

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

A SHORT STORY FROM THE *PLANETKILL* ANTHOLOGY



# PHOBOS WORKED IN ADAMANT

ROBEY JENKINS

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THE DARKNESS IN the deep stacks had a peculiady tangible quality, Ghuul thought as he double-checked the holographic map. Whilst not even a glimmer of light could be detected by his image intensifiers, there was a sense that the memory of light was contained in the oddly-proportioned columns of the oldest stacks. So when the sweeping searchlights of the servitor team touched one, it seemed to glow the light back at them for a moment, its ragged outline momentarily visible, even after the searchlight had moved on.

Ghuul could imagine that it was the unspeakable power of the ancient data that lurked in the silicon hearts of the stacks that made them glow. The Nine had given him leave to explore the ancient alien relics only under sufferance. They were desperate and it was he, Ghuul, who held the key to saving them

and everything on Celare Artem. The Planet Killer was coming, and if Ghuul failed then they would all die.

‘Movement,’ reported Moritz, bent over her motion detector.

‘Where?’ Ghuul whispered back, gesturing the servitors to stillness.

‘Straight ahead,’ replied Moritz, her pointing hand outlined in the glow from the auspex’s screen. ‘Stand back, archmagos. This is why you brought me, after all.’

Ghuul stepped aside as Moritz stowed her auspex and unslung the power axe from across her shoulders. The perfectly-tuned cutting blade glowed faintly in the dark. Moritz’s reputation in the skitarii - the Tech-Guard of Celare Artem - was built on a bloody foundation as one of the planet’s premiere duellists; it was why Ghuul liked her so much. Beside her marched a trio of unusually light-footed combat servitors, their arms swinging in unnatural arcs from the pendulum weight of the razor-sharp blades that stood in place of each hand.

Even as Ghuul was ordering his own guardian servitors into a defensive ring, Moritz cried out.

‘It’s here!’

Flashing into the path of the nearest searchlight beam, the ancient construct pounced with a vicious, white-noise snarl. It was arachnid in concept: as large as a man, with four slender limbs on each side. But the delicacy was an illusion as the front pair stabbed with lightning-swiftness through the thick chest armour of the first of the servitors. A second was swiping at the automaton's back legs - too late! The spider-construct had leapt up and off the shoulders of its first victim to disappear soundlessly into the blackness above.

The remaining two combat servitors stood, arms raised in a defensive posture, without any sign of having noticed the sudden and brutal demise of their companion. Their mistress circled the dimly-lit space between the stacks, her weapon held ready. Ghuul could see the nervousness in her practised steps. Even inside his ring of bodyguards, he felt it too.

In an instant, all stillness ceased as the construct shot out from a fresh angle, arcing over Ghuul's head to decapitate a second servitor. But Moritz had anticipated the creature's arc of descent, sweeping her power axe up into an elegant sweep that sliced the creature neatly in two across its thorax.

The sparking halves struck the floor, twitching. Its deadly limbs flickered once or twice as if it might still lurch back to functionality, but then it went still.

'We must be close,' breathed Moritz, chest heaving as her super-efficient artificial lungs flooded her augmented system with oxygen.

'Indeed we are, captain,' agreed Ghuul as two of his servitors swept the remains of the arachnid into a stasis chest. He checked the holographic map and took a few steps forward, pushing through the defensive line of servitors.

'This is Stack Three. If the Nine are correct, this is where we will find the Tabulum Aethyricum and the secrets of the Forebears.'

'And protection from the Planet Killer,' added Moritz.

'And from that thrice-damned ship's thrice-damned master, Abaddon,' Ghuul agreed.

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## CELARE ARTEM.

Those who knew the forge-worlds of the Adeptus Mechanicus called her ‘the Sapphire Mars’. Amongst the very oldest of the Martian forge-worlds, she had been settled even as the rest of the galaxy had reeled from the immense warp storms and disturbances of the Age of Strife, twenty millennia ago. A dead world, her settlers had built their first shelters upon the mysterious ruins of an ancient race and their first excavations had revealed marvels of alien science: marvels meticulously extracted, painstakingly recorded and piously concealed in the very deepest stand-alone datastacks. Even the index of that fell knowledge was guarded jealously by the Fabricator Lords: the Nine.

But with the power of that alien knowledge at the disposal of the Mechanicus, the dead world had sprung to life. Dry plains became seas. Empty deserts bloomed into forests. Wind-etched mountains grew dignified snow caps and the remains of the alien predecessors were carefully, quietly and entirely hidden. Instead, the settlers’ extensive genetic database was coaxed into generating a plethora of new life and, Under the watchful gaze of the biologists, Celare Artem - Wherein the Art is Concealed - became the blue-green forge-world.

‘MORTUUS STERCATUS IN celestial’ roared the figure at the console, hurling a diagnostic wand at the marble floor.

The delicate instrument shattered on contact, its components bursting into shrapnel across the polished stone. The silence that followed was filled with the echoing wheeze of the robed figure’s deep, ragged breaths as he stood, shoulders heaving, staring at the other who watched him from the far side of the temple’s portico.

‘Having some trouble, Archmagos Ghuul?’ sneered the man, robed in the bone-white of his Collegium, his hood pushed back from his bald pate to expose the mass of cables that hung down from his scalp. Some of them twisted like snakes around his cheeks as he approached. The dim fragments of light that mosaiced the floor threw long shadows across the newcomer’s face: his hollow cheeks and deep-set eyes gave him the demeanour of some elemental of death, come to haunt Ghuul’s miserable night of failure. ‘It seems to me that I might have to inform the Forty that you lied to them. And to the Nine. Won’t that be a shame?’

“What have you done to my design, Frenke?” snarled Ghuul. Would you jeopardize our whole world just to see me disgraced? Are you still so bitter at my elevation?”

‘Certainly not, archmagos.’ Frenke’s smile was as benign as a rictus. ‘I am above such petty rivalries. And I would not dishonour my Collegium or the spirits of the Great Temple by petty sabotage. If only I could say the same for you.’

He circumnavigated the construction that dominated the grand space of the Portico Publicum, peering up at the cluster of miniature warp core mantles that sat together at the heart of the generator. The whole construction was a labyrinth of cables, cogitators, power regulators, booster generators and current alternators that formed an irregular column shape rising from the floor into the vaulted roof, two hundred metres above them. Dotted along its length, vicious-looking dimension probes - a design Ghuul had personally recovered from an ancient hulk that had appeared on the edge of the Eye of Terror, some hundred years ago - thrust out of the mass that rose up like an alien idol into the distant, vaulted roof of the Great Temple. And some twenty-four thousand kilometres immediately above it was a satellite: the first in a network of precisely seventy-two identical satellites, each with their own halo of eight dimension probes, which would harness the output of the field generator, casting a web of protection around the entire planet... if it worked.

‘Innovative!’ Frenke spat. ‘I knew from the start that this obscene perversion would fail - that trying to create something new was doomed. You lack the piety to understand the will of the Machine, Ghuul. I’ve known of your foul Xenarite beliefs from the start. Celare Artem should never have encouraged your kind. The Nine should never have revealed the location of the Tabulum to one so... unorthodox.’

‘Be careful what you say, Frenke,’ hissed Ghuul. His bionic hands were of the most delicate type, designed to assist infinitely cautious and dangerous experiments and research on the strange alternate dimension of the warp. But as his anger at himself turned on the gloating astro-technologist, the hands balled into solid fists, seemingly of their own accord.

‘No, Ghuul,’ snapped Frenke. ‘I don’t think I shall be careful. You deceived the Forty into believing that you could save our world from the Planet Killer with this... device. And we’ve wasted fifteen work cycles tolerating its blasphemy on

the very doorstep of the Holy of Holies. And after all that, Ghuul; after all that... it doesn't work!

'It works!' Ghuul roared, closing on this avatar of his nemesis, his feet pounding on the marble as he marched to confront Frenke. 'My theories are right! There is no reason why I should not be able to generate a warp shield around the whole planet, powerful enough to defend against even the Planet Killer!'

'But you can't, can you?' Frenke hissed back.

'Because I have missed something!' blustered Ghuul, waving his hands limply. The theories are sound. The mechanism... I have tested it over and over again. It is consuming forty per cent of Artem Prime's power generation and nothing is happening!'

'Exactly!' shouted Frenke, triumphantly.

'No, Frenke, you never listen properly!' snapped back Ghuul. 'Nothing is happening. The power is being consumed by the machinery without being converted into anything else: no light, no heat, no motion... The device must work. The projection field must be in place already but there's some... missing ingredient! Don't you understand?'

Frenke's smile returned, cruelly wider than before.

'I understand, Ghuul,' he whispered. 'I understand that you're so incompetent that you seem to have turned your attention away from the Mysteria Machi-nata to... domestic science? A "missing ingredient"? You're pathetic. Tomorrow the Nine will order you servitorised for your blasphemy and I shall lead the true devoted of Celare Artem onto the evacuation ships, just as we should have done fifteen work cycles ago!'

He turned and began to walk away.

'No!' cried Ghuul. He reached out and seized Frenke's cowl where it hung around his shoulders, yanking his rival back.

'You dare?' snapped Frenke, bringing his own metal limb around to swipe at Ghuul's. He knocked away the grip on his cowl, but Ghuul had already seized Frenke by the neck. The tension strips under Frenke's skin went rigid and Ghuul

felt as if he was gripping plasteel, but Frenke had already retaliated. His right hand smashed into Ghuul's face and the desperate archmagos felt his cheekbone shatter and blood fill his mouth. As he fell to his knees, he stabbed upwards with his right hand, piercing Frenke's robes with the scalpel-sharp points of his fingers and thrusting into soft tissue.

Frenke's only response was a soft breath of pain before he brought his elbow down heavily onto Ghuul's left shoulder, snapping his collarbone.

'I will make you my personal servitor, blasphemer!' he spat into Ghuul's pale face. You will perform my ablutions with your heretic tongue!

Frenke raised his hand and Ghuul saw the foot-long blade slide smoothly from its hidden scabbard inside Frenke's synthetic forearm. There was no time left for regrets. The cocktail of painkillers and stimulants that his integrated pharmacopoeia had been pumping into his veins for the last minute finally kicked in as the blade began to fall and Ghuul thrust up with both hands at once, shoving at his enemy's torso, driving him back towards the silent tower of his machine.

You-!' cried Frenke, stumbling as his heel caught on the edge of a polished marble flagstone. His arms flailed madly, trying to regain his balance, but he fell back and Ghuul yelled in panic as he realised that Frenke was going to stumble into his precious creation.

There was a sound of wet scraping as Frenke fell, but halfway back towards the mass of twisted cables, he stopped. Frenke stared at the point protruding from his chest and raised one hand to touch the slick metal. But strength fled his limbs and with a hiss of escaping breath, he flopped. Ghuul sat crumpled in undignified repose, staring at the impaled form of the astro-technologist. The point of the dimension probe thrust up through Frenke's chest, glossy in the dim light with the viscera of ruptured soft tissue and delicate bionic implants.

He stared at Frenke's unmoving form. Ghuul's hands shook from adrenaline even as his internal systems automatically began detoxification, settling his shock and calming his mounting fear. This was not good. His implant scanners confirmed the cessation of lifesigns in the astro-technologist. Frenke had been at least seven hundred years old and the deputy head of the Collegium Teledynamicum. How could he be dead, just like that? Was there nothing left of

him? No shred of his essence...?

Suddenly, there was a click and a hum from the console and, still fizzing with the potent effects of the chemical injections that had saved his life, Ghuul leapt to the monitor, snatching another diagnostic wand from his belt.

Output! Suddenly, the machine was showing output! It was weak, for sure: only the tiniest fraction of a percentage of his forecast was now being emitted by the shield generator. But that was an infinitely greater proportion than the void that had, until now, been his sum achievement.

‘Udo!’ he screamed, gleefully, depressing the intercom rune. ‘Udo!’

In less than a minute, his lead acolyte - a young adept in beige robes, marked with the red border of the Mechanicus and the sky blue of the Metaphysicum - came hurrying into the portico, trying not to run, in respect for the sanctity of the Great Temple, but prodded into haste by his master’s tone.

‘Magister, yes, I’m-‘

Udo froze in shock as his augmented eyes rapidly adjusted to the gloom of the space and the cooling form of Frenke’s corpse appeared before him.

‘Quick, boy, we have output!’ snapped Ghuul.

‘But, magister, the Archmagos Frenke is-‘

‘I know, boy, I know!’ Ghuul paused, suddenly aware of the sight he had so thoughtlessly left untouched in the very portico of the Great Temple of Celare Artem. The Nine were desperate, but not so desperate as to consider the death of a senior adept as a reasonable price for success. ‘He attacked me, child! Tried to destroy the generator! But look! The output!’

‘Output?’ queried Udo, his natural dedication to the matters of the Metaphysicum finally overwhelming his shock at the sight of the impaled Frenke. ‘At last! How?’

Ghuul jabbed a gleaming finger at the corpse.

‘Life force, Udo!’ He grinned in half-mad triumph. The element I was missing:

the link between the warp and our dimensions is all around us! You, me... Frenke. As he died, his life force reinforced the energy transition and released some of the reflection power back into the generator!’

Yes, yes, of course,’ nodded Udo. ‘But how do we get more?’

‘Let me worry about that, child,’ replied Ghuul, turning back to feast his eyes greedily upon the miniscule change in the readings that had vindicated three centuries of research. ‘Get Frenke down and dispose of the body. It’s nearly dawn.’

ASTROPATH-PRIME XENOCH hesitated at the door to the Chamber of Silence. His white eyes stared blindly into the gloom, but his psychic senses stretched out to touch the plain walls, the stone floor, the table... The presence of the nine cards on the table was bloated and malign in the landscape of his mind. For twenty work cycles he had meditated upon the reading he had performed at the direction of Celare Artem’s Fabricator Lords - the Nine - and now, as he had sworn, he had returned to re-examine their import. The noise of the violent crowds outside the walls was not helping his concentration.

The Casde of Sighs, sacrosanct domain of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica on Celare Artem, was traditionally both dark and silent. Its blind occupants needed no light, and the stillness of quiet made adopting astrotelepathic trances easier. The disturbances wracking the warp around the usually stable Beltane Gate had been making communication with systems elsewhere in the sector increasingly sporadic and that was poor for morale in the Castle. But since word of his first reading had leaked, the darkness and silence had entirely ceased to be a comfort. The approaching doom had infected the minds of the forge-world’s astropaths, flitting telepathically from one to another, growing and mutating so that uncertainty became doubt and doubt became fear and fear... Well, now there was a horde of panicking menials, making crude attempts to break into the stronghold. A century of the Tech-Guard was deployed to keep them back. And the latest news was that the Archmagos Ghuul had hit upon an ingenious solution to the problem.

‘Wait here,’ he instructed his assistants.

Xenoch entered the Chamber of Silence and sealed the door behind him. It was the only Null Chamber in the Castle of Sighs and, as the door sealed and the

wards of shielding energised the psychic wall, he felt the constant link to his brothers and sisters of the Castle suddenly break off. For the first time he could remember in his long life, it was a relief to be separated from the minds of his adopted family.

Alone with his thoughts, his psychic sense of place and surroundings shut off by the Null shielding, he was nothing but a blind man: a scared blind man. But the cards were waiting for him on the table. He felt his way there and seated himself carefully in the throne-like chair.

For most astropaths, to meditate with one's psychic senses closed off was almost impossible. And few could master the practice of reading the Emperor's Tarot in a Null chamber. But the psyker's mind resided more fully in the nightmare realm of the warp than did the mind of the blunt human. He was open, Xenoch knew, to malign influences with strange agenda. The open mind - even of an astropath, soul-bound with the Emperor Himself - was a door of invitation to the spawn of darkness that clustered, waiting for the moment of weakness that called them...

But even a Null chamber could not entirely dim an astropath's connection to the warp. He was blind, physically and psychically, but the spark of power that had bound him in love and in pain to the mighty soul of Him-on-Earth still burned with an inextinguishable light. Xenoch focused on the light, letting it grow within himself, until his mind fell away. The doubt fell away. The fear fell away. Only the light was left: the unbreakable link through time and space to the enthroned God-Emperor.

'Prime Xenoch,' came a voice over the intercom and the astropath tutted at the interruption.

'What?' he snapped back.

'The rioting is getting worse. The skitarii have fallen back to the inner curtain wall and have taken casualties.'

'I will be there directly' Xenoch replied, sharply. 'Do not interrupt me again.'

Xenoch heard the intercom connection click off and, re-gathering his calm, he stretched out his hands to the cards. Their toad-like psychic corpulence had been quashed with the sealing of the chamber's door and now they were mere cards: immensely precious, psycho-crystalline wafer cards, hand-crafted by a magos of

the Collegium Psykana and precisely attuned to Xenocho's own self but, ultimately, just cards. With the chamber's Null shielding switched off, the cards blossomed with psychic life so fresh and bold that it was visible even to the non-psychic. But the ridges and bumps painstakingly crafted along the edges of each card were all that could tell him their identity now.

He touched the first: the Eye of Terror. It sat in the master position at the centre of the spread as harbinger of change and refuge of the damned. At the hub of the spread, it spoke of corruption at the very heart of things.

Beneath it, the Knight of Spheres lay inverted.

Xenocho sighed. The import of the cards seemed no less dire to him now than it had at his first reading. The gaze of Dark Powers had fallen upon Celare Artem; that much was indisputable.

Following the cards clockwise around the circle, Xenocho touched each in turn, refreshing his memory as to their exact locations, mining deeply within his knowledge and instinct to read the import of each.

The Nine of Chalices was a card of weak leadership and uncertainty. The Traitor stood at the right hand of the Eye of Terror. Above him was the Ace of Staves, foretelling the abuse of power. At the head of the Eye of Terror stood the magos, inverted - a dire warning of secret knowledge best left untouched - then the Two of Weapons, which stood for duality and for motives unclear even to the prime movers. On the left hand of the eye lay the Leviathan (the touch of the Ancients) and, below it and last in the spread, the Seven of Weapons, inverted (confusion and the threat of the mob).

'Prime Xenocho!'

The voice on the intercom was panicked, but Xenocho was too intensely focussed upon his work to notice immediately.

'I am not to be disturbed!' he shouted, hands shaking.

'Menials are in the Castle, Prime Xenocho! The skitarii-'

The voice cut off suddenly and Xenocho glanced reflexively towards the door. Was that a noise from the corridor?

His hand fell upon the last card once more: confusion and the threat of the mob?  
Surely -

The door of the chamber shot open, the Null shielding collapsed and the three dark figures poured in along with telepathic screams of terror, death and blood.

‘No!’ Xenoch had time to cry out before the crude bludgeon of the menial’s metal arm fell crushingly upon his skull and the astropath tumbled, dead, to the floor. Around him, his precious cards fell like a shower of rain.

AT DAWN, THE representatives of the Collegia met to receive the news of the death of Astropath-Prime Xenoch and his entire complement of astropaths. But the fear-sharpened anger at the loss of their only means of interstellar communications was blunted by the delighted report of Archmagos Ghuul. It was only logical, Ghuul concluded, that the condemned menials, who had so brutally murdered the astropaths, be handed over to him for further experimentation on the link between life-force and the coherence of the defence shield.

At noon, the Nine ritually invested Bastian Ghuul with Magenta authority and three thousand more expendable menials.

By sunset, a new structure had begun to grow on the great basalt doorstep of the Portico Publicum and its interior hummed in bilious luminescence. This new child of the Tabulum Aethyricum grew like twin trees, curling in weird organic curves up mighty amphibolite columns. As night fell, the structures reached their zenith, curving together across the architrave and intertwining their malign branches. With a static crack of ignition, the Annihilator burst into life: a shimmering, green window to oblivion. \*

GHUUL GLANCED SIDEWAYS at Moritz. Only centuries of experience allowed him to interpret her expression behind the patchwork of scars that consumed her face. The Skitaria’s eyes sparkled with glee as she watched the Annihilator consume each team of menials. The new device was almost divinely efficient. To have continued impaling menials on the dimension probes would have been preposterous -the remains of several early experiments still hung from their places, as a grisly memorial to their sacrifice to the Machine-God. The Annihilator, though, directly fed life-force to the shield generator whilst reducing the sacrifices to nothing more than insubstantial atomic dust.

Are you all right, Moritz?’ he asked the normally benevolent soldier.

‘Don’t you sense it, archmagos?’ she asked. ‘Can’t you feel the lightness of our path? Look-’ she gestured at the flock of menials being herded through the gate by the hooded skitarii guards. ‘Even they can feel the call of the device!’

Ghuul nodded distractedly. It was true. They had set up a plascrete tunnel to conceal the effects of the Annihilator from its waiting victims, but menials who had at first approached cautiously and fearfully were now surging forward in confused enthusiasm. The skitarii scarcely had to even point them in the right direction - although some swung their shock mauls anyway; whether to look busy or merely out of bullying instincts, he could not tell. But he saw nothing sinister in the change. They had seen dozens of their fellows go in already. There were no screams and the skitarii were disciplined and orderly. Why should they fear anything malign?

Of course, he could sense the effect that the device was having - as its power grew and spread, a sense of intense calm and security filled him. But the sacrifice was not a gleeful activity - it was merely necessary: the only way to protect his homeworld. The machine brought safety and a future in the truest expression of the Machine-God’s benevolence. It was unusual to see an effect drawn from the life-force of humans, but it had always been that way in a sense, had it not? Weak flesh dies. The Machine endures.

But this effect on Moritz was disturbing.

‘Archmagos?’ The Praetorian-Captain of the Temple Guard interrupted with a formal salute. We are nearing the end of the supply of menials.’

Ghuul tutted.

We’re barely at a consistent thirty per cent coverage and far from the power estimates my calculations predicted. I’ll petition the Nine for more.’

‘No!’ barked Moritz suddenly.

Ghuul turned to Moritz in surprise, but she pushed past him and stabbed her augmented right hand at the skitarius officer.

We don’t have time to wait for those relics to make up their minds when we

know what our world needs!

‘Get out there, captain, and round up every menial your regiment can find.’

The skitarii saluted again, turned and marched away.

‘Relics?’ Ghuul queried, stunned. ‘And when did the Temple-Guard start following your orders? I have Magenta clearance.’

This is too important, Ghuul,’ snarled Moritz, her mechadendrites waving aggressively. ‘I obtained

Dark Magenta clearance and the rank of Magos Commander to take control of the skitarii regiments. You concentrate on keeping your damned engine running!’

Moritz walked away and Ghuul silently watched her leave.

My project, thought Ghuul bitterly. My research, my vision, my genius, Moritz. You will not build your own worthless reputation where my glory should stand!

OUTSIDE THE HOUSE of Nine, Ghuul paused on the threshold and wondered what he would say - could say - to persuade the Fabricator Lords of Celare Artem to sacrifice even more menials to the strange idol he had built. But even as he hesitated, the great doors cracked apart to swing silently inwards on perfectly balanced bearings and he immediately thrust his hands respectfully into his sleeves and bowed his head. A fog of smoke, heavy with incense and rare oil fractions, rolled across him like the unfragrant breath of a dragon, and the Fabricators spoke - many voices enunciating the same words in scratchy, amplified unison.

‘Does it work, young Ghuul?’

Ghuul could hear the fear as well as the hope in their voices. A coolant leak somewhere nearby was spilling a thin layer of nitrogen in an undulating carpet across the floor but, here and there, it broke to reveal the gleaming, black marble floor and, in it, the reflections of the Nine, encased in their life support systems, orifices plugged and ancient skin gleaming with moisturising lubricant. They were trapped by their own power, Ghuul thought suddenly. They had sacrificed their humanity to knowledge. But did that make them more or less than human?

‘Yes, my lords,’ he bowed. ‘We have sustained thirty-four point seven per cent coverage for up to twenty minutes. But we have a permanent output of twenty-seven per cent.’

‘Unacceptable!’ rumbled the Fabricator Lords. He sensed a forest of serpentine mechadendrites above his head, waving and clattering in panic.

We have extracted catalysing agents from barely three thousand menials,’ explained Ghuul, venturing to raise his head slightly. And each extra percentage point needs a geometrically-greater quantity of agents to achieve.’

‘You have Vermillion clearance, Ghuul,’ they announced, and he lifted his head all the way up to look at the Nine. His visual units cut through the gloom to fully reveal their withered and ancient forms, trapped in communion with the Machine. They were fragile and flimsy, for all their immense knowledge. Their fear made them vulnerable and weak. They did not, truly, possess the faith in the power of the Machine that Ghuul knew he had: the certainty of the Tightness of his course. They did not deserve their supremacy.

Vermillion?’ he queried. Vermillion Prime?’

Vermillion Prime,’ they agreed.

Without a bow, Ghuul turned and left. The armoured doors swung shut behind him. He almost believed he could feel the fresh authority that had won him victory not only over that upstart girl, Moritz, but also over the pathetic husks of the Nine. Vermillion Prime clearance made him the single most powerful tech-adept on the whole of Celare

Artem. The sense of tangible authority might have been an illusion, but the responses from the systems around him were real and instant.

A swarm of servo-skulls swept down from the ceiling, reprioritized from whatever they had been doing, to serve his needs; cogitator banks lit up in obedient, eager readiness to the passing touch of his mechadendrites and, as he reached the central hall of the Temple, the head of every priest, skitarii and menial turned instantly towards him, their own deep conditioning responding as one to the authority codes being invisibly transmitted from his person.

Closest to him stood Moritz. The shock of the signals that even now were

coursing through the skitarii's systems stood out clear on her face. But Ghuul just smiled, the auxiliary cables beneath his bionic eye twisting at the motion.

'Round them up,' he ordered. 'All of them.'

IT WAS ASTONISHING, thought Ghuul as he swam free in the soup of data that had now been placed at his disposal. Here, he could sense the whole planet shifting and moving in step to his direction. With less than a nod, regiments of skitarii Tech-Guard moved at his whim. The sagitarii veterans drove stragglers from their hiding places within the forests, burning them into the open. The cataphracti rumbled along the wide avenues of the forge-world's many cities, driving the soft mass of menials before them.

But Moritz had been right: there was little of the resentment and resistance he had expected. The riots of just two days ago had calmed under the benign influence of the growing shield. The population had become compliant and docile. It occurred to him that perhaps the fragmentary alien designs from the Tabulum Aethyricum had been designed as much for this purpose as for the shielding. For the first time since he had found them, he wondered what race had preceded them on this world. The earliest stacks were unconnected to the data altar and always had been. What had the first settlers been so afraid of?

'Forty-two point nine per cent, archmagos,' announced Udo from somewhere far away.

With a conscious effort of will, Ghuul dragged himself up to the surface and out of the deep connections his new authority had opened up to him. It was easy to see why the Nine so easily surrendered their mobility for this sort of intimacy with the Machine. And why it was so hard to rouse them to anything close to normal consciousness.

'For how long?' he asked as he opened his eye.

'Permanent, master,' reported Udo, with a smile. 'Although it still takes a geometrically greater input of material for each increase, we are sustaining almost half your predicted output.'

'Still not enough,' sighed Ghuul. 'How many have we used?'

'Four hundred and eight thousand and sixty-three and counting, archmagos.'

‘Barely a tenth of the total menial population, then?’ grunted Ghuul. ‘I shall redirect Phi-Omega Maniple to Artem Peripheral, and tithe the remainder a further ten per cent.’

“Yes, archmagos.’ Udo bowed and retreated. The chamber in which Ghuul sat was known as the Chapel of Bronze, but his assistants already treated it with the reverence reserved for the House of Nine. Ghuul knew that his authority, so lightly given, had done more than merely raise his status. It had brought him closer to the Machine. He was becoming more like his God.

With a sigh, he descended once more into the deeps.

But something had changed in the world, even as he had spoken to Udo. The population data had shifted significantly. He quickly patched into a low-orbit satellite to look down at the nearest example of the shift in Artem Tertius and, yes: a great mass of people was leaving the city! Were they fleeing?

Immediately, though, he could see that they were moving, not away from Artem Prime and the Annihilator, but towards it. The tram lines were full and the great transport flyways that arched over Celare Artem’s fastidiously-crafted forest regions were increasingly busy with every form of transport. Even the footways bore a steady stream of pilgrims on every major link running towards Artem Prime...

Pilgrims, he thought. That was what they were, after all. They were coming to him. Coming to the mighty new idol of the Machine-God that he had raised in the Great Temple, but which cast its shadow of protection over the whole planet: a shadow built from the very soul-stuff of the world’s children. It was poetically beautiful. He dismissed his earlier doubts with a smile. His plan was perfectly at one accord with the very spirit of the Machine God. How could it be otherwise?

THEY CAME TO do homage in the tens of thousands until the streets of Artem Prime were choked with pilgrims, camping on every comer and blocking the wide boulevards with their numbers. And still they came.

The Planet Killer comes, young Ghuul,’ wheezed the unison drone of the Nine in his ear. ‘How do we fare?’

It was a spurious question. Ghuul was permanently uplinked to the data-altar now. His knowledge was as immediately available to the Nine as it was to him.

But despite the patronising tone, the Nine were deferring to Ghuul, architect of their salvation.

‘Seventy-four point three per cent, my lords,’ he replied anyway. ‘My calculations show that we need at least seventy-five point one per cent output to provide protection against even the least ambitious estimate of the Planet Killer’s power.’

There is no shortage of menials?’

It certainly seemed that way if one were unable to see beyond the walls of Artem Prime, he thought spitefully. But in fact they had already consumed over sixty per cent of the menial population. Artem Tertius, Peripheral and Zonal Geiger had already been shut down, their entire menial population stripped to feed the machine. Even now, his obedient tech-priests were stripping out every hard-wired servitor form they could access, shipping them in sealed stasis containers for annihilation.

Ghuul could not imagine what use its alien designers had intended for the Annihilator, but into its insatiable maw a thousand more desperate volunteers marched every hour. Each fresh death, each new release of life-force, pushed the generator’s output higher towards the vital one hundred per cent marker...

‘No,’ Ghuul agreed at last. You’re right. There is no shortage of expendable flesh.’

He understood what had to be done to protect his world.

THEY SCREAMED AS they were put through. No one else had screamed. Hundreds of thousands of menials had marched like stunned cattle through the gates of the Annihilator. The twitching quadriplegic forms of disconnected servitors were pushed or carried through without even a moan. But when Udo and Moritz brought a team to rip the Fabricator Lords from their places in the House of Nine, the ancient magi yelled and hissed in protest. When, without a word of explanation, they were carried into the streets, into the bright sunshine of Celare Artem, they wailed at the touch of natural light as ragged sockets dripped milky, pink fluid onto the granite pavings. And, as blank-eyed menials carried their limp, oil-crust bodies across the lintel of the Portico Publicum, they screamed in terror and final understanding until, in a perfect instant of disembodiment, their voices were stilled.

The sudden silence seemed to roll across the packed square of the Temple Courtyard and down the heaving avenues and into the immense forests. It was Moritz, lurking at his elbow, as she had been for weeks, who broke the silence first, but her voice was a whisper: too quiet for Ghuul's audio-receptors.

What?' Ghuul turned to look at her. But her eyes were fixed upon the towering door of the Temple. Her scarred features had gone slack and her arms hung limp, as if she had died but not yet fallen over. Her lips moved again and Ghuul was about to increase his audio-input when he heard the same whisper roll across the crowd in the square: the susurration of waves upon a shore as the dark clouds banked upon the horizon. '◆◆◆◆◆.'

The word hissed off the lips of every face in the immense square. It slithered from the mouths of his assistants and clicked from the oro-emitters of his servitor bodyguards. It sighed from the tannoy systems. And in the deep recesses of the most ancient Stacks, it hummed and sparked from the data vault's dark, alien heart.

Ghuul looked wildly about himself, desperate to find the source of the sudden, strange change in his people. But even as he thought to retreat, he found himself pinned in place by the weight of the optic cable attached to his skull, which his servitor attendants had dropped at the same moment as the word 'Oofioc' spilled from their slack and bloodless mouths. And then the crowd was moving. As one, they surged towards the Annihilator. All regard for Ghuul's authority codes was gone, now. He was jostled and pushed. The cable was kicked and stepped on and tripped over and, with its wild movements, Ghuul was himself jerked about like a puppet, driven with the crowds towards the gaping space of the Portico Publicum.

'No!' he shrieked, and thought suddenly of the desperate, terrified Fabricator Lords whom he had sent to the same fate, minutes before.

But, even as the surging crowd thrust him to within a few feet from the Annihilator, the cable on his skull reached the end of its extent and yanked him to an irresistible halt. The ranks of his people surged around him, a stream around a rock, into the teeth of the humming portal.

Moritz rushed past him without so much as a backward glance and he whimpered after her as she stepped into eternity. It was over in a split second,

but in that moment he saw, first, her robes disintegrate, then her peripheral augmentations, her skin -flaying her to the wet muscle - the soft tissue, bones and organs... all stripped apart to their constituent atoms in a fraction of a second. But by then, dozens more had hit the field, their bodies ripped to nothing as their life-force was siphoned away by the hunger of the shield generator.

The passivity of the crowd was crumbling. The slower movers were crushed beneath the urgent feet and tracks of the faster. Legless cataphracts, having torn themselves from their vehicles, dragged themselves on broken fingers towards the portico. Others turned on their neighbours, beating them to the floor or slashing them apart with mechanical attachments. With disbelieving eyes, Ghuul watched those on the periphery, unable to reach the portal, slicing apart their own flesh or hurling themselves from the windows and bridges that crisscrossed the city to hasten their inevitable destructions. And in his head - inescapable as the annihilation of his people - Ghuul felt the power output of the shield generator creep inexorably upwards.

As it passed the ninetieth percentile, he somehow found the strength to shift himself and his data-feed off to the side of the unending flow of bodies. Udo stumbled past him, seizing his master by the robes as he fell.

‘◆◆◆◆◆ the young acolyte screamed into Ghuul’s uncomprehending eyes, his face pale with terror. ‘◆◆◆◆◆

And the next second, Udo was torn away by the weight of the crowd, rushing with them into the green light of the Annihilator.

Desperate now, Ghuul reached up to the data-feed and wrenched at its connection to his skull. The pain of the uncontrolled disconnection sent shocks like blunt needles through his brain, snatching the breath from his lungs. But the angle of the feed was wrong: too far around the back of his skull to get both hands to it firmly. The feed was still live. Mindlessly, it plunged the frantic tendrils of his consciousness deep into the wash of data to make sense of the word that rang through Ghuul’s mind.

◆◆◆◆◆. ... [‘fou.bas]... Phobos... First moon of Mars... Of course, it was. He had seen it, four hundred years ago, through the porthole of the shuttle above the surface of the holy Red Planet... A tiny, tumbling thing, not even big enough to be spherical, pitted with craters like the scars of a pox.

◆613◆<; ... ['fou.bas]... Phobos... There was Phobos, unspeakable, staring backwards with eyes that glowed with fire... His mouth was full of teeth in a white row, fearful and daunting, and upon his grim brow hovered frightful Strife who arrays the throng of men...'

Phobos. Fear. Humans of ages past had christened the moon of Mars after their primitive god of fear before they had ever, really, understood what fear was. In the star-heart of his agony Ghuul's ego disintegrated before the force of unquenchable terror. No simple human fear was this that had lain in wait in those ancient stacks, but an ancient, alien Beast of Fear. And now Fear walked on Celare Artem; not the Beast itself, but the echo of its true touch, resounding through space and time to reverberate in the minds of Ghuul's people: the descendants of the first settlers who had chained it in the darkness and plundered its secrets.

Let loose by the call of their mundane fear of the Planet Killer, the Beast had reached out to make Ghuul its unwitting avatar. How gleefully he had spread its infection across his world through the defence shield, sustaining itself through the Annihilator. He was the Judas goat that led his people to the slaughter...

From so far away, the Beast reached to him across the stars. From beyond the Gates of Varl...

Defence field integrity 100%.

With the terrible strength of sudden and irrevocable madness, Ghuul wrenched the cable from his skull. A shriek of pain and exultation escaped his throat as he fell to his knees, the data-feed writhing and hissing sparks in the vice of his fist. As the life of the cable gradually died away, the silence of emptiness rolled in across the great square of the Portico Publicum and the great, glowing, green eye of the Annihilator stared down at Ghuul in wordless satisfaction.

CELARE ARTEM IS dead.

The forests grow and the seas tumble with joyful density of life and both encroach slowly upon the silent paths of the empty cities.

In the sky, the satellites click and beam strange powers that hiss with the whispers of the dead from one to another and on to the next in a never-ending web of impenetrable defence, and below them the machines go on. But the

boulevards are empty. The temples echo to the dripping of water and the occasional, tentative, scampering paws of a daring rodent. Fleets of ships sit forgotten on immense landing strips, their crew quarters empty and their passenger sections vacant. The blast marks of a single departing shuttle are stripped slowly away by a tropical storm...

A SCRATCHY VOICE, distorted by white noise, crackled from the brass grille on the astrovox console. Midshipman Leon McCabe leaned forward, trying to make out the mangled words through the crackle of aethyric interference.

‘...but we have heard that the Planet Killer is making way for Celare Artem, can you confirm?’

‘What are you listening to, midshipman?’ asked the Officer of the Watch from an inch away from his ear, startling McCabe into an involuntary yelp.

‘Residual astropathic echoes, sir!’ he replied, sharply. ‘From Celare Artem, beyond the Beltane Gate disturbance. I’m trying to patch them together. Time stamp is thirty days ago.’

‘Idiots,’ growled the lieutenant, turning away. ‘The Planet Killer hasn’t left the Eye for decades. The Mechanicus are jumping at ghosts, as usual. Let that be a lesson to you, midshipman. Listening to injurious rumour and gossip is punished by flogging for a reason!’

‘Yes, sir.’