’

‘You speak of imaginative impression, primitive emotion,’ Livia retorted. ‘To

divest such corruption from the intellect is the first blessing of the Ommissiah. Emotion pollutes logic, it encourages distraction and provokes heresy.’ She looked down the slope at Nazhir’s black-uniformed figure. ‘If the Commissariat truly appreciated the meaning behind the words they recite, they would embrace the Machine-God as the shield of the Imperium. Only stalwart constructs such as the Kastelans can be fully depended upon to guard mankind. Organics reject such a conclusion because to acknowledge the perfection of the machine is to recognize the weakness of flesh. It is one of the paradoxes of existence that a biological brain can conceive and construct mechanisms superior to itself, yet that same fleshy organ refuses to accept the meaning of what it has built.’

Marhault shook his head. He was even less inclined to debate with the datasmith than he had with Nazhir.

‘Magos Procrustes has made an error,’ he told Livia, changing the subject. ‘Thain orbits two suns. The planet has neither twilight or dawn.’

There was a sudden eruption of gunfire from the trenches below, and Marhault heard the shouts of officers and sergeants directing their soldiers, and the violent whine of First Platoon’s lascannon as it sent searing lances of laser energy into the enemy. Above the din came the maddened shrieks of tyranids.

‘The primary sun recedes as the secondary sun rises,’ Livia stated. ‘That transition may not *feel* like twilight, but it is sufficient for the purposes of the xenos.’

Marhault rushed towards the trenches. Livia’s steely rejoinder dented his pride even as the roars of the tyranids turned his blood cold.

How do we begin to stop them? Marhault thought to himself as he looked out at the savannah. Whenever the wind rippled through the grass it exposed a skittering tide of aliens crawling across the plain. The shadows lengthened as the erratic orbit of Thain’s secondary sun drew closer to the western horizon, making it increasingly difficult to pick out the creatures. There wasn’t a true night on Thain, only quasi-twilight as the secondary sun slithered along the horizon. The creatures couldn’t be waiting for darkness. It had to be something else.

‘Blood of the primarchs,’ Marhault swore.

‘They’re coming!’ a voice shouted from the trench. A second later the pseudo-night erupted in a renewed cadence of lasguns, heavy bolters, missiles and grenades. From the grox pens behind him, the Kastelan armed with the weapon pods sent blasts of disintegrating energy into the oncoming horde, while its

companion stood idle until the xenos came within range of its promethium-thruster.

The low walls of the pens afforded the robots some slight protection against the tyrannids – at least at this stage of the assault. Marhault had seen his comms trooper dropped by one of the hideous bio-weapons the xenos carried, the soldier's chest had been torn to shreds by something that was more carnivorous beetle than it was bullet. In the wake of the leaping creatures that swarmed towards the trenches were squat aliens carrying bony rifles. Their sporadic fire wasn't precise, but when their grisly bio-organic projectiles struck, the destruction they inflicted was horrific.

Marhault saw the savannah vanish beneath the surging rush of the aliens. The tyrannids weren't hiding in the grass now; they were charging towards the ridge in skittering leaps, a rolling surge of wicked talons and snapping jaws.

The noise of the mortars provided some small measure of relief to the hard-pressed Guardsmen holding the line. Each concentration exploded in a shower of chitinous limbs and burning grass. Marhault had the mortar squads stagger their salvos in a checkerboard pattern, raking the savannah across a hundred metre front. One burst would be twenty metres forward of the line, the next would be only ten metres, and so on. Anything to make it hard for the aliens to predict where the next salvo would fall. After the incident with the infiltrators, Marhault wasn't going to underestimate the cunning of their enemy.

The foremost of the aliens struck the minefield laid in front of Outpost Nymue's perimeter. Fragments of chitin and fibrous meat pelted down into the trench as creatures were ripped to bloody tatters by the buried explosives. In their frantic determination to hold the xenos at bay, the soldiers paid scant attention to the gory debris.

Balduin's platoon was doing its utmost to send a continuous barrage into the charging creatures. Marhault could see the lieutenant signalling his soldiers with hand gestures, directing their fire to different points along the line. Further along the perimeter, Lieutenants Peredur and Drystan were doing their best to get their platoons to match the fury of Balduin's position. Above it all there came the blasts of energy from Livia's robot, immolating clutches of xenos brutes with each barrage, leaving the residue twitching in the scorched earth until fresh waves of invaders ground them beneath hoof and claw.

Mines, mortars, Kastelans and guns continued to batter the tyrannids, but still the beasts came. The approach to the ridge was carpeted in xenos fragments and twitching carcasses, yet their charge lost none of its impetus. The attack seemed

mindless, devoid of the unsettling sense of strategy that had guided the monstrous infiltrators. Then Marhault noticed something curious. He saw a clutch of the spindly, claw-armed aliens reach the base of the ridge. Through his magnoculars he could distinctly see them hesitate for a moment. Instead of trying to climb the ridge and force their way through the saw-wire in front of the trench, the creatures turned. They scurried back into the minefield, deliberately picking a different path from the one that had seen them through to the ridge. One after another, the aliens were destroyed by mines they had missed in their initial charge.

‘By the saints, what are they doing?’ Rhegeb wondered. ‘Even an ork isn’t stupid enough to dance through a minefield twice.’

Marhault glanced at the stocky sergeant, catching his unease. ‘They’re clearing the minefield. The little ones are making things safe so bigger ones can pay us a visit.’ He handed his magnoculars to Rhegeb. ‘Five hundred metres out, stomping along behind another mixed swarm of shooters and stabbers.’

He had spotted them only a moment before, lumbering out from the gloom of Thain’s quasi-twilight: three trios of massive tyrannid creatures, each as tall as the ghastly infiltrators had been. There was no deceptive chameleon quality about these, however. They were hideous: terrifyingly solid, immense brutes with fanged faces and spiked heads. Four arms erupted from their armoured bodies, each clawed hand wrapped about the haft of some weird bio-organic weapon. Some bore what looked like colossal swords, while others carried cannons made of bone, or polypus sacks of quivering flesh. One of the brutes wielded a long segmented whip, the bladed tip coiled around its forearm.

‘Not so sure a lasgun will keep those bugs from taking the trench once they get up here,’ Rhegeb snarled. ‘Maybe they’d be obliging enough to eat a grenade if we ask them nicely.’

‘The mortars might be enough,’ Marhault said. ‘If we could catch them in a good concentration...’

The captain shifted his attention back to the Third Platoon’s perimeter. It was here that the xenos assault was making the most headway. The mines had been cleared and the rest of the brown-shelled alien vanguard was now scurrying up the ridge. Marhault was horrified to see the broad leaps the beasts were capable of. A single spring could have got them clear over the saw-wire, but the monsters dropped right into the wire instead and drove their bodies into the circular blades fastened along the obstacle. The saws whirred into action the instant pressure was put on them, tearing into the xenos bodies. Metal teeth that had been

engineered to saw through more fleshy foes had a much tougher time ripping away at the shells of the tyranids. After a few hundred rotations, the span of only a few seconds, the saws faltered and sputtered, their mechanisms fouled by the fibrous tissues and splintered chitin of their victims.

Marhault grimaced at the vile sight. Just as they had with the minefield, the aliens were slaughtering themselves to clear the wire for the main assault swarm coming after them. The sight indicated to Marhault that there was nothing else they could do here; the enemy just wouldn't be defeated, wouldn't be driven off, wouldn't retreat. They had to be exterminated, annihilated. Anything less and they would just keep coming. The only hope of holding the outpost was to pray the briefing that regimental command had given was right and that the swarm needed the bigger creatures to provide them with direction; otherwise, they would lose their cohesion. Fighting a thousand individual monsters was better than fighting a single unified swarm.

Even as Marhault was formulating a plan to concentrate his remaining mortars against the bigger tyranids, the ground beneath his feet trembled. Dust and loose bits of rock clattered down the sides of the trench. His first thought was that a shell had fallen short and crashed down somewhere within the perimeter. Then the tremor was repeated, swiftly followed by another and another. Had the tyranids brought some sort of artillery of their own to bear against the outpost?

'Captain!' Rhegeb shouted, his voice barely audible as a cheer rose from the Guardsmen in the trench around him. Heedless of the threat posed by the weaponry of the alien shooters, the sergeant stood and pointed towards the grox pens. 'Did you order the robots to advance to our positions? Because that's what they're doing!'

Marhault heard the words, but could hardly believe them. After holding the grox pens and providing support for all three platoons, the giant Kastelans were climbing down from the ridge and moving towards the Third Platoon's deployment. A ragged cheer rose from the soldiers on the line, relieved to find that the awesome combat automata were coming to help them. They didn't seem to appreciate that if the Kastelans concentrated their power here, then they would be leaving the rest of the perimeter more vulnerable than it already was.

Apparently Datasmith Livia was also unaware of that fact. Cursing, Marhault rose from the trench and scrambled up the slope towards the advancing robots and their red-robed custodian. She could put the claw-handed robot on the line, if she was so determined, but he wanted the one with the weapon pods back up where it acted as artillery for the whole company.

The datasmith waved aside Marhault's complaints when he confronted her. Without breaking stride, she issued her own orders. 'You will reserve your mortars only for those xenos organisms withdrawing from the battlefield.' Livia had an obsidian box inlaid with blocks of circuitry tucked beneath one of her arms. The datasmith paused in her pursuit of the marching Kastelans. 'You will not direct fire at any of the larger specimens,' she commanded. Her cold, monotone voice was too emotionless to carry a vocal nuance as subtle as that of a threat, but Marhault caught it just the same.

'I've got thousands of alien monsters waiting to strip the meat off my...'
Marhault cursed, but she was already walking off.

Livia had clearly taken it for granted that he would obey her orders. He looked aside as his aide came running towards him.

'Have the mortars maintain their sweep across the front,' he told Rhegeb. 'I'm going to get some answers from that cog-head!'

By the time he caught up to Livia, the datasmith had joined the Kastelans in the shadow of a ferrocrete pillbox just above the trenches. Ignoring the gnawing beetles and acidic spores that the tyranid's were firing into the outpost, Livia stood before the robot with the claws. It bowed towards her. The scene reminded Marhault of nothing so much as a lord-general's steward kow-towing to his master.

Nearby, one of Balduin's troopers shrieked, thrown back as something long and worm-like speared through his chest. One of the tyranid gun-organisms had vomited at him, and a ropy, serpentine maggot flailed about in the wreck of the man's chest for a moment, breaking ribs and rupturing organs, before its heinous vitality was expended and it sagged limp and dead across the body of its victim.

'Datasmith!' Marhault cried in warning to Livia. He worried what the loss of their keeper would do to the Kastelans, and what the loss of the robots would do to the Cadians. 'Get under cover!'

Livia's metal fingers slid across the Kastelan's chest, disrupting a magnetic seal and causing a hatch to slide back. She reached into the space behind the hatch, carefully withdrawing a thin square of transparent silicon that was lined with exposed circuitry. Reverently, she brought the slender object to a narrow slit in the side of the box she had been carrying. The crackle of a binharic orison droned from her throat, the mechanical susurrations replacing more human vocalization. She slid the card into the opening, then pressed one of her metal fingers against a different side of the box. A second card emerged from another narrow opening in the surface. To Marhault's eye, it didn't seem any different

than the one she had removed from the Kastelan.

More screams rose from the trenches. The chatter of heavy bolters and the crack of lasguns became more hurried and desperate. Marhault knew the tyranids were ramping up their attack. It might be a matter of minutes before they clawed their way into the outpost.

‘We don’t have time for this!’ Marhault snarled at Livia. ‘You have to get the robots back into the fight! They have to give my Guardsmen support!’

‘The imperatives assigned to the Kastelans have already been calculated,’ Livia said as she pushed the second card into the robot and slid the hatch closed. The metal giant rose from its bow, towering above the trenches as it lumbered towards the line. ‘Magos Procrustes has evaluated their objectives. Their purpose here was determined before they were even brought into the system.’

The pungent stink of promethium struck Marhault’s nose even as his ears were assailed by the whoosh of jetting chemicals and the simultaneous death-shrieks of dozens of the smaller tyranid creatures. The weapon jutting over the Kastelan’s shoulder was spraying streams of fire onto the aliens, searing their chitinous bodies and boiling the ichor running through their bulging veins. The chemical flames broiled a score of the clawed stabbers in the first blast. The smoking muzzle of the Kastelan’s weapon tilted slightly upwards, adjusting its angle with the whine of servo-motors. A heartbeat later, the robot was tossing another stream of flame across the tyranids, projecting it further back amongst the aliens and catching several of the armed shooter tyranids with a dozen more of the quick-moving stabbers.

The second Kastelan lumbered towards the trench, following its fire-spitting comrade. It took position at the first robot’s right flank. A deep, steely groan rose from within the machine as it thrust one of its arms outward, pointing the barrel of its gun-pod towards the tyranids. Purity scrolls and prayer beads fluttered in the exhaust fumes that boiled out from vents at the back of the armoured weapon. A glowing light flickered within the weapon pod, sending little flashes of blue phosphorescence bleeding from the seams and joins of the armoured casing.

Then the glowing light transferred itself to the barrel of the weapon. It lingered there for the blink of an eye before it dispelled from the Kastelan’s weapon and sizzled into the alien horde. The unleashed ball of energy was blinding, but when it struck one of the xenos creatures, the true magnitude of its wrath was displayed. The white-hot sphere splashed across its victim when it struck the creature’s shell. Instead of dissipating, the glowing energy held firm, blazing

against the alien's body with volcanic savagery. The tyranid shrieked and thrashed as the energy orb burned through its shell, burrowing into the softer tissues within. Marhault had seen this weapon in action against the tyranid infiltrator, but against these smaller creatures its destructive power seemed apocalyptic.

The Kastelan lowered the discharged blaster and raised its other arm, sending a second glowing sphere into the foe's midst. The exotic gun projecting over its shoulder shuddered into life, pumping more of the destructive orbs into the bestial xenos. Some of the troops on the line shouted in vengeful satisfaction as they watched mangled tyranids twitching and writhing in agony. Neither the promethium projector nor the energy blasts killed the creatures quickly; rather they burned and melted the creatures into a mess of charred wreckage.

The immense robot continued its march, crashing through the perimeter. Two soldiers, slower than their comrades, were smashed beneath the advancing machine. An instant later, the robot was climbing the opposite side and propelling itself through the saw-wire and out onto the savannah below. The giant's huge claws flung the wire aside as if it were nothing more than string, sending metres of steel cable and support rods tumbling down the ridge. At every step, its flame-projector played a sheet of fire across the path of the oncoming xenos, cooking them as they tried to reach the robot.

Marhault watched the scene as the Kastelan waded down into the teeming alien horde. He thought it had to be a mistake, some ghastly error that had deranged the Kastelan's machine-spirit. He started to demand an explanation from Livia, only to find that the tech-priest was gone. She had left the cover afforded by the pillbox. Maybe she had feared giving him an explanation, but when the second robot followed the first in a lumbering march across the perimeter, he knew it couldn't be a mistake. The Kastelans had been ordered to charge the tyranids.

The captain looked in shock at the gap the Kastelans had ripped in their own perimeter. The xenos could swarm right through the hole in their defences!

'If those things can think, then they're crazy!' Sergeant Rhegeb declared. Marhault was surprised to see his aide standing nearby with the rest of the command section. After giving orders to the mortars, Rhegeb had reasoned that their place was with their captain.

'The robots aren't doing this, it's the maniacs who gave them their commands,' Marhault cursed. He pointed at the company runners. 'Get to Balduin and Peredur! Tell them to get some of their people to cover the gap in the perimeter!' The captain didn't need to emphasise his point. The Cadians could see for

themselves the threat posed by the hole in their lines.

Marhault turned and stared back up the slope, looking for any sign of Livia slinking up to join Magos Procrustes in the command post. ‘Where’s that damn datasmith?’

Rhegeb caught Marhault by the arm and turned him back around, pointing at a small, red-robed figure following in the shadow of the advancing robots. It seemed a suicidal spectacle. The Kastelans were burning down scores of tyranids, but there were many more of the creatures. They couldn’t possibly kill each and every one. Some of the xenos were bound to slip through and when they did, the datasmith was going to discover a very sudden and very messy kind of death. He had almost be prepared to accept that as the price of Livia’s madness if it didn’t mean they would lose the Kastelans as well.

‘You’re not thinking of going down there?’ Rhegeb sasked grimly. A man who had once killed a kroot with his bare hands wasn’t someone who was easily frightened, but the look on his face now was as close to fear as Marhault had ever seen.

‘Without those robots, this position will be over-run,’ Marhault said. ‘We either die down there or up here. Either way, we *die*.’ He spoke loudly enough for his voice to carry to the rest of his command section. ‘Form up on me. The objective is the datasmith and getting her back behind the perimeter. If the Emperor is with us, the robots will follow her.’ There was no time to wait and see how many of his soldiers would follow him. Balduin and Peredur would need all of their Guardsmen to hold the gap in the line. It was up to his section to retrieve the tech-priest. Any moment might see a tyranid kill Livia.

Marhault and his unit sprinted down the ridge, leaping across a narrow bend in the trench before plunging out into the broken terrain where the saw-wire had been. The captain fired his laspistol into the face of a tyranid trying to pull its body through the tangled wire. He didn’t pause to see if his shot finished the creature or not, but kept running through the path the Kastelans had cleared. He could feel the heat boiling off the grass of the savannah as the robots’ weapons immolated great swathes of the vegetation. His ears rang with the whoosh and whine of their guns as they continued to press their advance into the swarm. Like walking war-idols, the Kastelans loomed over the plain.

The captain snapped off a shot at a tyranid stabber that came bounding out from the burning grass. The laser scored a patch of the thing’s breast, cutting through its already seared shell. The creature flopped against the ground, its legs kicking and clawing at the air. Two of his soldiers’ lasguns cracked from behind

Marhault, their beams piercing the alien's head and killing it. Other weapons sounded from nearby, dropping more xenos stragglers as they rushed out from the smoke.

The Kastelans and their administrator were nearby. The robots' paint was chipped and scratched, their legs black and purple with a patina of burned tyranid and alien ichor. Otherwise the immense machines seemed unfazed by their rampage through the swarm and their invulnerability seemed to extend to Datasmith Livia. Marhault could see her still following close behind the maniple.

'The Emperor smiles on us!' Marhault shouted to the Cadians. 'The datasmith lives!'

That good fortune, however, seemed about spent. A snake-like xenos erupted from the ground a few metres from where Livia stood. It lunged at her, its segmented jaws stretched wide and scythe-like claws poised to rend and mangle. Marhault heard Rhegeb shout a warning to the datasmith.

Exhibiting uncanny speed, the datasmith swung around. A stumpy, wide-barrelled pistol was in her hand. Without a second of hesitation, Livia discharged her gun into the tyranid serpent. Marhault's soldiers were dazzled by the blinding beam of light from her pistol as she shot at the alien. When they could see again, the beast was strewn across the grass, cut in half by the strange pistol. The severed ends of the creature were scorched black, and between them lay a small pile of ash.

Sergeant Rhegeb screamed suddenly as another of the tyranid burrowers erupted from the ground. Others from the command group added their own cries to the tumult as more of the serpentine diggers emerged up from the earth. Marhault turned back to help his aide, but one look told him it was too late to do anything but end his pain. The tyranid had punctured Rhegeb's gut with one of its claws and the man's left leg had been cut clean away. A spike-like tongue kept shooting out from the beast's mouth, punching holes in Rhegeb's back.

Marhault put a shot into Rhegeb's forehead. He felt a brief flash of sorrow for his aide. A quick glance revealed to him that the rest of the Cadians were no better off than the sergeant. Before any of the burrowers could toss aside their victims and charge at him, he did the only thing that offered any hope of survival. He raced towards Livia and the robots.

The datasmith aimed her gun towards him as he approached. Coldly, she peeled off a shot. As the flash of light blotted out his vision, he expected to feel the burn of the energy blast searing through him. Instead, he heard something heavy slam

against the earth behind him. Blinking through the spots fluttering across his eyes, he could see another of the tyranid serpents sprawled in the grass, its entire head reduced to an ashy stain on the ground.

‘Datasmith!’ Marhault cried out to the tech-priest. ‘The outpost will be overwhelmed if you don’t withdraw your machines back within the perimeter!’

Livia fired another blinding blast of energy at a third serpentine tyranid, slaughtering it as she had the others. ‘Your presence here is fortuitous, captain,’ she said. ‘You may increase the efficiency of this operation. Dividing my attention between the maniple and the xenos is... perturbing.’ She turned her back to Marhault, focusing on the Kastelans as they continued to fend off wave upon wave of the smaller aliens. ‘You will warn me if the enemy makes any effort to flank the maniple.’

‘Forget this madness!’ Marhault snapped. ‘You have to bring the Kastelans back to the outpost. We need them to hold the position!’

Again, the datasmith ignored him. She was focused instead upon a clutch of larger tyranids a few dozen metres away. The beasts were stealing towards the Kastelans, availing themselves of a screen of the smaller creatures to draw near. The robots didn’t wait for the aliens to attack. Instead, the gun-armed Kastelan focused all of its weapons against the surge. Scores of the smaller ones were ripped apart by the phosphorescent spheres, while a larger creature had its entire left side melted away.

As its fellow loosed a fusillade into the mass of aliens, the claw-armed Kastelan stormed forwards. Fiery promethium consumed any small creatures the glowing orbs had failed to burn and melt. One of the larger creatures trained its weapon at the advancing robot, firing what looked like maggots from the fanged end. The strange missiles failed to strike their target. Just as it seemed the shots would land, a skein of crackling green energy pulsed into life around the Kastelan. The power field repulsed the tyranid projectiles, reflecting the bio-organic missiles back at the creature that had fired them. They struck the big brute in its midsection and splattered into a caustic slime that ate away at the tyranid’s organs.

The last of the larger tyranids refrained from firing the long, thorn-like weapon it gripped in its secondary arms. Hissing, the beast lunged, driving the weapon like a lance into the robot. The power field crackled and sizzled as the huge thorn breached its protective energies. A ghastly tearing sound rose from the out-thrust bio-weapon as it slammed into the Kastelan. Marhault expected to see the robot impaled upon the alien spear, to see its metal body pierced by the fury of

the tyranid's attack. The robot's thick armour was stronger than the alien's weapon. A spider-web of cracks and fissures snaked across the length of the spear. A moment later it disintegrated into a cascade of fragments, destroyed by the shock of its own impact against the Kastelan's impenetrable hull.

The tyranid didn't retreat, and nor did the destruction of its bio-weapon seem to faze it. Shrieking in bestial savagery, the creature swung a massive, sword-like length of bone at the Kastelan's head while the segmented lash it carried whipped at the machine's leg. The blade flashed through the power field, scraping against the Kastelan's cranium and digging an ugly groove into the metal. The lash flared through the protective energies with such violence that the defensive mechanism was overwhelmed. A sickening howl rose from what Marhault judged to be the field generator. With a last flare of light, the field dissipated into a sputtering haze that stank of ozone and burned copper.

Snarling, the tyranid pressed its attack, lashing out with sword and whip. Without the field to blunt their impact, the full force of the alien's ferocity struck the Kastelan. Each swing of the sword tore the robot's armour, each crack of the whip ripping a new gouge into its hull. Slowly, the hulking machine was being forced back, staggering away from its xenos tormentor.

Then the Kastelan's promethium projector seared across the tyranid's sword arm, boiling every fluid flowing within it. The arm sagged uselessly against the alien's side, the sword frozen in its paralyzed hand. The segmented lash fared better, coiling about the robot's leg and grinding away at the armour plate. As the whip bit into its frame, the Kastelan reached out with its claws and took hold of the tyranid's secondary arms. There was a sickening crunch and a revolting pop before the Kastelan ripped one of the alien's limbs from its body.

The creature struggled to free its other limb from the steely grip, but its efforts were as vain as those of the smaller xenos that scurried from the grass to rescue it. Phosphorescent spheres from the other Kastelan burned the aliens in droves while the other robot's claws adjusted to hold the creature immobile. It lowered the alien to a level where Livia could reach it. From beneath the sleeve of her robe, the datasmith produced a taser goad, shocking the creature with blasts of crackling energy. The more damage inflicted against the tyranid, the less concerted the attacks of the smaller creatures became. Instead they became disorganized, losing the focus that had compelled them to ferociously charge the maniple again and again. Even the snake-like burrowers lost their initiative, withdrawing back into the earth without completing their encirclement of the Kastelans and their master. When the creature was stunned senseless, the robot

began to carry it back towards the outpost.

Marhault glared at the captured creature as the enormous robot lumbered past. Was this the leader of the swarm that had come to attack Outpost Nymue? Coldly, he aimed his pistol at the mangled tyranid.

‘If you kill it now, it will all have been for nothing,’ Livia’s cold voice warned him. The datasmith was aiming her own weapon, but not at the tyranid. Behind her, the other Kastelan was slowly falling back, its guns continuing to melt elements of the xenos horde.

Expecting to feel the disintegrating energies of Livia’s gun scorching through his body at any instant, Marhault lowered his pistol.

‘What does this mean?’ he asked.

Livia stared at him, her eyes as cold as the rest of her transcended body. Then, with shocking abruptness, her gun sent a blast of searing energy hurtling towards the captain. Marhault clenched his eyes tight against the blinding flare from the datasmith’s pistol. He expected it to be the last thing he ever saw.

Marhault was stunned when a powerful grip seized him by the shoulder. Blinking, he saw that he was being dragged back towards the perimeter. Blood was streaming down his leg; the burned stump of a tyranid claw was embedded in his hip. He glanced aside; he was being half-carried by Livia. The shot she had fired had not been for him, it had been for a lurking stabber tyranid that had pounced on him.

‘Curiosity is what lends human existence its purpose,’ Livia said when she noticed the captain looking at her. She was following the two Kastelans as they lumbered back towards the perimeter. The claw-handed robot was carrying the still-living remainder of the tyranid it had injured and captured. ‘It is not within my discipline to explain. You must speak with Magos Procrustes.’

Around them, the attacks of the smaller tyranids had collapsed. The creatures had lost none of their ferocity – the Kastelans were still compelled to burn the beasts back. What the aliens had lost was their cohesion, their sense of unified purpose. By eliminating the bigger monsters, Marhault dared to wonder if the robots had saved the entire outpost. When he asked as much of Livia, the datasmith’s answer was discouraging.

‘A respite,’ she said. ‘Time to accomplish the objective. There is no salvation for Outpost Nymue. The xenos will come again. Eventually they will overwhelm this position.’

‘Then what is the objective?’ Marhault gasped. The shock of his injury was beginning to dissipate and he was feeling the pain of his wound. The Kastelans

were at the saw-wire now. A few metres beyond would be the trenches. Balduin and Peredur had reinforced the breached section and brought whatever resources they could scavenge to hold the line. Marhault almost dared to anticipate one of his medics rushing out to assist him.

What he saw instead was the black-clad Nazhir. The commissar had his bolt pistol drawn. Marhault couldn't make out what Nazhir was shouting, but he did catch the words 'traitor' and 'Children of Iron' in his tirade. Suddenly Datasmith Livia stumbled as a shell from Nazhir's gun slammed into her. Marhault cried out as she dropped him and he slammed into a barbed strand of wire lying on the ground. Lubricants jetted from a smouldering hole in the datasmith's chest, sparks crackling up and down her right arm.

Before Nazhir could fire again, the commissar vanished in a burst of burning phosphorescence. The gun-handed Kastelan marched through his charred husk, scattering fiery fragments of the officer in every direction. A stunned silence gripped the men and women in the trenches, awed by the suddenness and completeness of Nazhir's destruction.

Livia struggled back to her feet, moving with a jerky, awkward shift of her body. Some internal components were fused by Nazhir's shot, but she still stooped and lifted Marhault from the ground with a mechanical gracelessness. She glanced down at him as she carried him once more.

'It is regrettable that was necessary,' she said. 'The loss of the commissar will decrease the performance of your soldiers. You must survive, captain, otherwise their efficiency will degenerate further.'

Marhault had an answer for the datasmith's cold, analytical pragmatism. But the pain from his hip made it impossible to put the thought into words.

Servitors relieved the claw-handed Kastelan of the hissing tyranid it carried. The nearly mindless man-machines emerged from the old processing plant, seized the creature in their metal claws, then disappeared back into the building. It was eerie watching the precise, emotionless procedure. As soon as the xenos was removed, the robot turned and lumbered back towards the grox pens to rejoin the other member of the maniple in defending the perimeter. Already, the alien attacks were picking up again. Marhault thought perhaps other 'command tyranids' were moving to join this swarm and assume control over it.

Livia carried the captain into the building, her steel feet ringing as she marched across the stone floor. The hallway hadn't changed since Marhault had used the place as his command post, but when they reached the factory itself, he was

struck by how rapidly and completely the Adeptus Mechanicus had transformed the place. Everywhere he looked he saw banks of machinery. Some he recognized as cogitators, while others looked to be communication relays, although on far greater scale than the one that kept him in touch with the colonel. Much of the factory's industrial machinery looked as though it had been moved and altered, repurposed to perform whatever new functions the tech-priests had requested from their machine-spirits.

As they advanced into the factory, Marhault saw the crippled tyranid set down on the flat surface of a hydraulic press that had once been employed to smash grox dung into cakes for easier transport. While the servitors held the alien in place, robed acolytes secured it to the slab with heavy chains. Once the xenos was secured, the servitors withdrew, filing back across the factory floor.

Marhault's eyes gaped wide in shock as he saw the servitors walk to one of the vats that had once been used to provide a chemical preservative to the cakes of dung. Now an entirely different mixture filled the vats: a terrible acid that, as he watched, consumed the flesh of each servitor as it threw itself into the bath. Even though the servitors didn't possess anything like genuine life, it still made for a sickening tableau.

'Their function has been fulfilled. Resources must be denied to the enemy.' The words issued from the vox-caster set into the body of Magos Procrustes. The tech-priest trundled towards Marhault. There was a laser scalpel in one of his hands. As he drew close, the optic set into his face narrowed and focused upon the chitinous claw embedded in the captain's hip. 'You are still essential. At least for a few more hours.'

Before Marhault knew what was happening, Procrustes activated the scalpel and drew it across his wound. With a deftness impossible to merely organic hands, he used the instrument at its maximum setting to saw through the claw while employing its softer energies to cauterize torn veins and arteries.

'This will stop the bleeding,' Procrustes declared. 'Your medics will have the stimulants on hand to maintain your functionality in the little time that is left.' The magos shifted his attention away from Marhault to Livia. 'The Kastelans have been issued their final orders?'

Livia bowed her head. 'They have been given their commands.' She hesitated for an instant. 'Do you think it will be possible they might be recovered afterwards?'

'Possible but not feasible,' Procrustes declared. 'The lower orders of tyranids might not recognize them as a threat once they enter hibernation. Any of the

higher organisms will destroy them.’ A slight touch of empathy entered the tech-priest’s voice. ‘Know that the objective has been worthy of the sacrifice.’

Marhault pulled away from Livia’s grip. ‘Sacrifice?’ he growled. ‘You’re worried about a few machines when my soldiers are being killed?’

‘All of us were brought here to facilitate this objective,’ Magos Procrustes stated. The tracks on the left side of his carriage rotated, turning him so that he could gesture towards the press where the tyranid was chained. Half a dozen tech-priests were surrounding it, cutting into it with a deranged assortment of tools and instruments. ‘That creature is what has been designated as a tyranid prime, a recently observed evolution of the common tyranid warrior. It is the lowest order of tyranid organism that has exhibited advanced neurology. Vivisection of its brain and nervous system may offer a clearer understanding of the hive synapse that guides their species.’

‘You are sacrificing my people for that?’ Marhault gasped. ‘They are dying for... for this?’

‘From the moment the hive fleet arrived in orbit around Thain, all who set foot upon the planet were doomed,’ Procrustes explained. ‘But disaster sometimes heralds opportunity. What we can learn from that specimen may be the first step towards eradicating that foul xenos breed! What does the termination of you or me matter compared to that, captain? Already a tech-adept with a neural imprint of my brain has been prepared. He will use the transmissions of this vivisection to continue my work. We will perish on Thain, but the work will live on.’

Marhault could see some of the acolytes leaving the vivisection. Their roles in the study completed, they were following the example set by the servitors and dumping themselves into the acid bath. His body shook with horror and revulsion.

‘Their purpose is fulfilled,’ Livia said, noting the direction of Marhault’s gaze. ‘Now all that is left is to deny their essential proteins to the xenos.’

Procrustes waved one of his metal talons. ‘Not possible, I fear. A residue is always left behind, but these chemicals ensure that what remains is difficult for the tyranids to assimilate.’ The magos considered Marhault for a moment. ‘Why does that solution offend you? It is the enigma of flesh that the individual promotes its own survival before that of the species as a whole. It is a failing that humanity must overcome if we are to thrive. The irrational and the obsolete must be discarded.’

‘I... am not ready... to be discarded,’ Marhault shivered, unable to take his eyes from the vats of acid. It was infernal. Obscene. Inhuman.

‘No, you aren’t,’ Livia said. The datasmith’s arm closed around him. Despite the damage from Nazhir’s shot, she had no problem drawing Marhault away from the command post and the macabre labours of the Adeptus Mechanicus. ‘You still have purpose. You must rally the Guardsmen. You must give them the motivation to endure long enough for the study to be completed.’

Marhault stared at her, incredulous. ‘You’ll die too?’ he asked. ‘You’ll dive into Procrustes’ acid?’

Livia gazed back at him, and for once there was something approaching compassion in her eyes. ‘Flesh is transient. It is metal that endures – metal and the knowledge that endows it with shape and purpose. All else is but a distraction from the purity of the Ommissiah.’

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