

The illustration depicts a dynamic battle scene. In the center, a large Adeptus Mechanicus character, a Techmarine, is shown in mid-air, wearing a red cloak and holding a massive, glowing blue energy weapon. To his left, another Techmarine is also in flight, holding a smaller weapon. The background is a bright, blue, crystalline environment with floating insect-like creatures. In the foreground, the heads of several purple-skinned, horned creatures are visible, looking up at the falling Techmarine. The overall style is a detailed, painterly illustration typical of Warhammer 40,000 book covers.

WARHAMMER
40,000

ADEPTUS MECHANICUS
THE ZHENG GIPHER
JOSH REYNOLDS

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THE ZHENG CIPHER

Josh Reynolds

The radium carbine bucked in Alpha 6-Friest's hands as she pivoted and fired at the hormagaunt springing towards her out of the press of battle. The rad-bathed bullet punctured the alien's skull, scorching the chitin black as it passed through and out the other side. She spun, carbine juddering as she fired again and again, trusting in her targeting sensors to send the bullets where the Ommissiah willed.

As she moved, her augmented limbs carrying her smoothly from one firing stance to the next, she took note of the disposition of her skitarii, calculated the efficiency of their current firing pattern, and found it wanting. 6-Friest stepped back, avoiding a scything talon, and smashed the butt of her carbine into the wailing hormagaunt's fang-studded maw. The front of the alien's skull crumpled and burst, spattering the front of her armour. Even as it fell, she was already seeking out new prey. The radium carbine slid through her fingers, spinning swiftly back into a firing position with a casual twitch of her wrists.

<Tighten up ranks.> She sent the thought pulsing out along the neural node-line that linked her combat-maniple. They responded with action rather than assent, tightening their formation, drawing together into a tight phalanx. Radium carbines hissed and barked, punching steaming holes in the heaving tide of alien chitin that sought to drown the cohort of skitarii vanguard attempting to pass through it.

<Watch your left, 10-Dulak,> she thought, sending a warning to one of her skitarii as something with too many limbs and claws rose up out of the press of lesser vermin and lunged for him with blades of bone and whips of stinging flesh. The rad-trooper whirled and fired, again and again, until the tyrannid warrior staggered and sank down, its body shrivelling and steaming as the baleful energies ate away at its flesh. The radium carbines she and her skitarii carried were masterpieces of baroque beauty, each one older than its wielder by

several generations. That beauty, however, belied a vile function – every shot bathed the immediate area in deadly radiation, rendering it as inhospitable as the rad-wastes of Mars itself.

Which was not to say that Kotir-8 was all that hospitable otherwise. The once harmlessly barren mining colony had been reduced to a xenos-infested wasteland, stripped of what little life it had possessed, its rocky gorges and snow-capped crags covered in a seething carpet of organic savagery. There had been two hundred and sixty-three extraction facilities on Kotir-8. Now there was one. Soon enough, there would be none. It was as inevitable as rust and ruin.

The facility in question rose above the seething horde. It was a hummock of metal and stone, built to withstand the worst environmental hazards the galaxy could throw at it, and to protect the extraction plant and its workers. Defence emplacements consisting of plasteel weapon blisters swivelled and rolled, spraying the forecourt of the facility with autocannon fire and cleansing flames. While the facility's firepower was substantial, it barely slowed the frenzied mass of alien bodies that swarmed about its walls like an angry sea of chitin and ichor. Soon, those defences would fall silent, ammunition cylinders and fuel drums emptied, and the armoured doors would buckle and burst, as they had two hundred and sixty-two times before.

Speed was of the essence. The facility held something too precious and important to allow it to be so savagely consumed. That was why 6-Friest and her combat-maniple had been dispatched, to fight their way across the arid plains and jagged crags from their point of arrival at one of the fallen facilities, to this last redoubt.

She recalled the juddering descent, the orbital lander losing pieces of itself as it plummeted through the swirling clouds of alien madness. Flying bio-forms – gargoyles, harridans and worse things – had converged on the lander as it pierced the upper reaches of the atmosphere, tearing it apart as it fell. She had lost two skitarii in that hellish descent, torn from their safety harnesses by the claws and tendrils of the monstrous creatures and dragged out into the crawling sky. Others had died on the march, pulled away from the others and into a tangle of talons and teeth, or else consumed by alien bile. But the vanguard had marched on, as relentless as the will of the Ommissiah itself. And now that they were within sight of their goal, 6-Friest had no intention of slowing down.

6-Friest signalled the closest of her combat-maniple, and they swung their carbines around, aligning them with hers. As one, they fired, punching a hole in the frenzied ranks of the enemy. Just beyond the leaping, skittering forms of the

hormagaunts, she could see two more of the multi-limbed warrior forms striding forward.

<9-Jud, target the synapse creatures.> A moment later, 9-Jud's radium jezzail shrieked. The long-barrelled rifle was a precision weapon, requiring a steady hand, eye and mind. 9-Jud had all three, thanks to the blessings of the Omnissiah. One of the tyranid warriors staggered as a bullet smashed into its chest. It lurched forward, screamed and toppled, black bile and steam spurting from its open jaws. The last of the warrior-forms broke into a loping run, smashing through the massed ranks of its smaller kin in its hurry to close the distance.

<Under optimum range, Alpha,> 9-Jud sent.

<Acknowledged. Engaging conqueror protocols,> 6-Friest responded. She slung her carbine and stepped forward, unhooking the arc maul from her belt. With a snap of her wrist, she activated the weapon. Energy crackled around its bludgeon, and she felt her combat-nodes shiver in sympathy as the weapon linked itself to her.

The tiny, fierce machine-spirit within the arc maul gave a static snarl of eagerness as she broke into a trot. It longed for war the way an adept longed for enhancements, ever-greedy. She knew that feeling well, and was happy to have the opportunity to indulge it. When metal met flesh, flesh failed. It was a lesson the hive mind had yet to learn, but Omnissiah willing, she would teach it today. She swung it in a tight circle, filling the air with the hum of arc generators as she moved to intercept the tyranid warrior.

The creature was already staggering, black froth dripping from its jaws. Even the alien horrors birthed by the hive fleets were not immune to the searing breath of Mars. To meet the vanguard in battle was to meet death, either by bullet or by simple proximity. But the quicker the synapse creature was put down, the quicker the rest would scatter, and the quicker she and her combat-maniple could complete their mission.

She ducked beneath its first sweeping blow with a bone-sword and brought the arc maul down on its exposed elbow joint. Electricity surged through the limb and the tyranid howled in agony as it rounded on her. She stepped back, narrowly avoiding the tip of a second blade. Her targeting array pinged as it focused in on a weak point in the creature's armour and she smiled beneath her helm. The creature had overextended itself. She lunged forward and smashed her arc maul into its knee, elbow and then, finally, its jaw, pulverising each in turn in a burst of blue lightning. Bone blades skidded across her war-plate in a scatter of

sparks, but failed to cut through the ancient artificer armour.

6-Friest stepped back as the tyranid slumped. The beast wheezed and tried to stand, but before it could do so, she pressed the barrel of her carbine to its wide skull and pulled the trigger. As the synapse creature slumped, a quiver went through the ranks of hormagaunts. Bestial instincts reasserted themselves in the absence of the guiding will of the hive mind, and the creatures began to retreat.

6-Friest knew it was only a temporary reprieve. Quickly, she signalled for her combat-maniple to head for the main doors of the facility. They did not wait for it to open. One melta-charge later, 6-Friest was stepping through a smoking, slag-lined hole and into the facility beyond. A ring of autoguns greeted her, and above them, pale, frightened faces. She let her carbine dangle from its strap and reached up to unlatch her helmet. The fear did not fade from the faces of the facility crew.

She did not blame them. Her features were as pale as theirs, but scarred by radiation and war. Her skin was peeling away in dry sheets and her teeth were few and far between. What hair she had was shorn close to the scalp, and as dry as the red sands. Her eyelids were gone and her eyes were covered by the goggle-like augmetics, filled with blessed salve, and constantly whirring and oscillating, recording information to be transmitted to her master in orbit. Thankfully, her gums no longer ached, and the old burns on her neck and cheeks had long since stopped hurting.

‘Rad-troopers,’ someone muttered.

‘Where is your adept?’ she croaked. She cleared her throat and asked again more clearly. It had been months since her last physical conversation. The neural link was more efficient, and easier on vocal cords seared by the rad-storms of Mars. She snapped her fingers. ‘Your adept,’ she said again.

‘Here! I am here,’ a voice said. A tall man clad in filthy Administratum robes shoved through the ring of guns. He was worm-pale and bald, with bloodshot eyes and a jaw coated in stubble. ‘Adept Sooj, at your service...?’ he said.

‘Alpha Vanguard 6-Friest,’ she said, clipping her helmet to her belt and turning. ‘9-Jud, 4-Hest, establish a perimeter. 12-Udo, take four others and come with me. 10-Dulak, take the rest and establish a defensive cordon around the loading bay. Chronometers set for departure schedule epsilon.’ She turned back to Sooj. ‘The cipher, adept. Is it safe?’

‘The—? Oh! Ah, yes,’ Sooj said hurriedly. He stared at her face with what she suspected was horrified fascination. Few outside of the skitarii barracks saw the warriors of the vanguard up close, and fewer still wanted to. Their very presence

was death to the unaugmented or unprotected, their robes and war-plate tainted by the baleful energies of the weapons they wielded in the Omnissiah's name. 'Our tech-priest kept it in the examination nave.'

'Take me to it. Now,' she said. Sooj nodded jerkily and hurried away. 6-Friest followed, 12-Udo and the others falling in behind her. She ignored the facility crew as they made way for her. They parted, giving her a wide berth as she swept through them. There were only a pitiful few left, a dozen at most, hollow-eyed and stinking of stale caff-rations and chemicals. They clutched their weapons with fervent devotion, however, and she did not doubt their willingness to fight. They slunk behind her skitarii, following at a distance.

'I-I rather expected more of you, when you said you were coming,' Sooj said. Contact had been established early on in the invasion. A ship had been dispatched as soon as word of the cipher's recovery had reached those who recognized its importance. It was only by the will of the Omnissiah that they had reached Kotir-8 before it was fully enveloped in the coils of the hive fleet designated Leviathan.

'How many crew were assigned to this facility, adept?' she asked, as she followed Sooj. He glanced at her and gave a harsh caw of laughter.

'One hundred and fifty-five,' he said. 'We have lost one hundred and forty-three personnel since the xenos made planetfall. As such, the continued operation of this facility has proven impossible.' He didn't look at her. 'I have recorded each name, and the manner of their passing, as it occurred. Each of them did their duty, and to the last. May the Emperor bless and keep them.'

'Your tech-priest was one of the casualties,' 6-Friest said.

It wasn't a question. Sooj nodded and hugged his sides as he led her down a corridor lined with rattling pipes and clattering gauges. Bundles of cable hung from the ceiling where they'd been rerouted to provide power, likely to the defences. It made her soul cringe to see such butchery of the Omnissiah's own, but under the circumstances, she was sure the Machine-God would be forgiving. The living quarters for the crew occupied three honeycomb levels, one atop the next

'Yes, old Rebos. He's the one who identified the cipher. Something... took him, on the third day. It took others as well, but Rebos was a blow,' Sooj said. He shook his head, and ran trembling fingers across his shaved pate. 'Without him, I have had sole responsibility for the continued survival of this facility and its remaining crew.' He glanced at her again. 'I am glad you showed up when you did, Alpha 6-Friest.'

‘And I am glad you were able to hold out as long as you have,’ 6-Friest said.

‘All blessings be to Rebos and the God-Emperor,’ Sooj said. ‘It was he who insisted on the proper maintenance of the weapons systems, and the power reroutes.’ He gestured at the loose cabling. ‘I was more concerned with the day-to-day operations...’ He trailed off. Then, hesitantly, he asked, ‘Are... are we the last?’

‘You are. Kotir-8 is lost,’ 6-Friest said. ‘You have done the Emperor proud, and the Ommissiah’s blessings will be upon you, for your efforts here.’

‘I’m just happy to be leaving,’ Sooj said. There was an edge of hysteria to his voice. His bio-rhythms were erratic, and 6-Friest could only vaguely imagine the strain he’d been under. Administratum adepts were not conditioned for war or survival, merely for calculation and the proper keeping of records. But the Machine-God had seen fit to gift Adept Sooj with a modicum of utility, enabling him to persevere where others of his caste might have crumbled and become worse than useless. It had enabled him to keep safe that which she and her combat-mantle had been sent to retrieve, in the face of the alien fury now consuming the world around them.

‘The cipher, adept,’ she said.

‘Here.’ Sooj led her into a chamber that she recognized as a Mechanicum nave – a laboratory, where Rebos would have studied, synthesized and recorded the materials discovered during the facility’s operations. Bits of archeotech and other, older remnants cluttered examination tables or slowly cycled through automated scanners. A robed servitor stood in one corner, steadily recording the findings of the scanners, its servo-stylus scratching quietly across the parchment which emerged from the feeder unit built into its augmented chest cavity only to fall in rolls and tangles about the floor, unread and soon to be destroyed forever.

‘Kotir-8 was a historical junk-heap, or so Rebos claimed. A millennia of history, buried beneath the topsoil. There were colonies here well before the Great Crusade, and well after. They were lost to war, and worse things, but the infrastructure was still here. Whole hives, buried beneath the arid soil, lost to recorded history,’ Sooj said, looking around. ‘The ore-haulers recovered bulkheads, miles of cabling and deck plates. We never discovered whether it was a ship or something else.’ He looked at her. ‘And now I suppose we never will.’

‘No,’ she said.

Sooj went to one of the tables and retrieved a cylindrical tube, inscribed with the sigils of the Adeptus Mechanicus. It was old. She could tell that even without the aid of diagnostic sensors. The brass tube had turned green with age, and

hardened soil still clung to the teeth of the cogwheel symbol emblazoned on each end of the tube. He extended it towards her, and she accepted it reverentially.

She ran her fingers across the markings, wondering at the man who'd made them. Inside was a message of some kind, a recording or a coded transmission. The words of a forgotten age, thought lost but now returned, by the grace and mercy of the Machine-God. The final testament of Magos Zheng, explorer and saint of the sacred brotherhood of the eternal cog. He who had gone beyond the Ghoul Stars, and vanished into the firmament of heaven without a trace. Until now.

It was worth a world, she thought, to recover this. Perhaps that was why the Machine-God had drawn the explorer fleets to Kotir-8 in the first place. So that the cipher might be found, before it was lost forever.

She felt the touch of the Omnissiah's will upon hers as she ran her fingers across the cylinder, and knew a moment of joy that the responsibility had fallen to her. She had ever served the Machine-God to the fullest of her capabilities, and this was her reward, to stand here, holding the legacy of Zheng, to return what had been lost to those who would care for it forevermore. 'I serve, and gladly,' she murmured.

'He never said what it was. Only that it was of immense value,' Sooj said.

6-Friest did not reply. Sooj would not understand, for his intellect was caged in meat, rather than at one with the choral nodes of the Great Work. Her eyepieces oscillated, summoning a digital overlay of the facility's schematics. She gestured. 'The loading bay, for the orbital haulers – it's there? What is its status?'

'Ah... uncompromised, as yet. Once we open the bay doors though, they'll get in.'

'They always get in,' 6-Friest said. 'It is what they are designed to do. Just as we are designed to reduce them to the protoplasm from which they are made. You and your men will accompany us to the bay. The extraction vessel is waiting for our signal.' She turned and left the lab, the cipher cradled to her chest.

'I – yes, of course,' Sooj said. He nodded and gestured. His men followed without complaint as the adept led the vanguard to the bay. The cavernous structure occupied a third of the facility, and was dominated by clanking carrier-belts, manned by sorting servitors, who now bent, pushed and separated the empty air in lieu of the stream of ore, which had long since ceased to pour from the great feeder chutes that lined the inner wall.

Steam vented from cracked, untended pipes, and gauges rattled querulously in dark corners. The facility had its own crude form of spirit, as did all complex machinery, however large or small. And that spirit knew that it was dying. Alarms whooped and fell silent in mournful song, and melancholy power surges fried unsanctified circuit boards, filling the air with greasy smoke and the tang of scorched metal.

6-Friest made a silent prayer for forgiveness, hoping the facility would understand. They all had their function, and they must perform it as the Ommissiah willed. They made their way towards the pentagonal landing platform, where in better times suborbital haulers would have landed to collect the raw ore, to be turned into promethium at the massive refinery-cities that had once girded Kotir-8's equatorial zone.

She heard the ping of the suborbital flyer's approach warning, and signalled her skitarii to open the landing bay. The great skylight, made from fractal plates of rad-hardened plasteel, groaned and squealed as it slid open. A few opportunistic tyranids took the opportunity to drop into the bay, screeching with hunger. The skitarii opened fire, sweeping the xenos beasts from the landing platform within moments.

The outpost shuddered, and alarms began to blare with a consistency they had not had before. She heard the distinctive hiss-crack of a radium jezzail echo through the bay, and knew that the outer defences had been breached. 6-Friest turned. <9-Jud, report.>

<Enemy has engaged assault protocols. Assault bio-forms in evidence. Orders?>

Assault bio-forms – that meant something larger than hormagaunts or the synapse broods. <Hold position. Continue situation analysis,> she sent. The unspoken addendum was 'until you are unable to do so', but no skitarius needed to be told that. Then, after a moment of hesitation, she added, <Ommissiah guide you, 9-Jud.>

<Acknowledged, Alpha. And... thank you.>

She cut the link without replying. As she did so, she saw 10-Dulak and the others falling back into the bay. Defender protocols had been engaged, and her skitarii knew what to do without being told. They closed the bay doors behind them and sealed them. 9-Jud and 4-Hest were not with them. Someone needed to slow down the enemy, while the extraction was completed.

6-Friest felt no guilt at the thought. It was a necessity, and one that the warriors of the vanguard were ever-prepared to make. They lived and breathed

the very stuff of death, and it was their constant companion. *Some parts wear out quicker than others, but all are necessary, all serve, for however short a time,* she thought. 9-Jud knew that. Cogs did not complain. She hefted her carbine and checked her ammunition.

The lander appeared over the platform, thrusters humming as it descended on columns of super-heated air and promethium. Its anti-personnel weapons hissed as it sank down, and chunks of burning tyranid pattered down onto the platform around it. It was small, as such flyers went. Barely large enough to carry a few passengers and the crew of specially-designed servitors that manned it.

Sooj stared at it in incomprehension. ‘It’s... is there a larger ship coming?’

‘No,’ 6-Friest said. She didn’t look at him.

‘But you said – we were to be extracted!’ Sooj’s voice rose, and his men began to murmur amongst themselves. The hope of survival, of escape, had ensured that they held on. If that hope were taken away, there was no telling how they might react. Nonetheless, 6-Friest did not have it in her to lie. Deception was the way of meat. The machine provided only clarity, painful and bright.

‘One may die, yet still endure if his work enters the greater work,’ 6-Friest said, still not looking at Sooj. The adept shook his head.

‘I don’t...’

‘We must endure the present, that those who come after may continue the great work,’ 6-Friest continued. She looked at the adept now. ‘The words of Technomagos Mojaró, on the eve of the Xenarite Schism. We are not flesh, adept. We are but cogs in the God Machine, turning as the Omnisiah wills.’ Almost gently, she added, ‘Sometimes those cogs must be stripped out, for the good of the machine.’

Sooj looked at her blankly. Then, his eyes widened. ‘This isn’t a rescue,’ he said hoarsely. 6-Friest cocked her head.

‘It is,’ she said. She gestured with the cipher. ‘But not for you.’

Sooj turned pale. It was an impressive feat, given his pallid appearance. 6-Friest’s sensors registered a drop in blood pressure, and she moved to steady the adept. He attempted to slap her hand away, but only succeeded in bruising his own. Cradling it, he backed away from her.

‘You’re going to let them kill us,’ he hissed, in a strangled voice.

‘No. You may fight, if you wish. Survival is unlikely, but the option is available,’ 6-Friest said. Her sensors registered a spike in adrenaline. She glanced at his face, noting the increased respiration, the dilation of pupils, and the subcutaneous twitch of the muscles in his hand. Sooj lunged for her weapon

a half-second after she extended her hand to intercept his. She caught his wrist and squeezed.

Bone cracked, and the adept shrieked. 6-Friest felt a moment of pity, as the other survivors reacted with predictable hostility. Autoguns bobbed up, even as their wielders were cut down by the carbines of the rad-troopers. In moments, the last survivors of Kotir-8 were so much inert matter. All save Sooj. She looked down at the adept.

He'd fallen to his knees, his wrist still trapped by her grip. He cursed her, even as he flailed at her with his free hand. She looked down at him. 'You would not have survived exposure to us, adept,' she said. 'Your moment has come, whether at the claws of the tyrannids, or from the slow dissolution that come with the radiation that is our blessing and burden. Be at peace, and know that your name will be remembered, in the record of this event.' She reached down and caught hold of his head. 'The machine will endure.'

Then, with a single, sharp motion, she snapped his neck. It was a small mercy, but one she was only too happy to provide. Sooj had served faithfully, and well, after all.

The alarms fell silent. She looked towards the doors and shivered as the neural strand connecting her to her combat-maniple shuddered. 6-Friest felt 9-Jud's death through its quivering filaments. She felt the heat that washed over him, consuming his organic components and cooking his brain within its shell of bone and metal. His last thought pulsed across the surface of her mind before flickering into static. 'Like the breath of Mars,' she murmured. He'd always been a bit of a poet, she thought, as she turned towards the heavy bay doors. Something slammed against the metal, causing it to distend and bulge.

<Fall back to the landing platform. Hold position. Defensive protocols.> She turned and darted up the steps to the top of the platform, robes swirling about her legs. The side of the lander opened like a blossom of metal, accompanied by the hiss of unseen pneumatics. A cloud of incense issued forth, heralding the figure which stepped out to meet her as she reached the lander.

The servitor was rad-hardened, and its head ended at the top of its lower jaw. The rest of its head was taken up by a holographic projector, surrounded by censer-exhausts, which spewed caustic, sterilizing incense into the air around the servitor. The inhuman features of the technomagos in charge of her operation flickered into view as the servitor stepped down out of the transport.

'Report,' he said.

Wordlessly, 6-Friest held up the cipher, in its protective case. The

technomagos's holographic eye-pieces whirred and clicked, focusing in on the cipher. A burble of sound squawked through the servitor's speakers and it held out a bulky claw. She deposited the cipher into its care, and the servitor slid it into a specially prepared node on its armoured chassis. Safe within that node, the cipher would remain inviolate even if the servitor were jettisoned into the vacuum of space.

'At last,' the technomagos rasped. 'The final cipher of Magos Arcturus Zheng, devised before his disappearance beyond the Ghoul Stars. What knowledge it must contain, what secrets...' The eyepieces whirred and clicked again, focusing on her rad-scarred features. 'You have done well, Alpha 6-Friest.'

'Acknowledged, Archmagos Vule,' she said. She glanced at the transport. It was small, albeit bulky, but it could hold herself and several of her remaining skitarii. She looked up, through the open bay. The skies were full of tyranid aeroforms, the clouds choked and stricken through with purple, sickly veins of crackling bio-luminescence. 'Probability of priority evacuation?'

'Nil,' Vule said.

6-Freist closed her eyes, but only for a moment. 'Understood,' she said, tonelessly.

'Your rad-output is unacceptable, Alpha 6-Friest. It might damage the cipher if proximity continues,' Vule said.

'Explanations are unnecessary, archmagos,' 6-Friest said. She raised her helmet and slid it on, locking it into place with a twitch of her fingers. 'Cogs do not question. They merely turn. I only ask that prayers be said on our behalf.'

Vule was silent, for long moments. Then, the servitor reached up, as if its puppeteer, so many millions of miles above the dying world, had inadvertently tugged on a string. The claw twitched, mere millimetres shy of her arm, before falling back. 'Ommissiah bless you, daughter of the machine,' Vule said. The hologram flickered and faded. The servitor turned and trundled back up into the flyer. 6-Friest turned away.

The doors at the end of the bay exploded inward, skidding across the floor, trailing sparks. A tide of alien filth flooded into the loading bay, led by the roaring, monstrous shape of a carnifex, its carapace scarred by rad-burns. The bay shuddered as it screeched in rage.

'Ommissiah guide and keep you all,' 6-Friest said, as she hefted her weapon. 'And pray for our brothers, whose task is not yet done. Our burden is soon to be set aside, our service to the Machine-God complete, but theirs must continue.'

'We pray,' her maniple murmured, as one.

The carnifex surged up the steps of the dais, plasma belching from its distended maw. Hormagaunts swarmed up the steps alongside it, and behind them came worse things. A crawling tide of filthy creation, a wave of flesh. When metal met flesh, flesh failed. But in failing, it could tangle and swallow. But it could not, would not, consume. She stroked her carbine, wondering how long it would be forced to sit and wait for the servants of the Machine-God to come and take it away. *I am sorry, old friend*, she thought, as she and her skitarii opened fire. *Be patient, for they will come for you, and you will sing the death-song of Mars anew, on other battlefields*. The radium carbine shivered in her grip as she fired, as if in melancholy response.

The carnifex reached the top of the platform. A skitarius died, rent asunder by snapping claws. Another was incinerated by a boiling gout of plasma. 6-Friest lifted her arc maul and stepped past the burning remains to confront the monstrous flesh. Behind her, she heard the roar of thrusters. Her mission was done. Her purpose was served, all sub-routines completed.

The carnifex rose up over her, pale flesh already blackening and blistering from its proximity to she and the others. Its jaw sagged, and she could see the incandescent mass growing within its gullet. She smiled as she felt the wash of its heat roll over her, consuming what little flesh was left to her, even as she swung the arc maul towards its skull. 9-Jud had been right.

It was just like the soothing breath of Mars.

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First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS UK.

Cover illustration by Jon Cave.

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ISBN: 978-1-78251-695-8

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