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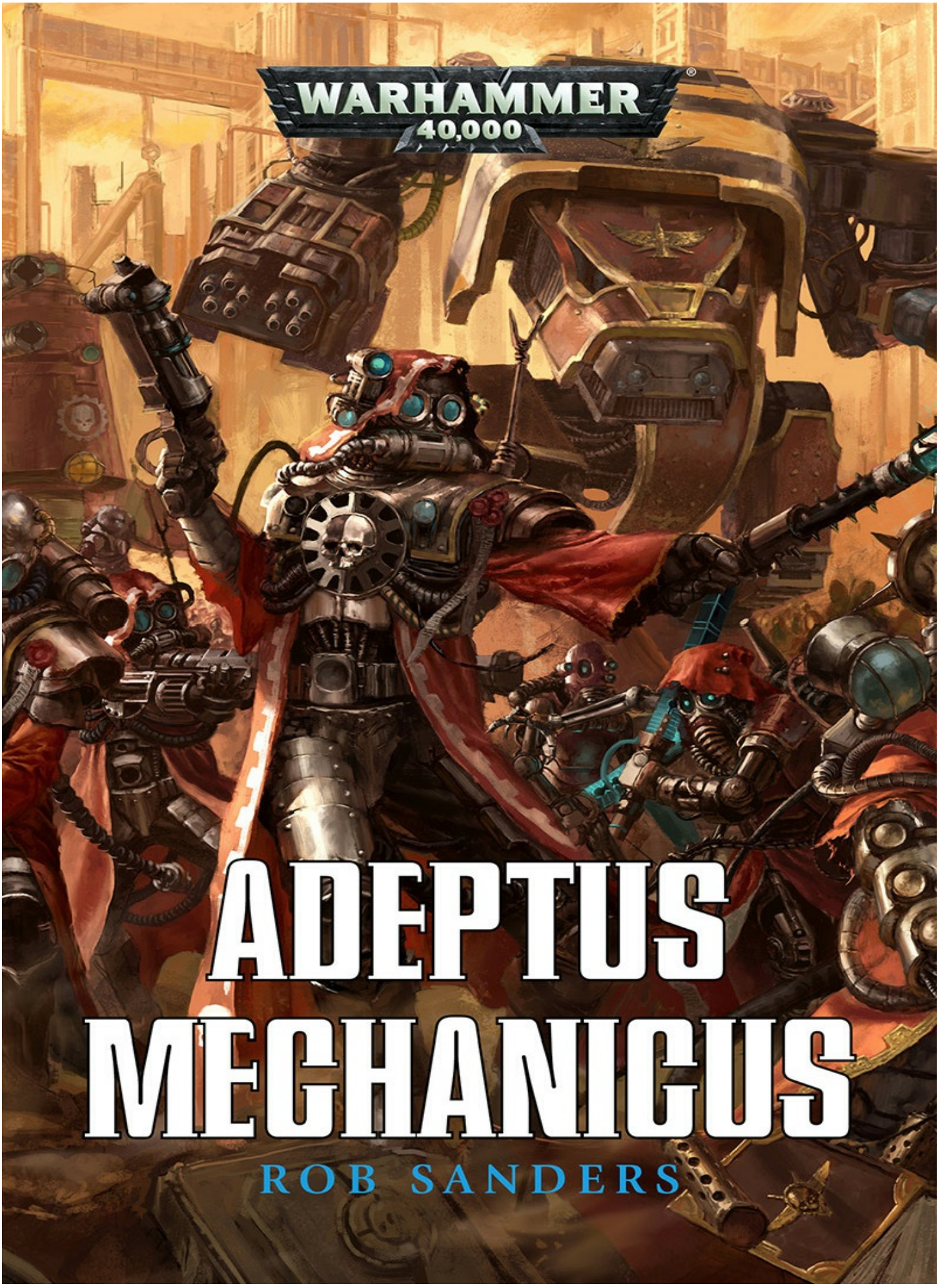
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ADEPTUS MECHANICUS

ROB SANDERS

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WARHAMMER 40,000

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

SKITARIUS

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SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF III
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+THE HIERARCHY OF COGS+*

The snow and ice were red. Not with blood, though the constant exchange of noospheric chatter between Haldron-44 Stroika's receivers and the explorator arkcruiser *Maestrale* told him that there was a 94.767 per cent chance that they eventually would be. Now, they were red with algae. The deep freeze of Perborea allowed little light down to the surface, but what gloom made it through the maelstrom fuelled the blooms that streaked the ice world's face.

Stroika was skitarii – from the hydraulics of his legs and the revolving joints of his arm-appendages to the acknowledged frailty of his flesh. He was as the Machine God continued to make him. Forge-raised on Satzica Secundus, Stroika had followed the patient path of protocol and worked his way up through the hierarchy of cogs.

<Secondary target identified,> Stroika reported.

Stroika's cranial engineering sizzled with the static of an uplinked intrusion. Sound that bypassed the ears. Visions that were experienced by the mind and not the eye. Binaric cant, novabyte and noospheric blurts overlaid one upon the other, neuro-synced straight into the brain. Orbital magna-picts, sensory feeds and holo-diagrammaticals dropped from the explorator arkcruiser above, like a thunderbolt, straight into the skitarius's mind.

The streamed doctrina imperatives all carried the authorisations of Magos Omnid Torquora, but Stroika experienced the intrusion as the pure will of the Machine God. All forge-worlders, from the Fabricator General to the lowliest servitor, made up the Corpus Mechanicus – glorifying the Machine God Incarnate with their artifice, both in their workings and their base organics. The Omnissiah found expression in and acted through them all. This was the Motive Force; the holy transference of data and instruction down through the stratified ranks of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Stroika – like all the skitarii of his legion – was possessed of a fraction of the Machine God. He was one of a billion, billion parts working in magnificent union and harmony. It was through the priesthood and techno-magi of the Cult Mechanicus that the Omnissiah made His needs and wishes

known. As hosts of the Machine God's unquestioned divinity, the magi spoke the word of the god, in His many favoured cants and streams. Stroika felt his doctrinal wetware respond.

<This mission has been blessed, Stroika-unit,> Magos Torquora told the skitarii officer. <By the cog that turns. By the oil that eases. By the spark that leaps. We do the Great Maker's work here. This most holy of missions does not allow for complications. You understand me, Stroika-unit? Identify the secondary target. To break with me and the mission is to break with Him. Receive of His blessing and remember all that you have achieved in His name. Know that you will achieve so much more.>

In the great gears of the Mechanicus machine – the machine that made war in the name of indomitable progress and majesty reclaimed – the fighting constructs of the Omnissiah became greater than their parts. Haldron-44 Stroika had striven to become greater still.

Stroika remembered. He reviewed a lifetime in service to the Machine God. How he had been a star-gazing menial, whose weak flesh was a blueprint of tattoos depicting the holy bionics and augmentations he had dreamed of one day possessing. He remembered a miserable eternity as a citizen-factotum and his subcutaneous electronic bar codes that burned with accumulated tallies and commendations. As an auxilia forge-sentinel, blessed with his first augmetics, he had been given the honour of guarding isotope scrap depot 3-64-63.

His record of off-world service in the numberless ranks of the Legiones Skitarii would have been a credit to any cybernetic soldier of the Cult Mechanicus. As sub-alpha, princeps and alpha he had led clade units of his own. He had earned the Crux Mechanicus and had risen through the ranks. Now, with a small legion his to command, he was Alpha Primus Haldron-44 Stroika of the Deuteron-IV Praetori, seconded to the infamous explorator Omnid Torquora.

Stroika's attachment of Sicarian infiltrators, selected from his expeditionary legion for the mission, were spindly silhouettes in the snowstorm. The integrated senses of his helm immersed Stroika in a blizzard of data. Omnispectral lenses and bleak optics filtered the red static of the storm. His acquisition reticules fixed on the outline of each of the skitarii soldier-operatives in turn, cycling through radiant energy wavelengths. Stroika's cogitae cores decrypted and processed the different datastreams fed back to him through the arkcruiser's phylactix.

The Primus experienced the ice world as no one man of mere flesh and blood could. He saw his column of infiltrators from orbit. Through the arkcruiser's arrays he acquired the meagre heat of the skitarii organics and the power signatures of their bionics on the razored apex of the icy ridge. High-gain antennae from a swarm of disposable probes returned to him the data-betrayal of the killclade's own voxmissions and uplink designations. He felt the air-to-ground surveyor pulses of the Mechanicus Sky Talon holding position kilometres above them. He became one with the auspectral returns of the Onager Dunecrawlers that had transported them across the desolate ice plains. The simultaneous datastreams met in Stroika and gave the skitarii commander a holo-dimensional fix on their position. All this, Stroika processed through the busy warmth of his cranial cortex.

The Sicarians of the Infiltroriad-Spuria~660 fired the climbing spikes of their cloven metal feet, making progress up the frost-shattered ridge. They were led by the detachment's commander, Princeps Talus-Spuria I/X, who – like his infiltrators – advanced with his right-hand weapons-cradle collapsed and locked to his back.

The soldiers moved with a hydraulic choreography, bionics trudging in unison and their mantid gait in sympathy with the leading princeps. To Stroika, Talus-Spuria I/X and his nine other infiltrators appeared like long-legged insects, from their gangling advance to the dome of their helmets and

bulbous optics.

<Princeps, all stop,> Stroika streamed.

His order received an immediate response. The infiltrators became still, like figures frozen in a pict. Standing like statues on the ridge, dusted with red snow, the skitarii and their princeps awaited further orders.

Bringing the metal digits of a bionic gauntlet to the side of his helm, Haldron-44 Stroika made a series of delicate adjustments to otherwise chunky instrumentation. A crest-holder ran transversally across the top of the helmet: the demicog of a Primus. The vanes and crenellations of the plume crackled with the flow of transmitted data. The silky foil of his officer's greatcloak, the rust-red of Mars, flapped behind him in the storm, acting as a receptor-threaded receiver.

Haldron-44 Stroika felt the presence of the Omnissiah echo through him. Through his neurocircuitry. Through the synaptic flash of sparks between his brain cells. Through his very soul.

The mind of the Primus flashed with orbital auspectra, static-grained captures and holodiagrammatic representations. Binary streamed through his thoughts, while data-layered codemissions and the cacophonous cant of lingua-technis laced through him. Stroika became momentarily one with the downlink and saw the energy signatures of his targets moving across the blood-streaked ice of the valley. Several kilometres ahead of them, the data-visitation revealed a large life form. No doubt something the targets were stalking whilst Stroika and his infiltrators in turn hunted them.

Silhouettes of codified fauna native to Perborea flashed up beside the energy signature. Another gift from Magos Torquora and the *Maestrale*. None seemed to match the form, however. This didn't surprise Stroika, as Perborea Prime, being a backwater ball of ice in a hazardous system, was not a well-documented world.

<Secondary target unknown,> Stroika streamed back to the arkcruiser, his thoughts piggy-backing the phylactic shunt between the skitarii, the Onager Dunecrawler, the Sky Talon and the *Maestrale*. <Collating…>

Crunching up through the ice, weaving through the column of skitarii, Haldron-44 Stroika assumed position on the razored ridge. Looking down through the bloody, howling maelstrom into the valley below, the Primus could barely make out their targets. Magnocular lenses on his helm whirred to focus and filters cycled but the targets were still just a signatured blur through the blizzard.

Stroika lifted his left arm. It was an augmented appendage terminating in the bionics of an armoured gauntlet, and he held it up like a feudal world lord flying a bird of prey. Instead of a raptor, however, the skitarii officer carried an infoslave servo-skull which bore the designation Phrenos~361. The construct was fashioned after the Cog Mechanicus, being half bone and half cogitator. A cog turned about the skull like the rings of a gas giant, spinning in place on a magnetic field. The barrel of an arc blaster protruded from the servo-skull's under-jaw, ready to drop and lock in firing position. A bundle of prehensile interface cables drooped down from the stub of Phrenos~361's spine, anchoring it to Stroika's arm.

<Get me a visual,> Stroika ordered, launching Phrenos~361 into the crystal-cold air. The servo-skull retracted its serpentine cables, its rotating cog speeding to a magnetically accelerated blur. Angling the blade-cog about it, Phrenos~361 was able to fly down the side of the ridge. Stroika watched the drone surge away. Cycling through the optical arrays of its augmented eye-sockets, Phrenos~361 transmitted a pict feed of its progress across the algae-streaked ice. The servo-skull's data was uploaded to a visualisation processor in Stroika's mind.

Buffeted by the streaming blizzard of red, Phrenos~361 cut through the freezing maelstrom, closing on the targets. Shapes smudged into the storm became silhouettes. Phrenos~361 counted twenty-three in total, the outline of each figure searing to brightness before fading away as the servo-skull catalogued them. In the main the column was made up of lumbering brutes, buried in ragged skins and furs. They pushed their exhausted carcasses on, leading with the jutting underbite of their tusk-crowded jaws.

Smaller, sinewy creatures struggled through the red drift about them, large noses protruding from hoods and the shredded cast-offs of their brute compatriots. Phrenos~361 flashed through the outlines of individual limbs and a stream of data analysing bodily proportion and ratio. The dimensions of the figures confirmed what Stroika already knew. Their targets were xenos. They were greenskins.

<Proceed,> the Primus ordered, prompting the servo-skull to move on.

Haldron-44 Stroika had extensive experience of orks. His service record indicated 2,372 confirmed greenskin kills across a range of warzones, but he had never encountered xenos such as these before. The creatures he had expertly despatched on Antioq, Ptolomae Phall and Phaeta Secunda were monsters in love with their godless machines and the devastating capabilities of their primitive xenos technologies.

The column of fur-shaggy aliens Phrenos~361 hovered above sported no such developments. The greenskins were barbarians in the truest sense of the word. They dripped with simple jewellery: bones, teeth and scavenged shiny objects, threaded through their ears, lips and green flesh. The only protection they boasted was the resilience of their monstrous frames and the furs that hunched their backs, trailing red through the snow. Their only weapons seemed to be simple stabbers and choppers, crafted from crude pieces of recovered scrap – dagger shards, spear-sharpened struts and axes fashioned from twisted metal.

The greenskin savages didn't seem to notice Phrenos~361, who surged ahead of the loping column through the streaming snow. The pict feed relayed back to Stroika showed little more than the red static of the valley floor. Finally, the servo-skull closed in on a larger creature. The blur of the alien monstrosity seared into focus as Phrenos~361 advanced as close as it dared.

The creature's outline flashed up against a cycling catalogue of potential matches but in the end the Mechanicus survey files failed to identify the beast. Bigger than a Dunecrawler or tracked conveyer, the beast slid through the snow and ice like a slug, warming the freeze beneath it to create a slippery trail that carried its bulk. Its blubbery body was covered with a carpet of shaggy hair while its head was decorated with a quartet of antlers. A thin membrane extended between the network of prongs, filtering the howling gales of their red bounty. Trapped algae funnelled down through the hollow antlers and feeding tubes into the alien herbivore.

<Data collated. Threat assessed,> Stroika told Magos Torquora. <Conclusion: non-threatening. Mission proceeding.>

<Diagnostiquorum consulted,> Torquora told him. <Assessment confirmed… wait… parsing…>

<Magos?>

Stroika's mind became a kaleidoscope of alerts and warnings. Data-feeds and hologrammaticals told him that an inbound meteorite was due to impact in the vicinity. Perborea was a crowded system, awash with debris and the planetary wreckage of ongoing calamities. Several such impacts had struck the mountains and the *Maestrale* had suffered collision damage from a number of close encounters.

<Incoming,> Stroika transmitted to his infiltrator clade. The gangly skitarii went down on one knee

in unquestioning choreography. The Primus joined them as a meteorite – bright and white – blazed through the sky overhead. It narrowly missed the ridge upon which they were positioned. Following the path of the meteorite, Stroika's cogitators and targeters flashed estimated trajectories through his mind. He watched it strike the valley floor. A red cloud rocketed angrily for the sky, with a blast wave radiating out from the crater.

<Brace for impact,> the skitarii officer ordered. His modulations were calm but insistent. As the blizzard died about them and the wall of snow and fury roared up the valley side, the Sicarian infiltrators shot anchors and cables into ice at their feet. <Three… Two… One… *Impact*.>

Haldron-44 Stroika felt the blast wave hit him. The elemental force almost took him from his feet – as it would have done for the rest of his skitarii, but for the anchors that kept the spindly soldiers from flailing away. With his greatcloak whipping about him, Stroika reviewed his sizzling feeds. The greenskins had marched on with indifference through the screeching turmoil of ice and snow. Several of their diminutive attendants had been blown some distance away, their rags catching the force of the blast like kites. The Primus watched Phrenos~361's pict feed pitch wildly as the servo-skull fought to ride out the storm.

As the howling impact hissed to a stop, Stroika and the Infiltroriad-Spuria~660 found themselves submerged in a thick, bloody haze of ice and algae. The meteorite crash had kicked up colossal amounts of snow into the atmosphere. Stroika knew that if he didn't act swiftly, his greenskin targets would become lost to him. He was not the only one to come to such a conclusion, although it was difficult – and pointless – attempting to separate thoughts of his own from those visited upon him by his tech-priest master up in orbit. In the end, they were all gifts of the Machine God, regardless of the mind from which they originated.

<Reacquire targets,> Omnid Torquora ordered. <Priority one.>

Stroika acknowledged the order with the noospheric blurt of a salute.

<You heard the magos,> Stroika told Talus-Spuria I/X and his infiltrators, <and through him the Great Maker. Reacquire the targets. Triple-time it.>

With the *clunk* of climbing anchors released from the ice and whipping back on their cables, the princeps and the Infiltroriad-Spuria~660 launched themselves over the frost-shattered ridge. Reaching out with the fingers of a gauntlet to steady himself, Haldron-44 Stroika followed, skidding down the valley side after them with his greatcloak flapping. The blood-red snow of the slope streamed about the skitarii officer and in his descending wake.

SELECTED: DENTRICA II OF III
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+BASE FLESH+*

Stroika could hear the wails of the beast. As his skitarii had zeroed in on their targets, cloaked by the red mist of the meteorite impact, the greenskins had closed on their own.

Holding some distance away through the bloody haze, Stroika and the infiltrators were rejoined by the servo-skull Phrenos~361. The drone whirred to a stop, landing on the Primus's gauntlet and securing itself with the prehensile grip of its snaking cables. The skitarii officer's clicking optics revolved slowly to focus, overlaying filter upon filter. In false-colour horror, Stroika was presented with a vision of slaughter. The greenskin savages were hacking apart the alien herbivore, burying

huge, cleaver-like blades in the beast, shearing through fur, blubber and bone. The creature's blood turned the snow to dark slush about it. It shook its antlers and emitted a mournful roar of defiance as it attempted to slide its way out of the frenetic butchery.

Stroika's auditory equalisers rang with the valley-bounced echoes of the beast's suffering. Infrared filters froze the warmth of blood-splatter patterns as they sprayed through the red miasma. The guttural grunts and bellows of the greenskins were cross-referenced for linguistic origin.

Talus-Spuria I/X and his skitarii held position on the ice of the valley, their spindly forms masked by the haze of snow that still hung in the aftermath of the meteorite strike. With their augurs and optics, Stroika and the skitarii could see the xenos, but the savage greenskins could not see them. The Machine God abhorred waste, however, and Talus-Spuria I/X had his soldier-operatives run firing protocols, preparatory targeting solutions and xenos data-files, ensuring that when the time did come to engage the enemy, they were as ready as they could be. Kill-shots had already been calculated. Trajectories had been calibrated. Probabilities had been processed. These, augmented by the flexibility, invention and natural instincts of their base flesh, made the Omnissiah's servants deadly opponents in waiting.

Haldron-44 Stroika watched. Recorded. Monitored. The greenskins finished the miserable alien herbivore before hacking the beast to pieces. They took huge slabs of skinned meat and shaggy fur over their shoulders while their servant creatures dragged antler, bone and the harvested delicacy of internal organs. Little was wasted and by the time the feral hunting party was done, all that remained was a mound of steaming entrails.

<Proceed?> Talus-Spuria I/X transmitted.

<As you were, princeps,> the Primus sent back.

The infiltrators tracked their quarry along the valley and up through a labyrinth of steep-sided ice ravines. The greenskins' progress was slow but indomitable, while the miasma of blizzard-quelling meteorite impacts helped to mask the presence of the Infiltroriad-Spuria~660. Like skeletal spirits, rimed in red and ice, the skitarii haunted the xenos, matching them step for step, calibrating their own advance to maintain a consistent distance between them and their targets.

Breaking out across a new ice field, Stroika and his skitarii trailed the greenskins to a crooked mountain that reared in isolation from the frozen plain. The outline of the mountain flashed in the optic overlays of Haldron-44 Stroika's helmet. Angles extended beyond the structure and data streamed down beside the imposing form of the red peak.

<Are you receiving this, magos?> Stroika said.

<Processing,> Omnid Torquora transmitted back from the *Maestrale*. <The diagnostiquorum concur. It looks favourable, Stroika-unit.>

<Sir,> Talus-Spuria I/X said.

<We have lost the xenos?>

<Yes, Primus,> Talus-Spuria I/X returned. <Solonoid-Spuria IV/X confirms that the xenos have entered a tunnel in the mountainside.>

<Magos,> Stroika said, <I am requesting authorisation to proceed.>

<Granted,> Omnid Torquora told him. <Clarification required. The Omnissiah demands it.>

<Secure the tunnel, princeps,> Stroika ordered.

The infiltrators observed their instructions with simultaneous urgency. The light hydraulics of their cloven legs helped them to bound through the red snow at speed. Stroika's own appendages brought

him up behind their fanning number. His cloak streamed behind him.

<Weapons online,> Talus-Spuria I/X blurted in chuntering code. The glow of the infiltrators' optic-arrays *clunked* to a brighter shade. The skitarii of the Infiltroriad-Spuria~660 extended their left arms, each holding a flechette blaster. The pistols sizzled to life. The weapons-cradles that replaced their right arms unfolded, extending from where they had been collapsed and locked behind their shoulder joints. Each formed the hydraulic arm and pivot-cradle of a close combat weapon. The infiltrators were armed with taser goads that crackled with voltaic lethality.

As the skitarii infiltrators split into two fast-advancing columns, Haldron-44 Stroika launched Phrenos~361 once more into the air. The servo-skull's cog-blade whirred silently to a blur, carrying the drone forward to scout the tunnel. With his cloak rippling behind him, Stroika thrust the hydraulics of his bionic arms out, forcing two arc pistols to slide down their length on rails. As the chunky pistols *clunked* into palm locks, the skitarii commander settled his thumbs back around their grip-interfacia and brought the weapons to crackling life.

<Skitarii,> Stroika transmitted to the infiltrators. <Honour the machine. Be as its parts, working in harmony, in blessed unison, as one.>

The Infiltroriad-Spuria~660 filed into the ragged entrance cut into the ice wall. The algae-threaded freeze gave way to darkness. This mattered little to Stroika and the skitarii. Their augurs and optics fizzled as their visual filters allowed them to probe the depths of the tunnel. Stroika's feeds recorded the drop in temperature and the changing gradient. They were descending.

The Primus trudged down the centre of the passage, his heavier hydraulics chewing up the ice floor. Infiltrators padded along the walls of the tunnel in two columns, leading the way with the silencers of their pistols. While their combat chassis design offered their base organics ample protection, it was still a lighter designation, suiting their allotted role.

Phrenos~361 had drifted far ahead of the unit, almost catching up to the meat-lugging greenskins. Relaying pict feeds back to its master, each presenting some enhancement or capture of note, the servo-skull showed the xenos disappearing into a ragged metal opening at the end of the tunnel. The rust and twisted serrations made the opening appear like a mouth swallowing the greenskin monsters.

The Mechanicus tech-priests and soldiers formed a shunting chain of hallowed transmissions. Stroika and the infiltrators experienced the mission through the servo-skull's optics, as Magos Torquora and his diagnostiquorum experienced it through them. The Omnissiah monitored the glorious progress of His servants through every feed, stream and imperative passing between them.

<Vessel located, magos,> Haldron-44 Stroika said. <Praise the Omnissiah.> The skitarii officer regretted the invocation immediately. His rising heart rate and the flush of hormones recorded in his bloodstream smacked of pride and self-congratulatory relief.

<You will be informed when the mission is completed, Stroika-unit,> Omnid Torquora sent back. <When it has met its designated goals to the satisfaction of your priestly betters and to the greater glory of the Machine God.>

<Understood, magos,> the Primus transmitted. He felt his mind flood with the phylactic intrusion of the priesthood. Like a scope brought to focus or an instrument recalibrated, Stroika felt the trivialities of wayward impulse fade. He felt the procession of sentiments warm from the heart run cold. His mind seared to precision and necessity. The cloud of thoughts and feelings afflicting brain and flesh dissipated, sizzling to the demand of his cerebral systems: targeting data, ballistics and acquisition reticules.

He was no longer Stroika, forge-worlder, proud servant of the Mechanicus and commander with care for both his skitarii and his techno-magi overlords. He was Stroika the living weapon. A cold equation, an eventuality to be delivered, an instrument of divine artifice and design. He was sync-slaved – synapse and engram – to a higher purpose. An instrument of the holy Motive Force.

<Probability that the vessel is the *Stella-Xenithica*, 17.877 per cent,> Torquora informed him.

Geometrics and augur scans of the isolated mountain flashed through Stroika's neural engrams and processors. Now the Infiltroriad-Spuria~660 had tracked the xenos back to their ice caves, the *Maestrale* had been able to narrow its search for a vessel long crashed on Perborea and buried in ice. Only the colossal craft's mighty prow now protruded above the frozen plateau, in the shape of the crooked mountain. The arkcruiser's ice-penetrating augurs had given Omnid Torquora and the diagnostiquorum the vessel's estimated shape and dimensions.

<Probability that the vessel is the *Stella-Xenithica*, 42.112 per cent,> Torquora said.

The Sicarian infiltrators waited either side of the opening, where the warped metal met the ice. As Phrenos~361 glided through the crumpled superstructure of the ancient vessel, the servo-skull projected a broad shaft of hologrammatic light that felt its way through the ruin. Walls were rust-mulched fragility clinging to the skeletal structure of the vessel's girders and decking, giving the inside the appearance of a dripping cave or the burnt-out interior of a leviathan's ribcage. Phrenos~361 moved quietly through the freeze, optics whirring, scan-shaft buzzing. New instruments emerged from its cranium. In the distance, echoing through the tortured architecture of the craft's vast interior, the drone's vox-corder isolated the sounds of the greenskins. The monsters were dragging their prize back to the feral tribe that had made the wreckage their home.

Phrenos~361 stopped to repeat a scan, augmenting with filtered optics and captures. The servo-skull had been scanning for positive idents, fixtures and serial numbers. Anything that might help the Mechanicus confirm the vessel as the fabled *Stella-Xenithica*. A series of digits flashed through Stroika's mind. It was a serial mark on a trunk distribution pipe, something that had largely escaped the ravages of time and temperature. Something recently uncovered by the soggy collapse of a rust-eaten wall. Stroika's stubby vanes relayed the find to the *Maestrale*. Even as he did, he could tell from the archaic numeration that the serial number was old and it was Martian.

<…Positive identification confirmed,> Omnid Torquora told Stroika. The explorator's voice was cool and steely, betraying nothing of the excitement Stroika knew the magos must be feeling. <Our search is over. The serial confirms the vessel's origin. The Martian shipyards. The holy Ring of Iron. Cross-referencing the manifests, I am ready to declare this wondrous find as the *Stella-Xenithica*, Terran colony ship, bound for the Autrega System, lost in the void. Probability 99.678 per cent. Blessed be the number. We give thanks for our certainty. Stroika-unit – secure this hallowed artefact and its secrets.>

<Phrenos~361,> Stroika transmitted, prompting the servo-skull to glide around. <Survey the vessel and report findings.>

The drone turned and, with its revolving cog-blade accelerating about it, drifted off down the passage, scanning and pict-cataloguing the find.

<Skitarii,> the Primus addressed the infiltrators. <We stand before the artifice of our Martian magi and forefathers. Its sacred design, the wonder of its workings and the consecration of ancient iron is ours to claim in the name of the Omnissiah, for it is He who guided Magos Torquora to this place of rediscovery. It is in His name that we shall purge the corruption of the xenos infestation and restore

the secrets of this find to the servants of Mars.>

SELECTED: DENTRICA III OF III
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+HARD DATA+*

Stroika heard little of the battle. His mind was drifting on the serenity of screed and data-hymnals that proceeded from the skitarii infiltrators as they fought their way through the green alien plague. With filters and scrubbers engaged, Stroika heard the canticles of the Omnissiah.

The greenskin monstrosities and their runts, however, gripped their skulls with foetid claws and bled from their eyes and ears. Without filters, the aliens were treated to the white noise of crippling neurostatic that proceeded from the Sicarian infiltrators. Despite the veritable assault on the senses that being in the neurostatic aura entailed, the greenskins fought like mindless barbarians. Roaring through their pain and confusion, their brute faces trickle-streaked with blood, the xenos savages fought on – swinging, stabbing and bludgeoning with their primitive weapons.

Stroika leaned out of the path of a monstrous weapon. His mind burned with projections, warnings and hologrammatical trajectories. These, combined with augmented reflexes to act on such information, gave the servants of the Adeptus Mechanicus the edge they required to survive the dangers of a hostile galaxy.

While not genetically engineered for transhuman supremacy like the Adeptus Astartes, the skitarii's blessed bionic enhancements allowed them to punch above their weight when faced with warp-spawned corruption or the savagery of the alien. For the Cult Mechanicus, there was a tool for every job and a job for every tool. The advanced weaponry, cybernetic resilience and sensory superiority of the skitarii meant that they were invariably that tool. Whether it was the garrisoning of forge worlds and fabricator moons, the merciless punishment of techno-heresy or crusading for that most precious of commodities – data – the Legiones Skitarii were both the tool and the weapon of choice.

Beneath the armour plating, the battleware and bionics, however, there were men. Men who had been butchered in the Machine God's name, serving the Great Maker through their flesh, blood and augmentation. Cogitae and bioplastic wetware could do little to match the economy of base organics. For a priesthood who needed warriors who could think for themselves while unquestioningly serving the needs of the Mechanicus, however, the creativity of the human brain and fortitude of the human heart were necessary evils. For where the logic of the machine was absent, mistakes were ultimately made.

The weapon was as savage and uncouth as the orks could have made it: the thick length of a bone, inset with a cleaving blade fashioned of sharpened girder-shard. The barbarian greenskin that wielded it was not about to be lectured on the finer points of design, however. The rude blade *whooshed* in front of Stroika's throat before smashing straight through Gaskii-Spuria IX/X. The Sicarian infiltrator was swept aside in a cacophonous blur of plating, hydraulics and blood. Stroika watched Gaskii-Spuria IX/X's biometric feeds die on his optic overlays, along with the infiltrator as the green beast cleaved what was left of him down through the rusted decking.

Stroika brought up his arc pistols. Blasting streams of electricity from the weapons, the skitarius forced the brute into a retreat. The creature's hulking frame was punched back by each arcstream burst, its green flesh smouldering to blackness.

As it lifted its monstrous pike above its head, Stroika shot the weapon from palsied green claws that smoked and crackled with the surging energies blasted through them. Stomping forward on his thick-set hydraulics, Stroika fired upon the alien again and again. Two chest-searing streams stopped the beast's gargantuan heart, a third scorched into its forehead and broiled its brain. The xenos barbarian reeled back like some felled giant, smashing partly through the corroded decking.

From the layout, the cavernous chamber that the greenskins had chosen as their communal hovel had been some kind of flight deck. Mouldering mounds of scrap that had been long-forgotten designs of atmospheric lander littered the space, while a cargo recess in the floor served as a raging fire-pit upon which blubber-fat was burned and meat roasted. Fungal blooms grew out of the scrap and debris, thriving in the dank interior of the ice-entombed derelict.

Runts had been left in charge of preparing the feast. With their unintelligible shrieks of disorientation and alarm bouncing about the dripping darkness, barbaric green beasts and feral hunters were flooding the chamber from adjoining grottos and partially collapsed passageways. One static-enraged beast shouldered a path of destruction straight through a corroded wall.

The infiltrators met the furious rush of green muscle with suppression fire from their blasters. Flechettes thudded across the open space, shredding furs and mauling alien flesh. As the metal darts sank into the tough hide of the feral creatures, electrical signatures drew more of the darts down on the targets, savaging the orks. The greenskin monsters pushed on furiously through the white noise and flechette storm as further blasts ripped through them. Several crashed to the deck in neurostatic incapacitation. As they fell, the infiltrators finished the beasts with the stabbing blaze of their taser goads.

The flight deck flashed with roasting streams of electrical energy. As the cells of Stroika's arc pistols drained away, he ejected the battery magazines and slammed the grips of the pistols into the thigh-loaders of his titanium legs. There spare mag-cells waited, pneumatically punched into the handgrips of the pistols upon impact.

Bringing up the pistols, Stroika blast-hammered screeching runts back into the great fire and through the weakened deck plates, down into the darkness below. Several ran for their miserable lives, forcing Stroika to shoot them in the back. He turned one into a convulsing nest of spidery arcs that smouldered on the deck, while the force of another arcstream caused an alien wretch to explode in a fountain of crackling gore.

The Sicarian infiltrators soon became stretched. Like Stroika they moved with the unflinching speed and fluidity of the machine. Acquisition reticules and calibrators danced across the darkness, zeroing in not only on enemies but on pre-calculated vulnerabilities. Information streamed. Links and feeds chuntered with the unspoken exchange of combat data. Hard-linked weaponry answered the call of targeter and xenocidal impulse.

Compatible fusions of combat hormones and serenitives were released slowly into their bloodstream, enabling the skitarii to maintain a state of battle-furious calm. Enemies were despatched with a ruthless, religious fervour. This found expression in the cold, almost automatic efficiency of their slick aim and death-dealing lack of sentiment. To an enemy the cybernetic soldiers might appear as machine-spirit guided robots, but the skitarii were more than just hydraulics, gears and processors. They hated with the hearts of men and dreamt the glories of the Omnissiah ascendant, a day when all true constructs of flesh and iron might be connected as one. A time when the Machine God might extend His data-ravenous reach and that of His empire throughout the whole galaxy.

The greenskins came at them, the bloody beads of their eyes searing with neurostatic rage and territoriality. The ancient crash site of the *Stella-Xenithica* was their tribal home, possibly since their original planetary infection. They were not going to give it up or be driven out onto the merciless, algae-streaked plateaus of the ice world. The feral beasts charged, their fur-wrapped feet thundering across the quivering deck, their eyes bleeding and their jaws opened wide in fang-furious display. The beasts were gigantic and wielded bludgeoning blades fashioned from twisted struts and torn decking – huge, rude and serrated.

<Pattern Involutia,> the Primus ordered.

With stabbing, hydraulic steps, the skitarii infiltrators formed a circle, their backs to one another and the roaring fire. Their blasters punched through the darkness beyond, ripping through hearts and throats. The resilience of the alien beasts, however, was something to behold. Stroika's cogitator grew warm inside his skull, processing the data of death and destruction that was all around him. As feral greenskins crashed into the deck, the brutes behind them stamped through their carcasses in rage-filled desperation.

The skitarii officer saw the wall of jagged weaponry and green muscle close about them like a trap. It was a spiked and shrinking enclosure of alien rage that would skewer and then pulverise the Infiltroriad-Spuria~660.

Haldron-44 Stroika felt the presence of the Machine God burning through his neurocircuitry and the brain in which it was embedded. Magos Torquora was transmitting the gifts of the Omnissiah from the phylactic diagnostiquorum aboard the *Maestrale*. Alien dissections. Files of xenos research and experiments that bordered on the heretekal in their detail. Structural schematics of early Terran colony ships from the infotombs of Mars. Through Stroika, the Omnissiah made His merciless need known to the soldiers of His machine empire.

<Be the sacred oil that soothes the impairment of age,> Haldron-44 Stroika transmitted to the skitarii squad, <and the prayer that reclaims spirits thought lost. Cleanse the holy form of His design of pollution – of alien life that is death to the machine and an affront to the purity of the Omnissiah's purpose. Fourth denticle, concentrate fire.>

The Sicarian infiltrators turned in unison. Three greenskin monsters were tearing their way up through the rusted mesh of a bay floor-cover nearby. Like the digits of an ancient timepiece, Stroika's warning relayed to the cybernetic soldiers the position of the emerging aliens – four teeth or denticles around the Cog Mechanicus. The space became a storm of shredded darkness.

Stroika aimed his arc pistols at the chamber ceiling. His targeters and uplinked overlays attempted to find a structural weak spot in the blackened girder supports running the corroded length of the hangar. As he fired, the infiltrators zeroed in on the target and added their own blasts to the strategic fire. The chamber grew to brightness before Stroika's crackling streams faded. The mauled, white-hot section gave. The weight of the girder tore its opposite end from the mouldering supports. Stroika watched as the girder fell, followed by a cascade of detritus from the floor above, burying the three greenskins hauling themselves out of the decking.

<Tenth denticle, concentrate fire,> Stroika transmitted to his skitarii. The schematic Magos Torquora had sent him revealed the weakness of a plasma-welded join in the decking nearby. The joint marked where cargo bays had given way to the flight deck proper. Blasting a pair of arcstreams along the length of the rust-weakened seam, Stroika's fire encouraged the Infiltroriad-Spuria~660 to follow suit with their rust-shredding blasters.

With the added weight of charging greenskins slamming down on the floor section, the join sheared away with a rippling fountain of rust. Within moments the decking beyond the seam was gone and a number of the stomping greenskins with it. Stroika watched the feral savages fall down through the wreckage, into the blackness beneath.

<Now show the Omnissiah your reverence and bend a knee,> Stroika commanded. As the circle of infiltrators knelt in unison, Stroika turned. With his bionics firmly anchored to the ruined deck, his torso began to revolve. Turning within the abdominal gimbal-mounting of his hydraulic legs, Stroika brought up his arc pistols. Holding the weapons out to either side of him, he let loose streams of electrical energy that twirled about him and over the helmets of the kneeling skitarii. The arcstreams crackled and spat through the darkness, lashing greenskins back with their fury. Green flesh smouldered in the wake of the revolving beams, while bolts of residual electricity rippled about the hulking frames of the oncoming monsters.

Several of the scrawnier, snaggle-toothed specimens went down and struggled to get up under the repeated attentions of the arcstreams. The larger brutes – feral orks jangling with rings and primitive glyph-carved tokens – seemed able to shrug off both the scorching beams and the muscle-spasming effects of the current. With several greenskins dead or dying on the flight deck but many more still raging for the skitarii, Haldron-44 Stroika's arc pistols stuttered and fizzled dry.

The effect was instantaneous. The xenos brutes came back at the circle of cybernetic soldiers like a green tidal wave. The infiltrators' white noise seemed to infuriate the beasts as much as disorientate them. The huge monsters heaved their primitive axes down. The skitarii used their optic-arrays, logistic overlays and pneumatically fired reflexes to avoid the worst of the greenskins' fury. Spindly infiltrators leaned back, stepped sideways and turned aside bludgeoning weapons that demolished the flooring and smash-scattered wreckage. Despite the heart-stopping fury of the attacks, the skitarii's movements were fluid and assured.

As the alien beasts roared at them, the infiltrators had only a dull awareness of their human fears, their minds sizzling with the rush of data being processed and shared. Their magi overlords had calibrated their experience of the world to suit the needs of the mission. Fear was but an inconvenience. Feelings, emotions, relationships, these all had their allotted place and purpose in Mechanicus society. In battle however, such frailties of the flesh were phylactically dimmed and eclipsed by their function as living weapons of the Omnissiah.

Their brains might have been allowed the creativity and invention to make them a flexible force – capable of evolving strategy, zeal and improvisation. Their hearts, however, were a void. Instead of sentiment and inclination, the skitarii felt targeting data, battle-protocol, imperatives and the processed thought-streams of their officers and lord magi. They felt the presence of the Omnissiah in order and instruction. They felt Him act through their very bodies, their bionics and organics. For the soldiers of the Legiones Skitarii, it was all they needed to know.

The rabid violence of the chamber was intoxicating. With fury and frustration, the greenskins came at the skitarii with growing speed, savagery and force. The Sicarians of the Infiltroriad-Spuria~660 calibrated their movements and predictions to remain a millisecond or two ahead of their monstrous foes, looking for an opening. The greenskin savages were not without a mad unpredictability, however, and for Quasiq-Spuria II/X and Valek-Spuria V/X the opening never presented itself.

Stroika felt the biometrics of both infiltrators spike and fade as the orks they were combating unleashed their feral wrath. One green monster slammed a strut-spear straight through the chest

housing of Valek-Spuria V/X, skewering the skitarius. The ork heaved the cybernetic soldier up with ease, allowing him to screech horribly down the length of the serrated shaft.

The greenskin savage shook the thick spear from side to side. Valek-Spuria V/X's spindly appendages flailed about, before his ruined torso and gimbal waist-socket parted. Stamping down on his helm with a fur-wrapped foot, the greenskin put the infiltrator out of his misery. Quasiq-Spuria II/X was felled by another alien beast, the force with which the creature chopped down with its hacker enough to smash the skitarius into bloody scrap.

<Maintain formation,> Stroika heard Talus-Spuria I/X order. The princeps moved in to plug the gap where his pair of infiltrators had died.

As the feral greenskins intensified their territorial assault, the princeps and his infiltrators deployed their close combat weapons. Flechette blasters still shredded orks to distraction, between the brutal sweeps and stabs of primitive weaponry. Adding to their ragged thud, taser goads sparked off crude blades and sent bolts of bone-shattering energy through green flesh from their hyperdynamo capacitors.

Several greenskins backed away like chastised animals, snorting, working their mangle-fanged jaws and shaking the shock from their weapons. A number of beasts dropped their hackers and choppers, glaring at the Sicarian infiltrators with suspicion and rage before drawing their skinning shards from fur belts.

The most hulking and monstrous of the savages – a thing that wore the skull of an even larger chieftain as a tribal helm – lumbered forth. It wielded a spiked metal totem pole as a weapon, which it used to spark-smash the taser goad of Schrada-Spuria VII/X aside. Grabbing the infiltrator's slender metal arm in one great claw, the greenskin chieftain seemed unfazed by the thudding of crackling flechettes into his barrel chest. The chieftain used the bionic appendage to wield the Sicarian infiltrator as a weapon. Smashing aside Solonoid-Spuria IV/X and Cynkade-Spuria X/X with their comrade's armoured body, the towering savage beat Schrada-Spuria VII/X from side to side into the demolished decking.

<God of man and machine,> Haldron-44 Stroika thoughtstreamed to himself, <guide me, Your instrument, in destroying this pollution of Your great works.>

Stroika's revolving shoulders cycled clockwise, sending his appendage-arms down and around. As they did, his wrist joints turned, presenting his arc pistols to the rear. Two auxiliary appendages cycled and unfolded over the tops of his whirring shoulders, from where they had been carriage-locked to the back of his combat chassis and hidden beneath his officer's cloak. Each weapons-cradle held a crackling arc maul. The weapons sizzled with electrical energies. With his quad weapons appendages charged and presented, Stroika prepared himself to face the monstrous chieftain.

From the arkcruiser, the Machine God answered his call. The Primus's cogitator coils and combat overlays were flushed with additional data downlinked from Magos Torquora and the explorator diagnostiquorum. Species-specific vulnerabilities. Logistae projections. Battle-addenda, compensating for the creature's larger size and resilience.

'Meet my Maker…' Stroika voxed at the oncoming ork, his static-laced voice a metallic boom in the cavernous chamber.

The noise just seemed to provoke the hulking thing. The greenskin chieftain swung its totem like a great, spiked metal club. Stroika's movements were assured and hydraulically slick, his helm and crest-holder ducking down beneath the furious passage of the uncouth weapon.

He side-stepped, allowing the beast to cave the decking in beside him, the totem tearing mangled mesh and cargo pit covers up from the floor. Flinging the scrap aside, the greenskin chieftain came at Stroika again. The red beads of its bleeding eyes burned with territorial hatred, while the beast's scar-cratered face contorted with its desire to see Stroika and his skitarii join the mouldering wreckage of the chamber.

Augurs and phylactic intrusions crowded Stroika's optics with trajectories, highlighting and streaming notation. The skitarii commander turned up the length of the deck-buried totem. Stroika's torso spun in its interface socket, his outstretched arms coming around like a wheeling star. One arc maul, followed by the other, smashed through the globed muscle of one green arm, knocking the chieftain back with the intense electrical shock that the arc mauls delivered. With energy snapping in a spidery web about the wound, Stroika brought around his pistols, streaming fire from one and then another into the beast's barrel chest.

The greenskin roared its pain and shock. Even the beast, dull as its nervous system was, could feel the intense flow of electricity through its bones. In its retreating frustration, the hulking creature lashed its totem column back, taking the head of Vega-Spuria III/X from his armoured shoulders with a sickening *clunk*.

Lifting its weapon, the chieftain stomped across the ruined deck at Stroika. Burying the spiked totem in the busy, encrusted architecture of the hangar roof, the green abomination hauled on the superstructure. Stroika's neurocircuitry sparked with warnings and contingencies. With a groan, the corroded metal gave. Using the totem as a grapnel, the alien pulled part of the chamber roof down on Stroika, forcing the skitarii officer to take several powered steps and dive out from under the descending wreckage.

Bringing his arc mauls up, Stroika created an improvised roll cage from the curvature of his appendage-arms and the length of the weapons. Tumbling back to his metal feet in one fluid movement, the Primus whipped his foil cloak about his cybernetic frame and positioned himself on the greenskin's flank.

Blasting the monster in the neck and side of the head with twin streams from his pistols, Stroika monitored the beast's predicted reaction. Bringing its claw to its seared face, the stun-shock of electricity coursing through its thick skull, the monster stumbled to one side. Still carrying the momentum of the roll, Stroika stomped behind the beast. He smashed at the monstrosity through its furs, prompting an agonising roar from the greenskin.

It brought its girder totem around savagely, but Stroika stopped, anchoring his metal feet to the deck and locking his hydraulic frame. Holding the arc mauls out to deflect the weapon, the skitarius felt his absorbers, pistons and fibre-bundles soak up the impact. The anchors on the soles of his feet tore up the rusted deck and he was pushed backwards by the monstrous force of the swing.

With alarms and integrity warnings flashing through the darkness of his helm, Stroika intensified the blaze of electricity between the metal totem and the crackling mauls. Heaving back with his hydraulic might, Stroika shocked the weapon from the spasming claws of the feral chieftain.

Pressing his advantage, the Primus rotated his shoulder demi-joints. Bringing his pistols back overhead and his arc mauls behind, he blasted continuous arcstreams at the beast, forcing it into a retreat. Holding out its massive claws before the onslaught and howling its alien agony, the monster stumbled back through the engagements of several of its tribe. Its kin were faring just as badly against the Sicarian infiltrators.

Falling back over a rust-shattered pipe, the greenskin monster went down. Still it retreated, half crawling and half convulsing back beneath the intense energies that razed its flesh and wracked its body. The creature looked up at the Omnissiah's cybernetic servant, its blood-bead eyes glassy with alien hatred.

As Stroika brought his crackling arc mauls over and down once more, he beat the alien creature down into the deck. The skitarius turned with the force of a fired piston. The arc mauls came around, trailing a static-bright glare. They struck the hulking greenskin in the side of the head. The first stove in the skull it was wearing as a tribal helm and then the beast's own. The second took the ugly head from its globed shoulders and sent it bouncing off through the darkness.

'For the sanctity of the Machine,' Stroika voxed down at the fountaining carcass of the green monster, 'and He who works through the miracle of its operation. You are an aberration and not part of the Omnissiah's grand design. Therefore, you must be destroyed.'

Keying back into his feeds and the web of data streaming from the engagement, the Primus found the chamber to be strewn with alien bodies. Among the rank corpses of the feral monsters was Cadmiad-Spuria VI/X, who had died a few footsteps away. Princeps Talus-Spuria I/X moved about the chamber with his surviving infiltrators, pointing their pistols down at dying greenskins and blasting a point-blank and functional death into the skulls of the beasts. It was not execution. It was eradication.

Stroika felt the return of his humanity – the shred his duties allowed him. He was no longer the living weapon that circumstance demanded. Emotions flooded back. Filtered though they were through his psychosurgical suppressions, they still presented as an intoxicating rush. He felt the conflicted warmth of concern, of relief, of satisfaction. As he cast his busy optics across the bodies of his dead skitarii, he noticed the distant pang of loss and responsibility in deaths that had previously been reported and catalogued.

Riding on the magnetic hush of its revolving cog, Phrenos~361 drifted forth out of the darkness, augurs, scopes and pict lenses retreating into cavities in the servo-skull's cranium. Revolving his shoulder joints, Stroika cradle-locked his maul-appendages to his back. Ejecting his spent power cells and extending the hydraulics of his arms he sent his arc pistols back along their rails to where they sat in cavity holsters inset within his chest plating. The Primus brought up his arm and allowed Phrenos~361 to land, anchoring itself with prehensile cables and micro-mechadendrites. The drone uploaded the hard data of its survey findings.

<Magos,> Haldron-44 Stroika transmitted back to the explorator arkcruiser. <The *Stella-Xenithica* has been purified of the alien infestation. No further xenos targets detected.>

The report was a formality but one Stroika took legitimate pride in delivering. Through phylactic communion, Magos Torquora and the diagnostiquorum saw what the skitarii saw and experienced the mission vicariously from the *Maestrale*. Through the umbilical streams of invisible data-tethers, they were one with the Omnissiah.

<Status report,> Torquora streamed back.

<Princeps Talus-Spuria I/X reports the loss of seven Sicarians. I am recommending the princeps, Solonoid-Spuria IV/X and Cynkade-Spuria X/X for the Exonumia-Maxital in recognition of their part in this historic undertaking. With your permission I would like their designations recorded in the mission log.>

<Granted, Stroika-unit,> Torquora transmitted back.

<The vessel-artefact is secure, magos, and awaits your inspection,> Stroika told him. <A survey

reveals an estimated two-thirds of the colony vessel intact. I would, however, recommend that purge teams accompany your survey catalogistae and the magi archeotechnis down to the crash site. The vessel may still be infested with alien growths and spores.>

<They have already been despatched, Stroika-unit,> Magos Torquora told him, visiting upon the skitarius an orbital pict of a great explorator drop-ship, sat on the ice beside the buried wreck of the *Stella-Xenithica*.

<I don't understand, magos.>

<They were despatched the moment you confirmed the identification of the vessel,> Magos Torquora told the skitarius. <The Omnissiah allows not for doubt in these matters of high significance and I allowed none for your failure. You have and will always have my complete confidence, Primus.>

<The honour is all yours, magos explorator,> Stroika sent back. <By the Machine God's good grace, your researches led His servants to this great find. Who knows what secrets will be unearthed from a relic-vessel of such age?>

<I am coming down to the surface,> Omnid Torquora told him. Stroika could detect, even in the ancient magos's steely transmissions, the hint of excitement. <Let us find out.>

0010

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… +*THE CORPUS MECHANICUS*+

The arkcruiser *Maestrale* made its descent. Below the explorator vessel the forge world of Satzica Secundus turned. Bathed in the heat and red light of its local star, the planet's thick, black cloud cover was tinged with an infernal hue. The arkcruiser's approach meant dropping down through the planet's swarm of tiny fabricator moons. Upon doing so it drifted downwards through the orbital plates, defence platforms and shipyards that circled the forge world. The ponderous progress of their mesmerising paths was a thing of intersecting beauty. These obstacles the *Maestrale* negotiated with clockwork precision. There would be many scopes, optics and eyes trained on the vessel and Magos Torquora would not risk the disaster of a collision.

The low gravitational conditions on Satzica Secundus meant that the factoria, smoke stacks and strato-forges reached high up into the sky. They pierced the planet's oppressive cloud cover, the result of thousands of years of relentless industry. The chemical brume of heavy metal vapours was a pincushion through which the tallest soot-stained towers, forge temples and ventscrapers rose.

Haldron-44 Stroika stood on the edge of the flight deck, looking down upon his forge world home as it rose up to meet him. The servo-skull Phrenos~361 hovered idly nearby, waiting to be of some service to its master. About them the superstructure of the bay creaked as the arkcruiser once more knew the gravitational pull of low anchorage. Stroika's optics glazed with idle trajectories and data unsought. As it was, the *Maestrale* was keeping rotational pace with a colossal structure below – a mighty forge whose temple towers rose so high out of the black cloud that they almost appeared to reach out for the arkcruiser.

Stroika didn't need datastreams to tell him that he looked upon the forge temple principal, the seat of the Fabricator General and High Gnostarch of Satzica Secundus. It was known across the forge world as the Thunderfane, for taking the cacophony of its sacred industry highest into the heavens.

As Stroika watched, he saw a baroque craft of ornate design ascend from the Thunderfane's apex platforms, a vessel all brass, gold and Martian red. Extending the telescoptics of his helm, the Primus

scanned the vessel for identification. To his surprise, the Fabricator General's own orbital barge was approaching the *Maestrale*, flanked by a pair of ornamental landers.

<Sir.>

The stream carried the signifiers of 10-Victro Tiberiax, Stroika's legionary second among the Deuteron-IV Praetori. While alphas, commanders and princeps like Talus-Spuria I/X led individual units, Stroika and Tiberiax held responsibility for every skitarii soldier on board the *Maestrale*, and both the martial and cult traditions that governed their number.

<Report.>

<The magos, sir.>

The landing bay was suddenly awash with activity. A gaggle of tech-priests arrived on the deck, the skirts of their rust-red robes trailing after them. Some were spindly magi sporting scaffolds of slender clawed appendages, while others were nests of snaking mechadendrites. Several of the diagnostiquorum were broad, barrel-chested constructs whose augmentations had added a baroque bulk to otherwise feeble frames.

The tech-priests were shadowed by Mechanicus protectors, personal bodyguards of frightful augmentation. The magi and their personal ward engines in turn were flanked by 10-Victro Tiberiax and soldiers of the Lex-70 Ranger-Expatriarii. All knew their place in the stratified ranks of the Mechanicus. The heavy hydraulics of the skitarii's legs beat a rhythm on the deck that could be heard and felt.

Stroika had assigned the rangers as a planetary escort, ensuring that the visored helm and plate of each soldier gleamed. Their robust hydraulics had been soaked in baptismal oils and received special attention for the slightest lag or fault. With ceremonial battle cloaks and polished galvanic rifles, Stroika was certain that the Lex-70 Ranger-Expatriarii would do both himself and his magos proud.

At the heart of the delegation was Magos Omnid Torquora. The explorator had spent an extended lifetime in the field. He had favoured the perils and rewards of exploration and reconquest over a forge world existence, with its feudal politics and currying favour at the Thunderfane.

His choices had cost him, however, especially during his early survey missions as a young explorator in the Dragortha Deeps. His body was now but a flesh-plugged husk. The depths of his red hood hid the ghoulish features of a cadaverous face and the darkness within it framed the blue burn of optics that seared with priestly obsession.

Torquora's torso was spoiling flesh shot through with cables, while the ragged stumps of his limbs had been surgically interfaced with a hulking suit of crafted armour. The clinker-plate frame lent the ancient tech-priest the bulk of a battle-automaton, the magna-pneumatics of each shoulder supporting stowed heavy weaponry. The chunky hydraulics of armoured legs carried the weight of the explorator's augmentations, *clunking* with each heavy step.

A slender pair of auxiliary appendages reached out through the tech-priest's chassis-concealing robes. Their multi-digits were feverishly at work across the runebanks of cogitators and logic engines housed within the armoured pulpit that formed the suit's projecting chest.

Omnid Torquora led his diagnostiquorum of tech-priests, logistae and artisan advisors. The disciples of the Machine God. Behind them an itinerant ark trundled on thick tracks. The prize within was hidden behind adamantium plate, a kaleidoscopic bubble of overlapping protective shielding, stasis fields and a chrono-containment lock. A technological treasure the explorator had recovered from the *Stella-Xenithica* and was now to ceremonially present to his Fabricator General.

<Escort and delegation ready, sir,> Tiberiax communicated.

10-Victro Tiberiax marched ahead of his skitarii and the diagnostiquorum's protector ward engines. Like his rangers and Stroika, Tiberiax gleamed for the occasion. The silver of his plate and the rich red of his battle cloak honoured the event. The only individual who seemed to have gone to no extra preparation was Torquora himself, whose brazen bionics went unpolished and whose robes were dark with the stain of maintenance and grease. Even the explorator's spoiling stench had gone unmasked. Stroika's processors told him that there was a 16.349 per cent chance that the magos had simply been too busy with his preparations. Based on how the officer knew Torquora felt about forge world politics, the skitarius estimated a 43.998 per cent likelihood that it was intended as some kind of slight or insult.

<Very good,> Stroika sent back to Tiberiax. <You are right on time.>

Tiberiax sent the noospheric blurt of a salute to his commander, which Stroika returned as he joined the party. Cranial locks turned on the side of Stroika's cog-plumed helmet, allowing the Primus to disengage it from his cranial interfacing. His shaven head was covered in haptic sockets, flesh plugs and a web of embedded cabling. He held the helmet out and allowed the servo-skull Phrenos~361 to carry it in its trailing mechadendrites.

Stroika's skin was swarthy like that of his Satzican brothers. His eyes were his own, but ringed with screw-interfacia optics that gave him the appearance of wearing lensless goggles. His mouth was relaxed and his face at the kind of peace and obedience of mind that surgeo-suppression procedures ensured.

Stroika looked to Magos Torquora and opted for the modulated informality of speech.

'The Fabricator General sends his personal barge for you, my lord.'

'For me?' the explorator said, his own modulations shot through with truculence and sickly static. 'For you? No, Stroika-unit. For the treasure we bring him. He honours the Machine God's wonder with his barge, not our own.'

'Are we not all the Machine God's wonders, magos?' Stroika ventured.

'Yes, but we are not all equal in His eyes,' Torquora replied, the party of tech-priests and its ceremonial escort making its way across the deck. The Fabricator General's barge rose to meet them, the ornate transport settling in a flight bay. The hydraulics of its landing claws hissed and the craft was briefly lost in a cloud of steam. 'One cog may turn another through a set of gears and yet by the nature of the mechanism the two cogs never meet. We are those cogs, dutifully turning, lending power to the betters turning above us.'

'But we are about to meet the Fabricator General…' Stroika said.

'By the grace of your function, you have been allowed your curiosity,' Torquora warned the Primus. 'Do not use such a hallowed gift for insolent suggestion.'

'My lord, I…'

<I know what you are thinking before you do, Stroika-unit,> the magos explorator told him, his voice echoing through the skitarius's thoughts. <Do not forget that. If your questions proceed from a spiritual impulse–>

'They do, magos,' Stroika assured him.

<Spoken like a cult soldier,> Torquora streamed. The Primus did not know whether this was a compliment or not. Once again, Stroika heard the magos's voice proceed from his jaundiced lips.

'These events are unusual in their historical significance. Protocol is being subverted. You are to me

as I am to the Fabricator General. As billions are to him. He is nothing, however, to the Great Maker – who is the glory of the Machine absolute, the Corpus Mechanicus. The Omnissiah can make us and He can break us. In this instance, something wonderful has happened. A gift long lost has been given back to our empire. This audience with the Fabricator General is not an honour – it is a formality. I tell you this: the Omnissiah has bestowed this gift on us all. I shall be flesh-damned before I let it end up in the depths of some vault or as part of a political pay-off. It shall function as it was intended and through that function honour us all. I would not meet with this nest of silicon vipers, were they not to be the key to such a realisation.'

'Then you hold no regard for the Fabricator General and the priesthood of Satzica Secundus?' Stroika asked.

'I hold them in every regard,' Omnid Torquora told him. 'I simply wish to be that cog far removed. I do not desire to be coated in the grease of their oily dealings, their affairs of heart and greed. Why do you think I sought the path of the explorator? It was the ships of such undertakings and the tech-priests that commanded them that could take me farthest from this place. We must, however, pay the price of our successes.'

As the delegation of tech-priests, protectors and skitarii rangers approached the orbital barge, its ramp descended. Lowering with it was Master-Manciple Proxis, the Fabricator General's personal emissary. Proxis kept the claw-toolage of his appendages buried in his accommodating sleeves. The master-manciple's ribbed gown and hood concealed the wonder of his workings, but his face was plain to see. Within the glass bowl of his head sloshed an excited mixture of liquid metal that masked his features. The metal had the ability to replicate the faces of those whom he addressed. Combined with a dialogus-matrix, this made Proxis an excellent emissary for his master, since it was difficult to feel hostility towards one's own face.

Proxis issued forth a stream of code, reverential blurts and binaric cant. He followed this introduction with one issued from his vox-hailers.

'Magos Torquora,' Proxis said, his features assuming the semblance of the explorator's rancid own, 'his excellency Voricar Trega, Fabricator General and High Gnostarch of Satzica Secundus, bids you a welcome return.'

'I am honoured,' said Omnid Torquora, turning his hood slightly to reinforce to Stroika that he was anything but. Within moments the master-manciple's face had changed again. It assumed the form of his Fabricator General – the flattery of a younger incarnation, of course – before returning to a silvery representation of Torquora's own.

'It has been too long, magos,' Proxis said.

'And yet not long enough…' Torquora returned, allowing a ripple of doubt to pass through the liquid metal in the bowl, '…to fully complete my mission. I had to leave a macroclade of skitarii to secure the remaining secrets of the site. I fear that we leave further secrets undiscovered, to be pillaged by the enemies of Mars.'

'The Fabricator General regrets that,' Proxis told him, 'but wishes me to assure you that reinforcements are en route to the Perborea system to further secure the *Stella-Xenithica* site.'

Torquora turned to allow Haldron-44 Stroika to see the displeasure on his ruined face, the light from the deck lumens invading the depths of the tech-priest's hood. Stroika had left a skitarii garrison under the command of Talus-Spuria I/X, who had received a well-earned promotion for his part in securing the colony ship.

His orders had been to provide security for the wreck and the small army of catalogistae and magi archeotechnis Omnid Torquora had left on the miserable ice world to continue the Omnissiah's good work. Stroika had thought it unlikely that the secrets of the colony ship would be discovered by others, based upon the length of time that had passed between previous visitations. The Primus could not believe that the *Stella-Xenithica* or even the greenskin savages had purposely visited the ice ball of a planet, which held little strategic or resource value. What Stroika hadn't factored into his assessment was the danger posed by other magi and explorators, eager to get to Perborea and steal the vessel's valuable secrets and treasures for themselves.

'Is that–' Proxis began, craning the bowl of his head around to see the itinerant ark behind.

'Yes,' Torquora cut him off. 'It is.'

'When the Fabricator General learned of your find, from the encrypted astrotelepathic field reports, he insisted upon seeing such a treasure for himself. He was eager that it benefit immediately from the sanctity and full security of the forge world. That is not a problem, is it, magos?'

'No problem,' the explorator said, through gritted adamantalloy teeth.

'You understand, of course, magos…'

'Oh yes,' Torquora told him. 'I *understand* completely.'

'Shall we, then?' Proxis said. 'The entire forge world awaits you and your treasure.'

'Let's.'

SELECTED: DENTRICA II OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+THE QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE+*

The orbital barge roared across the surface of the clouds, churning up a billowing chromatic haze from the toxic darkness below. As Haldron-44 Stroika stood in the baroque luxury of the bay-vestibule, he watched his home world blur by. The barge passed between zeppelins tethered to processing towers and down through the torrents of high-altitude traffic: haulage brigs, bulk transports and freighters.

Cherubim and silver-skinned servitors moved about the barge passengers, all decked out in the feudal livery of the Thunderfane, offering consecrated oils, power and amasec for those tech-priests who were partial.

A pair of ancient security-automata flanked the closed bay ramp, their still and imposing forms like statues. Master-Manciple Proxis was exchanging words of congratulation with the tech-priests of Torquora's diagnostiquorum, as his role dictated. Several electro-priests came forth chanting cult litanies and giving thanks, the flesh of their faces a network of sub-dermal circuitry. Making the sign of the Holy Cog and slashing the crackling bolts of blessing across chests with the termini of their fingertips, the tech-priests moved on to more formal rituals about the shape of the tracked ark.

Like the magos explorator, the skitarii rangers and protector bodyguards wanted little to do with the ceremony and fuss unfolding in the vestibule-bay. With the servo-skull Phrenos~361 still holding his helmet beside him, Haldron-44 Stroika returned his gaze to the broad viewport on the barge's elevated belvedere.

The barge was surging across the thick ocean of black cloud, taking a tour of the region's grandest and most significant strato-forges. Upon their clean domes, pyramids and temple tops that reached

clear of the smog, thousands of tech-priests, magi and forge world significants gathered to watch the passage of the barge from balconies and platforms. They were there to honour the return of the *Maestrale* and its precious cargo, but despite gathering for the purpose of celebration, there were no shouts of jubilation or waving from the crowd. They simply stared blankly at the passing of the barge and the treasure it contained. They made the sign of the Holy Cog and streamed their coded praise.

Stroika knew that it would be the same in the darkness below the cloud cover. In earlier service to the Omnissiah, he had toiled in the groundmills and scraper-factoria. He had done so as both a fresh-fleshed menial and a citizen construct, proudly putting the first of many augmentations to work in the name of the Machine God Incarnate.

Code-streaming vox-hailers would have announced through the smog the arrival of the explorator arkcruiser and the unseen overhead passage of the barge. Forge-worlders in rubber and trunk-trailing gas masks would have stopped to observe the occasion on the freightways and up through the workshop-platforms. They would have done so in similar silence, no doubt enjoying a moment's respite from their back-breaking duties.

Completing their brief tour, the flanking ornamental landers peeled away as the barge set its course for the Thunderfane. The vessel coursed between columns of flame that reached up from the stackscrapers of satellite strato-forges as the temple furnaces vented in its honour. The forge temple principal towered magnificently against the Satzican sunset, its colossal crown of node towers arcing with power. Coming in through the electrical storm, the ceremonial barge deposited its passengers on a lofty temple platform.

With Phrenos~361 hovering beside him with his helmet, Stroika led the way between the still forms of the security-automata. 10-Victro Tiberiax fell in line and the two skitarii officers stepped off the platform with their cloaks flowing behind them. Omnid Torquora followed with platform-shaking steps, trailing his diagnostiquorum and the itinerant ark, which itself was flanked by ranger sentinels and protector bodyguards.

The delegation from the *Maestrale* found it slow going through the outer halls of the strato-forge temple. As the capital forge on the planet, its halls were grand and swarming with a sea of tech-adepts: forge masters, arch-magi, tech-priests, magnates, logistae and cult retainers. Temple thralls stood guard in cages mounted on stilt-platforms, dotted throughout the chamber's length. The smell of ceremonial ozone burned on the air.

Stroika and Tiberiax parted the crowds, but with so many wishing to congratulate the magos explorator and catch a glimpse of the trundling ark, negotiating the hall took time. Finding another hall and another, each boasting its own sub-strata of forge world society and significance, Stroika knew that Omnid Torquora would be detesting every wasted moment. They had both spent so much time away from their home, exploring and on legionary deployment, that they were not ready for the overwhelming welcome.

<Stroika-unit,> Torquora streamed, <get us out of here. That would be an order.>

Stroika and Tiberiax exchanged a wry glance and a nod, the two skitarii officers surging on through the crowds. Through the great arch beyond, lined with choral servitors vox-blurting code-canticles of the Cult Mechanicus, Stroika found a ceremonial doorway guarded by another pair of relic security-automata.

Master-Manciple Proxis and Torquora's delegation were admitted by armed temple thralls. The inner temple beyond was sparse in comparison to the entrance halls, with a few dozen forge masters,

logistae and magi in attendance about the enthroned figure of the Fabricator General.

'Magos Explorator Omnid Torquora,' Master-Manciple Proxis announced. The call was echoed by vox-hailing servitors ornamentally embedded in the chamber pillars.

The huddle of tech-priests parted as Torquora stomped his augmented way across the chamber and up to the throne, flanked by Stroika and Tiberiax. The skitarii officers went down on one knee, as did the explorator in his hulking suit. He rose again, towering over the attendant magi and advisors. A swarm of winged cherubim scattered from where they had been perched around the throne and the scaffold about it. Machinelings scuttled away. The suddenness of the movement turned hoods and drew the sear of optics. The glowers – both organic and artificial – were palpable. While he was not the only imposing construct among them, Torquora's size and offline weaponry were designed to intimidate.

Such displays did not stop a robed member of the Fabricator General's retinue from venturing forth. The construct wore the black robes of a temple codescrubber, a magos catharc charged with the Fabricator General's spiritual security.

A mekspider rappelled from the chamber ceiling on a tiny winch-wire, landing on Stroika's shoulder. Extending a probe-interface, the mekspider momentarily explored a local flesh-plug in the skitarii officer's ear before dropping onto the floor and crawling up a member of the diagnostiquorum. Mekspider drones of different sizes and designs skittered about the explorator delegation, criss-crossing the open space with their wire feeds. They were all conduit-connected to the magos catharc, who was checking Torquora and his attendants for any sign of technological deviance or xenological corruption. The magos catharc took readings from Omnid Torquora personally.

The black cloak and hood of the Fabricator General's codescrubber housed a rippling body made up almost exclusively of writhing, tentacular mechadendrites. The helmet-mask of its face and whirring telescoptics did little to offset the horrible suggestion of a body buried in a nest of strangling serpents. As it moved through the crowd, the tech-priests and forge masters instinctively withdrew. Some of them had clearly received the chief codescrubber's invasive attentions. Haldron-44 Stroika shuddered to cogitate the lengths to which the magos catharc would go to purify a machine of code-corruptions or xenos infection.

'Omnid, Omnid, Omnid…'

The metallic voice was everywhere. Like a whetstone along a blade – chill and grating.

'My Fabricator General,' Torquora said.

'Approach, my friend,' the metallic boom announced. 'It is good to see you.'

At the Fabricator General's suggestion, the magos catharc slithered aside and the mekspiders crawling about Torquora's delegation rose towards the ceiling on their fibre-cables. Stroika watched his magos stomp up towards the throne, allowing the skitarii officer a better view. The throne was set upon a dais of colossal cogs. About it was a scaffold from which draped a semi-transparent foil. The material was shot through with engrammatic patterns and circuitry, forming the sigil of the Thunderfane forge temple and its planetary overlord. Through the foil Stroika could make out the enthroned figure of Voricar Trega, High Gnostarch of the Thunderfane and Fabricator General of Satzica Secundus.

The steel hiss of the Fabricator General's voice proceeded from huge vox-hailers set in the throne. The throne itself was not only the figurative seat of power in the forge temple principal and the

Mechanicus world beyond; it was an actual seat of power. The throne was made up of a quad of fusion towers from which electricity snapped and arced. The Fabricator General sat within – an almost permanent fixture. Little of the man that had been Voricar Trega remained, the ancient magos now being little more than a robed automaton, sitting in a nest of interfaced power cables and haptic feeds. It was said the very power produced by the forge world itself passed through the Fabricator General's crackling form.

Omnid Torquora knelt once more and took up the foil with one of his auxiliary appendages. Drawing it to his hood, he kissed the Fabricator General's sizzling sigil. Standing, the magos explorator drew back.

'What has it been, Omnid?' Trega said, his voice echoing through the floor and chamber. 'A century?'

'Two, my lord,' Torquora told his master.

'You have been busy, magos.'

'The Great Maker wishes it so,' Torquora said. 'I see His blessing continues to burn bright in both Satzica Secundus and your resplendent self. This is your third incarnation?'

'The Omnissiah favours me with His grand design,' the Fabricator General affirmed. 'Enough about me. This day looks to your accomplishments. So, the *Stella-Xenithica*…'

'The Perborea system, my lord,' Omnid Torquora said. 'Out on the Nooneus Drift. Planetoid seven of sixteen.'

'A Terran colony ship, out there?' Trega boomed. 'How did you come to find the vessel-artefact?'

'Many years of research, data-salvage and dead ends, Fabricator General,' the magos explorator told him.

'But the defining piece of evidence,' Voricar Trega said. 'Come now, Omnid. Don't be modest. Share your successes and receive, through us, the Machine God's thanks. The relevance is pressing.'

Stroika felt his magos hesitate. The skitarii officer's equalisers recorded faint stress patterns in Torquora's returns and a vague sense of threat in the Fabricator General's own. The gathered retinue of forge masters, magi and logistae seemed to close in on Torquora and his revelations. The small horde of sycophants and predatory advisors was mostly made up of scrawny, cybernetic fusions – hooded tech-adepts draped in robes and spidery servo-appendages. Punctuating their number, however, were true oddities, ancients and sectarians like Torquora and Trega, who had fully embraced their machine form.

'Merchant Charter records, my lord,' the magos explorator told him. 'Guild losses are reported by law to the Chartist Captains but can be acquired by interested parties for a price. I detected a pattern of disappearances in the vicinity of the Nooneus Drift. My Navigator and magi aethyricus isolated a tempestuous region of the warp nearby on a backwater trade route. It was my theory that the anomalous conditions pushed traversing vessels off course.'

'That was your theory,' Voricar Trega said, the node columns of his throne crackling with expectation. 'But the Omnissiah demands of us data, does He not, Omnid? Hard data.'

'Yes, my lord,' Torquora said. 'I took the arkcruiser *Maestrale* along the same route.'

'A risk?'

'Aye, but a necessary one,' the magos explorator said. 'For the Great Maker did not engineer us merely to exist but to push the boundaries of that existence. To become more – and that cannot be achieved without risk.'

‘Good, Omnid. Good…’

‘The tumultuous immeteorology of the route forced us to drop out of the warp on the edge of the Perborea System. Sixteen unremarkable planets orbiting an unremarkable star. The system was, however, crowded with debris, making exploration hazardous.’

‘But that did not stop you.’

‘No, my lord,’ Torquora said. ‘We made a systematic survey of the worlds, cataloguing many new species of xenos fauna and flora. We discovered several wrecks. Merchant vessels listed as losses in the Chartist records.’

‘And the *Stella-Xenithica*?’

‘Yes, my master,’ Torquora confirmed. ‘En route from Terra to Autrega, the colony ship had suffered the same fate – only thousands of years earlier. The crew perished in the extreme conditions and the artefact-vessel had suffered both the crash and the effects of time and environment. My skitarii forces purged the derelict of xenos infestation and secured the site for archeotechnological investigation. Cataloguing continues, but one of our first finds was of such magnitude that protocol dictated you should be informed, my master.’

‘Show us,’ the Fabricator General commanded with a gesture, his metallic digits slow and heavy with expectation.

Haldron-44 Stroika and 10-Victro Tiberiax advanced with the tracked ark, flanking the machine. A number of the magos explorator’s diagnostiquorum came forth to collapse the shielding, stasis fields and chrono-containment security systems of the armoured chest. Removing the heavy lid, several magi went to delicate work connecting cables and mumbling spirit-appeasing litanies of candescence over the technological wonder inside.

‘A Mark IV Martian hololithic projector,’ Omnid Torquora announced as his tech-priests made the sign of the Holy Cog and retreated before the Fabricator General. ‘A relic in its own right.’

Torquora nodded and one of his magi archeotechnis hauled down on a switch handle set within the itinerant ark’s side. The hoods and faces of the gathered tech-priests were illuminated by the hololithic static that fizzled in the space above the baroque projector. With a *clunk*, the projector cycled through a series of three-dimensional images. The air shimmered with intricate charts, blueprints and construction details. These were accompanied by columns of test data, material designations and litanies; a hololithic template containing all the sacred knowledge required to build the wonder of a technological artefact.

‘By the Motive Force…’ one of Trega’s forge masters uttered.

From the ripple of prayers and makings of the Holy Cog, Stroika assumed that many of the tech-priests had not believed the magos explorator’s reports. The Fabricator General knew Torquora of old, however, and had had no such lack of faith.

‘Praise the Omnissiah,’ Voricar Trega thundered, ‘for here before us are His missives, brought forth from the doom of our past and the darkness of ignorance.’

The forge masters and tech-priests watched as the blueprints of an ancient weapon flashed before them.

‘I present to you,’ Omnid Torquora announced, ‘the Standard Template Construct schematic for what these hololithic captures term a “Geller Device” or “Empyreal Bomb”.’

Stroika watched as optics intensified and a ripple of Omnissiah-honouring prayers passed through the gathering. There were no gasps or exclamations – only the drone of engaged cogitators and logic

engines.

'This is indeed a wonder,' Voricar Trega said, 'as you promised, Omnid. You have done well and honoured both your forge world and the Great Maker, whose ancient works grace our presence. What say you, my councillors?'

The gathered magi and forge masters turned in on themselves, gabbling code and cant as they unleashed their enthusiasm on each other. Stroika watched them in silence, the air alive with wireless feeds and identifications transmitted as badges of authority.

'Phlegra Octaveen,' the Fabricator General urged. 'What say you?'

A tall, armaplas tank crawled forward on a quad of legs. The tank was filled with a murky liquid and a respirator rose and fell on its brass top. Lamps flickered on within, illuminating Phlegra Octaveen III, arch-calculus and cipher engine. There was little left of the old hag. Her threadbare cranium and toothless maw were strapped into an oxygen mask, while a wrinkled, saggy torso floated in the tank's murky solution, supporting a single, skeletal arm. Pipes and nutri-lines ran up through the solution and into the logista's diaphragm and the ragged stump of her other shoulder. The inside of the tank was covered in smears and numerals: the notations, mathematical enumeration and supra-calculi of the cipher engine.

'Lord Fabricator,' Octaveen said, bubbles rising from her mask as she spoke through a pair of vox-hailers. 'Even the briefest of computations show the impact such a device might have on the galaxy. The Imperium and the Martian Empire are beset by warp storms in the void and immaterial storms within the aethyr itself that frustrate communication and physical expansion. This device would revolutionise warfare and travel. We could be looking at another golden age for both empires.'

'A-a-and why would we want that?' Eudoxus Zultra vox-stuttered, the gangling forge master looking around for agreement from the hooded tech-priests about him. 'T-t-t-t-he Machine God has seen fit to bestow this wonder on Satzica Secundus and its priesthood. W-w-w-w-why share such a gift with those of base flesh? T-t-t-t-he worlds of men would appropriate it as their own – as they do all the Omnissiah's wonders.'

'They honour not the Machine God…'

'Terra must be notified. Our accords have lasted thousands of years…'

'The device belongs with Mars…'

'Argentae,' the Fabricator General said, the metallic hush of his voice descending upon the argument like a foil blanket on the flames of a fire, extinguishing it instantly. 'Argentae Nuvias, my old friend. Your thoughts, magos aethyricus?'

Haldron-44 Stroika saw that the tech-priest could not attend personally and instead joined the retinue as a ghostly hololithic presence that bled from the gloom of the chamber. Nuvias's hood and robes crackled, providing little evidence that anything existed within them.

'As a weapon,' the magos aethyricus said, 'it would deny the pollutive entities of the warp purchase on the dimensional reality of worlds sacred to the Omnissiah. A powerful tool in our never-ending fight against the incorporeal threats that lay claim to our very plane of existence – the plane where flesh and iron exist in harmony.'

'Could it even be constructed?' Engra Myrmidex said, drifting forward through the crowd. The Fabricator Locum was second in authority only to Voricar Trega himself, and had long upgraded beyond the restraints of humanoid form. His shell-hull was comprised of clinker brass plates, arched into a foetal curve. The head of the ancient was a nest of optical arrays, pictcorders and auspectra,

and below these hung a delicate array of fine brass instruments and mechadendrites. His tail dribbled a length of interface cables and holding his frame in place were a pair of coaxial propellers – ducted fans that helped him to hover above the ground. Most grotesque of all was the techno-magos's tri-sentience: three surgically intermeshed brains, carried beneath the shell like a bulbous, pulsing, precious cargo. Three minds that spoke as one. 'Reproduced? Mass produced?'

'Well, Argentae? Phlegra?' the Fabricator General demanded. 'Speak, as you would before the Great Maker himself.'

'The template seems intact, my Lord Fabricator,' the logista bubbled.

'The Machine God will provide the rest,' Argentae Nuvias said with shimmering confidence. The tech-priest and tech-priestess had little intention of disappointing their machine master.

'Then, my Fabricator General,' Engra Myrmidex said, drifting his fans and form around to face the enthroned Trega, 'I would consider it an honour only your greatness could bestow, to oversee the construction of this Geller device, this empyreal bomb, and test it.'

'You will do no such thing,' Omnid Torquora announced.

Stroika looked about the chamber. Silence had once more descended. The necks of magi and forge masters clicked around as they moved their hoods between the magos explorator, the Fabricator Locum and their Fabricator General. The skitarii officer detected the heat signatures of weapons held by temple thralls as they came online. He felt his aegis protocols stir and his own weapons engage. A stream of noospheric chatter passed silently between the Primus and 10-Victro Tiberiax.

'Kn-kn-kn-know you not your place, magos?' the forge master Eudoxus Zultra said, craning his lank frame over Omnid Torquora and jabbing the spindly toolage of a finger at him.

'You address your betters here,' the magos catharc hissed from the octopoid slithering of its hooded robes. 'This is not the void or some backwater rock where you might feel the freedom of your lofty station. Take care, magos. You stand among giants here at the Thunderfane. Magi ordained by the Great Maker and charged with His authority decide what will and will not be done. All else goes against the Omnissiah's grand design and is deemed heretekal.'

'Your name and designations will forever be recorded in the discovery of this wondrous find, Omnid,' the Fabricator General soothed. 'You wish to be involved further in its development?'

'I do, my Lord Fabricator,' the magos explorator said.

'Your encoded messages betrayed some reticence about being recalled to Satzica Secundus, Magos Torquora,' the Fabricator Locum said. 'It was expected that you would return to your work on Perborea and unearth further wonders for your forge world and Fabricator General.'

'Would you not rather return, Omnid?' Voricar Trega asked. 'Construction. Deployment. These were never your calling, old friend. And this technological wonder must be tested. Data, my friend. The ongoing Quest for Knowledge supersedes petty notions of ownership. We must know the device's capabilities. The discovery was yours but the find brings glory to all. Besides, the Omnissiah fashioned you for service amongst the stars.'

'Where I would serve him, Lord Fabricator,' Torquora insisted. 'Testing the Geller Device.'

'Absolutely out of the question,' Engra Myrmidex said.

'It sounds to me, Fabricator,' Torquora seethed through the metallic hiss of each carefully chosen word, 'that you speak not for your master but in his stead. You are not Fabricator General yet, Lord Myrmidex. As others gathered here have been swift to remind me, remember protocol. Remember your place in the mighty machine of our forge world collective.'

Stroika's equalisers could detect the strain in the modulated voice of the magos. He knew his master did indeed wish to leave the forge world and return to his duties. He would not, however, give up the prize of an STC template so easily to the scheming magi of the forge world priesthood. Even Haldron-44 Stroika, with his limited appreciation for temple politics, could see that the Fabricator Locum was attempting to claim the all but limitless power of the Geller Device for himself.

The chamber was silent. Myrmidex did not want to repeat his mistake, nor Omnid Torquora overreach himself in the opinion of his Fabricator General. Voricar Trega seemed equally impressed and disappointed in them both.

'The Fabricator Locum,' the Fabricator General said finally, 'his attendant magi and the forge masters under his purview will undertake the holy construction of this Geller Device for the testing of it on the nearest immaterial anomaly to Satzica Secundus – the Great Gyre, the warp storm that claimed our sister forge world Velchanos Magna, so long ago.'

'Very wise,' Argentae Nuvias said, the hololithic representation of the magos aethyricus crackling and warping.

'V-v-v-v-velchanos Magna, yes, yes,' Eudoxus Zultra agreed. Other forge masters and magi gave their modulated approval.

'However,' the Fabricator General said, hushing the gathering once more, 'I do not wish my old friend Omnid Torquora to be separated from this undertaking. The Omnissiah chose him as I do now, to see this holy experiment through and usher in this new golden age of which we speak. He will attend on the Fabricator Locum as his executive second and aid him in securing the data required to deem this undertaking a success. This is part of the Great Maker's design, and as such cannot be contravened or perverted. For as my magos catharc was right to indicate – that is a heretekal path. Lord Myrmidex?

'Spoken like the Omnissiah himself, Fabricator General,' Engra Myrmidex said stiffly.

'*Archmagos* Torquora?' Voricar Trega asked, elevating the explorator with a single word. Monitoring his master, Haldron-44 Stroika detected an almost imperceptible hesitation before Omnid Torquora spoke. When he did, his words cut with steely acceptance.

'All praise the Omnissiah…'

0011

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+OPUS MACHINA+*

The lighter put down on the flight deck of the Ark Mechanicus vessel *Opus Machina* with all the slick urgency its cockpit-interfaced slave-servitor could manage. As the rear ramp descended, Haldron-44 Stroika strode out and across the hangar. His footsteps thudded into the deck plates with rhythmic insistence, forcing 10-Victro Tiberiax to hurry from the lighter to catch up.

As the two skitarii officers made their way through the hump-shuttles and landers being manoeuvred around the flight deck by tracked conveyers, the void beyond the hangar was obscured by the vessels of a Mechanicus fleet. Arkcruisers, explorator vessels. Mechanicus heavy frigates. Armed arkfreighters. Adamanticlads and forge tenders. The fleet was dominated, however, by troop carriers of the Legiones Skitarii, like the command carrier *Basilika* that Stroika and Tiberiax had just left.

<Is it wise to question the Fabricator Locum in this way, sir?> Tiberiax transmitted. Marching through the Ark Mechanicus was like traversing a small city. The vessel was bustling with tech-priests and underlings going about their staid business. Stroika strode through armies of servitors, deck menials, crew-constructs, enginseers and magi, taking crowded passages, stairwells and elevators up to the command deck. Skitarii were posted as sentries, members of the Rho-Micron 3-6-3 Hysparsii serving as cybernetic armsmen aboard the *Opus Machina*. The skitarii offered salutes in the form of noospheric blurts as the officers passed, acknowledging Haldron-44 Stroika's rank and position as expeditionary commander.

<The fleet is fragmented,> Stroika returned, as Tiberiax followed him through the labyrinthine interior of the Mechanicus capital ship. <The *Opus Machina* might have successfully translated, but only half of the skitarii carriers made it through.>

<It was a rough warp translation,> Tiberiax admitted. <And the journey little better.>

<What of our mass conveyers and super-heavy transports? Our Titan battle groups? Our Ordinatus war machines?> Stroika said. <This is a catastrophe. And what of the archmagos?>

<I'm sure that they have just been delayed in the warp, Primus,> Tiberiax said, attempting to offer

some kind of reassurance. <Archmagos Torquora and the rest of the fleet will join us presently.>

<If they haven't been destroyed,> Stroika sent back, <or sent thousands of light years off course by some immaterial tempest or perversity of the warp. Even the *Basilika*'s Navigator admitted that the immeteorology was unusual.>

<Affirmative,> 10-Victro Tiberiax admitted. <Those are, of course, possibilities too. We can at least give thanks to the Omnissiah that the test device is safe on board. Can you imagine the loss? The first empyreal bomb to be crafted in centuries – claimed by the warp. Such a tragedy would not have been without irony.>

<That's just it,> Haldron-44 Stroika told him as they arrived on the busy command deck. <I don't think the Geller Device *is* still safe on board.>

SELECTED: DENTRICA II OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+NISSIAH+*

The command deck of the *Opus Machina* was crowded. Omni-task servitors whose torsos were fused into deck podia lined runebanks and bridge consoles. Lexmechanics walked up and down the screens and data repositories, pointing out anomalies and advising adjustments. Climbing up to a mezzanine deck supporting the command throne and hololithic altar, Haldron-44 Stroika saw the spindly silhouettes of the vessel's techno-magi against the sickly glare of the Great Gyre.

The bridge's great lancet screens were bleached with the warp storm's amaranthine glow. A colossal phantasmic smear on the blackness of the void, the Great Gyre silently raged in a mind-numbing swirl. The riftspace across its vast border spumed and fluxed, not seeming to know what it was. With the *Opus Machina* and its Mechanicus fleet stationed above the angled plane of the warp storm, the screens also commanded a view of the reality-shredding maelstrom at the heart of the Great Gyre. Optics crackled and faded at such a sight, while Stroika's filtered overlays sizzled and warped, offering nonsensical returns.

<It's quite a sight – don't you think, Primus?>

The phylactic intrusion caught Stroika off guard and it took a moment for the skitarii officer to run permissions and identifications. He swiftly found that he was being addressed by Engra Myrmidex and that the Fabricator Locum unsurprisingly had phylactic access to all lower cybernetic operatives. The skitarii legions attached to the mission were not only his to command – each individual soldier was his to interrogate and know.

<Lord Fabricator?>

<One could stare at it for hours, wondering what secrets hid within,> Myrmidex transmitted.

<Would that not be inadvisable, my lord?> Stroika said, some base part of his emotional matrix finding the intrusion unwelcome. Stroika and Magos Torquora had a long standing relationship. Torquora was a tech-priest – a holy man and prophet, who read in the galaxy and its workings the presence of the Omnissiah. Engra Myrmidex, so Torquora had suggested, was part of a stratum of forge world society which saw, in politicking and seized chances to serve, the opportunity to speak for the Machine God rather than be His mouthpiece.

Torquora had warned Haldron-44 Stroika to take care around the Fabricator Locum; that the testing of the Geller Device was yet another of Myrmidex's seized opportunities. That saddled with an all

but immortal Fabricator General in Voricar Trega, Myrmidex desired power and promotion that Satzica Secundus could not offer him. With Myrmidex haunting his thoughts, Stroika tried to suppress such recollections.

<Go on, Stroika-unit,> the Fabricator Locum urged playfully. Standing with Tiberiax, who seemed to be phylactically engaged by one of the tri-sentience's other brains, the skitarii officer watched Myrmidex drift up from behind him and join the magi gathered about the hololithic altar. The Fabricator engaged the tech-priests with his vox-hailer, conducting a conversation with Tiberiax, his techno-magi and Stroika all at once.

<Would not a god-fearing servant of the Omnissiah go mad staring at such insanity?> Stroika sent back.

<That is why I look at it through your eyes, Primus,> Engra Myrmidex told him. Stroika found that his optics were fixed once more on the mind-searing vision of the Great Gyre. The eye of the warp storm spewed forth a reality-curdling miasma that polluted the thought and tugged at the will.

<Sir,> Stroika said.

<Have you reviewed the mission files for the Gyre, Stroika-unit?>

<Yes, my lord, but…>

<Tell me,> Myrmidex said. <Why do you think we are here?>

<To test the Geller Device, my lord. To deploy the empyreal bomb and record the data.>

<But why here? Why not some other immaterial rift? The Mawstorm or the Charybdiseum?>

With his eyes and optics still fixed on the Great Gyre, Stroika's signa-senses recorded returns of discomfort and pain, while the cogitators embedded within his skull grew warm.

<You want what is to be found inside the storm,> Stroika streamed back.

<What the storm took from us. Satzica Secundus. Velchanos Magna. Ptolomae Phall. A tripartite of Mechanicus forge worlds. The powerhouse of the Outer Reach. The envy of the segmentum. When the greenskin plague took Ptolomae Phall, did we not fight for our sister forge world? Did we not wrestle it back from the savage invader? You fought in that war. I have reviewed your records.>

<My lord, please.>

<When the warp storm erupted, when the Great Gyre laid claim to our tiny corner of the Martian Empire – what did we do? I'll tell you, Stroika-unit. We did nothing. For the storm held us back and our forge-kin perished – or worse, were assimilated into the madness and corruption of those that call the warp their home. Now we have a weapon we can use against those that pollute forge world soil with their presence. A weapon that will blow a hole in the side of that storm and allow us to take back Velchanos Magna and its secrets.>

Stroika had been trying to turn his head. When he was abruptly allowed to do so, the sudden movement almost unbalanced him. 10-Victro Tiberiax reached out with his inhuman reflexes to steady his Primus. Blurting his appreciation, Stroika made for the hololithic altar. He blinked his eyes and shutter-cycled his lenses, attempting to rid his vision of the Great Gyre's ruinous glare.

'Primus,' Engra Myrmidex announced through his vox-hailers. The Fabricator Locum turned on his duct fans, prompting the tech-priests and techno-magi gathered about the hololithic display to turn briefly also. 'Thank you for coming across to the *Opus Machina* at such short notice. I trust your skitarii legions are ready for the coming action.'

Stroika and Tiberiax exchanged a glance. The Fabricator Locum hadn't summoned them, but was now appropriating their attendance as if he had. Stroika went to answer but he suddenly felt the anger

warming his chest fade. His personal concern for Omnid Torquora, the absent vessels of the fleet and the other half of his skitarii force died in his throat. Myrmidex was phylactically dialling back his capacity to feel emotion and process his all too human anxieties. The Fabricator Locum needed Haldron-44 Stroika the weapon on the command deck – unquestioning and ready to be deployed. He did not need the sentiments of the flesh and the concerns of a mere skitarius clouding the judgements of his tech-priests about the altar.

'I have completed my tour of inspection,' Stroika informed his priestly master. 'All troop carriers are ready for deployment. My skitarii legions await your orders, Lord Fabricator.'

'Very good, Primus,' Engra Myrmidex said. 'And they shall receive them shortly. Come forth. You are about to witness history in the making.'

Stroika obeyed. Striding across the mezzanine deck he turned to see Udexl Spontik, the tech-priest captain of the *Opus Machina*, hard-wired into the command throne. At the rail, Stroika saw Xyphon Rae, commander of the Rho-Micron 3-6-3 Hysparsii stationed on the vessel. Xyphon Rae saluted his Primus with a noospheric acknowledgement, which Stroika returned.

A shaft of hololithic representation blazed up from the altar, and tech-priests, logi and Mechanicus artisans gathered about the sizzling display. There were several that Stroika recognised – magi that the Fabricator Locum had favoured with positions of responsibility on the project to create and test the Geller Device. Argentae Nuvias was no longer a hololithic representation. The magos aethyricus stood flesh and iron on the mezzanine bridge, consulting with the artisans who had constructed the device from the STC template. Standing silently behind, Stroika could see that the Fabricator General had given Myrmidex his magos catharc for the mission. The octopoid nest of mechadendrites glowered at the skitarii commander from the depths of his hood and rippling robes.

Bridge alarms and some commotion from the busy rows of runebanks and consoles below prompted Engra Myrmidex to turn gently to his tech-priest captain.

'Spontik?'

The tech-priest captain's quad-array of optics lit up within his hood.

'Augur arrays have detected an object exiting the perimeter of the storm cloud,' Udexl Spontik droned.

'Bring it up,' Engra Myrmidex commanded. The hololithic display became a three-dimensional diagrammatic overlay of the void space between the storm's perimeter and the Adeptus Mechanicus fleet. The display tracked an object moving at speed towards the *Opus Machina*.

'Speed and mass match the servo-probe of the arkfreighter *Nissiah*,' a tech-priest called, moving between the altar and the rail for runebank confirmations from below.

'Identification confirmed, Fabricator Locum. It is the *Nissiah*'s servo-probe,' another tech-priest chuntered in code.

'General order,' Engra Myrmidex said, his modulated voice echoing across the cavernous command deck. 'Pass throughout the fleet. No vessel to open fire on that probe.'

'Receiving a transmission, Lord Fabricator,' a tinny voice called up from the lower command deck. It was a deck tech-priest, hovering over a lexmechanic and a pair of console-embedded bridge servitors.

'Isolate,' Myrmidex ordered. 'Magos catharc. Have the transmission codescrubbed and band-filtered for corruptions. I don't want anything getting through.'

'Noospheric signal isolated and purified, my lord,' the magos catharc announced as he slithered and

coiled within his robes. ‘I have a single cleansed transmission. A pictolith, with auditory overlay and contextual codestream.’

‘Patch it through,’ the Fabricator Locum ordered.

The hololithic display rising up from the bridge altar warped and crackled into a three-dimensional freeze-frame of some horrific, static-laced entity. A code-screech ripped through the altar vox-hailers, like some damned thing trying to be free of its own datastream. As the pictolithic capture proceeded, the warp entity disappeared to reveal a hangar of the arkfreighter *Nissiah*.

The capture was shaky and degraded, as though the transmechanic charged with its recording were being thrown about the deck by quakes running through the vessel. The capture proceeded in silence for a moment before the cacophonous din of the *Nissiah*’s klaxons and alarms intruded. The monstrous boom of things trying to breach the thick hull of the arkfreighter could be heard, drowning out even the klaxons. Stroika’s equalisers isolated the sound of skitarii gunfire. Galvanic rifles firing at maximum wattage.

A tech-priest appeared before the capture, delivering a mission-log entry.

‘This is Magos Aethyricus Third-Class Dornelis Trask,’ the tech-priest reported. ‘Tech-priest Captain Oblonox is dead. The bridge is lost and the *Nissiah* no longer has steerage way. Fields have become overwhelmed and have collapsed. We have been boarded.’ The pict capture suddenly plunged deckwards as the vessel suffered another impact. When it returned to Magos Trask he was pointing the toolage of a long finger beyond. ‘Kill it… kill it,’ the tech-priest called, prompting the flash and stream of weapons fire. ‘I repeat, we have been boarded. Most of the commanding priesthood are dead. The skitarii armsmen cannot hold the ship. I undertake as my last duty the historic activation and test detonation of the *Nissiah*’s payload: the Geller Device.’

The vessel shook as Trask moved through the hangar, sending the tech-priest crashing through itinerant console-podia and instrumentation. Haldron-44 Stroika watched the magos aethyricus mumble prayers and rites of ignition as he worked at the side of a large, baroque construction. It looked like an orbital mine – all accretions, crackling nodes and trailing cables.

Stroika’s meme-coils and the flashing outline of his identification overlays told the skitarii officer that he was looking at the Geller Device. This was the empyreal bomb that Myrmidex, Omnid Torquora and a small legion of artisans had toiled to create on Satzica Secundus from the details provided on the recovered STC template. Stroika watched as Magos Trask calibrated the Geller Device, throwing switches and hauling down on the robust sequence of handles that armed the device. The magos aethyricus stumbled back as overlapping fields that fluxed and crackled from the nodes suddenly enveloped the device and grew in brightness and intensity.

‘I have armed the empyreal bomb for detonation,’ Trask said, speaking straight into the shaky capture. ‘Without access to the bridge, I do not know if we are on top of our target coordinates. Tech-priest Captain Oblonox reported that augur arrays and instrumentation are highly unreliable within the storm. It is my estimation that we are some way short of the Velchanos system. I am launching the mission-log aboard this servo-probe as arranged. Machine God willing, it should survive the proximity of the detonation and ride the shock wave, accelerating towards the rendezvous. I cannot speak for the environmental corruptions or time-space dilations it might encounter.’

The pictolith shook violently and the searing flash of galvanic streams intensified. Stroika could hear fresh alarms and the excruciating sound of bulkheads being rent and beaten to mauled scrap.

‘Commend me to my forge temple,’ Magos Trask announced, ‘to my Lord Fabricators and the Great

Maker – to whom my workings shall return.'

With those final words, the recording fizzled to nothing and the tech-priests found themselves looking at each other over the altar.

'The servo-probe, Lord Fabricator?' Tech-priest Captain Spontik asked from his command throne.

'Magos catharc?' the Fabricator Locum asked.

'Polluted, my lord.'

'Destroy it,' Engra Myrmidex commanded.

'Turrets,' Spontik droned. 'You have your target.'

Haldon Stroika advanced to the rail where the Fabricator Locum hovered on his angled duct fans. The skitarius watched as the servo-probe was blasted to fragments by the Ark Mechanicus's supercharged forward turrets.

'Where is it?' Myrmidex demanded, his bank of optics and augurs directed at the bridge lancet screens. The tri-sentience of his conjoined brains pulsed with agitation, while the cogitator banks to which they were connected within the shell of his chassis chuntered away. 'Data – we must have data.'

The Fabricator Locum stared into the madness of the raging warp storm. The smear of unreality that besmirched the void. The flashing fury of immaterial tempests. The raging static that arced and sizzled as two planes of existence fought to establish themselves.

'Something!' Myrmidex vox-blasted across the command deck. It was strange for Stroika to see a holy tech-priest of the Machine God indulge his passion in such a way. The skitarii officer could only imagine that as Fabricator Locum of all of Satzica Secundus, Engra Myrmidex was used to controlling the events around him. Out in the cold blackness, at the mercy of the void and the unnatural disasters that intruded upon it, events were often beyond such control.

Myrmidex turned on his priestly advisors. 'Well?'

Logos Voygann couldn't help himself.

'My lord,' the walking cipher engine offered. 'There is a 69.345 per cent chance that the Geller Device failed to realise its purpose.'

Several artisans piped up, refuting such a possibility. They were in the middle of assuring their Fabricator Locum that they had followed the specification detail in the recovered STC template precisely when Myrmidex interrupted them.

'Logos Voygann,' the Fabricator Locum said, 'you are relieved.'

'But, my Lord Fabricator…'

'You may leave,' Myrmidex hissed through his vox-hailers.

'Sir,' a deck tech-priest trumpeted up from below.

'What?' Myrmidex roared, his frustration echoing about the cavernous command deck.

'Augur arrays show a disturbance in the immaterial cloud formations, my lord.'

The Fabricator Locum drifted back to the rail, up to where Haldron-44 Stroika had forced himself to stare once again into the Great Gyre.

It was imperceptible at first. The briefest dot of an afterglow. Gradually, as the skitarii officer's optics focused and filters cycled, he began to appreciate an opening in the swirling maelstrom. As the black of the void beyond the warp storm showed through, it became clear that an area within the galactic south-west quadrant of the monstrous storm was returning to reality.

'Data, data, data,' Engra Myrmidex called, his magi and artisans returning to their runebanks and

instruments.

'Readings suggest the re-establishment of dimensional equilibrium.'

'A rimward area of the storm is suffering instability.'

'Area expanding, Fabricator Locum.'

'Geller field signatures confirmed, my lord. We are observing the effects of the empyreal bomb.'

Stroika and the Fabricator Locum watched as a rolling front of erupting reality coursed through the warp storm. Like a drop of ink on parchment, soaking and spreading outwards, the blast wave of the empyreal bomb pulsed powerful Geller waves out through the storm. The same life-preserving fields that encapsulated warp capable vessels during immaterial travel now expanded, establishing a bubble of reality in the south-west corner of the Great Gyre. Through the lancet screens it appeared as though some colossal, void-cruising creature had taken a huge bite out of the storm.

'Tech-priest Captain,' a helm servitor droned from the command deck. 'Warning. Shockwave approaching.'

Haldron-44 Stroika looked at the smeared disturbance of the Great Gyre. The field pulse of the detonating Geller Device was now spreading unseen through the void, detected only by the Ark Mechanicus's augur arrays and instrumentation. The skitarii commander instinctively reached out for the mezzanine rail.

'To port!' Tech-priest Captain Udexl Spontik called from his throne. 'Helm answer.'

'What are you doing?' the Fabricator Locum countered. 'Enact evasive manoeuvres.'

For a moment, confusion swept through the bridge of the Ark Mechanicus. It was an unusual phenomenon among the command deck crew, and all the more disorientating for it.

'Emergency override 7690-8832,' the tech-priest captain said, the modulations of his voice urgent and vox-hailed across the chamber. This the deck tech-priests and bridge servitors understood. Protocol. Contingency. 'To port. Helm answer. We must ride out the wave prow-on.'

Stroika could almost hear the workings of the Fabricator Locum's cogitators within his armoured shell. For the moment, Engra Myrmidex remained silent.

'Advise engineering to engage Geller field protections,' Udexl Spontik commanded.

'Tech-priest captain,' Haldron-44 Stroika said. 'The carriers. The fleet.'

Spontik nodded, stabbing at the studs of a vox-system set in the arm of his throne. 'Transmechanics, pass the word.'

With his bionic gauntlets fixed like anchors to the rail, Stroika felt the *Opus Machina* tremble beneath him. The Ark Mechanicus was huge and not used to such treatment. The bridge consoles erupted with a cacophonous din. As the invisible shockwave reached the mighty Mechanicus vessel, sparks fountained from runebanks and the command deck lamps flashed to an emergency red.

Stroika leaned to see through the side lancet windows. Enhancing his optics he could make out the shape of the *Basilika* and other skitarii carriers riding out the Geller shockwave, prow-on like the flagship.

'Damage report,' Udexl Spontik demanded. Stroika listened as deck tech-priests and servitors listed the minor malfunctions and disruptions suffered by the mighty Ark Mechanicus. Although the skitarii commander was no expert in the workings of such a vast vessel, the damage seemed light. Spontik ordered, 'Have the fleet tech-priest captains report in.'

As the laborious drone of listed repairs and the observed protocols of vessels calling in their status went on, Haldon-44 Stroika's whirring optics were drawn once again to the warp storm. It was the

Great Gyre no more. With a quarter of its dread maelstrom cleansed from the void, the cyclonic nightmare of its form had been disrupted. It was truly a wonder to behold and the skitarius offered thanks to the Omnissiah. Once again, an example of His great works had driven back the forces of ignorance and superstition – blasting the corruptions of the warp storm back to the beyond. Stroika thought of Omnid Torquora. When the magos explorator arrived he would be secretly furious that he had missed the successful test detonation of the Geller Device.

'Have the augurs and magnascopes begin an audit of the region uncovered by the device,' the Fabricator Locum ordered.

'Known effects already being catalogued, my lord,' one of Myrmidex's magi reported.

'The region uncovered by the blast seems to be holding its integrity,' another told him.

'Dimensional matrix established and empyreal instabilities fixed,' the magos catharc said, slithering back and forth between runebanks on the mezzanine deck. 'For now. There is no data to establish how long that will last, whether it will last at all or whether the Geller effect is now a permanent phenomenon in the region.'

'Then we should not waste any time,' Engra Myrmidex said, drifting back and forth on his duct fans. His nest of optic-arrays and augurs cycled, extending and focusing on the devastation he had created in the void beyond.

'You aim to proceed into the warp storm, my lord?' Haldron-44 Stroika said. 'Without waiting for Magos Torquora and the rest of the fleet?'

'I want an audit of all the worlds uncovered by the Geller Device,' Myrmidex ordered, ignoring Stroika. 'Check them against historical charts for the region, pre-dating the emergence of the storm.'

'Cataloguing, Fabricator Locum,' the tech-priest captain of the *Opus Machina* said. 'However, the Primus has made a valid point. Any exploration of the worlds within the revealed region would be extremely hazardous. The area could return to its previous instability about the fleet.'

'And you command but half of that fleet,' Haldron-44 Stroika cautioned. 'My lord, would it not be better to wait for Magos Torquora? The god-machines of our Titan battle groups? The blessed war machines of the Centurio Ordinatus?'

'By then we will have more data, Fabricator Locum,' Udexl Spontik said. 'The region might have settled.'

Engra Myrdidex remained silent. Haldron-44 Stroika, 10-Victro Tiberiax and the tech-priest captain of the Ark Mechanicus exchanged grim glances.

'Have you found it?' the Fabricator Locum seethed, his modulated voice shot through with static. His magi knew exactly what he was referring to. The real reason Engra Myrmidex had desired the honour of test detonating the Geller Device. The real reason he had come to the Great Gyre equipped for war.

'Quadrant Beta~Phi/Gamma, my lord,' a magos reported.

'Sector 17-52,' a second tech-priest clarified.

'The *Nissiah* detonated her payload prematurely,' the magos catharc told his Mechanicus master.

'Have such failure added to the service records of Tech-priest Captain Oblonox and Magos Aethyricus Trask,' the Fabricator Locum said.

'Very good, my lord,' the magos catharc replied. 'Velchanos Magna located.'

'Where?'

'On the detonation perimeter, Fabricator Locum,' the magos catharc said. 'The *Nissiah* fell somewhat short of her target.'

‘You’re sure it’s the forge world?’ Engra Myrmidex said.

‘Historical charts match position and pattern of satellite distribution, my lord,’ the magos catharc confirmed.

‘Fabricator Locum,’ Haldron-44 Stroika said. ‘Please, listen to your tech-priests. The forge world is beyond our reach.’

‘I never said that,’ the magos catharc hissed. ‘It is located on the Geller pulse perimeter – on the storm front.’ He looked to his Fabricator Locum. ‘Nothing, however, is beyond the Machine God’s reach – as we have just proven.’

‘My lord…’ Udexl Spontik began.

‘Yes, tech-priest captain,’ the Fabricator Locum shot back. ‘I know, extremely hazardous. Bring the magnascope capture up on the screens.’

With enough of a hesitation to communicate his disagreement, Udexl Spontik ordered a deck servitor to process the Fabricator Locum’s command. The lancet screens crackled from the crispness of the void to the pixellation of extreme magnification. There, before the gathered magi of Satzica Secundus, was the blurry, misshapen smear of a planet. Their sister forge world, Velchanos Magna.

As the magos catharc had informed them, the mighty forge world was located on the detonation perimeter. About the planet, the cold cleanliness of the void met the sizzling pollution of the warp storm. The fluxspace was stained a mind-aching magenta by the immateriality of the Great Gyre that raged beyond.

Engra Myrmidex glided about on his duct fans, the tech-priests and crew of the mezzanine deck falling under the searing gaze of his optics.

‘That is Velchanos Magna,’ the Fabricator Locum said, his attention settling on Haldron-44 Stroika. ‘Its secrets – like those of the *Stella-Xenithica* – wait to be reclaimed by the servants of the Omnissiah. We shall cleanse its surface of the unreal, the unbeliever and those that would pervert the purity of the Machine God’s purpose. Primus Stroika, Tech-priest Captain Spontik. I charge you with such a hallowed responsibility. You will use the forces and materiel in your possession and retake that forge world. You will do this for Satzica Secundus and to the greater glory of us all. I demand this of you as you will demand of your subordinates. As the Omnissiah demands of me. This is the Covenant of the Machine, and as such, cannot be broken.’

Once more Haldron-44 Stroika felt the phylactic intrusion of Engra Myrmidex. The Mechanicus overlord was in his mind, his cogitator coils and the Omnissiah-appeasing designation of his purpose. His very being became one with the Fabricator Locum’s cold requirements.

Staring at Myrmidex and the storm-wracked forge world beyond, he felt his objections and calculations melt away. He became the unquestioning weapon wielded. No more caring of consequence than the machine-spirit of a rifle whose trigger had been pulled.

‘Yes?’ Engra Myrmidex put to the magi on the deck.

‘Yes, Fabricator Locum,’ they answered back, filling the command deck with the boom of their obedience.

0100

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF I
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+PURGE+*

The flight deck was in chaos. As Haldron-44 Stroika strode across the open space, he tucked his officer's baton under one arm. The skitarii commander's coils burned with the traffic being relayed through them. Stroika had been rewarded for his part in the discovery of the Perborea STC template with greater responsibilities. Every skitarii soldier and support construct aboard the fleet's carriers and arkships was under his authority. Legions were his to command. Deploying so many cybernetic soldiers, their associated crawlers and Ironstrider engines was no easy task, even for one of the Machine God's favoured servants. The slick choreography and unison with which the skitarii deployed and carried out their deadly duties required drill, communication and absolute obedience.

The helter-skelter dispersal of forces such as the Astra Militarum lacked the precision and fearless commitment of the skitarii. It was lax, improvident and Stroika suspected cost as many lives in getting down to the surface as the Adeptus Mechanicus spent securing a landing site in enemy hands. Stroika almost felt sorry for the machine-spirits forced to operate alongside such soldiers.

Every skitarius knew his place in the wider scheme of battle. Each was a cog set within the teeth of another, turning in silent synchronicity. The banter and fearful smiles of Guardsmen had no place aboard a skitarii drop-ship. Emotional engagements were dialled back by the fleet's priestly overlords, meaning that even in the midst of an assault, with havoc unfolding about them, skitarii reviewed their protocols, calibrated targeters and uploaded strategic overlays.

The Primus stepped forward as a column of towering ballisterii engines walked past, followed by an Onager Dunecrawler, chewing up the deck with its crustacean-like legs. An alpha jogged by, offering Stroika the blurt of a salute, his metal footfalls in rhythm with the skitarii vanguard that ran behind him. With radium carbines leant against one armoured shoulder and trench-cloaks flapping behind, the gleaming soldiers were an impressive sight. Beneath their crackling pack generators, battleware and war-plate, their poisoned flesh told a different story. Missing teeth. Bleeding ports. Radioactive burns like a camouflage pattern across pallid flesh.

Stroika would have recorded commendations for the impressive vanguard skitarii, but for the fact that beyond engaging automated tallies and sigil recognition, the skitarii commander was barely aware of the deck.

Stroika was in phylactic communion with scores of skitarii officers across the *Basilika* and the advancing formation of troop carriers. The *Augon*, the *Cyberion* and the *Treaty of Olympus* were all part of the first wave and, like the *Basilika*, were loading clades of cybernetic soldiers, vehicles, heavy weapons and materiel aboard bulk landers and orbital drop-ships that would put deployments of the Astra Militarum to shame.

Uncaring of claustrophobia and the lack of such personal space as even a Guardsman would require, Adeptus Mechanicus drop-ships could carry nearly twice the force deployment of an Astra Militarum transport. On top of that, the drop-ships and bulk landers themselves were larger. Once loaded, the monstrous craft were carried across the flight deck on parallel columns of ceiling rails that were built into the superstructure of the skitarii carriers. Once they had left the deck and were held over their planetary destination, the drop-ships released their anchor clamps and thundered down into an orbital descent, each followed moments later by another craft and another. It was this procedure that Haldron-44 Stroika was overseeing, not only across the first-wave carriers but across a second and third. As ranking alpha, Stroika led from the front with the first skitarii to get planetside. He had left 10-Victro Tiberiax in charge of the second wave and Nalode Deka 871 – a cold creature, even for a skitarius – with responsibility for the third.

The ear-splitting sound of a klaxon roared across the flight deck. At the same moment, Stroika received a priority stream from the command bridge that superseded his other overlays and interactions. It was Tech-priest Captain Pharad, alerting the skitarii commander that the *Basilika* had almost achieved orbit around Velchanos Magna.

It hadn't been an easy approach. The system was strewn with ship wreckage, the dereliction of void-docks and the macroscaffolding of long-abandoned experiments. With the *Opus Machina* and several arkcruisers shielding the Mechanicus transports, forge tenders and escort carriers, the Fabricator Locum had authorised the fleet's complement of heavy frigates and destroyers to punch through the system defences.

The *Opus Machina* had intercepted augur station communications from a moonlet orbiting a red gas giant on the outskirts of the Velchanos system. The scrapcode was heavy with corruption and had alerted the forge world to the approaching danger. The Fabricator Locum had ordered the stations left alone, favouring the speed of an assault directly on Velchanos Magna.

The Ark Mechanicus could not avoid the lance blasts of a sentry ship, however, rising from the upper atmospheric miasma of another bilious gas giant. The black beast of a ship was spiked with vanes, antennae and boarding spikes, and had been hidden from augurs in the dense radiation of the planet. From the look of the heavy cruiser and the sickness of its streamed signatures, it appeared as though Velchanos Magna had continued operating as a hub of industry, construction and maintenance, despite being claimed by the Great Gyre so long ago.

The *Opus Machina* took the balestream across its port flank but returned fire with its monstrous plasma batteries. As the mauled cruiser fell back into the bile-swirling storms of the gas giant, the Ark Mechanicus had ploughed on. Despatching its blockade-breaking spear tip of frigates, adamanticlads and torpedo-launching destroyers, the Mechanicus fleet surged corewards. The *Opus Machina* and the skitarii fleet ships negotiated the debris and flashing wreckage of enemy vessels that

had been blasted apart or rammed in half by the Mechanicus ships.

The fleet suffered its own losses, however. On the bridge of the *Basilika*, Stroika had watched fleet tenders and forge ships descend on the frigate *Auxilicron* and the adamanticlad *Mallix* with the aim of making void repairs to the crippled vessels. On the approach to Velchanos Magna, the fleet ran parallel to a debris trail that tumbled through the void behind the forge world. Colossal chunks of rock, the size of small moons and rolling with the irregularity of boulders, housed stations, gun platforms, void-beached hulks, silos, anchored mines and electromagnetic nets that sizzled with their powered intention to snag approaching vessels.

Fighting a running battle between the twisted blockaders and the macro-weapon emplacements launching salvoes at the fleet from the debris field, there was little space to manoeuvre. While the troop carriers – carrying their precious skitarii invasion force – thundered on, the *Opus Machina* and passing arkcruisers blasted the defence installations to pieces. Mechanicus frigates engaged system ships at point-blank range and, vessel by destroyed enemy vessel, the fleet made its indomitable approach.

Stroika pointed his baton at passing cohorts of skitarii soldiers, tallying their identifications. As the *Basilika* manoeuvred into position above the forge world it was imperative that all of his constructs and materiel were on board the drop-ships. Rangers from the Xenris Phase 404/De-Phracta began filing onto the flight deck, counted in by their attending alpha. Their arc rifles and transuranic weapons were slung. Like the vanguard skitarii before them, the rangers jogged across the deck with a loping, heavy-set choreography.

The rangers began assembling in front of the *Nuncio*, the drop-ship in whose shadow Haldron-44 Stroika was standing. The monstrous craft's engines roared to life and cycled with a deep chug that could be felt in the stomach.

'Alpha Kertz, get those rangers on board,' Stroika voxed across the hangar.

'Yes, Primus,' Kertz answered. There was no embarrassment or resentment in the skitarii officer's words – only obedience. Like Stroika, Kertz's emotional capacities had been faded in favour of aegis protocols and acquisition wetware. He thought only of the coming battle and his rangers' preparation for such hostilities.

<Master Ansiss, I want those crawlers stowed and secured,> Stroika transmitted through the din to a skitarii officer pacing a trio of lumbering vehicles. <Do you read me? Lively, now.>

<Immediately, Primus.>

Slipping his baton into his belt, Stroika approached the *Nuncio*. Grabbing hold of a ladder on the side of the rumbling craft, the skitarii commander hauled his combat chassis up the armoured hull towards the cockpit. Halfway up he stopped and turned. The Xenris Phase 404/De-Phracta were still filing in from the barracks decks and armoury, while the crawlers, under the instructions of Master Ansiss, were reversing into the underbelly bay.

Stroika would have cursed himself, if he had such a mind to. While the loading of the drop-ships took place in a silent and organised fashion, the process was still too slow in the skitarii commander's estimation. With the *Basilika* descending into position, he could feel in his workings the battle between the pull of the forge world's gravity and the carrier's artificial own.

All drop-ships should have been loaded and ready for launch by now. In his present state of mind, however, such disappointment found the form of a file-registered notation. An analysis deferred to post-operation, when the Primus resolved to review embarkation procedures, armoury rotation and

access to the hangar from the barracks decks.

The skitarius felt a shudder pass through the troop carrier. Climbing the ladder, Stroika felt the *Basilika* bank harshly. As he had proceeded with the important duty of assembling his legions for battle – both on board the *Basilika* and in phylactic communion with commanders on other carriers – the fleet had punched through the forge world's system defences. The *Opus Machina* and her arkcruiser consorts had blasted and broadsided their way through the twisted system ships and spiked monitors that ran down on the Mechanicus fleet. Destroyers had launched streams of torpedoes into orbital mines and debris-mounted silos, turning the gargantuan fragments of rock and embedded installations that tumbled after the forge world into showers of stone and scrap. Mechanicus heavy frigates soaked up the firepower of orbital defence platforms and system ships, shielding the skitarii carriers from the worst of the damage.

As the *Basilika* rolled, with fat beams of energy criss-crossing the blackness of the void outside, the flight deck was granted a vertiginous first view of Velchanos Magna. Stroika's overlays danced with diagrams and flashing notations as he paused on the ladder. There was so much to take in.

The forge world was a planetary horror. Thousands of years buried in the insanity of the Great Gyre had turned Satzica Secundus's sister forge into a tainted monstrosity. It was an insult to the Machine God to whom it had originally been dedicated. Bathing in the furnace-light of a spent star, its blessed dirt now crackled with the saturations of the warp. Its surface-smothering industriascape had become a twisted labyrinth of dark labours, while the mighty forge temples that once reached into dusky Velchanosian skies now burned with the balefire of the beyond.

Stroika soaked up the deviant enormity of the vision. The nightmare surface of ventscrapers and smoke stacks roared hellfire and belched spiritual pollutions. The stately forges had now become the perverted palaces of the Dark Mechanicum. Daemon-possessed machinery transported raw materials and weapons, vehicles and warrior constructs across the planet like plagues of spindly, black insects.

Worst of all, Velchanos Magna seemed to have experienced a great physical calamity during its many years of isolation, a planetary affliction born of a malfunctioning weapon or terrible experiment. One quarter of the forge world was missing, blasted to the gargantuan chunks of rubble that tumbled in its orbiting wake. Velchanos Magna now harboured an open wound.

The ragged gash running down the side of the forge world was busy with platforms, macroscaffolding and skeletal dry docks. The structures were set within the exposed rock and the installation-blistered cliff face of the gaping abyss. Half-constructed within shipyards were monstrous vessels, sitting within black scaffolding like fat flies cocooned within a spider's web. Some of the ships followed recognised, if long forgotten, patterns of architecture. Others were heretekal deviations and experimental craft. Most horrific of all, however, were the abominate craft that almost seemed alive within the construction yards. The very metal of the vessels appeared possessed by otherworldly entities that gave the ships a fell life of their own.

Below the shipyards and constructions, Stroika could see the infernal glow of the planetary core. It was a sea of molten iron, slurping, burning and churning. Even from orbit, the forge world's heart seemed to be possessed of some daemonic intelligence of its own, forming mind-scalding visions and monstrous faces in the liquid metal of its damnation.

Velchanos Magna was truly a world long lost and damned. A planet taken from the Adeptus Mechanicus and twisted into a dark forge that served the needs of the daemon, the heretek and those tech-pledged to Chaos.

Alarms began to screech across the flight deck. Sodium arc lamps flashed yellow and Stroika felt the upload of contextual data. It was from the command deck. Tech-priest Captain Pharad had sent warning of ground-to-orbit ordnance launched from the forge world below.

<All skitarii board your nearest drop-ship,> the Primus transmitted on all streams and channels. <Drop-ships *Nuncio*, *Vegra-Maximon*, *Lucifex*, *Sumptal IV*, prepare for launch.>

Pulling himself up the ladder, Haldron-44 Stroika made for the cockpit of the *Nuncio*. Cracking comets of electromagnetic fury roared up past the troop carrier. Blasted from nightmarish silos set amongst the slave mills and manufacturing districts of the crowded forge world's surface, the crackling bolts of the energy blasts seemed to screech, arc and spit with a rabid, infernal fury. Another seared up along the flank of the *Basilika*, grazing the troop carrier's hull plating. As Stroika reached the cockpit side-hatch, he heard the wail of a proximity alert. Instinctively locking the fingers of his bionic gauntlets about the rungs of the ladder, the skitarius readied himself for the damage to come.

<All skitarii, brace for impact,> Stroika ordered across all mindlinked streams and synced frequencies. <All skitarii, brace for impact.>

The Primus fully expected to be thrown from the side of the drop-ship, but the physical shock wave of a weapon striking the underside of the troop carrier never came. His cogitator coils sizzled with possibilities. His overlays streamed with data and the flash of diagrammatical representations. For a moment, Stroika wrestled with the likelihood that they had not in fact been hit at all and that the proximity warning had triggered prematurely.

Exploratory bolts of rancid energy found their way up the side of the carrier and probed the flight deck floor like monstrous digits. Stroika knew that he had been wrong on all counts. The electromagnetic blast was not a crippling volley fired up from the forge world's surface at all. Cycling through filters, Stroika watched the blasts crackle furiously across the deck and came to realise that the balls of lightning were not weapons as such, but daemonic entities. Separating off, streams of infernal energy snapped and arced across the deck, jumping from one piece of equipment to another. Bulk loaders and powerlifters assumed a horrific life of their own. Their machine-spirits transmitted miserable, codified screams as the daemons devoured them and overloaded the intricate workings of the vehicles.

<Do not engage,> Stroika ordered, but it was too late. Rangers of the Xenris Phase 404/De-Phracta, entering the hangar and as yet to embark their designated drop-ships, fired on the boarding entities. On Alpha Kertz's orders, a cohort of skitarii blasted the rogue hangar machines to smouldering wreckage, forcing the daemons to arc from the floor, to the ceiling, to the hangar wall and into a fresh selection of equipment.

The skitarii laid down suppressive fire for their compatriots who were still running for the drop-ship ramp at Kertz's command. The daemonic entities took possession of a cluster of heavy weaponry waiting to be loaded onto the rail-mounted drop-ship behind the *Nuncio*. A neutron laser projector suddenly came to life, blazing trails of blinding light across the deck. As skitarii rangers ran for the drop-ship they were cut in half by the pinpoint intensity of the powerful weapon.

Electrical arcs cascaded along the walls of the hangar, feeling their way into the circuitry and power lines housed within. The flight deck bulkhead slammed down, decapitating an unfortunate ranger who was caught below the descending door. With their compatriots trapped in the corridor beyond, skitarii of the Xenris Phase 404/De-Phracta worked to manually crank the bulkhead door open.

<Get out of there!> Stroika commanded, but within moments the electromagnetic daemons were amongst the rangers. As Alpha Kertz backed across the flight deck, firing his arc rifle and dragging as many skitarii as he could muster, the entities crackled and spat through the rest of his cohort. Jumping from sparking weapon to weapon, the daemons overloaded the power packs, turning skitarii rifles into small hand-held bombs. As rangers dropped to the deck in a succession of eye-searing explosions, other cybernetic soldiers had the presence of mind to abandon their weapons.

This did not stop the daemons streaming straight into the skitarii themselves, however. Directing the remainder of his units into the troop bay of the *Nuncio*, Alpha Kertz had to watch as the infernal entities flooded the cybernetic workings of his soldiers. One by one, Kertz – and through him, Stroika – felt themselves cut off from the ranger units. Possessed by the daemon entities, the skitarii drew arc pistols from their belt holsters and placed the muzzles to the sides of their helmets. A sequence of blasts and dropping bodies worked its way through their number, as one by one the cybernetic soldiers unloaded streams of death straight into their own augmented skulls.

Haldron-44 Stroika swung through the cockpit hatch legs-first. The drop-ship cockpit was small, busy and cramped, with only enough room for a vox-station situated behind a chair-interfaced servitor-pilot. The servo-skull Phrenos~361 sat atop an interface column, waiting for its master, while Cytor 2-Circadii – ranking alpha amongst the skitarii soldiers being transported aboard the *Nuncio* – climbed the troop bay ladder.

'Circadii, get those bay doors closed,' Stroika ordered.

'But, Primus…' the alpha said.

'Right now, skitarius,' Stroika said, sending the officer back down the ladder. 'Pilot – you are ordered to make way. All haste, if you please.'

The ghoulish servitor's teeth chattered between its drawn, black lips. Acknowledging the skitarii commander with a chunter of code, the pilot-servitor moved its digit-interfacia across the cockpit instrumentation.

Returning to the open hatch, Stroika could see that the remaining skitarii of the Xenris Phase 404/De-Phracta were dead. The electromagnetic daemons were nowhere to be seen. The bulkhead door had reopened, however, and the air of the flight deck was being sucked down it. Stroika saw crates and skitarii bodies dragged towards the howling maelstrom of the passageway.

The Primus could barely imagine the hell that was being unleashed on the barracks decks and beyond. Fortunately, he didn't have to. As the *Nuncio* rocked on its launch-rail, Stroika realised that the daemonic entities had reached the armoury. The screeching evacuation of air from the hangar promptly ceased as gouts of flame, arcing electricity and pranging frag roared from the opening.

Sealing the cockpit hatch, Stroika stumbled back over to the vox-station. The skitarii commander snatched up a communications line. Stabbing the interface into a haptic port in the side of his helm, he slammed his combat chassis down in the station chair.

'Calling all drop-craft awaiting disembarkation aboard the *Basilika* and the carriers beyond,' Stroika voxed, strapping himself into his seat. 'This is a command override – Delta/Iota 9-37-64 – you are to ignore your launch protocols. Launch now with whatever troops and materiel you have stowed. I repeat. Launch now. This is an order to purge. Acknowledge.'

As the *Nuncio* rumbled along its launch-rail, acknowledgement signatures piped up across the vox. The *Basilika* began to roll, sending a kaleidoscopic blur of the heretek forge world whirring before the cockpit.

Initiating phylactic communion, Haldron-44 Stroika attempted to mindlink to Tech-priest Captain Pharad or any of the skitarii officers left aboard. All he could manage was the horror of a few seconds spent experiencing the dying moments of tech-priests and cybernetic soldiers. Sizzling through static overlay after overlay, Stroika caught glimpses of the decimated armoury, bodies floating through the zero-gravity of the airless barracks and daemon entities thrashing through the runebanks and servitors of the carrier's small bridge.

<Pharad,> Stroika transmitted, but all the tech-priest captain had for him was the insanity of a man possessed. Smashing his cranial augmentations against the command deck wall, Pharad had lost himself to the daemon that flooded his conduits and workings. Stroika caught a glimpse of brains and bloody bionics as the tech-priest captain indulged the insanity of his daemon puppet-master. Hearing the code-laced corruption of the infernal entity whispering to him through the phylactic interface, Stroika broke off the connection.

Jumping to the phylactic consciousness of the tech-priest majoris, Stroika found that Magos Androvac and his enginseers were all either dead or dying. Blinking between their static-shot feeds, Stroika saw that the engineering section was bleached with bright, white light. His optic overlays were crowded with code and updates. He searched through the datastreams coursing through his cogitator. His mind was swarming with redundant feeds from all over the *Basilika*, mixed in with drop-ship acknowledgements and clarification requests from skitarii officers aboard the other troop carriers – including 10-Victro Tiberiax. He had no time to answer.

Amongst a meme-repository of logged items and updata, Haldron-44 Stroika located the confirmation that he had feared finding. Magos Androvac's final assessment, transmitted only moments before his death. Confirmation that the carrier's sub-light plasma drive was in the process of overloading. The daemonic entities would not stop until all on board the *Basilika* were dead. Stroika couldn't let that happen.

'All *Basilika*-registered drop-craft,' Stroika voxed, 'you are ordered to disengage your rail-anchors. I repeat. Break launch sequence and initiate drop immediately.'

The servitor-pilot of the *Nuncio* turned its head, giving Stroika a view of a single dead eye and yellowed teeth.

'Do it,' he told the servitor. The drone chuntered code back at the Primus, warning him of the impact to come.

'All skitarii,' Stroika called across the internal vox, flicking to the troop bay channel. 'Brace!'

Stroika felt the familiar leap of the disengagement in the pit of his stomach. Releasing its anchored hold on the rail, the *Nuncio* fell the short distance between the hangar ceiling and the flight deck. The impact shuddered through the drop-ship's superstructure, up through the troop bay, the cockpit and the vox-station chair. Tinny alarms and flashing lights erupted from the cockpit instrumentation but the pilot-servitor moved its fingers slickly across switches and studs, silencing the *Nuncio*.

Without the landing gear lowered, the drop-ship bounced a little off the damaged deck before sliding on its underbelly towards the hangar opening. Grabbing the support handles, Haldron-44 Stroika tightened his harness. As the mesh of a cargo underbay crumpled beneath the weight of the monstrous drop-ship, the craft caught on the lip of the depression and began to tip.

Allowing himself a moment of disconcertion, Stroika felt the craft lurch forward. The cockpit tilted and before the skitarii commander knew it, the *Nuncio* had tumbled straight out of the rolling hangar nose first, into a thundering freefall.

Hauling on heavy-duty hydraulic handles and plungers, the pilot-servitor began the process of negotiating the plummeting drop-ship out of its dive. Strategically firing airbrakes and flaps as the *Nuncio* shot down through the upper atmosphere of the forge world, the drone brought the nose of the drop-ship up and fired the descent thrusters – all the while wearing a rictus grin. Stroika could hear the boom of the powerful engine-quad all about them, fighting the force of gravity that was dragging them at horrific speed towards the surface of Velchanos Magna. As the *Nuncio* levelled out and slowed its descent, Stroika felt that he could risk moving about the cockpit.

'Troop bay,' Stroika voxed, 'Acknowledge.'

'Troop bay, aye,' Cytor 2-Circadii returned.

'Status?'

'Ready for disembarkation, Primus,' the alpha told him. 'On your mark.'

'The order is given – weapons online.'

'Weapons online, aye,' 2-Circadii said.

Unplugging from the vox-station and unbuckling himself from the chair, Haldron-44 Stroika took several anchored steps across the cramped cockpit. The pilot-servitor didn't even seem to notice him. Craning his neck and looking up through the canopy, Stroika stared back at the *Basilika*.

One by one, the carrier's skitarii-laden complement of hulking drop-ships were falling from the port side of the yawing vessel. He watched the *Sumptal IV*, the *Vegra-Maximon* and the *Lucifex* all pull out of their tumbling descents, followed by successive ranks of following drop-craft. Two drop-ships suffered a minor collision upon clearing the carrier, while craft designated to drop from the starboard hangar opening were forced to slip from the launch-rail to the deck and slide backwards the length of the flight deck. It seemed to make little difference to the tumble they found themselves in upon disembarkation.

'Not exactly protocol,' Stroika muttered, satisfied that the drop-ships were clear. Not a moment too soon, as the starlit void suddenly blazed white as the sub-light plasma drive of the *Basilika* went critical and detonated. Cycling through optical filters, Stroika watched the skitarii troop carrier blast itself to a billion shards of voidscrap, prompting evasions and emergency manoeuvring from the other transports.

As Stroika's optics fell on the *Opus Machina*, holding station with several arkcruisers above the carrier deployment, the skitarii commander attempted to make phylactic contact with the flagship's command deck.

<Ark Mechanicus,> Stroika transmitted, <Ark Mechanicus, be aware. Ground-to-orbital ordnance. Ground-to-orbital ordnance. Immaterial infection. Be advised, haul off to a safe distance.>

Given the nature of his report, Stroika expected to contact Udexl Spontik or the magos catharc. Instead he found the Fabricator Locum inside his head.

<Stroika-unit,> Engra Myrmidex said, his words like thought-crafted steel. <Status report.>

<We lost the *Basilika* and her crew to immaterial infection,> the Primus told him. <We have deployed at 82 per cent fighting strength. I have ordered the rest of the skitarii legions to initiate insertion prematurely also. The mission proceeds as normal, Fabricator Locum.>

<Make sure that it does, Stroika-unit.>

<My lord,> the skitarii commander said. <Naval resources, plus the encountered system and planetary contingencies, point to a determined defence.>

<What is your point, Stroika-unit?>

<Only, Lord Fabricator, that Velchanos Magna has not been idle in its isolation,> Stroika transmitted back. <The forge world seems at the height of its defensive and productive powers. Are you sure that you wish to commit our ground forces without reinforcements?>

Engra Myrmidex sent back nothing for a few moments.

<Just do your duty,> the Fabricator Locum streamed finally. <Take the planet for me, for your Fabricator General and forge world, for the Machine God. Just take back what belongs to the Holy Mechanicus.>

<Yes, my lord.>

0101

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF I
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+COUNTDOWN+*

The pilot-servitor blurted a sequence of code back into the compartment, which amounted to little more than an obligatory caution. The drone didn't care whether its advice was heeded or whether Haldron-44 Stroika brained himself against the cockpit wall during a rough landing. It delivered the warning anyway.

'Ready, thirty seconds,' Stroika voxed down into the troop compartment. 'Ready all. Ready all. Officers make preparations for disembarkation. Pattern Ensconica. Establish a fall-back perimeter about the landing site, extending skirmish lines about the different sites to establish a foothold and base of operations. Review your mission parameters. Offer your prayers. Observe your screed. You are the Machine God's indomitable will in this benighted place. Omnissiah willing, we shall return this world to His empire. Stroika out.'

The descent had been a test. *Nuncio* had been the point of a thunderbolt, dropping out of the heavens upon Velchanos Magna. One hundred and two skitarii drop-ships had managed to clear their troop carriers, establishing vector columns and descent patterns to avoid being intercepted in the lower atmosphere.

Such precautions hadn't stopped the searing tracer fire of macrocannon emplacements piercing up through the spiralling columns of drop-ships, or a temple-mounted defence laser quad sending a fat beam of sickly energy at the formation. The blistering stream of light burned the *Steel Promise* from the sky and went on to make a lucky strike against the hull plating of the manoeuvring arkcruiser *Venturossa*. The electromagnetic blasts of daemonic entities continued to erupt from silos set in the industriascape below. One such blast struck the drop-ship *Stentorius*, turning the craft into a deathtrap of detonating engines and possessed cybernetic soldiers who found themselves turning weapons upon each another. All Stroika could do was listen to the unfolding slaughter over the vox. This was compounded as the peeling wreckage of the polluted craft crashed through another drop-ship, claiming further skitarii lives.

As the planet's surface raced up to meet them, Stroika had taken care to highlight key strategic structures, thoroughfares and districts. As Primus he had been granted access to antique hololithic maps of Velchanos Magna, before its descent into madness and loss to the Great Gyre. These were presented as a filtered overlay that bled across the outline of temples and key structures that Stroika's optics could pick out of the twisted malaise of the heretek forge world. The hololithic maps had also been updated with evidence from the infotombs of Satzica Secundus of wonders to be secured or pillaged. The Fabricator Locum intended to claim all the technological treasures that the forge world had hoarded, in the name of the blessed Omnissiah.

The servitor-pilot vomited forth a stream of code that brought Stroika back to the moment. The skitarii commander slammed himself back down in the vox-station seat at the drone's urging. Cockpit instrumentation chimed with approaching augur contacts.

'Location?' Stroika demanded, but before the servitor-pilot could oblige, the Primus heard the sound of gunfire. A staccato of heavy-bore shells hammered across the armour plating of the drop-ship. Stroika felt the servitor-pilot respond at the controls, but the *Nuncio* wasn't built for such handling. Without offensive weaponry, the Mechanicus drop-ship was essentially a fortified compartment with descent engines. The streams of fire pounded their way across the hull of the *Nuncio*. Like streaking darkness searing through the forge world skies, Dark Mechanicum aircraft screamed past the cockpit.

The drone chuntered its identification of the aircraft as a Hellblade fighter wing. Stroika watched as swarms of air superiority fighters – like razored pincers cutting through the infernal haze – weaved through the descending columns of drop-ships. The thunder of autocannon fire reverberated through the *Nuncio* as more and more fighters targeted the craft. Several shells smashed into the cockpit canopy, cracking the armourglass and sending the instrumentation into a panic of lights and high-pitched sound.

'Enemy aircraft inbound,' Stroika voxed across the open channel as the storm of Hellblade fighters streaked through their formation. 'Evasive manoeuvres.'

'*Nuncio*, this is *Ignicia*,' the vox crackled. 'We've lost steerage way and are drifting.'

'*Nuncio*,' another officer reported across the channel, 'they're targeting our engines–'

Other voxmissions were cut off mid-sentence as the Hellblades used their precision fire to take out augur arrays, comms vanes and cockpits.

Stroika felt himself dragged to starboard as the servitor-pilot put the drop-ship into a controlled spin, making it more difficult for the hard-wired slave-servitors in the cockpits of the Hellblades to zero in on its vulnerabilities – vulnerabilities Haldron-44 Stroika understood only too well. The fighter wing's autocannons couldn't hope to breach the *Nuncio*'s thick plating but they could do plenty of damage to essentials like the descent engines, sensors and cockpit.

'*Nuncio* to drop-craft,' Stroika voxed, 'evasive counterclockwise. Limit exposure. *Ignicia*, just get on the ground and hold position. We'll work our way over to you.'

'Copy, *Nuncio*,' Stroika received from the drop-ship as it peeled away.

With his optics whirring to focus, Stroika tried to get a fix on the Hellblade fighter swarm. Through the smashed canopy, with the drop-ship in a corkscrew descent and the enemy aircraft shrieking their way across the twisted industriascape, it wasn't easy. With diagrammatical overlays showing the fighter swarm banking for another high-speed attack, Stroika realised that it was time to call upon the fleet's own air support.

<Lord Fabricator?>

<Yes, Stroika-unit. I am here. We are all here. We wait in expectation, Primus.>

<My lord, our insertion is encountering heavy resistance. Enemy air superiority fighters are frustrating our approach.>

<Yes?>

<Lord Fabricator,> Haldron-44 Stroika insisted. <I already have but half the force required to successfully execute this mission. If you don't wish me to have only half of that again, then the arkcruisers will need to despatch their own squadrons.>

Engra Myrmidex hesitated, as was his habit when performing functions for which he had no appetite or inclination.

<My lord…>

<Stand by, Stroika-unit. The Omnissiah will provide.>

Stroika did not know exactly what the Fabricator Locum meant but entrusted such considerations to the techno-magi and the Machine God they served. They were the Omnissiah's Faithful.

The servitor-pilot blurted a code-garbled warning. Stroika unbuckled his combat chassis from the chair. The momentum of the corkscrewing drop-ship threw him to the opposite wall of the compartment. Edging along it, Stroika took up position behind the ghoulish pilot and peered out through the smashed canopy. The Dark Mechanicum fighter aircraft had come around and were accelerating into an attack run. Stroika watched them stab their way through a cloud bank that was pouring from a nest of crooked tower-chimneys and superstacks. Like tiny flechettes, they shot through the poisonous cloud. The fighter swarm left the piercing twinkle of infernal forgelight in their wake like a hellish constellation in the darkness.

Air support or not, Stroika knew that the skitarii drop-ships couldn't simply present themselves as helpless targets. His mind and cogitator coils whirled with vectors, angles, airspeeds and trajectories. Scenario after diagrammatic scenario flashed up across his overlays. He did not have time to process every percentage and possibility.

'Yes,' the Primus said to himself finally. Confidence flooded his chest, proceeding more from instinct than mathematical certainty. 'Yes…'

Throwing himself back at the vox-station, he stabbed the comms cable into his haptic helm-port. 'All skitarii drop-craft,' Stroika said, 'Receive and obey. Have your pilots make preparations for an extended engine burn, followed by a cut-off and freefall.' The skitarii officer didn't wait for the understandable concerns and questions that would follow such an announcement. There were few protocols that would apply to such a situation.

'Ready?' Stroika put to his own pilot. The servitor turned its head and chattered its yellow teeth. A blurt of affirmatory code followed. 'Synchronise and maintain station on the *Nuncio*,' Stroika voxed to the skitarii officers aboard his drop-ships.

Stroika watched the approaching storm of air superiority fighters whirl by the shattered canopy of the corkscrewing *Nuncio*. With figures streaming down the side of his evolving diagrammatical overlays, he waited. Two more seconds. No, three.

'On my mark,' Stroika called across the open channel. He buckled his harness tighter. 'Mark!'

The skitarii commander felt himself thrown upwards towards the compartment ceiling but the harness kept the deadweight of his combat chassis in its chair. He heard the descent engines roar and initiated a cogitator count that flashed up before his optic-array.

There was a dull *clunk* from above as the bloated underbelly of another drop-ship glanced off the

Nuncio's hull. As the servitor-pilot wrestled with the craft's controls, levelling out the drop-ship following the light impact, Stroika saw the *Lucifex* plummet past them after a mis-timed burn. Such errors reinforced to Stroika the difficulty of what he was attempting. Even with omnitask servitors at the controls, the drop-ships handled like flying crates. They were designed to take a pummelling, get skitarii forces to the ground and little else. Their machine-spirits tended to be simple, belligerent entities, unused to such demands and improvisations. The kinds of manoeuvres Stroika was demanding from his transports had simply not been factored into the drop-ships' blessed design.

Stroika's cogitator countdown flashed its conclusion.

'Cut engines,' the skitarius voxed. 'Engage freefall.'

Stroika felt the powerful rumble of the descent engines die about him. The forge world's gravity latched back onto the monstrous drop-ship, immediately reasserting its authority. Dragged upwards, only Stroika's harness managed to keep his cybernetic frame in the chair. Air howled about the drop-ship's ugly form as the *Nuncio* plummeted like an adamantium ingot towards the twisted surface of Velchanos Magna.

'Brace… for… impact…' the Primus ordered across the vox. The drop-ship rattled about him, while the force of the uncontrolled descent shuffled vehicles about within their belly-hold restraints.

Even though Stroika's cogitator countdown – now running in reverse – told him that the collision was coming, it was still a surprise. The drop-ship might not have fielded offensive weaponry but there was little that could have prepared the pilot-servitors of the Hellblade fighters for drop-ships falling out of the sky. Craft using the bulk deadweight of their own armoured forms as falling artillery.

With the drop-ships not where the aircraft's targeters expected them to be, the swarm of Dark Mechanicum fighters overshot their objective. Instead of being engaged in a weaving attack run amongst the bark of autocannons, the Hellblades found themselves cutting through open space and the thin, radioactive smog that blanketed the forge world.

From above, the skitarii drop-ships plummeted through the fighter wing formations. Hellblades detonated against the reinforced hulls of the craft, enveloping their brute architecture in harmless fire and fury. Drop-ships smashed wings and tails from the streaking fighters and cleaved aircraft clean in half. While critically damaged Dark Mechanicum fighters rained down among the thunderbolting drop-ships, following Hellblades failed to pull up. Servitor-pilots had no choice but to fly their serrated fighter craft straight into an armoured wall of free-falling transports.

As the tail of the fighter wing formation came to the realisation that their approach vectors had been compromised, servitors of warp-polluted flesh and vox-shrieking madness peeled away. Hellblades banked to narrowly miss the falling drop-ships, with a few fortunate aircraft managing to accelerate straight through the descending havoc.

As a fighter smashed into the port side of the *Nuncio*, Haldron-44 Stroika was thrown back and forth in his harness. The cockpit instrumentation recorded the collision and light damage, firing alarms and blinking lamps until the pilot-servitor deactivated them. Unnatural flames washed briefly across the shattered canopy before receding with the crash.

Several swerving Hellblades shrieked by but after a few precious seconds bereft of impacts, gunfire or blazing fighters, Stroika decided that he had to slow the column's descent.

'All craft,' the skitarii commander voxed, 'engage airbrakes, flaps and fire descent engines, full thrust. Mark. Three… two… one… *fire*.'

Stroika felt the sudden deceleration tear at the weight of his bionics. His harness straps cut across

his armour and his heart reached for his throat. The descent engines roared about the craft. The servitor-pilot hauled once again on handles and plungers. The *Nuncio* lurched as flaps were torn from the drop-ship by the irresistible forces at work.

Stroika's mind and cogitator coils reeled with numbers and descent vectors but this time there was little he could do to influence the dire circumstances to which his skitarii were committed. Air brakes screeched. Flaps failed. The powerful descent engines roared their insistence. Stroika heard the superstructure of the *Nuncio* groan like a beast of burden that had given its last. He felt the torment of the craft's machine-spirit.

As the drop-ship slowed, the Primus saw the forge world's surface rise to meet them, a spiked and serrated labyrinth of mills, manufactoria and freightways. Flames rose from vents and furnace pits, burning in all the colours of daemonic darkness. Radioactive steam swirled into soot-streaked clouds of sulphur, while a toxic, heavy-metal smog seemed to hang over everything. Through the chemical haze, Stroika could see the underworld glow of venting forge temples and the hellfire of heretekal craft. Possessed magna-machinery swung colossal arms and freight-claws above factory roofs on towering derricks. Below their dread labours, armies of frightfully augmented slaves and warped servitors swarmed along freightways and channels of molten iron that flowed up from the planet's daemon-infused core.

As the *Nuncio* moaned to a halt, the drop-ship's belly smashed down through the scaffolding and oiled cables of a broad assembly line. The structure ran the length of the line, supporting magnetic claws and cargo-conveyors that transported finished products. With the descent engines still raging at full power the *Nuncio* rose, dragging a section of scaffold and cabling away with it.

Most of the drop-ships aimed for open spaces like freightways or container yards and benefitted from the extra distance such areas afforded. Several could not save themselves from the structures of higher buildings, however, crashing down through the light architecture of vents, vanes and corrugated roofing.

The only real loss was the *Dromedo*, the drop-ship coming down between a quad of belching superstacks. Getting entangled in the girders and support lines holding the metal ventscrapers together, the *Dromedo* brought the creaking chimneys down and itself down with them.

As the *Nuncio* led the thundering assembly of idling drop-ships away towards the appointed landing site, leaving the downed *Dromedo* and its skitarii survivors, Stroika issued the same orders he had to the crippled *Ignicia* and *Lucifex*.

As Primus he could not afford to compromise his legions or the mission for a single skitarius, cohort or clade. The alphas and skitarii soldiers of the *Ignicia*, *Lucifex* and *Dromedo* understood their protocols and what was expected of them. As the Mechanicus invasion force roared across the infernal industriascape of Velchanos Magna, Haldron-44 Stroika began to understand, in turn, the horrific enormity of what Engra Myrmidex and the Machine God expected of him.

0110

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF I
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+DROPSITE+*

111/389.777_453.22’23’22 had been selected as the dropsite by the Fabricator Locum in consultation with his attendant magi and Primus Haldron-44 Stroika. On a hololithic representation it was just a grid coordinate. An area of clear land, identified on antiquated schematics and devoid of the busy architecture that characterised the rest of the manufactoria district. Stroika had decided that it was as strategically sound a starting point for an urban invasion as twenty-seven thousand other dropsites, but Engra Myrmidex favoured this position over all others for the simple fact that it was situated closest to the Magnaplex Maximal – the former forge temple principal of all Velchanos.

For the Fabricator Locum, the Magnaplex Maximal had to be a key operational target for Stroika and his skitarii for a number of reasons. As he had told his magi, Stroika and his senior alphas, the forge temple principal was still likely the technofeudal capital of the planet – even under the Dark Mechanicum – housing the forge world’s command structure. Myrmidex hoped for a swift and decisive invasion, with the forge world’s ruling priesthood annihilated in the opening stages. The lower strata of hereteks could then be mopped up by purgation actions while the infotombs and technological treasures of Velchanos Magna were plundered and catalogued.

The Fabricator Locum also told Stroika and the gathering that the infotombs below the Magnaplex Maximal housed the forge temple’s High Altar – the respository of the forge world’s most precious knowledge. Thousands of years of secrets, from both before and after Velchanos Magna’s terrible tragedy, awaited them.

These factors had weighed heavily on Stroika’s analysis and battle plans. On the planetary approach, when the fleet became truly acquainted with the extent of the damage suffered by the forge world, the Primus feared that Myrmidex’s key objective had been lost. By some fell miracle however, the Magnaplex Maximal had escaped decimation. The monstrous forge temple sat on the edge of the colossal drop-off that plunged kilometres down to the raging planetary core.

Settling on the dropsite, Stroika had been asked by 10-Vitro Tiberiax how they could count on the

site still being clear and suitable for landing the Mechanicus bulk troop transports. Stroika had told his second-in-command that Mars itself still bore much the same layout as it had done ten thousand years before, despite suffering several apocalyptic tragedies – including civil war and the treachery of Horus. As holy sites, forge temples were not demolished or moved. Since the needs of such sites remained the same, the supply networks that existed in surrounding districts also tended to remain the same. When Stroika showed Tiberiax the ancient data he had on the dropsite, the skitarii officer was further convinced. The landing zone had been a radioactive waste dump known as the rad-barrens before the warp storm, and not a great prospect for redevelopment.

<Incredible,> 10-Vitro Tiberiax streamed, standing on the huge ramp of the *Nuncio*. <Just incredible.>

Haldron-44 Stroika walked up beside him, with the servo-skull Phrenos~361 hovering nearby. Tiberiax was amazed. The Primus had been right. Thousands of years of warp storm isolation and spiritual pollution had done little to change the area. It was still a radioactive wasteland, bar the fact that after thousands of years of continuous service it was more of a mountain of radioactive waste.

Like a conquering general of old, Haldron-44 Stroika had taken the high ground. All about the rad-barrens, terraces had been cleared by magna-machinery and dozers to enable further use of the site. The radioactive machinery now sat as smouldering wrecks, permanent additions to the site they tended – a testament to the precision fire of skitarii rangers. The terraces served as landing sites for the Mechanicus drop-ships that were spilling forth thousands of skitarii solders, Ironstrider engines and Dunecrawlers that made short work of the radioactive slopes.

Nalode Deka 871 trudged up the slope towards them, flanked by a pair of his runestalkers. It had been Deka's killclades that had been responsible for the bodies that lay strewn across containment barrels, tumbling down gritty slopes and face down in pools of radioactive seepage. Before the cybernetic sharpshooters of Tiberiax's ranger cohorts or even the vanguard skitarii – whose function it was to establish such a foothold in enemy territory – Princeps Deka had unleashed his cybernetic killers.

Exploiting a loophole in his protocols, Nalode Deka 871 had deployed his spindly runestalker units upon touchdown and they had set about massacring the servitors, waste processors and slave-reclamators with their transonic blades. Even now, under Deka's orders, the gas-masked killers picked their way across the rad-barrens on their cloven appendages, butchering the misshapen denizens of the shanty communities at the foot of the radioactive mound.

<You streamed for me,> Nalode Deka 871 said as he reached the ramp of the *Nuncio*. In his metallic hiss of a voice, it sounded more of an accusation than a statement.

<I did,> Stroika transmitted back. <And you know why, princeps. Report.>

As the three skitarii officers stood in mindlinked communion, Ironstrider engines and their riders filed past. The long legs of the walkers took them down the ramp and over the radioactive shallows.

<I prosecuted my duty in line with my protocols,> Deka told his Primus, his optics burning to pinpoints of light from within his hood.

<But not in line with my intentions,> Stroika warned. The skitarii commander didn't know how much of the man Nalode Deka 871 had been existed within the spindly armour of a runestalker. Stroika suspected very little. Perhaps just a brain, full of murderous service, and an icy heart that beat to the rhythm of war. With their blasted bodies dragged from the field of battle and straight to a surgical slab, dying skitarii who had served their overlords well were blessed with future function in the form

of Sicarian ruststalkers. Little more than cybernetic assassins, they were close combat constructs of cold savagery.

Princeps like Nalode Deka 871 saw themselves as manifestations of the Motive Force – the violent requirements of progress and change. In becoming but a scrap of flesh within a metal body, Deka viewed himself and his sufferings as taking a step ever closer to the Omnissiah's ideal. He viewed the flesh of his enemies similarly so and aimed to relieve them of its burden with his transonic blade and the chordclaw appendage of crackling talons that shimmered with molecular dissonance at his side.

<Every construct must play his part, princeps,> Stroika told the ruststalker, <his allotted part in the successes to come. For if one part of a machine decided to perform the function of another and abandon its own, where would that leave the machine as a whole?>

Nalode Deka 871 didn't answer.

<Perhaps your cogitator is busy doing something else, princeps?> Haldron-44 Stroika said.

<No, Primus.>

<Good,> Stroika said, his stream crackling with growing infuriation. <Perhaps it can handle this. You will leave the vanguard to its duties, for it is my honour to lead them as any Primus should. From the front – with his unquestioning legions behind him.>

<Yes, Primus,> Nalode Deka 871 hissed.

<Since you have seen fit to turn our dropsite into a mound of corpses, I have further butchery for you,> Stroika transmitted. <While my cohorts advance on the forge temple principal and Princeps Tiberiax's spread out through the surrounding districts, sub-hives and forges, you will secure the dropsite further.>

<You wish me to remain behind with the drop-ships?> Deka streamed incredulously.

<Alpha Nanierix and his ranger contingent have that responsibility,> Stroika said, shooting Deka down once more. <His rangers, omnispectrals and servo-skulls have reconnoitred the structures around the rad-barrens. This district is dominated by slave mills. Indentured labour units and cybernetically enhanced slave populations – in their thousands. Nanierix tells me that their dark overlords have them on the move and suspects they have been given impromptu directives to storm the dropsite, while defence forces are assembled. Tiberiax and I will handle the defence forces. Those indentured wretches, however, are to be slaughtered where they toil. Take your killclades to the mills, princeps. Neutralise the threat to our foothold here. Do you understand your duties, Princeps Deka? Their import and the limitations of their parameters?>

Once again, Nalode Deka 871 was silent. The princeps seemed to sense movement in 10-Vitro Tiberiax's servos and before the other princeps could issue a doctrinal remonstration, issued a static-laced response of his own.

<It will be done, Primus.>

Turning and walking away down the hill, Deka stopped. A stream of autocannon fire tore up the black grit of the slope, sending fountains of radioactive seepage splattering for the sky. A forge world Hellblade – one of the regrouping remnants of the fighter wing that had attacked the drop-ships – shrieked overhead. Streaking up behind it through the thin chemical smog was a Lightning strike fighter, painted in the god-pleasing red of Mars. The aircraft had been despatched from the fleet's arkcruisers upon Engra Myrmidex's command. Fast as they were, the Lightnings and their servitor-pilots had not been of service during the skitarii insertion, but were now proving their worth against

the forge world's defence wing and temple-mounted emplacements.

As Nalode Deka 871 continued down the slope, the Lightning seared a pair of las-beams at the attacking Hellblade, downing the enemy aircraft with its cannons. A second Lightning screamed in to despatch the falling target. It fired a missile that turned the enemy craft into a ball of tumbling flame before peeling away.

With frag raining harmlessly down about him, Haldron-44 Stroika felt the steely presence of the Fabricator Locum through his umbilical data-tether. Ghosting the Primus and his skitarii soldiers through the sweeping interface of phylactic communion, Engra Myrmidex surveyed the dropsite through the eyes, optics and augurs of the skitarii on the ground.

10-Victro Tiberiax felt the phylactic intrusion also and gave his Primus a nod. Even the Fabricator Locum's mere presence was enough to prompt the officers. Engra Myrmidex was watching – and through him, the Machine God.

<Praise the Omnissiah,> Tiberiax said, making the sign of the cog with the interspaced knuckles of his gauntlets.

<Praise the Omnissiah,> Stroika agreed. <Let this day be His. Let this fallen world's secrets be our Lord Fabricators' and victory our own. To your cohorts. I expect the capital districts designated Chorga, Numaris, Achaton and Daesirius – including their sub-hives and temples – to be in skitarii hands by this denticle tomorrow, Velchanosian Standard.>

<My skitarii will not rest until it is so, Primus.>

10-Victro Tiberiax left his commander and stepped off the side of the *Nuncio*'s ramp, slipping between a train of Onager Dunecrawlers that were making their arachnoid way onto the field of battle from the drop-ship's hold. Stroika cast his cycling optics across the rad-barrens and the heretek forge world beyond. With a lidless blink he cleared his datastreams and overlays.

His rad-censer crackled with the deadly radiation of the mountainous dump, like those that dangled from the silvered battleplate and red trench-cloaks of the skitarii thousands disembarking their monstrous drop-ships. Stroika watched the sea of hoods and helmets bob down the mountainside, the blistering blue glow of weaponry like marker-lights signifying their progress. The gait of robotic legs and the sight of so many cybernetic soldiers in synchronised movement was almost hypnotic. Orders were streamed. Obedience was silent. It would have made for a serene vision but for the torturous din beyond.

The heavy-metal *clunk* of crawlers and Ironstrider engines. The sky-splitting scream of heretek fighters and Mechanicus Lightnings doing battle above. Worst of all, the sickening thunder of endless forge world production. Vox-hailers bawling corrupt scrapcode, warnings and inducements. Bottomless quarries being blast-plundered of raw materials – stone, metals and ores, all warped by the storm-bathed taint of the Great Gyre. Hell-fed furnaces, raging with immaterial energies. Vast, baroque complexes that roared with machinery possessed, swarms of warp-thralled workers and monstrous weapons of daemonic design.

Beyond the shimmering mire of spent fuels, rusted barrels of contaminant and irradiated scrap upon which Stroika stood, the forge world of Velchanos Magna extended like a nightmarish vision of infernal industry and black, byzantine architecture. Exhaust towers vented strange flame, while sky-scraping node columns arced unnatural energies. It was a darkness of chains, corrugation and mechanised vastness, lit by sparks, arcing energies and cascades of molten metal.

With the capital districts and their forge temples forever facing away from the system's bleak star,

one half of the planet was cast in perpetual night, seen through the thin veil of a chemical brume. The twisted silhouette of forge-fire-dotted industry extending towards the horizon, however, was backlit by the fierce metallic blaze of light proceeding from the planet's exposed daemonic core. It was towards this fell brilliance that Haldron-44 Stroika would take his skitarii vanguard, and where, Omnissiah willing, the forge temple principal – the Magnaplex Maximal – awaited him.

'Phrenos,' Stroika said, his modulations misting on the cool air of the radioactive peak. 'Go ahead and apprise Alpha Versorias of my intention to accompany him and his vanguard skitarii in the first wave. We shall meet the enemy on the freightways. We shall destroy them among the very production plants that created them. Tell him to ready his cohorts.'

As the servo-skull drifted off down the radioactive slope, Stroika turned to see Alpha Nanierix march down the drop-ship ramp flanked by a pair of his trench-cloaked rangers. The skitarii held galvanic rifles and, like Nanierix, offered the Primus a noospheric salute.

'Alpha Nanierix,' Haldron-44 Stroika said.

'Yes, my Primus?'

'The dropsite is yours.'

0111

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF I
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+FALSE CONSTRUCTS+*

<I am one with the Motive Force. One with the Great Maker – He who crafts all true constructs in one of His many images. He who infuses, fills with His power, lends His strength.>

Haldron-44 Stroika offered his prayers to the Omnissiah and the magi who were both His receivers and His mouthpiece. Through their data-tethers, the skitarii had been calibrated for battle. Their strategic wetware had been synced and their emotions dialled back. They were the living weapons of the Machine God. Only officers like Stroika were allowed any degree of flexibility. This allowed for inspiration and creativity – qualities that guided tactical deployment, enhanced leadership and ensured a rapid response to new situations and challenges.

The infernal twilight of the Bronte-Chordata forge temple was thick with the metallic fug of smelting. Haldron-44 Stroika's optics cycled through false-colour filters to enhance his vision in the dungeon-like gloom.

The temple was as much a cathedral to damnation as a forge. The gargantuan workshop of the Machine God was now a hellish furnace of spiked chains and twisted architecture. The roasted corpses of those whose beliefs had failed to please the Dark Gods hung from the roof struts, while the Cog Mechanicus and temple sigils had long been vandalised and perverted into symbols of daemon patronage. The very metal of the mesh walkways steamed in contact with the footfalls of the Omnissiah's skitarii servants.

Stroika's targeting reticules drifted from ghostly outline to outline, discounting the gleam of forgelight off metal and the movement of automatonic machinery. Podium-interfaced servitors went about their endless labours, supervising magna-machinery whose fevered workings seemed to have a fell, glowing life of their own. Like the furnace magna-machinery, the servitors did not react to the skitarii advance. Stroika approached a drone foreman whose flesh-smeared form was a mess of burns and ugly stitching. A set of half-formed horns protruded from his bare servitor skull.

As the crackling muzzle of Stroika's arc pistol moved towards the thing's foul form, the light

revealed ruinous symbols and sigils carved brutally into the drone's back flesh. Uplinks from the Fabricator Locum's magi aboard the *Opus Machina* phylactically matched the symbols on both the servitor and the temple walls to pict files that had been mnemonically logged and classified in the ancient vessel's runebanks.

A cascade of information dropped down before Stroika's optics. Collected intelligence and hard data captures pertaining to the probable corruptions at work on Velchanos Magna. The likely allegiances to which the Dark Mechanicum of the forge world were victim, after a small eternity spent in the warp storm. Inconstant beings that called themselves powers, daemons and gods. Slaves to darkness. The damned vessels into which the unnatural force of Chaos was distilled. Things that twisted the souls of men and the cold integrity of machines alike, bending them to their ruinous will. Fell creatures of dimensional evil, who had corrupted the arch-heretek Kelbor-Hal and the warlord Horus ten thousand years before, splitting both the Martian Empire and the Imperium of Man asunder.

Haldron-44 Stroika felt a cold hatred burn through his neurocircuitry and processor coils. He knew not whether this proceeded from his previous experience of fighting the hollow instruments of Chaos. He did not know whether it was the Great Maker's revulsion, finding expression through the purity of His constructs, for a corruption that was everything that the Motive Force was not. He did not know whether what he was feeling was simply another doctrina imperative, delivered straight into his mind from the techno-magi above. Those who saw everything he saw. Knew everything he knew.

<Touch nothing,> Haldron-44 Stroika warned the skitarii vanguard of the IV Tantal. <Interface with nothing. Review your protocols and mission directives. This place, this entire planet reeks of corruption. It will try to fool your filters. It will attempt to twist your calculations. Above all it will seek to pollute your workings and make the holy craft of your form an instrument of powers dark and unknowable. The use of dataspikes is prohibited. The only thing you put into the servants of the Dark Mechanicum are the shells from your radium carbines. Understood?>

The Primus's helm-vanes sizzled with the flood of obedient returns and acknowledgements. The drone foreman went about its business, monitoring the activity of labouring claws and smelting buckets, unaware of the pistol muzzle at the back of its skull or the skitarii forces advancing through the forge temple.

Stroika moved on and his vanguard skitarii with him. With each potential target flashing and fading as it was discounted, Stroika moved his pair of arc pistols. Deployed along their appendage-rails and locked into the palms of his bionic gauntlets, the fat pistols hummed and crackled as they drifted slickly from target to redundant target.

On the companionway overhead and on the one above that Stroika could hear the synchronised footfalls of vanguard skitarii, led by their sub-alphas. Their helms and war-plate jangled softly with their movements, while their red trench-cloaks were a foil whisper in their passing. Through the companionway mesh the Primus could see the glow of their radium carbines. The skitarii soldiers held the radioactive weapons up to their helm targeters, zeroing in on potential targets, like Stroika, as they filed down the walkways. On the other side of the forge temple's holy furnace, his mindlinked feeds told Stroika that Sub-Alpha Enron's units were doing the same.

Stroika's rad-censer crackled and hissed as it bounced from his belt. Its insistence had not subsided since leaving the contamination of the dropsite. This was to be expected. For the vanguard skitarii, their radium weaponry was both a boon and a curse. While benefitting from the devastating effects hyper-irradiated shot visited upon the enemies of the Omnissiah, the skitarii were constantly bathed in

the radioactivity of their own weapons. To fight side by side with the vanguard was to suffer the same slow death from rad-poisoning as the Omnissian martyrs themselves.

It was this suffering – this physical and spiritual burden – that made the vanguard such expert killers. They were the Machine God's ambassadors of destruction and fearless in the face of enemy threats, which they were routinely the first to encounter. It was difficult to scare or intimidate cybernetic warriors who already knew they were living the last days, minutes and moments of their lives. Moments in which they were resolved to honour the Great Maker, who would soon be welcoming their return and recycling.

<Hold,> Haldron-44 Stroika streamed, his phylactic command echoing through the minds and cogitators of the IV Tantal, to which he had attached himself. The skitarii soldiers above him and advancing on the other side of the forge temple came to a dead stop. Omnispectrals confirmed that something was advancing towards them at speed. <Lock target,> Stroika commanded, feeding his data to the IV Tantal. He heard the whine of their radium carbines change pitch and the soft jangle of aims being corrected in unison.

The code-signatures of Phrenos~361 hit Stroika moments before the servo-skull shot by. The drone's magnetic cog-blade was a blur as Phrenos flew up the companionway at Stroika and his skitarii. Whooshing overhead, the skull streamed its master the data it had collected from its reconnaissance.

<Belay that,> Stroika ordered, allowing the servo-skull to pass the skitarii unmolested. The Primus's overlays were rapidly updated. The dark depths of the Bronte-Chordata forge temple suddenly blazed with the glowing outlines of new targets. Targets Phrenos~361 had discovered on its forward sweep. A small, misshapen army waiting in ambush, scrambling the skitarii filters. The forge temple's corrupt mechanoids seemed to know they had been discovered.

'You trespass in the domain of Ulcan Gnostramari,' the vox-hailers of the temple boomed through the gloom and the polychromatic mist. The voice was a rancid echo of the proud machine it had once been but still carried the unmistakable imperiousness of a magos or forge master. The words were threaded with the cacophony of encoded madness.

'Arch-Fabricant of Velchanos Magna.' The voice descended into a rust-heaving cough, before continuing. 'Lord Prophetechnos of the Underforge, the Darknid Core, the Iron Almighty… the Abystra-Dynomicron.'

Stroika's acquisition reticules danced between the profusion of targets. They were only filtered outlines in the darkness but recognition wetware told the Primus that his skitarii faced an assembled force of flesh-corrupted forge guard and hunched, spiked gun-servitors – sickly abominations who were warp-fused to their glowing weaponry. Among them, deep within the ranks of the temple sentinels, Stroika's filters found the flashing silhouette that seemed to be issuing the vox-hailed ultimatums. The monstrous forge master under whose damned auspices the Bronte-Chordata temple operated. One of Ulcan Gnostramari's Dark Mechanicum servants.

From the modulations and horrifically augmented outline of the fell forge master, Haldron-44 Stroika failed to identify the monster. He found no match against his historical records and pict files, leading him to believe that the magos must have risen to his position during the forge world's long isolation and contamination.

Ulcan Gnostramari, however, was a designation well known to Stroika from his mission uploads. He had been Fabricator General of Velchanos Magna well before the apocalyptic warp storm claimed the planet. It seemed that Gnostramari ruled Velchanos still, having found new service in the ranks of the

Dark Mechanicum and a ruinous patron in the abominate thing referred to as the Abystra-Dynomicron.

<Hard data, Stroika-unit,> Engra Myrmidex said, the hiss of his phylactic intrusion a tidal wave of doctrinal imperatives crashing through the skitarii commander's thoughts. <We must clarify Gnostramari's position. Only he will have access to the forge world's oldest, deepest, darkest secrets. Hard data, Stroika-unit. Hard data.>

'The punishment for such trespass,' the heretek forge master boomed, before rust-hacking once more, 'is assimilation.'

With the renegade forge guard's stub-carbines and the IV Tantal's radium weaponry aimed at one another through the furnace murk, the pits of molten iron bubbling below suddenly exploded. The liquid metal blasted up at the skitarii vanguard, the glowing fury assuming the dribbling shapes of the immaterial entities that possessed it. As huge splatters of molten iron cascaded down, skitarii soldiers were lost to the glowing ferocity. Stroika's mind echoed with the brief screams of his men. The cybernetic soldiers steamed beneath the molten iron, their flesh and workings melting away, while their souls were torn apart by the daemonic monstrosities who found form in the boiling metal.

As both infernal iron and the assimilated alloys of his skitarii dribbled down through the melting mesh of the companionways, Haldron-44 Stroika gave the order to open fire. Moving forward along the walkways with their radium carbines up to their helms, the vanguard skitarii of the IV Tantal blazed away at the enemy targets. Flagging the overlay signature of the corrupted forge master as a restricted target, Stroika led the way.

With the temple forge singing with the hammering ricochets of stub rounds and radium shot, Stroika watched the forge master and a pair of hench-units withdraw. Negotiating sections of melted walkway with hydraulically powered leaps and crouching behind the cover of rails and meshing, Haldron-44 Stroika led the indomitable advance of his skitarii soldiers through the Dark Mechanicum forge temple.

His optical overlays furious with targeting reticules and infliction data, the skitarii commander ducked and backed before the sweeping pass of possessed machinery. Only his cybernetic reflexes saved Stroika from the walkway-chewing attentions of crane-claws and furnace buckets that attempted to eat skitarii soldiers alive. Fountains of daemonic metal splashed across the walkways, ever weakening their structural integrity and forcing the IV Tantal and their sub-alphas to find alternative routes through the twisted, byzantine structure.

As Stroika and the vanguard skitarii finally closed on their enemies, the Primus found that the cowards were pushing temple slaves down the walkways at them. The cultist labourers were garbed in the ribbed rubber and hoods of forge-worlders. Their rebreather canisters swung before them like trunks. The stitched and stapled rubber barely covered the obscenity of their warped mutations. Through the hood visors, Stroika could see eyes white with a mixture of terror and exultation as the cult menials sacrificed themselves for their forge master, their Arch-Fabricant and the unholy Abystra-Dynomicron.

Forge guard soldiers – the planet-bound, technofeudal armies of individual temples and the forge world as a whole – forced the menials on into skitarii gunfire. The forge guard were a twisted shadow of their former glory. No longer the holy warriors of the Omnissiah, their corrupted flesh was rust-stained and seeped about their workings. Their ceremonial cloaks were black tatters and their tarnished cybernetics decorated with spikes, chains, razor-wire and stub-belts of sigil-carved bullets. Ghoulish optics burned from their black, skull-fashioned helms, picking out targets amongst the

advancing skitarii, while their stub-carbines barked from where they were resting on the shoulders of body-shielding menials.

The menials' rubber suits became shredded remnants as radium rounds tore into them. Warped bone splintered and flesh pulped, before the wounds blackened to rad-poisoned craters. Temple slaves fell dead to the floor, forcing the forge guard forward into the fray. The vanguard skitarii's aim held no more mercy for the cybernetic soldiers, whose black helms opened up in a splatter of curdled brains and cogitator workings.

The renegade cyborgs' own aim wavered between single salvoes of unnatural accuracy that seemed guided by some daemon force, and mad, magazine-emptying displays of chattering bravado. With bullets showering the companionways, both behaviours held dangers for the advancing skitarii.

Stroika engaged his conversion field, allowing the energy shielding to soak up the onslaught of slugs. As the enemy fire intensified and forge guard soldiers vox-hailed madness and code-corruption at the Primus, the conversion field was overwhelmed and sizzled to dormancy.

The skitarii would not be halted, however. Stroika knew from his uplinks and constantly updated feeds that battles like this were taking place across the capital districts, with cybernetic soldiers stoically battling on through mills, workshops, assembly plants, freightways and forge temples; through frightfully warped enemies and their own inevitable losses.

They would not fail their magi and their Machine God. They could not. There was an evil present that demanded utter destruction, a perversion of the Omnissiah's purpose that could not be allowed to endure. To see such a duty through required an adamantine resolve. A steel will. An iron nerve. All the Omnissian gifts with which the soldiers of the Legiones Skitarii had been blessed. With bullet-chewed vanguard warriors falling from the walkways and cybernetic soldiers clutching bionics that had been blasted off, the IV Tantal marched on.

Stamping through the rancid scrap and corpses of both slaughtered menials and the forge guard who had misused them, the vanguard skitarii suddenly became aware of a new threat. Gun-servitors on the higher platforms were observing their dread directives and opening fire as their enemies reached range. The combat drones were barely human, their bones and parchment skin stretched across implanted heavy weaponry. Hunched, spiked and fused to monstrous packs that fed their heavy bolters and fuelled their multi-meltas, the servitors lumbered forth, their mouths open and glowing in silent screams.

As Sub-Alpha 7-Enron-7 disappeared in a maelstrom of heavy bolter fire and several point-skitarii on the opposite companionways streamed away to flaming flesh, war-plate and alloy under the attentions of a multi-melta aimed down their advancing column, Stroika knew he had to press the skitarii advantage.

<Sub-Alpha Quendix, take command there,> Stroika transmitted. <Bring up your calivers. Target the heavy weaponry.>

With the skitarii pushing the forge guard back with their fearless progress and the storm of radium shot and stubber slugs intensifying between the two enemies, Quendix summoned two of his vanguard skitarii special weapons units. The two cybernetic soldiers stomped forward in unison, swishing their trench-cloaks aside while taking a titanium knee. Bringing up their heavy plasma weaponry, the pair aimed their calivers at the far platforms, unleashing a succession of raging blue orbs that burned like small suns.

The rate of fire was punishing, the skitarii sweeping their calivers left and right to bathe the gun-

servitors in a hail of plasma. Combat drones began to fall to their scaffolded knees, with holes burned through their malformed chests. Others shook heavy bolters that had chugged to silence, not realising that plasma orbs had eaten through the weapons and their mechanisms. A gun-servitor on the flank simply detonated, a ball of plasma blasting straight through him and into his pyrum-petrol gas pack. The explosion took two other combat-servitors with it and turned a third into a bolt-blasting inferno that was as much a threat to forge guard with their backs to the drone as to the advancing skitarii.

Haldron-44 Stroika ran forth, his footfalls shaking the walkway, flanked by two vanguard skitarii who blasted warped forge guard soldiers out of their commander's path with conservative volleys of radium shot. As their magazines ran dry, the Primus unleashed twin streams of electrical fury from his arc pistols. Corrupted mechanoids convulsed as they were hit by the arcstreams. They spasmed and clutched their stub-carbines, sending sporadic blasts of bullets down through the walkway mesh.

Stomping past, Stroika didn't even wait for the arcstream to fry their flesh and workings. With the fading of their biometric returns, Stroika's cogitator added the kills to a running total for the mission which had already reached three digits. Such records were useful – as much in the case of a Primus as any other skitarii soldier – for determining promotions, legionary responsibilities, status and cybernetic enhancements. Unlike the Astra Militarum or the Adeptus Astartes where such decisions were left to the fallible human and suprahuman judgements of individual officers, in the Legiones Skitarii such matters were decided using hard data.

Having reloaded their radium carbines, the skitarii soldiers followed, but their commander suddenly stopped. As several slugs sparked off his battleware, Stroika's overlays were flashing a warning. A colossal fountain of molten iron was raging up beside the companionway. Stroika could see the nightmarish shapes of daemon entities reaching out for him in the dribbles and slurps that embodied their melted forms.

Turning, Stroika extended his arms. With a hydraulic *clunk*, the pistols sprang back on their rails. Raising his knee, the Primus kicked the first skitarii soldier in the chestplate, sending him stumbling back into his compatriot – just out of the descending path of the liquid metal. As the companionway melted before Stroika and the skitarii, he turned to find that another splatter of raging iron had turned the other side of the walkway into a dribbling mess. The structure began to waver beneath his feet.

Stroika's optics flashed and streamed with alerts that told of an all too obvious danger but little in the way of options to escape it. Kicking the railing out in front of him, Haldron-44 Stroika backed up to take advantage of the short run the weakening companionway afforded him. Stamping across the mesh, the skitarii officer powered his hydraulics for a leap of faith. Once more he found himself streaming prayers to the Omnissiah and hoping that the Machine God was receiving them.

<Great Maker, I am Your holy instrument, blessed of iron and cursed of flesh. Lord Omnissiah, Machine God of Mars and patron of forge-fires all, guide my workings.>

Launching from the trembling companionway, Stroika sailed across the open space. Below him the raging heart of the forge bubbled and spat. Kicking his titanium legs for momentum, he snatched a length of tarnished chain from a number that were hanging from redundant rails set in the furnace chamber ceiling.

Swinging across the distance with the red foil of his cloak rippling behind, Stroika's metal feet found the rail of the parallel companionway. Snatching for a hold on the structure he saw that Alpha Quendix and his vanguard skitarii had yet to reach his position. The Primus found himself surrounded by a surprised collection of enemies.

<Protect the Primus!> Stroika heard Quendix stream to his skitarii.

With radium rounds hammering into the throng, Stroika kicked a twisted menial's hooded head from his shoulders before dropping down on the companionway. Grabbing the forge guard who had been using the temple drudge as a shield by his horn-pierced helm, Stroika smashed the Dark Mechanicum soldier's head into the railing. As his horns broke away and the helm shattered about his daemonic half-face, Stroika grabbed the forge guard's weapon and brutally backhanded the stinking soldier with his bionic gauntlet. Turning the stub-carbine on the downed soldier, the skitarius then sprayed the weapon's barrel back and forth before the throng of corrupted slaves and soldiers.

Body after cybernetic body fell before the point-blank fury of the weapon. As his carbine ran empty, Stroika threw it with hydraulic force at a fat, flailing menial who was spilling out of his rubber suit. The weapon struck the warped worker on the hood and dashed the consciousness from him.

With the skitarii commander so close and isolated, the forge guard fought back with a vengeance, clambering over the bullet-ridden corpses of their compatriots to get to him. Stepping backwards along the companionway, Stroika tore a pair of fat mindscrambler grenades from where they were mag-locked to his belt. Depressing their studs he bounced them down the walkway. They detonated with a brief flash, and the mesh companionway became a lightning storm of faint blue energies that crackled about the advancing forge guard. The bio-electric surge coursed through their workings and crippled their minds, causing the corrupted cybernetic soldiers to fall to their knees or clutch their helms in agony.

As Quendix and his skitarii advanced hurriedly to envelop Stroika in their number, radium rounds hammered the forge defenders back in a rad-storm of savage gunnery.

With blackened bodies falling before them in droves, the skitarii pressed on as their protocols dictated. Stroika had already received imperatives from Engra Myrmidex that superseded these.

<Sub-Alpha Quendix,> Stroika transmitted to the officer. <You will take command here and clear the forge temple of false constructs. I want this structure purged of those that answer the call of the Dark Mechanicum. Do you understand?>

<Yes, my Primus,> Quendix said, leaning back out of the path of a bullet that ricocheted off a nearby rail. <Sir, where are you going?>

Haldron-44 Stroika climbed up on the same rail and hauled himself up through the twisted metal of the companionway above. He looked down at the sub-alpha.

<To inform the master of this forge that he is master no more,> Stroika told him before climbing up through the labyrinthine scaffolding of the walkways above.

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SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING…
UPLOADING…
UPLOADING…
SIGNAL INTERFERENCE… *+FLESH AND IRON+*

Clawing the tips of his bionic digits into the elevator doors, Haldron-44 Stroika braced his combat chassis and heaved. As the black doors parted, the skitarii commander was granted a view of the twilight halls beyond. He had travelled from the unholy forgeworks of the temple up to the private quarters of the temple's forge master, situated at the very top of the structure.

The vaulted chamber through the doors was a benighted den of dark chrome and runebanks that glowed with the light of pict screens and warped augurs. A twisted servitor was fused to the banks, silently monitoring the unfolding havoc in the forge temple.

Sparse furniture gave way to a dark metal mosaic representing some fell sigil in the perversion of a cog. Private workshops and diagnostica led to a laboratorium cordoned off by a partition of splatter-stained plas. A filthy cyber-surgical slab took pride of place, interfaced with a multi-limbed automaton that sat in a nest of barbaric tools and instruments. Beyond the laboratorium, the chambers opened out onto a balcony platform extending over the temple roof, set between a quad of node columns that arced furiously with the unnatural energies of the forge.

Stroika cycled his optics and omnispectral augurs searching for signatures but he could find none. Perhaps the forge master had abandoned the Bronte-Chordata temple in search of safety with his Arch-Fabricant. With his arc pistols humming down by his sides, the Primus moved quietly into the chambers.

Like a lightning bolt down through his spine, it hit him. Haldron-44 Stroika fell forward onto his knees, denting the dark metal of the floor. Now across the threshold of the chamber, his overlays lit up with the outline of targets, hidden from view but from little else. Their signatures lit up on all available spectra but had failed to do so from behind some kind of scrambling field protection the

forge master operated in his private chambers.

Stroika could smell his flesh cooking about the heat of his combat chassis and bionics, as the paralysing energies of an incapacitator flowed up through the floor. The node columns outside were now dormant as their vented energies seethed through the skitarii commander instead. His cabling, his neurocircuitry and his nerves burned with the overwhelming power. Stroika could barely move. He could barely think.

He tried to aim his arc pistols but no targets presented themselves. His optics began to shimmer and his overlays to scramble. Lightning arced from the floor up into his outstretched gauntlets, firing the hydraulics on his pistols and sending them back up their rails and into their cavity holsters. The multi-coloured energies crackled between the dark metal of the floor and the outstretched fingers of his gauntlets, dragging his hands to the ground. His auxiliary appendages tried to unlock from his back-cradles but they too would not respond under the electrifying lock the incapacitator had on his systems.

'No, no, no,' a voice boomed from the blurry gloom beyond, the same one he had heard in the furnace chambers below. 'That will not do. How can I learn anything from you…' The voice broke off, hacking its way through the rusty gargle of a cough. '…learn anything from you if you are trying to kill me? Eh? Eh?' The forge master seemed amused and managed the dark echo of a chuckle before falling foul of more coughing.

'See, fool servant of the one god – cold, distant and removed,' the forge master said, 'the Arch-Fabricant will reward me for the data inside your cogitator cortex and the phylactic interface through which the mindlinked intelligence of your puny invasion flows.'

The voice seemed to get closer as the forge master approached from behind a pillar. Stroika's optics faded in and out of clarity, his filters flickering with the spoiled current passing through his cybernetic superstructure.

The forge master was a tall but hunched thing, whose barrel-body – broad with rancid augmentations – was lost in the black leather of a huge hood and robes that draped his workings. From his back sprouted countless slender claws and tarnished mechadendrites. Two socket orbs of molten iron burned within his hood like newly formed worlds, while the tentacles of some facial corruption dribbled through the filthy grille of a vox-speaker.

Two other dark shapes ventured forth from alcoves, lank of metal limb. The transparent plastek of their robes showed them to be Dark Mechanicum protectors. Their warped flesh was pallid and their battle shells and bionics a filthy black. Their gauntlets were nightmare nests of torturous weaponry – transonic blades, rusted saws, needles and crackling talons – while their faces were featureless black masks. Two more appeared from behind Stroika, where they had always been concealed, just either side of the open elevator doors.

'When I hand you, your skitarii and the dusty old tech-priests who sent you here to my master, the Abystra-Dynomicron will not only bless my temple with iron to be forged but will forge me anew, with the crafting power of the warp flowing through me. Nothing will be beyond my unmaking.'

The excitement of the idea got the better of the forge master as his leather robes rose and fell with the exertions of his hacking cough. Spitting a rust-corrupted ichor that dribbled forth through the grille and down the shivering tentacles that squirmed through it, the Dark Mechanicum magos hocked the last of the filth onto the floor before moving towards the surgical laboratorium.

'Bring him, bring him,' the forge master said, clearing his congested throat. As the protectors took

Stroika under the arms and hauled him up from the crackling metal of the floor, he could see that the hench-units and the forge master wore rubber coverings on their feet-appendages. Stroika's, however, they dragged along the incapacitating metal of the floor that ran through the length of the chambers. The strange energies arced and snapped between the skitarii officer's cybernetic form and the dark metal.

Stroika tried to fight the paralysis being visited upon him but the incapacitator was simply too powerful. The dread energies felt their way not only through his power core but also the cells of his arc weaponry. He could neither power nor deploy his weapons, reducing them to lumps of dead metal dragging his weakened frame down. Feeling feebly for the mindscrambler grenades that were mag-locked to his belt, he found them to be equally useless.

The skitarius felt his physical systems begin to shut down. Neural processors and battle wetware ran to dormancy. Feeds and overlays died with a crackle. It was all he could do to keep his optics, life support and base cogitations running.

In desperation Stroika reached out through phylactic channels for assistance. Someone who might be able to offer aid – even if that was denying the forge master his prize. The *Opus Machina* was too far away for such a stream. As was 10-Vitro Tiberiax. If ever Stroika was in need of Nalode Deka 871's cold, murderous skills it was now, but he had despatched him on a mission to secure the dropsite. His only hope was a broad spectrum phylactic appeal. Perhaps Aemod-44 Versorias or Sub-Alpha Quendix could respond.

As the Dark Mechanicum protectors dragged him through to the filthy laboratorium and dumped his body on the slab, the cyber-surgeon automaton came to vicious life, chuntering with pincers, las-scalpels and bone saws.

Stroika could do little but feel anger at his own failure and dread at the procedure to come. The skitarius didn't fear the savage surgery or disassembling that was the automaton's foetid duty. He feared that after failing his Machine God so completely, his parts and base organics would not even be deemed worthy of recycling. After passing through the polluted claws of the Dark Mechanicum, why would the Omnissiah want what was left of him?

The skitarii commander felt a raw fury proceeding straight from his thumping heart, but trapped as it was inside the immobilised metal coffin of his combat chassis, there was little that could be done.

The forge master had retreated behind his trap and waited for a skitarius to venture forth: an officer, a killclade, a unit of Omnissian soldiers, it didn't matter. The forge temple was lost. Greater prizes waited for the forge master if he could give his dark overlords access to the mission directives and the doctrinal imperatives that guided the Adeptus Mechanicus invasion.

Darker thoughts clouded the Primus's mind. With Stroika's phylactic interface – a piece of him that would be recycled to serve the needs of the Dark Mechanicum – the enemy could monitor and frustrate the Legiones Skitarii's every move on Velchanos Magna. The problem personally for Haldron-44 Stroika was that his brain and neurocircuitry would come attached to that interface, with little need for anything else.

Feeling the hopelessness of his predicament and with no cogitated probabilities to inform or comfort him, Stroika's arc-scalded mind drifted to screed and prayer.

'Great Maker,' he mumbled through lips that burned with the unnatural energies of the incapacitator, 'aid Your cybernetic servants in the prosecution of Your unbreakable will.'

The wretched forge master, whose attentions had been focused on priming his dread automaton, leant

in to listen. About Stroika the black shapes of the protectors were gathered.

'You think prayer will help you now?' the monstrous mechanoid coughed through his rust-stained grille. 'You think your Machine God cares for you, soldier?'

'Through beam, blade and the wrath of righteous iron, visit through us Your punishment of the unbeliever,' Stroika continued.

'Your god cares nothing for your sufferings,' the forge master said, hacking up rusted filth that splattered and speckled Stroika's war-plate. 'Empty vessel of the Mechanicus,' the forge master told him, leaning over Stroika and allowing the filth of his dangling tentacles to settle on Stroika's paralysed appendages.

'You are blind, like the tech-priests of Mars,' the corrupt construct said. 'Your Machine God is as cold as steel and as aloof as your prayers unanswered. Under his technotyranny, you serve the machine. Here, the machine serves us. Here we do not celebrate interface and augmentation. We are a living glorification – we are the union of flesh and iron in ways you could not possibly understand.'

Stroika tried to block out the poison of the forge master's words.

'Punish he whose path twists with the darkness of his faith,' the skitarii commander mumbled on. 'He who has embraced ignorance over the true enlightenments. Whose creations are false without Your spirit.'

As the forge master went about making final preparations, engaging restraints and raising the surgical slab on its hydraulic crank, he dribbled further madness at his victim.

'Our masters demand no less of us than your hollow god,' the fell forge master hissed. 'Yours sends you across the galaxy to pillage the knowledge and technological wonders of others. We, however, are repaid for our allegiance. In the giving of body, craft and soul to the ageless beings of the beyond, the secrets of the galaxy, the universe and those planes that exist beyond it, shall all become ours. Beings that existed long before technology's Dark Age… before our understanding took us to the stars… before the first of our kind picked up a rock and dashed out the brains of another. Only they can deliver us from ignorance – the only true evil.'

Haldron-44 Stroika felt the metal binders snap shut about his bionic appendages. As the surgical restraints locked and the automaton moved in with its tools of butchery, Stroika felt the slab rise and the titanium of his feet leave the dark metal of the floor.

The relief found expression in the dull spark of power cells returning to life, the sluggish return of automotive functions and cerebral systems rebooting.

Unaware and uncaring of such revelations, the forge master withdrew slightly to accommodate the closing tools of his blood-speckled automaton.

'No matter,' the monstrous master told him, his grille tentacles quivering. 'You will know, soon enough.'

Stroika's lips moved on in silence, prayers spilling from him as a countdown continued in his head.

'Whose very existence is anathema,' the skitarii commander said.

Three.

'Whose living lie betrays the holy Quest for Knowledge.'

Two.

'Those who have no part in Your grand design…'

One.

The mindscrambler grenade he had primed on his belt minutes before detonated. Free from the

incapacitator current that up until then had run up through his legs, his workings, his weaponry and neurocircuitry, the primed grenade once again found its function.

With a brief flash, the bioelectrical pulse of detonation enveloped the surgical laboratorium in an arcstorm. The blast set off the two remaining mindscrambler grenades mag-locked to Stroika's belt, bathing intricate workings and organics in a second and third wave of bioelectrical incapacitation.

The automaton's saws and las-scalpels shuddered to a halt above Stroika. Both the protectors and their forge master stumbled back, clutching their hoods in agony and confusion. As they reeled and the bioelectrical storm of the mindscrambler grenades crackled away, Stroika felt his pulse-ravaged mind sink back into blackness.

SELECTED: DENTRICA II OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+IMPERATIVE+*

Stroika's optics blinked to life. Given a momentary glimpse of the filthy laboratorium lumens, the skitarii commander felt his vision fade once more. With a warping crackle, his overlays bled forth from the darkness. He had been both unconscious and offline, as returning feeds – sluggish and glitch-fevered at first – informed him.

Diagnostic alerts told him of superficial damage caused to the rear of his combat chassis and motive bionics. Fortunately for Stroika the mindscrambler grenades inflicted overloads and neural trauma on their victims rather than physical damage, though they could even kill lesser-grade mechanoids with the intensity of their bioelectrical pulse. If he had been carrying frag or krak grenades, Stroika would have been blasted to bloody shrapnel – but that wouldn't have prevented the skitarius from arming the grenade and denying the forge master both his phylactic prize and his miserable life.

Optics and omnispectrals returned to life. A stream of further diagnostic data told Stroika that the dormancy the incapacitator had inflicted on his primary systems – both cybernetic and neural – had shielded him from the worst of the mindscrambler blast. His cogitator coils spooled a list of subsidiary systems that had suffered damage from the bioelectric pulse and recorded a 32.451 per cent chance that Stroika had suffered wetware and brain damage affecting non-essential functions.

Stroika's vision blurred and his feeds sizzled before searing back to clarity. Bracing himself against the surgical slab and testing the function of his circuitry and appendage hydraulics, the skitarii commander heaved against the binder clasped about the bionics of his right arm. With the surgical automaton and slab workings fried by the mindscrambler pulse, the metal restraint stretched and snapped, releasing Stroika.

Half sitting up on the slab, the skitarius peered about the filthy laboratorium. Overlays annotated his surroundings, while Stroika's mission chronometer indicated that he had been offline for less than a minute. He found one of the Dark Mechanicum protectors dead and crackling on the dark metal floor. His three black-shelled compatriots were stumbling about the laboratorium, through equipment and the plas partitions. Their cortex processors seemed to be scrambled, while the forge master appeared to be feeling his way along the chrome piping of the wall, similarly affected by the bioelectric pulse.

Stroika's targeting reticules returned. The cell-power to his arc weaponry was yet to, however. A reticule detected movement from the direction of the balcony platform. Reasoning that some sentry had been recalled from the forge temple roof, Stroika hauled at the restraint clasped around his left

arm.

As the signature drifted into the forge master's private chambers, Stroika outstretched the bionics of his right arm. Shooting down its rail, an arc pistol locked in place with the skitarius's gauntlet. The signal slowly resolved, Stroika's ident recognition systems still sluggish after their bioelectric trauma.

The skitarii officer recognised the signature of Phrenos~361. The servo-skull, already searching for its master, had answered Stroika's phylactic call, ascending the curved roofs of the forge temple's exterior. Lowering his pistol, Stroika felt power return to the weapon from its tripped mag-cell.

<Phrenos~361,> Stroika streamed. <Deactivate the chamber defences.>

The servo-skull's rotating cog-blade angled, taking the drone into the main chambers, where it scanned the runebanks for the mechanism that cut off power to the incapacitator. Stroika had no desire to feel once again the polluted energies of the security measure flowing through his combat chassis.

<Stroika-unit,> Engra Myrmidex said, his voice once more echoing about the fuzzy recesses of Stroika's mind and cogitators. <Stroika-unit, you have been offline. Status report.>

Haldron-44 Stroika took a moment to process the demand.

<Interference from the temple structure, my lord,> Stroika lied. <Unsanctioned energy sources, architectural deviancy, field transonics.>

Stroika turned his arc pistol on the three pulse-dazed Dark Mechanicum protectors in their black shells and plastek robes. Blasting what remained of their sentience from their helm-crania, Stroika moved his arm slickly from one hench-unit to another. As the protectors dropped to the floor, crackling with destructive energy, Phrenos reported that it had deactivated the chamber defences. From outside, Stroika saw the glow of the roof node columns reassume its previous crackling ferocity.

<Secure prisoner,> Stroika commanded, pulling his arm and the hydraulics of his legs free of the surgical slab. Phrenos~361 drifted in on the magnetic whirr of its cog-blade. As the foetid forge master – barely cogitating where he was – turned, with his hunched back to the wall, the servo-skull buzzed in close. The forge master lifted his hood, grille and face-tentacles and froze as the drone's cog-blade accelerated before his throat. Using the serrated cog like a circular saw, Phrenos~361 pinned its prisoner to the wall.

Tentatively, Haldon-44 Stroika climbed down onto the floor and shook down his combat chassis. Exercising his auxiliary appendages, hydraulics and workings, the skitarii commander began to feel like himself again.

<Stroika-unit, respond,> Engra Myrmidex demanded. <Status.>

The skitarius walked about the private chambers of the forge master, cross-referencing his feeds with what he was seeing on the runebank pict screens.

<The mission proceeds ahead of schedule, Lord Fabricator,> Stroika streamed back. That wasn't an untruth. Both Alpha Versorias and 10-Victro Tiberiax had made excellent progress through the capital districts, taking many significant installations and forge temples along the way. <I am securing hard data in respect to the location of the enemy commander as we speak. It is imperative that he is secured with the forge temple principal, yes, Fabricator Locum?>

Engra Myrmidex hesitated.

<Proceed, Stroika-unit.>

<Thank you, my lord,> Stroika told the Fabricator Locum. Then to Phrenos~361 he streamed,

<Search the roof. Full auspectral scan – all filters.>

As the servo-skull drifted back outside, Stroika grabbed the dazed forge master and dragged his rusted metal carcass out onto the balcony platform.

Outside, Stroika marched between the arcing node columns. The thin chemical smog of the forge world's nightside drifted about the temple roof, the skitarii commander's movements disturbing its polychromatic miasma. The forge master stumbled and skidded across the platform, coughing and hacking his way to the railing edge.

Beyond, Haldron-44 Stroika could see the constellation of forge fires and molten channels that made up the crowded industriascape of the capital districts. The mountainous silhouette of the Magnaplex Maximal reared from the twisted skyline and cut its darkness from the hellish radiance of the exposed core. The infernal glow of the Abystra-Dynomicron created a roaring horizon, with the heat and light of the daemon's iron core reaching up into the night sky.

Grabbing the forge master by his leather robes, Stroika hauled the servant of the Dark Mechanicum off his feet and over the roof edge. The forge master, still confused from the mindscrambler pulse, blurted coded insanity. His tentacles slithered and knotted about one another while rusty filth gushed through his face grille, splattering Stroika's gauntlets. The skitarii commander spread his metal feet further apart and balanced the distribution of his weight. The red foil of his cloak rippled in the caustic breeze. The forge master, meanwhile, kicked his legs and clutched his appendages to his barrel chest, desperate not to fall through his own robes.

Stroika's optics burned into the darkness of the forge master's hood, the corrupt construct's own fading like a pair of cooling coals.

'Impure thing of the dark arts,' Haldron-44 Stroika said. 'You claim to have all the answers. That there is no limit to your daemon-sponsored knowledge. Then prove it, by answering a very simple question. Where can I find the Arch-Fabricant?'

The forge master seemed to struggle with his words, blurting cacophonous scrapcode and liquid corrosion from his grille. The skitarius didn't know whether this insanity proceeded from the master's scrambled cogitators or his ruinous pollution.

'Forge master,' Haldron-44 Stroika said, shaking the corrupt construct above the vertiginous drop. 'You have already fallen so far in the estimation of the Machine God. Don't make me drop you further off the top of your own temple.'

With his tentacles flailing, the master coughed up a stream of rusty filth from his inner workings that cascaded down the gleaming war-plate of Stroika's chest. As the Dark Mechanicum construct chuckled his madness through his hacking cough, Stroika heard the sound of gunfire.

Patching into Phrenos~361's pict feed, Stroika saw that around the back of the temple tower, the servo-skull had discovered a launch pad. Waiting on the platform was a baroque skiff – a grav-craft boasting a twisted carriage-bay for the forge master and his retinue, plus a single malformed servitor-pilot who was interfaced with the open cockpit. The cable-threaded drone had drawn a stub pistol on the servo-skull and Phrenos had returned fire with its underjaw arc blaster.

<Scan skiff destination,> Stroika streamed to the servo-skull.

As Phrenos~361 drifted about the crackling corpse of the warped pilot, it transmitted the coordinates of the skiff's destination. The Magnaplex-Maximal. The forge master was going to flee his temple, with news of its loss taken to Ulcan Gnostramari, Arch-Fabricant of Velchanos. He was going to butcher Stroika and take his phylactic interface – still attached to the skitarii commander's

brain – to the forge temple principal as an offering of appeasement. A gift to help his Arch-Fabricant repel the skitarii invasion.

Haldron-44 Stroika opened the adamantalloy digits of his gauntlets. The dark chuckle died in the congestion of the forge master's throat as the leather of his robes slipped from the Primus's fingers.

Stroika watched the forge master flail and vox-shriek his way down the side of the forge temple. He seemed to fall for an eternity before crashing through the twisted architecture of the upper forge, leaving rusty splatters along his path, each impact a trail of corruption on the metal corrugations of the forge temple. The shrieking died on the poisoned air as the forge master plummeted through a set of power vanes that simultaneously electrocuted and shredded the servant of the Dark Mechanicum. As the vanes flared, the corroded workings and spoilage of the forge master rained down into the freightways below.

Haldron-44 Stroika extended an arm and allowed Phrenos~361 to land. The Primus cycled his optics as he drew his gaze across the capital districts of the renegade forge world. He flickered through magscoptics, filters and overlays, while data scrolled and ghostly, phylactic pict streams played one over another. The skitarii commander matched the updates he was experiencing to what he was seeing from his elevated position.

Alpha Versorias was making good progress along the arterial freightways, elevated maglev routes and waste-drains gurgling with toxic run-off. His column of crawlers and Ironstrider engines had punched through the hasty barricades, tractor-conveyers and freight-monitors that had been halted to provide obstructions. Like the ancient caravans of early Mars, their progress through the capital districts was indomitable.

Vanguard skitarii cohorts, like the one now belonging to Sub-Alpha Quendix, moved through the adjoining mills, assembly-lines and complexes, fighting through the gloom and twisted architecture of manufactoria, production complexes and machine workshops. Moving slickly through such environments, their advance had been expert and economical. Skitarii soldiers used cover and in turn covered one another in a silent advance. Like parts of a well-oiled machine, the skitarii cohorts moved in a wave of murderous silence through the capital districts.

In their wake, the freightways, factory floors and forge temples were littered with the scrap and corpses of mechanoids who had failed to stop them. Slave menials armed with little more than the corruptions and bodily blessings that living under ruinous skies had inflicted upon them. Combat-servitors whose warp-kissed flesh was augmented with powered claws and eviscerating chainblades. Spike-armoured soldier-wretches of the temple forge guard. Horrifically modified hench-units that stank of spoiled flesh. Flagellant spawn that had been monstrously fashioned into living weapons. The heretek tech-priests of besieged installations, whose corrupt, sigil-scrawled bodies had been weaponised to fire streams of aethyric energies. Factory automatons that thought and fought for themselves.

10-Victro Tiberiax and his alphas had done well to keep pace with these forward columns. Securing bordering districts, Tiberiax and his rangers had hunted down renegade forge masters and taken temples dedicated to the infernal entity that raged at the planet's core. His skitarii had claimed two key freight stations, downing scores of orbital barges, hump-shuttles and haulage brigs. The monstrous magna-machinery towering over the Ghorgaxae-Hectra assembly yards had been neutralised. A raging inferno now lit up the night sky with warp-channelled energies where the Mal/Tec Terrawatt fusion reactors had once been. The corrupt genitor lords and magi that ruled the

worker sub-hives of the twisted Flesh Forges had been assassinated.

Orbital augur scans and captures relayed from the *Opus Machina* told Stroika of the hell that waited for them all about the Magnaplex Maximal. The Arch-Fabricant was holding back his personal army of killer constructs and abominations; foul forces attached to the forge temple principal and charged with its defence. Daemon engines that had been born in the fires of the Abystra-Dynomicron.

In the satellite districts Tiberiax and his ranger cohorts had increasingly run into the dread forces of hereteks and magi from across the forge world. Warp-fuelled mechanoids and altereds raced to their Arch-Fabricant's aid, compelled by the ancient protocols of technofeudal observance and new promises of reward streamed and warp-cast across the planet. Tiberiax and his army of rangers were now working their way up the blazing channels of molten iron that flowed through the satellite districts before forming the ferric falls of the abyssal drop-off, the sentient liquid metal returning to the daemonic core of the cursed forge world.

Time was against all the holy constructs of the Omnissiah fighting for the planetary soul of Velchanos Magna. While Haldron-44 Stroika's skitarii legions moved in on the capital forge, augur arrays aboard the arkcruisers of the Adeptus Mechanicus fleet told of colossal movements of cybernetic troops and materiel across the surface of the renegade forge world.

Blizzards of atmospheric craft, ugly freighters and lighters now descended upon the contested districts, packed with wretched reinforcements. Shrieking through the thin chemical skies and over the heads of skitarii soldiers were swarms of fighter wing aircraft. The spiked, black outlines of servitor-piloted Avengers streamed warp trails and cut up the freightways and sacrificial plazas with their merciless boltcannons. The Fabricator Locum was faring little better in low orbit, where the suicidal runs of mangle-fashioned system ships, armed freighters and defence monitors threatened to down the *Opus Machina* and her arkcruisers. This was made worse by fresh updates of heat signatures in the shipyards and partially constructed Dark Mechanicum vessels rising above the renegade forge world from their dry docks.

As Haldron-44 Stroika phylactically monitored the thousands of skitarii carrying out their tactical invasion of the capital districts, billions of corrupt warriors were making their way through the freightways and ongoing industry of Velchanos Magna, converging on the unholy site of the forge temple principal. Even if Stroika and his skitarii took the Magnaplex Maximal and its secrets for his Fabricator Locum, there was no guarantee he could hold it against such numbers – as Engra Myrmidex undoubtedly expected. This said nothing of the progress of abominable Ordinatus war machines and the spirit-corrupted Titans that were striding through the nightmare industriascape from the damnation of fortress workshops on the other side of the planet.

Stroika stood there. Processing. Analysing. Strategising. When Sub-Alpha Quendix arrived on the balcony platform, leading a unit of vanguard skitarii, he did not bother to turn.

<The forge temple is in our hands, Primus,> Quendix reported. <All defending forces have been annihilated.>

<Very good, sub-alpha,> Stroika said. <Your skitarii may take a moment for prayer, for the anointment of damage with consecrated oils and replenishing ammunition.>

<Thank you, Primus.>

<No,> Stroika said. <Thank you, *Alpha* Quendix. I am enacting a field promotion based upon your record and the loss of your cybernetic superior.>

<You honour me, Primus.>

<I do,> Stroika streamed, <and you will honour me and the Machine God for whom you fight with the following. I aim to move on with the column and take the forge temple principal with all despatch. I need you and your cohorts to take Cynodon Delta, Cynodon Gamma and Dispyria-Omicros by force, as you have this temple. We cannot allow the forge masters of those installations to flank our approach. Questions?>

<None, Primus,> Quendix reported.

<Good. Have incapacitated skitarii returned to the dropsite and instruct Princeps Deka to have his Sicarians transport ammunition and power to the advancing columns.> Stroika knew that the princeps would detest such a duty. It was time, however, to let Deka's ruststalkers off the leash. <Inform him that I have duties more suited to his skills upon his arrival.>

1001

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF I
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… +*THE NUMBERS HAVE SPOKEN*+

Haldron-44 Stroika found himself buried in the abominable shadow of the Magnaplex Maximal. The molten blaze of the planet's daemonic core raged behind it, while the dark magnificence of the forge principal had long been refashioned into a temple celebrating the infernal union of man and machine, the daemon and the Ruinous Powers of the warp.

The Magnaplex Maximal was a dread wonder of hanging forges and iron falls, the molten metal lighting up the darkness with the spit and slurp of its malevolence. The falls fed a broad moat that was both a defensive feature and an aesthetic one. The fiery channels met around the rear of the mighty forge, spilling over the great drop that bordered the temple in a broad cascade that rejoined the vast daemon entity from which it originally flowed. The Abystra-Dynomicron, infernal sponsor of the renegade forge world and provider of its power and its unnatural craft.

There had once been a circular plaza surrounding the forge temple principal, with doctrinal quadrangles forming the denticles of a cog. It was a wonder that could be seen from orbit and honoured the Omnissiah with its form. Now there was but a shattered thoroughfare of black, iron-threaded stone, with much of the layout having been lost to the cataclysm that had exposed the core.

The quadrangles now housed small mountains of mouldering scrap and bone – the fused carcasses of cybernetic constructs who had failed or disappointed the Arch-Fabricant and the daemonic core to whom he was Lord Prophetechnos. Obscene symbols dedicated to the daemon and the rancid deities of the beyond were carved into the floor and displayed on the pillars of elevated freightways and twisted maglev lines that strangled the cog-plaza like overgrown metal vines.

It was there – before the abominate forge temple that spewed forth infernal iron and the daemon engines for which Velchanos Magna had become infamous – that the Arch-Fabricant made his stand.

The battle had raged for hours. The skitarii vanguard had kept pushing forward under Stroika's command, cohorts of fearless cybernetic soldiers crackling with radioactivity from the contamination of their devastating weaponry. Moving through the smouldering destruction about the forge temple

principal, immaculate in their battleware, were sentinels in crimson and silver.

Ranger units crept through the wreckage of vehicles and over small mountains of debris created by stilt-freightways that had been blasted and toppled for cover. With their galvanic rifles and arquebuses, they turned the battlefield of shattered rockcrete, twisted black metal and fire-gutted factories into a hailstorm. The shrieking path of servitor shells turned corrupt mechanoids into crackling infernos of systematic overload. As bullets of depleted transuranium from arquebuses smacked through armour plating and buildings, the renegade forge-worlders inside were turned into streaming showers of blood, oil and workings. All the while, the skitarii vanguard made their advance before the maelstrom of such pinpoint slaughter.

Sicarian ruststalkers haunted the derelict workshops and factories, butchering their way through the Dark Mechanicum troops who were sheltering there. With the shimmer and buzz of transonic blades, the ruststalker units disassembled cybernetic warplings, finishing the polluted constructs with the molecular dissonance of chordclaw sweeps, the blurs of talons ripping effortlessly through flesh and bionics.

Haldron-44 Stroika rode on the back of an Onager Dunecrawler, leading a contingent of other armoured arachnoid vehicles across the debris of the smouldering battlefield. Clutching the bulbous back of the crawler with a single gauntlet and the toe-point of a metal foot, Stroika led columns of the vehicles, like swollen metal ticks, towards the enemy. With broadening eradication beams atomising enemy formations and neutronic streams turning spiked vehicles and monstrous automatonic machines into crackling, burnt-out wrecks, the Dunecrawlers continued their indomitable advance. Servitor-driven Ironstrider engines moved nimbly across the debris and body-strewn terrain. Weaving between the Dunecrawlers, they seared fat las-beams into approaching enemy contingents and the twisted shapes of light vehicles.

For the skitarii commander, the battle was havoc overlaid with havoc. While his legions exchanged fire with loathsome, warp-fuelled fusions of man and machine, his optics and phylactics provided further complication and insight.

Stroika's cogitators burned inside the tissue of his brain and the plastek of his battle wetware. The angles and extended trajectories of incoming beams and bullets updated in a continuous cycle. The twisted battlefield was a vista of flashing forms. Targeting reticules shot back and forth, identifying the warped, myriad forms of the Dark Mechanicum to be locked and killed.

Data spooled in an endless, updating loop, apprising Stroika of strategic openings, enemy reinforcements and skitarii losses. Phylactic pict feeds and vox-transmitted reports recreated the cacophony of battle within his mind. Simulations bled to nothing as the speed of unfolding events overreached them and fizzling filters showed Stroika the battlefield in all its auspectral glory.

Cutting through the miasma of overlaid data and the moment-by-moment, life-or-death decisions, the Fabricator Locum was ever present. Boosted by the phylactic arrays carried by the armoured Dunecrawlers, Engra Myrmidex's voice echoed about Stroika's mind.

<Stroika-unit…>

<Warhound-designation god-machine inbound…>

<Battle maniple kill-ratios are falling…>

<Unidentifiable power flux detected, sixth denticle…>

<The Omnissiah guides us, in all things…>

<Protocol 96/3-1 states that when…>

<Status?>
<Legionary accuracy down 0.24 per cent…>
<Securing the secrets of the forge is of prime importance…>
<Observe your doctrina imperatives…>
<The temple is not to be damaged…>
<Estimates revised – parameters extended…>
<Time is running out…>
<You must take that temple…>
<Stroika-unit, report…>

Stroika drifted the fingers of his gauntlet down to a wound in his midriff. An enemy shell had found its way through both the overlapping force fields of the Dunecrawler and his own conversion field. Passing straight through both his war-plate and his side, it had been an incredibly fortunate shot. Stroika suspected that sniper constructs sat up in the hanging forges of the temple were using some kind of daemonic guidance to place their shots. Bringing the bionic digits up, the officer could see the rich, red blood on his fingertips, the same that was running down the side of his silvered armour.

The skitarii commander felt the burn of doctrina imperatives that were yet to be met and protocols unfulfilled. Waving an Ironstrider engine rider over to him, Stroika stepped from the Dunecrawler onto the side of the walker. Once again holding on with a single gauntlet and the tip of his metal toe, Stroika rode out the rough terrain, pulling in close as the Sydonian Dragoon rider took the Ironstrider engine at speed up and down a mound of rubble and serrated girders. Phrenos~361, who had been sheltering in an alcove amongst the Dunecrawler's armour plating, whirred to a magnetic blur and drifted through the mayhem behind its master.

Warp-beams of unnatural energy cut through the reality about Stroika, while autocannon fire chewed up an advancing file of vanguard skitarii. Temple tech-thrall soldiers, attached to the forge principal, turned the air into a criss-crossing web of red needle beams.

An accompanying ballistarius engine that had been pacing Stroika went down in a stream of boltcannon fire, delivered by Dark Mechanicum fighters swooping in low on their spiked wings. As another volley and another followed, hammering the servitor-driver, the engine and its skitarii rider into the rockcrete, Stroika updated the column of crawlers he had just left with the aircraft's course. Within moments, several Onager Dunecrawlers had fired their rocket arrays, blasting the midnight-black fighter and its wing-servitors out of the sky.

Halting and moving, halting and moving through the battlefield hailstorm of gunfire and searing beams, the Sydonian Dragoon allowed successive rockcrete pillars to soak up the worst of the attention. Arriving at the forward extent of the skitarii advance, Stroika found hundreds of cybernetic soldiers pinned down behind the toppled section of an elevated maglev rail and the armoured train it was carrying. A skitarii maniple held its pinned position as warped Dark Mechanicum battle tanks pulverised the debris with their massive tracks. They exchanged heavy blasts of energy with the advancing line of Onager Dunecrawlers.

Meanwhile, the interior of the maglev monitor train that had fallen across the battlefield glowed with an ominous light. The contingent of cybernetic heavy shock troops that the monitor train had been carrying to harass the skitarii rear sections now cut through the armour of the compartment roofs with their barrel-mounted chainblades.

Levelling the length of his taser goad like a lance, the Sydonian Dragoon riding the Ironstrider

engine smashed one of the corrupted cyborgs back through its compatriots. With a flash of power, the heavy shock trooper was smash-blasted into several razor-wire-entwined bionics. Along with heavy-duty appendages and cradled weaponry, the twisted ladder of an interfaced spine and a shrunken skull-helm flew back into the darkness of the carriage-compartment.

Dropping down to the shattered rockcrete, Haldron-44 Stroika launched his arc pistols on their appendage-rails and blasted several shock troopers back. The warrior cyborgs droned machine madness inside their spiked, armoured shells. They experienced the battle as a miasma of electromagnetic turmoil, heat signatures and seismic percussion.

As the constructs rattled with Stroika's assault, spidery arcs feeling their way across armour and through the black ooze of their workings, Stroika cycled his shoulder joints. Turning his torso socket at the same time, the skitarii commander became a cranking whirlwind of arc mauls. The weapons trailed a blaze of sizzling power, smashing shrunken cybernetic heads from barrel-chassised bodies and pushing the flared muzzles of warp-blasters aside.

With Stroika cycling his limbs and turning, each slick movement firing with a hydraulic *thunk*, the Primus beat and blasted the emerging shock troopers into a headless throng of weaponless warriors. Battering the aethyric beams of their rifles and appendage-cradles aside, Stroika mercilessly ended cyborg after cyborg. He ducked and leant out of the clumsy, chugging paths of barrel-mounted chainblades. He crushed skull-helms and visited point-blank storms of electrical energy into the juddering, smoke-streaming torso-units of the augmented killers.

Within moments the forward skitarii registered the presence of their Primus fighting among them. They processed the emerging danger of the corrupted shock troops, who were cutting their foetid way out of the very cover the skitarii were using. Retaining the shelter of their positions, the skitarii turned to face the toppled train. They blasted a synchronised volley of servitor shot from their galvanic rifles. Hammering the droning shock troops aside, the sophisticated ammunition caused the cyborgs to overload and explode in battery-blasts of crackling power and slime-coated workings.

As Haldron-44 Stroika took cover with his skitarii, the last of the heavy shock troopers stomped out of the monitor train compartment, only to succumb to the shrieking attentions of servitor shot.

Turning his helm aside at the explosive overload and the fine spray of black slime, Stroika swished his greatcloak aside and worked his way down the line of skitarii. Identica told the Primus that he was amongst the 4.2 Fortisoi-Cyratica. Stroika found their registered alpha, 606-Sartrid Inculus.

<Report, alpha,> Stroika said.

<Armour and conveyers, Primus,> Inculus told him. <Battle tanks and automatons mounting heavy weaponry. All supported by temple emplacements. Exploratory advance negated. We experimented with a frontal assault but the losses were unacceptable. We need the crawlers.>

<Armour is on its way,> Stroika told him.

<We need air strikes,> Inculus said. <Sir, we need orbital bombardment.>

Like the skitarii alpha, Haldron-44 Stroika could make an endless list of what the invasion force needed. Scrambling up the side of the monitor train – the armour of which was covered with shredding metal barbs and spines – Stroika risked a look over the mangled maglev line and the debris of the collapsed stiltway.

<Be careful, sir,> Inculus said.

Up on the train, Stroika came to appreciate the warning. Just above the vanes and crenellations of his half-cog plume, a raging storm of heavy shell, chuntering cannon and fat energy beams was being

exchanged between ranks of black, baroque battle tanks and the advancing Mechanicus crawlers. As Phrenos~361 rose to join its master in cataloguing the area, Stroika put a gauntlet on the servo-skull's bone crown and pushed it down below the havoc of bullets and beams.

It was no place for man or machine, as the lines of half-atomised skitarii bodies testified. The cybernetic soldiers that 606-Sartrid Inculus had sent to test the approach had been blasted apart mere moments after surmounting the debris beyond the train.

The grit and twisted metal of the collapse suddenly flashed with the hammering of sickly, stuttering beams. Stroika ducked his helm as the beams, fired from one of many cannon-emplacements set in the hanging forges of the monstrous temple, cut through the air overhead. Where the sickly streams of energy phased into the covering wreckage, the metal struts began to squirm and the rockcrete liquefied to a bubbling sentience. Stroika withdrew his gauntlet as the living wreckage reached out for him.

Looking up just in time, Stroika's optic-array and overlays alerted him to the fact that the tapering turret of an enemy battle tank had acquired his position. The skitarii commander jumped down from the train just as the long turret vomited forth the blinding purple flash of a shot. Wreckage and plaza debris vaulted into the air as the cannon blast thudded into the embankment of plasteel and shattered rockcrete. The toppled monitor train was knocked back, forcing the skitarii taking cover behind to jump, scramble and crawl out of the pulverising path of the rolling carriages.

<Back!> Haldron-44 Stroika urged, rolling to his metal feet. He jabbed the finger of a gauntlet along the length of the monitor train. <Back!>

As Alpha Inculus and the 4.2 Fortisoi-Cyratica retreated along the tangled carriage-compartments, the tank shot evolved into a miniature storm of sizzling, abyssal energies that tore up the armoured train's bulbous engine. It was another of the Dark Mechanicum's warp-fuelled weapons. The monitor train's forward compartments disintegrated in the maelstrom before the anomaly itself finally dissipated.

Settling back into cover a little way down the train's length, Stroika stared up into the sky. He could hear the throaty roar of Mechanicus Thunderbolt fighter-bombers from the arkcruiser *Ultros* coming in low and savaging a maniple of Dark Mechanicum battle-automata with their nose-mounted cannons. As the rockcrete-punching cannon bursts ripped through the lumbering advance of the warp-plated robots, they fell apart. The horrific phantasms of polluted machine-spirits clawed and raged as they sizzled into the broken ground about the clattering plate and hydraulics.

As the Thunderbolts climbed once more and banked about the mountainous, black form of the unholy forge temple, Haldron-44 Stroika phylactically reached out for the magi of the arkcruiser.

<*Ultros*,> Stroika streamed amongst the din of explosions, heavy-gauge cannon fire and whining beams of unnatural energy. <*Ultros*, this is Primus Stroika. Identica confirm.>

<Confirmed, Primus Stroika.>

Climbing up the spikes of the temple monitor train once more, Stroika got a fix on the position of the column of armour and tracked conveyers that sat under the protection of the forge temple gun emplacements.

<I'm sending you coordinates for a Thunderbolt bombing run on the temple plaza,> Stroika transmitted.

<Be advised, Stroika-unit,> the techno-magos aboard the *Ultros* returned. <Air strike risks damage to the forge temple principal and the mission objectives.>

<Then ensure your servitor-pilots don't miss,> Stroika streamed back.

Phrenos~361 issued a warning blurt of binary, re-streaming the feed from its optics to the skitarii commander's overlays. Spilling out of several monstrous conveyers, Stroika detected the clustered signatures of Dark Mechanicum thralls.

The soldier-menials were running through the hail of beams and heavy stub rounds proceeding from the approaching Dunecrawlers. Ejecting his arc pistol mag-cells, Stroika slammed the weapons down into his thigh-loaders.

<Enemy inbound,> Stroika transmitted to Alpha Inculus and his skitarii. With the polished wooden stocks of their galvanic rifles pulled in close and barrels aimed up over the train, the rangers waited for the rush.

Thralls ran with ruinous abandon at the skitarii position. Broad streams of murderous energy from the skitarii armour cut them in half, eradication beamers atomised their left flank and crawler-mounted heavy stubbers chewed up the first wave. As the soldier-menials that made it through the barrage reached the embankment of wreckage they jumped, the stumbling momentum of their battlefield run taking them over the monitor train.

Galvanic rifles barked in unison. The range was close and the shrieking reports short-lived. Many of the Dark Mechanicum thralls died in the air, the servitor rounds turning their minor augmentations into detonators for associated power systems. As crackling corpses rained down on the skitarii, missing heads and legs, Haldron-44 Stroika realised that the soldier-menials were missing something else.

Those thralls that escaped the synchronous blast of servitor shot dropped down into the cover behind the train. They rolled and skidded back to their feet like code-fevered constructs. Stroika saw that the butchered workers had already had their arms cut from their shoulders and therefore didn't carry any weapons. They wore gas masks over their mouths but the rest of their faces bore the hallmarks of mutation – scales, spines and the warped flesh of the heretek. They came back at the skitarii, running into the wooden stocks of rifles as Inculus's rangers put them down. As they scrambled back to their feet, Stroika saw that each mutilated menial wore a pack that began to shimmer, crackle and glow.

<Alert!> Stroika transmitted to the rangers. Phrenos~361 banked and drifted out of range. As the skitarii commander knocked a thrall to one side with the clutched grip and protruding mag-cell of his arc pistol, the rabid worker's mask came away. Instead of a mouth, the Dark Mechanicum thrall had a worm-like scolex, with metallic, needle-like teeth. It came at the skitarii commander again, forcing Stroika to launch it back with a hydraulically fired kick against the thrall's chest.

The menial's pack detonated with a soul-wrenching boom. Stroika's world momentarily became a kaleidoscope of receiver-splitting sound and otherworldly energies. His optics flashed with warnings and unidentified field detections. As the packs of the other thralls simultaneously detonated, including those attached to rifle-blasted corpses, explosions swiftly became implosions.

The manic menial before Stroika streamed away to a molecular mist that was dragged into an aethyric vortex. The phenomenon opened up in the floor where the pack had detonated, dragging Stroika to the ground and towards the swirling rift. While small, each vortex pulled at reality with warp-gaping power, swallowing scrap, wreckage and soldiers of the 4.2 Fortisoi-Cyratica. Allowing his pistols to ride back on their rails, the skitarii commander slammed the digits of his gauntlets into the shattered rockcrete like grapnels. As Alpha Inculus lost his grip on the monitor train, Stroika reached out for the officer, snatching for his arm as he was dragged by.

Then – as swiftly as they had begun – the warp vortices closed and disappeared, swallowing

themselves up and leaving the cacophonous reality of the battlefield behind. Between the air-searing beams that criss-crossed about him, the chuntering cannon fire and the incessant overloads and explosions that rocked the battlefield, Stroika's mind felt like it was under assault. As the vortices subsided, he became once more aware of the sheer volume of data and information he was processing. Clarifications phylactically addressed. Updates from the *Opus Machina* and the arkcruisers in low orbit. Contextual pict feeds. Monitored losses. Verified kills.

Ironstrider walkers had engaged robotic machines infused with abominable intelligence of their own – gravitic forge-claws, sentinel machinery and the towering menace of tracked slave-drivers.

Several Onager crawlers had become scrapcode-infected by multi-limbed cyber-parasites that skittered, rolled and crawled across the battlefield in a polluting plague. The electro-amniotically immersed drivers were forced to set their crawlers and the precious data that they carried to self-destruct, taking out several chain-draped Knight walkers in the process.

Vanguard skitarii of the Saggitarq 8/90 Io-thetra had succumbed to machinator units. The Quoidos VIth Neutriad were down to half-strength against various sects of mechadendrite-swarming magi militant – hereteks who had taken to the field personally to visit the dark wrath of their monstrous, experimental weaponry on the servants of the Omnissiah.

Nalode Deka 871 and his ruststalkers had almost been buried alive in the sub-basement ruins of a demolished factory by a siege-automaton that was spiked like an urchin and carried its cybernetic victims as trophies, impaled on its rusted defences.

10-Victro Tiberiax, meanwhile, had made little progress against the constant influx of reinforcements. His rangers aimed their rifles and transuranics back and forth, caught between the expertly drilled warriors of the Magnaplex Maximal praetorian forge guard and arriving technofeudal reinforcements sent by satellite forge temples. Small armies of gun-servitors, forge thralls, battle-automata and hench-units – all warped by the touch of Chaos.

Scrabbling back to cover, the remaining skitarii rangers of the 4.2 Fortisoi-Cyratica put their backs to the monitor train. Some had lost their weaponry to the strange vortices, while others now slipped off their helms to reveal their sub-dermal circuitry, optics and swarthy forge world features. Phrenos~361 shot between mangled wreckage and pieces of cover, once more joining its master.

<Thank you, sir,> 606-Sartrid Inculus said, getting up and helping his commander to his feet. <Primus, should we not explore another avenue of attack?>

As Stroika slammed his greatcloak and back against cover once more he knew that the officer's suggestion did not come from cowardice but cold logic. However, Stroika couldn't abandon his commitment to the progress they had already made. Advancing on another front would take hours that the skitarii didn't have.

The Primus looked up as his equalisers isolated the rising rumble of Thunderbolt fighter-bombers on their attack run.

<No need, Alpha Inculus,> Stroika reassured him. <Omnissiah willing, our entry point to the objective is about to be blown wide open.>

Stroika and Inculus watched the rust-red Thunderbolts line up for their attack run on the Dark Mechanicum columns of armour and conveyers.

<Incoming,> Inculus alerted his remaining rangers.

The night sky suddenly lit up with detonations, but not those initiated by bombs dropped by the Thunderbolts. One after another, the fighter-bomber wing of the arkcruiser *Ultros* disappeared in a

disintegrating smear of destruction. From the south, Stroika saw a flickering stream of gargantuan tracer fire. Some colossal weapon had blown the entire fighter wing out of the sky.

As Stroika's cogitator cycled through threat possibilities, the colossal, stooped silhouettes of not one but two Warhound Scout Titans stomped into view. The monstrous machines travelled parallel to the abyssal drop-off and the exposed planetary core. As they strode closer and Stroika's telescoptics pict-resolved in, the skitarii commander was cursed with a vision of annihilation. Watching the first of the godless machines limp closer, it became clear that their hulls had been possessed by daemonic entities. Void shielding that rippled with field-haunting entities flickered with some infernal malfunction. The lupine metal architecture of the Titan's forward command deck was transmuted into the daemonflesh of some monstrous creature of the warp. While one of its legs retained the corroded workings and plate of its original design, the other was warped and covered in a crustacean-like shell.

It was draped in the power cabling and chains that the Titans had walked through to reach the forge temple in time. At its side it carried the Vulcan mega-bolter it had used to wipe out the Thunderbolts, while the monstrous muzzle of its blast gun dribbled warp-threaded plasma into the freightways below and the buildings it was demolishing beneath its huge feet.

'Machine God of mercy…' Stroika said to himself. Looking up into the sky, he didn't find the Great Maker to whom he offered his prayers. He did see the *Opus Machina* in low orbit, like the fleet's mauled arkcruisers, fighting off charging system ships, boarding actions and the turbolaser batteries of orbital defence platforms.

<Ark Mechanicus, Ark Mechanicus,> the skitarii commander streamed. <This is Stroika. Respond.>

It had been two minutes and thirteen seconds since the Fabricator Locum's last demand for information or status. This told Stroika that something was keeping Engra Myrmidex busy. Perhaps it was the *Opus Machina*. Or the increasingly bleak picture orbital data was painting of closing Dark Mechanicum forces as they were drawn from across the planet down on the Fabricator Locum's precious objective.

<Ark Mechanicus, respond,> Stroika transmitted.

<Yes, Stroika-unit,> Myrmidex responded. His transmissions sounded strange.

<We need orbital support,> Stroika said. <Two targets inbound. God-machines. Warhound-class. South-south-east. Seventh denticle.>

The Fabricator Locum didn't seem to understand what Stroika was saying.

<You are failing Him, Stroika-unit,> Engra Myrmidex told him. <We are all failing Him. We are undone in the Great Maker's eyes.>

Stroika looked over at the dark, mountainous shape of the Magnaplex Maximal, then up at the *Opus Machina*.

<I don't believe that, Lord Fabricator,> Stroika streamed. <I believe that the Omnissiah's work can be done, even here on this heretek-swarming abomination of a world. My cogitator coils tell me that our objectives can be achieved.>

<You know nothing, Stroika-unit,> Engra Myrmidex told him, his transmission laced with the heaviness of defeat. It had the signature of a magos who had accepted his fate and that of everyone else. <How could you? You are but a weapon. An instrument fashioned by the priesthood to wage war.>

<I am a holy warrior – a crusader of the Omnissiah,> Stroika told him. <And as such, by my

imperatives and protocols, I tell you that we can win this.>

<You sound like I did, Stroika-unit,> Engra Myrmidex told him. <I too was blessed with ignorance at the beginning of this enterprise. But sometimes belief is not enough. Like I was then, you are not in possession of all the facts. The data eludes you – as it did us all. Soon you will understand.>

Stroika was running out of time. His mind burned with phylactic intrusion, with the pict feeds of the dying and the cold equations of war.

<My lord, we need those orbital strikes. Two targets. South…>

<The calculus engines have run the probabilities, Stroika-unit,> Engra Myrmidex told him. <The logi have made their determinations. Anything else is a waste – of energy and materials. The Machine God abhors waste. We live and die by His manifestation: in flesh, in metal and in number. The numbers have spoken, Stroika-unit–>

<Lord Fabricator!>

<–and they say that we are lost.>

<My lord!>

<Goodbye, Stroika-unit.>

1010

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+FORGEBREAKER+*

With a blinding flash, the huge and ancient Ark Mechanicus cracked down the middle, exposing the fiery innards of the ship. Decks in flame. The ruptured keel. The intricate workings of interstitial sections and the battery-banks of the port cannons. Like a molten wound it opened, the reinforced superstructure of the vessel protruding like shattered bones. The *Opus Machina* – colossal Ark Mechanicus of the Omnissiah – split in two.

But for his overlays and logic coils, Haldron-44 Stroika wouldn't have believed what he was seeing. The *Opus Machina*'s back was broken. She had been struck by another vessel at ramming speed on her starboard side. The shields of both ships arced and seared as the Ark Mechanicus was bulldozed through the atmosphere towards the Dark Mechanicum forge world.

Stroika stumbled back. The beams cooking the air about him and the shells sparking off the wreckage seemed to fade away. In that moment, the deaths of skitarii soldiers and the corrupt constructs they were fighting became inconsequential. The explosions and battlefield destruction paled to nothing in comparison to the apocalypse unfolding above Stroika's head.

Flames ripped through the shattered wreck of the Ark Mechanicus as the vessel's catastrophic damage met the oxygen and chemical taint of the lower atmosphere. Stroika couldn't believe it. The ramming vessel was still smashing the flagship on. Finally, like the ruined carcass of a gored beast, the *Opus Machina* tumbled at Velchanos Magna. She rolled dorsal over keel, twisting, splitting and raging. As she plummeted towards the planet's surface, her shearing fore and aft sections barely attached, the attacking vessel was revealed.

Stroika's optic-array cycled furiously through filters while he stood, like many others on the field of battle, dumbfounded. Even the glow of Phrenos~361's optics were fixed upon the orbital spectacle. As a cybernetic construct – a skitarii soldier – the Primus knew he had to fight on. His doctrina imperatives and protocols allowed for little else. As a man – who thought and felt for himself – Haldron-44 Stroika was horrified. He struggled to process what was happening. For the sickening

steeliness of the moment, he was lost.

The attacking vessel was no system ship or monitor, her colossal size and design told Stroika that. The vessel, like those that followed in a brute flotilla, seemed of an altogether different design to the craft defending Velchanos Magna. They might have been repaired or augmented in the forge world's great shipyards, but they had certainly not been built there.

Stroika's overlays mapped the dimensions of the monstrous vessel. Even from the surface, he could make out its original class, obscured by an eternity of augmentation and experimentation. It was a portless beast of the void, storming forth blind through the blackness. The clinker-armoured nightmare of plate laid over reinforced plate gave way to sections of what appeared to be bronzed flesh, stretched across the sharp ridges of the ship's architecture. Beyond this was a bulbous, cathedralesque aft section. The vessel's reinforced prow sat in a nest of gargantuan impact-absorbing hydraulics and was shaped like a mighty hammer. It had been this terrible weapon that had smashed the *Opus Machina* asunder.

Flashing projections showed Stroika how the ramming vessel had emerged from the raging maelstrom of the nearby storm front undetected. Unseen from the surface. Unavoidable for those unfortunate vessels already in orbit. The projections flashed its ramming-speed run at the Ark Mechanicus, with its flotilla of rusted cruisers, fat troop-hulks and squat frigates keeping pace. The Fabricator Locum and his magi had run their evasive models and probabilities. Their conclusion was that nothing could save the stately Ark Mechanicus from the inevitability of such a devastating attack.

Seconds passed for Stroika like minutes stretched to hours. The impossible had happened. The Adeptus Mechanicus flagship had been destroyed and the commanding priesthood under whose authority the mission was prosecuted were gone. The bombardment cannons and prow lance batteries on the flanking enemy cruisers opened fire at near point-blank range, tearing into the Mechanicum arkcruisers. The vessels glowed with devastation, the impacts of the enemy weapons like volcanic eruptions opening up in their armoured mid-sections. Stroika watched the *Ultros* fall away as the cruisers ploughed on, engulfing troop carriers, adamanticlads and Mechanicus heavy frigates in a void storm of merciless cannon fire that obliterated what was left of the Machine God's fleet.

Stroika's feeds streamed with the last data the flaming Ark Mechanicus had to offer. Runebank and meme-log confirmations of the enemy vessel's designation, based upon design, age and ancient identica. The *Opus Machina* had factored every last scrap of data into their doomed resolution and the cold acceptance of their fate.

Stroika watched the colossal vessel pull up its hammer-shaped prow, and rain tiny descent craft down on Velchanos Magna like a fish seeding eggs. Dreadclaws. Stormbirds. Gunships. Stroika's optics flashed with flotilla identifications ancient and terrible. The hammer-prowed nightmare was a battle-barge called *Forgebreaker*, last recorded to be under the command of one Idriss Krendl, warsmith of the Iron Warriors Traitor Space Marines.

As the phylactic returns from the *Opus Machina* and the arkfreighters died and their magi with them, Haldron-44 Stroika was confronted with a number of searing facts. The first was that he was now the ranking representative of Satzica Secundus, the Mechanicus invasion force, and the holy Machine God on the surface of Velchanos Magna.

The second was the fact that what remained of the skitarii legions under his command were now trapped on a Dark Mechanicum forge world – a planet that without orbital support and at their present force disposition they could not hope to conquer.

The third fact reduced the first and second to mere formalities. The Iron Warriors had arrived in force above Velchanos Magna. Not to resupply their monstrous Chaos Space Marine forces. Not to repair or refit their cursed and indomitable vessels. Not to trade for fell weaponry, genebred slave-troops or the daemon engines of the planet's hellforges.

They were attacking the Dark Mechanicum forge world. The Iron Warriors did not want what Velchanos Magna had to offer the sons of Perturabo. They wanted Velchanos Magna. Like scavengers of the plain they had waited as a mighty beast had been attacked and felled by a noble predator, only to run the predator off. Descending on the wounded beast, they now aimed to deliver the kill. It was the unstoppable progress of history repeating itself. The inescapable nature of all living things. The universal cycle of galactic life and death.

Stroika's optic-array moved from the horrific shape of the *Forgebreaker* delivering its warped payload of transhuman death to a more immediate threat. His overlays sizzled with the flashing outline of the falling Ark Mechanicus and the projected trajectories of its descent.

<Holy Omnissiah, preserve Your great works,> Stroika streamed. In the phylactic absence of Mechanicus magi – the prophets through whom the Machine God Incarnate heard and answered all prayers – the Primus didn't know who he was communicating with. Stroika could not escape the impossible truth, however. With the cold calculations of a machine, the Iron Warriors – experts in the arts of siege – had fired off their first salvo. The *Opus Machina*. Striking the behemoth vessel in exactly the right place, at the right speed and time, *Forgebreaker* had hammered the Ark Mechanicus not just at Velchanos Magna, but precisely at the zone about the forge temple principal. The battlefield fought over by the thousands of skitarii soldiers and corrupt mechanoids who would be first in line to defend such an objective against merciless opportunists like the Iron Warriors.

Stroika looked about. His optics whirred between skitarii assuming the pointlessness of cover, the steady advance of the Dunecrawlers and the warped constructs of the Dark Mechanicum that in their code-madness seemed to care little about the catastrophe to come. Demolished workshops and the shattered plaza glowed with the outline of potential options for shelter but the battlefield was largely a decimated mess of scrap, mounds of rockcrete and collapsed sub-basements. Being the forge temple principal, the mountainous outline of the Magnaplex Maximal – with its hanging forges and molten iron moat – had been built to last. It had been crafted to endure even the apocalyptic events that led to the unearthing of the planet's daemonic core. Stroika did not, however, have the time to fight his way into the fortified structure.

The Primus's chronometer began a three-figure countdown to impact. He had less than three hundred seconds before the crashing Ark Mechanicus, coming in shallow, decimated the battlefield. Looking at the glow of the planetary core reaching up into the sky behind the Magnaplex Maximal like a hellish corona, Stroika knew there was only one place his skitarii could take shelter from the apocalypse.

<Disengage,> Haldron-44 Stroika ordered across the phylactic link that still existed between him and his skitarii legions. <Disengage and make with all haste for the shipyard drop-off. I repeat. This is an Eta-Sigma-Zeta override. I am ordering you to abort your mission imperatives. Initiate your aegis protocols and get clear of the battlefield. All other considerations rescinded. To me, skitarii. To me!>

Stroika turned to find Phrenos~361 drifting out from where the cybernetic shock troops had cut their way from the monitor train compartment. The servo-skull gave an affirmatory binaric blurt.

<Go!> Stroika ordered, following the servo-skull inside.

As Stroika's optic-array automatically cycled to accommodate the foetid darkness of the compartment, he ran through the false-colour static of the gloomy interior. Skitarii rangers filed into the train after their Primus, all following in the omnispectral-scanning wake of Phrenos~361. As the servo-skull drifted through the fug of corruption, it alerted Stroika to the presence of upcoming obstacles. Launching one of his arc pistols on its appendage rail, Stroika blasted the control mechanisms of the heavy metal doors and vestibule locks that separated the armoured carriages. As the control panels crackled and spat with the energies from his pistol, the weight of the sliding doors dragged them down on their rails, creating an opening through which Phrenos flew and Stroika jumped. Hurdling and rolling through the open doors, the skitarii raced through the disorientation and darkness, negotiating the length of the train that shielded them from the madness and intensity of enemy gunfire.

Kicking out the terminus-compartment's lock, Stroika once again led his skitarii out onto the field of battle. Risking a glance into the sky, Stroika could see the flame-wreathed wreck of the *Opus Machina* tumbling out of the heavens at them. Through the thin veil of smog, above the thunderbolting derelict, the night sky was a constellation of streaming sparks – the drop-trails of Dreadclaws and Thunderhawk gunships following the Ark Mechanicus out of orbit.

Stroika's aegis protocols prompted his optics and overlays to identify enemy constructs and the threat of incoming fire so that he might avoid them. Leaping wreckage with his hydraulically powered legs and with the red foil of his cloak flapping after him, Haldron-44 Stroika led his rangers at speed across the destruction of the battlefield. The battle tanks and tracked troop conveyers stationed in front of the temple blasted the plaza and twisted girders about them. Ranger skitarii were disintegrated in optic-scalding beams and rocketed up into the air in cybernetic pieces as heavy ordnance pounded craters into the battlefield.

<Faster,> Stroika streamed to all receiving skitarii. <For your Primus. For your forge world. For the Machine God and everything that is pure – get to the drop-off!>

The Primus's augurs recorded the returns and mass of skitarii signatures making their way towards the temple. They were coming out from behind cover and sprinting with powered steps across the shattered plaza. Such speed did not allow for evasion and meant that the cybernetic warriors had to find the most direct route between their position and their newly designated objective.

It was exactly the kind of suicidal charge that Stroika hadn't ordered during the battle for the grievous losses it would have entailed, and the skitarii commander hadn't been wrong. As his cybernetic soldiers ran across open ground, their aegis protocols engaged and weaponry silent, the Dark Mechanicum forces mauled them. With skitarii running straight at them, the red of their trench-cloaks flowing behind, the corrupt mechanoids of Velchanos Magna could not resist firing upon the fast-moving targets.

As Stroika hurdled scrap and jumped blasted holes in the plaza, he monitored with steely dismay the datastream of deaths that his systems recorded. Skidding down beneath a shearing blaze of gunfire from the temple emplacements, Stroika got back to his feet and fired his hydraulics. Pushing his bionics to their limit, he followed the darting shape of Phrenos~361 across the bullet-chewed plaza, with his train of skitarii behind. His augurs told him that although the cybernetic soldiers under his command were dying in their droves, many were making it through the maelstrom of beams, blasts and chuntering bullet streams. Enough, the Primus hoped and prayed.

With their mechanised reflexes and the indefatigability of their hydraulic legs, the skitarii pushed on through the carnage. Clustering and forming groups of soldiers whose cogitators selected the most direct routes, their gathering numbers presented even the rabid mechanoids and possessed machines of the Dark Mechanicum with too many targets, allowing at least some of the skitarii to make it through the murder zones and choke points the hereteks had waiting for them.

Kicking up soot, ash and grit, Stroika's footfalls took him straight through the plaza-mulching gunfire of temple emplacements. The skitarii commander did not care. All he could process were the pict streams of hundreds of cybernetic soldiers sprinting across the battlefield in his wake and the star-blotting shape of the Ark Mechanicus raging down through the heavens at them.

As Stroika ran, the black, mountainous shape of the Magnaplex Maximal disappeared. A curtain of blazing gold had risen before it. Like waves crashing against a rocky shore, the molten iron of the temple moat had blasted skyward in its fell radiance. Melting the final bridges, stiltways and maglev lines leading in and out of the forge temple principal, the sentient metal of the core would not allow the skitarii to approach the temple.

As Stroika led the growing horde of skitarii down the structure's towering length, the fierce heat of the liquid metal and its infernal fury heated their war-plate. With the daemonic metal boiling and fountaining in a curtain alongside the running skitarii and the forge temple's defences raised, emplacements and enemies stationed beyond the molten moat could not engage them. With the tumbling wreckage of the colossal Ark Mechanicus all but at the surface, it was a small mercy.

Skidding to a stop before the drop-off, where freightways ran off into oblivion and workshops remained half-demolished, Stroika took in the twisted magnificence of the forge world's shipyards. The macroscaffolding and skeletal supports of dry docks stretched from one side of the planetary breach to the other. Like the victims of spiders in a web, ships were covered with girder scaffolding – partially constructed Chaos cruisers, warped vessels under repair and daemonships suffering the fell techno-rituals of heretek magi.

Below, Stroika could see the daemonic core of the forge world – the Abystra-Dynomicron. The monstrous entity that had possessed the planet, powered the polluted industry of Velchanos Magna and gave the corrupted constructs of the Dark Mechanicum a dread daemon deity to worship in place of the Machine God. Kilometres distant, the molten iron of the core burned with the brightness of a sun, threatening to scorch Stroika's cogitators out. All he could see was the infernal blaze of the liquid metal sentience. The hellish underforge. A daemonic entity of iron.

<Go, go, go,> Stroika ordered as those skitarii soldiers fortunate enough to have survived the charge ran towards him. Rangers carrying galvanic rifles and arquebuses. Rad-troopers of the skitarii vanguard, crackling with radioactive contamination. Spindly ruststalkers armed with blade and claw. Although the Dunecrawlers had been too slow to make the drop-off, several Ironstrider engines had managed to negotiate the mayhem of the battlefield unscathed. As Stroika urged his skitarii on, he saw soldiers abandon their walkers and sprint for their Primus.

Stroika felt the thunderous quake through the titanium of his legs. His countdown had run to zero. The *Opus Machina* had arrived. As skitarii ran for their augmented lives, the shattered shell of the ancient spacecraft smashed into the planet's surface. The Ark Mechanicus rolled through the capital districts with apocalyptic force, the crashed vessel tearing through infernal forges, workshops and twisted temples. As the *Opus Machina* flattened the industriascape, ripping up foundations and sub-levels, the wreck twisted apart. One section continued to bounce and tumble through the exploding furnace

works and arcing reactors. A tumbling maelstrom of flaming decks and smashed superstructure, it decimated the approaching forces of the Dark Mechanicum, burying even the monstrous forms of the possessed Titans.

The prow section sheared through the capital district, obliterating the destruction of the battlefield and shattered plaza. Mechanoids in their thousands as well as skitarii Dunecrawlers were lost in the black storm-front of rockdust, soot and debris that was the herald of utter destruction. Smashed into the forge world's surface by the horrifying progress of the crashed vessel, constructs that had spent hours attempting to decimate one another were wiped off the face of the planet.

<Go, go, go!> Stroika streamed to his skitarii. While those throngs of cybernetic soldiers who had made the drop-off were racing down skeletal stairwells and ladders that ran down the rocky cliff-face, others were still running for their lives. The prow section of the *Opus Machina* struck the robust architecture of the Magnaplex Maximal. The ground shook under Stroika's feet, almost knocking the sprinting skitarii from theirs.

The Primus didn't know whether it was the mighty forge temple's deep-set foundations or the sorcerous technologies and arcane rituals of its cursed architecture that saved it. The Ark Mechanicus smashed through a corner of the temple, decimating hanging forges and the fell, daemon-honouring decorations that made up its twisted silhouette. The forge temple principal remained intact, however. Bouncing off the structure, the prow section turned in a wild, plaza-excavating spin.

As Stroika smacked his gauntlet across the armoured backs of skitarii who had made the drop-off, he saw those that had been seconds too late swallowed by the ferocious clouds of black dust and debris. Stroika's flashing overlays told him that he could no longer afford to wait. Turning from the spectacle of decimation – turning from skitarii soldiers whose pict feeds bleached to static at the horrible moment the Ark Mechanicus buried them – Haldron-44 Stroika ran for the drop-off. With the *boom* of the crash all about him and the dust-bank at his back, the skitarii officer pushed himself to the physical limits of his cybernetic form. Urging his hydraulics on, Stroika skidded down onto his side. Entwined in the foil folds of his greatcloak, the skitarius went down onto an appendage elbow and slid through the grit.

Skidding off the drop, Stroika fell. His combat chassis and bionic limbs struck the platform below with a ugly *clunk* before he tumbled helm over appendage down a flight of riveted steps. As he half rolled to his feet the war-plate across Stroika's chest struck a metal rail, stopping the skitarii commander from flying head first into an abyssal drop and the raging churn of the planet's daemonic core.

Overhead the crashing destruction of the *Opus Machina* thundered on, the inferno of the prow section's exposed decks and superstructure blurring by above Stroika and the descending skitarii. The gargantuan rear section of the Ark Mechanicus had rolled through thousands of Dark Mechanicum constructs and vehicles before tumbling from the edge of the drop-off. It crashed through the macroscaffolding of the shipyards and into the silence of an ungainly plummet, the hellish glare of the daemonic core swallowing it whole.

The prow section launched from the cliff edge, spinning and dropping through the girders, catwalks and thick cabling of dry docks. With a shard-spraying impact, the *Opus Machina* struck a scaffolded daemonship. The companionways about the possessed vessel had been swarming with heretek tech-priests, readying the abomination for launch with unholy chants and fell blessings. The hull plating of the monstrous cruiser was encrusted with a warped carapace, featuring trap-jaw mouths and the

predatory gaze of otherworldly eyeballs. Blood vessels and capillaries had spread through the damned workings of the ship. As the Ark Mechanicus's prow section struck the daemonship, knocking it from its supports and macroscaffolding, infernal tentacles exploded from the obscenity of fleshy ports, embracing the *Opus Machina* as the pair tumbled together for the hellish doom of the molten metal core.

SELECTED: DENTRICA II OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… +*IRON PLAGUE*+

Stroika took a moment for himself. His cybernetic body did not tire but his cogitator coils needed a few seconds to process the volume of apocalyptic data his system had absorbed. The destruction. The loss of the *Opus Machina* and the mission priesthood. The deaths of thousands of the Machine God's holy skitarii servants. The arrival of the Iron Warriors.

Probabilities and projections extended little way beyond certain death. Imperatives burned unfulfilled. Protocols demanded actions that could not be prosecuted. Haldron-44 Stroika came to understand the nature of his construction. Why the techno-magi of the Cult Mechanicus saw fit to leave their cybernetic legions and officers with the disabilities of base flesh. In situations where imperatives and protocols failed, all skitarii had left were their instincts. Their gut feelings. Their faith.

Looking down at the hellstorm of the Abystra-Dynomicron, into which the *Opus Machina* still tumbled, Stroika saw Nalode Deka 871. The princeps stood amongst a number of ruststalker units who were waiting on the skeletal platforms several levels below. Deka looked up at his commander, his optics blank and unreadable.

Phrenos~361 drifted by, its spinal mechadendrites clasping the rail and anchoring the servo-skull to the platform. 10-Victro Tiberiax hobbled down the steps. Putting a gauntlet under Stroika's appendage-arm, he helped his commander to his feet.

Stroika turned. The hydraulics of Tiberiax's left leg were shattered and his plumed helm was missing. The swarthy skin of his shaved head was bloody and bruised, his features split down the middle by a ragged scar running across his face. Several cranial augmentations had been ripped free of their housings by some head-smashing trauma.

<Tiberiax…>

<Orders, Primus?>

Stroika looked at the vanguard skitarii and rangers that were making their way down the stairwell. Some were black with the roasting attentions of energy beams, while the war-plate of others was dented and punctured where bullets had blasted through their workings. A number had lost arms or appendages.

Each cybernetic soldier still walked straight and tall. Proud and pious, knowing that the Omnissiah still had work for their bionic blessings. Stroika found the sight of the surviving skitarii inspiring and pledged to himself that he would find a duty worthy of them.

<Primus?> Tiberiax transmitted.

<The fleet is lost and the commanding priesthood with them. There is no one left to speak for the Machine God except us – and for the skitarii, actions speak louder than words.>

<Yes, Primus,> Tiberiax agreed.

<We have to stay true to our faith,> Stroika streamed, <even in this benighted place, at this most testing of times. Our faith in the Great Maker and His creations.>

<Affirmative.>

<The rest of the fleet is delayed, but they will arrive – eventually.>

<If they are lost in the warp, Primus, they might not arrive for days, weeks – years even,> 10-Victro Tiberiax reasoned.

<Then we know the enormity of the task ahead,> Stroika said. <Omnid Torquora will come for us – of that I have no doubt.>

<What until then?>

<We must do our best to facilitate that arrival by taking and holding our objective,> Stroika said.

<The forge temple principal?> Even Tiberiax was surprised at his Primus's insistence.

<Yes, the Magnaplex Maximal,> Stroika said. <In the temple the objectives of Engra Myrmidex and Omnid Torquora meet. Taking the forge temple and the secrets contained within is the most economical use of our limited resources. Through such an action, many of our imperatives can still be met.>

<With entire legions at our disposal we could not take the Magnaplex,> Nalode Deka 871 intruded. <What makes you think we can with a few hundred survivors?>

Stroika looked down at the steely Deka and then back at his second-in-command. He waved a gauntlet at the rocky face of the cliff down which the platforms, skeletal stairwells and ladders extended.

<Above us is the Magnaplex Maximal,> Stroika told them. <Down here – the temple underforge and infotombs. The forge temple draws its power and iron from the daemon core below. There must be a way in. The freightways above have been cut off. There must be access tunnels below the surface that were similarly truncated.>

<You wish to infiltrate the forge from below?> Deka clarified.

<Take it,> Stroika streamed to the officers. <Hold it. Plunder it of its secrets. Hard data. It's what we were sent here to do. Despite the odds stacked against us and the determination of the Dark Mechanicum to deny us our prize.>

<The Geller Device stirred up a vespid's nest here,> Tiberiax agreed.

<I always had faith in our success and I still do.>

<Against the Iron Warriors?> Deka put to him.

<Against all enemies of the Omnissiah,> Haldron-44 Stroika said.

<What do you need of us, Primus?> Tiberiax transmitted.

<Princeps,> Stroika streamed. <You are to lead our forces on down the cliff-face. Find us a way in to the temple underforge.>

<Affirmative,> the ruststalker officer returned after a crackle of hesitation. <Anything to get off this scaffold.>

Stroika privately agreed with the ruststalker's withering assessment. He could not help but feel the vulnerabilities of their position on the shattered walkways that creaked over the monstrous rage of the Abystra-Dynomicron.

<Tiberiax.>

<I'm yours, Primus.>

<Verify our number, our supplies of power and ammunition,> Stroika commanded. <We have a mixture of cohorts here. Divide by designation and nominate officers by ratio of confirmed kill where we are missing sub-alphas.>

<Right away, Primus,> 10-Victro Tiberiax said.

<Wait, do you detect that?>

<Affirmative…>

<Teleportation signatures,> Stroika streamed. <Go!>

As Nalode Deka 871 led the skitarii down through the network of scaffold stairwells and scorched platforms, Tiberiax followed, urging the skitarii on. The cybernetic soldiers climbed down through the structure. They dropped through openings to lower platforms and shimmied down ladders with sparks showering the skitarii below.

Stroika phylactically felt his way to the pict streams of skitarii soldiers dying up in the decimated capital district. The Iron Warriors were on the ground. Through the fading, grainy visuals, the Primus saw Dreadclaw drop pods fire their descent rockets and hit the wreckage-strewn wasteland with their landing talons. Hydraulic lifts descended with a shudder, revealing the infernal light of the Dreadclaw interiors.

Stroika watched as hulking monsters were unleashed onto the field of battle. They wore the battered, ancient plate of Tactical Dreadnought armour. The silver and gold of their suits was mottled with corrosion and splattered with blood. Faded black and yellow chevrons marked out individual plates and spiked sections.

Some horrific curse of the flesh had changed the Iron Warriors of the 51st Expedition. Monstrous clusters of muscle, tendon and brawn seemed to have outgrown the ancient Terminator suits which all the Iron Warriors wore. The warped flesh appeared to be part of the suits' structural integrity, with the shattered pieces of helms embedded in the monstrous heads and faces of the long-changed Chaos Space Marines.

They moved with the assurance of Titans, stomping across the smouldering wasteland about the Magnaplex Maximal, yearning for the death and destruction to come. Most disturbing were their hands, that seemed bloated with the brawn of cursed flesh. The limbs had broken entirely free of plate and gauntlet. The metal of their suits morphed into the corruption-laced abomination of their flesh. At the malformed termination of such limbs, however, flesh solidified once more to metal. Bloated appendages formed a myriad of spawned heavy weaponry – colossal claws, bio-chemical flamers and multi-barrelled flesh cannons.

Rusted Thunderhawk gunships swooped in, belching black smoke and depositing legionary battle tanks and siege weaponry, while spiked lighters and ram-shuttles descended, spilling genebred Space Marines and cult cybernetic warriors enslaved to the Iron Warriors' dread cause. Suddenly the pict stream was obscured by the loathsome shape of an Iron Warrior monster, who, looking down on a dying skitarii warrior with its warped face, stamped on the soldier's head.

As Haldron-44 Stroika scanned for manifestations he saw a group of three monstrosities appear from the lead-smeared shimmer of teleportation. Stroika felt the creak of the scaffold superstructure as the Iron Warriors assumed their horrific form. The two flanking mountains of fleshmetal were armed like their warped brethren falling from the skies in an iron plague.

The warlord in the middle appeared bigger and more wretchedly malformed than even his monstrous escorts. A tarnished mail cloak was draped across the huge globes of his shoulders, marking him out

among the afflicted Iron Warriors as a warsmith or officer. The hulking abomination's Tactical Dreadnought armour was dripping with skulls and chains. This gave way to dread-formed fleshmetal that assumed the shapes of gargantuan killing claws, the tapering digits of which were cursed with the thrashing titanium teeth of chainswords.

The Chaos Space Marine's head was an age-cracked mess of malformed features. His smashed half-skull was held together with wire mesh, through which his warped flesh had dribbled, sliding his features down onto the monstrous muscle of his neck.

As the Iron Warriors warsmith got his bearings, he almost toppled forward on the platform. Grabbing the warping rail with a gargantuan claw, the monster steadied himself and gave Stroika a fiendish half-grin of mock relief.

<Skitarii,> Stroika ordered. <Take out the walkways.>

Rangers and vanguard soldiers halted their descent and leant their weapons against ladders and rails. They took aim with their galvanic rifles, transuranic arquebuses and radium weaponry. With their targeters and expert marksmanship, the skitarii shredded the cables and fixtures of the walkways connecting the Iron Warriors' platform to their own section, allowing the macroscaffolding to fall away.

As the Iron Warriors bounced uncertainly on their own platform, Stroika thought to press his advantage and have his skitarii take down the larger section, sending the warsmith and his monsters into the burning maelstrom of the core below. Before Stroika could issue the command, the abominable warsmith, smiling no more, grabbed for support on the shaking platform. He waved in a pair of Thunderhawks with a giant, malformed claw.

The first of the corrosion-pitted gunships swooped in for its master, obscured in a bank of belching, black smoke. The second gunship was a riveted nightmare of extra plating barely kept in the air under the power of its guttering engines. A pair of flank-mounted heavy bolters opened fire as the gunship hove into view.

Stroika leapt down stairs and dropped through ladder wells with his descending skitarii, as the heavy bolters shattered their way through the companionways above. As the cockpit-fused monstrosity of an Iron Warrior pilot guided his Thunderhawk in, he mangled platforms and section supports with the wings of the gunship. Bringing the gunship down sharply he collapsed a section, forcing Stroika and several skitarii vanguard soldiers to leap for an adjacent platform. As Stroika hit the shaky mesh and rolled, another cybernetic soldier was helped over the rail by 10-Victro Tiberiax and two of his rangers. Two other skitarii tumbled to their deaths with the plummeting scaffolding.

<Go, sir!> Tiberiax told his Primus, having set up two rangers with transuranic arquebuses on the platform. As the rusted Thunderhawk drifted out and down, rounds from its heavy bolters ricocheted off the rocky wall of the cliff-face. <Mark your target,> Tiberiax told his rangers. <Fire!>

The shells blasted away in unison, hammering through the armaplas of the Thunderhawk cockpit canopy. As they thudded through the monstrous head of the Iron Warrior pilot, the gunship began to fall away. As Stroika made his way down through the macroscaffold of the shipyards, he saw the descending gunship smash into the second before ploughing straight through a web of cabling and down into the daemonic core of the planet.

With Tiberiax and his rangers on his metal heels, Stroika negotiated the labyrinth of mesh and railing, all the while watching the warsmith's remaining Thunderhawk level out and rescue itself from disaster.

<Deka!> Stroika streamed.

<Found one, sir,> the princeps transmitted back, his ruststalkers filing into the smashed entrance of a truncated tunnel set in the cliff-face. They were cutting a maintenance lock from its hinges. As hundreds of skitarii soldiers crammed into the confines of the soot-caked tunnel, Stroika joined them. 10-Victro Tiberiax brought up the rear, his rangers backing in with their arquebuses aimed back out of the tunnel.

As the skitarii filed in through the hatch, Nalode Deka 871 closed it and braced the broken lock with a thick plasteel pole. Deka and Tiberiax looked to their Primus as bolt-fire directed up the tunnel began to hammer at the thick metal of the door.

<I don't think that's going to hold them,> Tiberiax streamed at Deka.

<It won't have to,> the ruststalker returned. <Look at how difficult it was for us to get in here. That scaffold won't hold an Iron Warrior.>

<They will find a way in,> Tiberiax said, certain of their enemy's determination.

<*We're* in,> Haldron-44 Stroika told his officers. <And we've got a job to do. Princeps, find us a way down through the underforge. We need the forge temple infotombs.>

<Affirmative.>

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SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+HELLFORGE+*

The skitarii moved with slick synchronicity through the infernal gloom of the underforge. With their trench-cloaks wrapped about them and their weapons held in close, cybernetic soldiers followed freshly promoted sub-alphas through barbed bulkhead doors and fanged archways. Down through stairwells twisted in their grand designs. In and out of node columns that crackled in ruinous-symbol-inspired orientations.

Wounded skitarii trailed blood and oil, cradling broken limbs and shattered appendages, while the spindly shapes of ruststalkers slipped silently ahead. Drifting in the lead on its cog-blade, Phrenos~361 used its omnispectrals to alert the skitarii of the Dark Mechanicum menaces ahead.

Stroika found himself stepping through the merciless economy of the ruststalkers' handiwork. Flightless cherubim, butchered in their filthy robes, the horror of their infant features still buried in their hoods. Dismembered security-servitors, lying dead next to the wickedness of their close combat appendages. Temple praetorians and heretek hench-units with their workings stabbed out of them.

Haldron-44 Stroika led a unit of vanguard skitarii in the footsteps of Princeps Deka and his augmented assassins. Leading with a palm-locked arc pistol, Stroika moved across furnace works and through chambers of twisted architecture. Some contained heretek machinery and possessed cogitators that glowed red and green in their malevolence. Others were laid out with surgical altars that burned with daemonic technoscript. Upon the altars, damned creations of flesh and dark technology lay half finished while abominable intelligences went about propagating their evil, uncaring of the skitarii interlopers that moved silently through the shadows.

There were bizarre chambers sporting large, empty pools of curdling unguent. Others held corrupt machinery – nests of arms gathered about blood-filthy thrones, bearing claws, pincers, drills and flayers. Multitudes of warped mechanoids that had been obscenely interfaced. Monstrous, heretekal creations whose dangers were contained within stasis fields. Warpsmiths emerging from their socket-sarcophagi, crafting with the corrupt, immaterial energies at their command.

All throughout the temple, the sound of industry dominated. Sparking. Arcing. The thousands of slave-engines hammering at armoured plate. The ceaseless suffering of constructs as part of dread experimentation and whim. The modulated vox-screams of warped workers claimed by the daemonic creatures they had had a hand in forging.

Throughout their infiltration of the Magnaplex Maximal, Stroika's equalisers recorded the hiss of molten iron. Liquid metal from the daemonic core not only fed the hellforges of the temple, it travelled along trench rivulets set in the stone of chamber floors and passageways. The sentient iron spat and flared with flame, lighting the halls, workshops and corridors of the forge temple and forming the infernal glow of crafted sigils and symbols.

As the overforge housing dark ceremonial halls, heretek workshops and warped laboratories gave way to the diabolical grandeur of the underforge, Stroika felt the blessed alloys of his combat chassis and appendages steam. In the presence of such unspeakable evil, the Cog Mechanicus that emblazoned the skitarii's battleware blackened. The very metal of their Omnissiah-honouring cybernetic bodies and armour burned. Here daemonic drones drifted through the busy, black architecture of the underforge on the sickly sibilance of duct fans. They were larva-like entities whose disgusting, fat tails dribbled interface cabling and whip-like mechadendrites. Their heads were flesh-fused with otherworldly augurs that scanned the forge-chambers and corridors through which they patrolled. These daemon-constructs in particular the ruststalkers and the skitarii following them took great pains not to alert.

In the daemon furnaces, warpsmiths and arch-hereteks were hard at work, their monstrous, myriad forms smudged silhouettes against the brilliance of their forges. The possessed servo-automata and machinery of the forge swooped magna-claws, cauldrons of infernal iron and pincers over the heads of misshapen servitors and the sentience of liquid metal thrashing in channels and pits. Spiked chains draped down through the forges like forests of kelp, knotted with construct cadavers and machine victims. Strange aethyric energies arced across the great chambers, while molten iron was dispersed through the temple in fat, raging cascades. The daemon iron was drawn up from the planetary core by pulsing tractor fields and distributed throughout the Magnaplex Maximal and the forge world furnace works beyond.

As the ruststalkers came to a hidden halt, Nalode Deka 871 moved from shadow to shadow, working his way back to his Primus. Leaving his rangers covering the skitarii rear, 10-Victro Tiberiax came forward, meeting Stroika by a sacrificial anvil-altar. With Stroika's vanguard skitarii crackling with radioactive lethality about them, the officers met in silence, face to face. Drifting back through the gloom, Phrenos~361 came to land on Stroika's outstretched gauntlet.

<We have a problem,> Deka told them.

<We have two,> Tiberiax said.

<Princeps?>

<The underforge works its way down through a number of sub-levels. The temple infotombs and data crypts should be located below,> Nalode Deka 871 informed his commander. Beckoning Stroika forward and telescopically focusing his optics, Deka pointed down at the hellforge beneath.

As Stroika's optics did the same, he zeroed in on the damned industry below – one level of sizzling pits, furnaces and machinery set beneath a number of others, with the molten sentience of the Abystra-Dynomicron field-streamed up through the hollow centre of the underforge. Warpsmiths and heretek magi were conducting dark techno-rituals, with vox-hailing servitors chanting dread summonings. The

forges swarmed with bat-winged cherubim that flew above the pits, helping to manoeuvre servo-automata and parts into place.

Warpstreams from totem node columns passed across the surface of furious pits of molten iron, churning them to a vortex. From these hellish gateways, daemonic manifestations and entities were drawn, dragged forth from the horror of the immaterium. As fluxing monstrosities of otherworldly energy seared to form they were scalded into reality by the Abystra-Dynomicron's molten iron. The polychromatic sheen of liquid metal gave the daemons the monstrous appearance of forge fiends. They screeched. They hissed. They thundered. The spidery automata-arms of possessed machinery moved in with damned choreography, covering the abominations with clinkered plates of barbed, black armour. As the plates were agonisingly riveted and plasma-fused to the daemons' forms, winches and infernal cherubim manoeuvred mountings and brute experimental weaponry into place.

The forges shook with the corporeal sufferings of the creatures as Dark Mechanicum warpsmiths enslaved them to their will and the underforge crafted them into daemon engines. Stroika watched as the daemon engines stomped forth from their molten birthing pits at the curse-coded command of their warpsmith handlers. Towering walkers of defiled metal and daemonflesh. Scuttling monster-machines of cutting claws and many legs. Cannon-fused traitors whose spiked, glowing tracks chewed up the temple flooring. Forge fiends and maulers that furnace-roared their destructive appetites.

Deka wasn't wrong, Stroika reasoned.

<Access to the infotombs?>

<Magnelevators on the forge levels,> the princeps pointed out across their mindlink.

<Tiberiax?>

<My rearguard rangers report scrambled drones and gunfire in the overforge,> Tiberiax told him.

<The Iron Warriors?>

<They found a way in,> Tiberiax said.

Deka looked from the daemon engines to the entrance to the overforge.

<Perhaps we can orchestrate an introduction,> the ruststalker officer said.

<I think that's inevitable at this point,> Haldron-44 Stroika told Deka. <But we can't rely upon our enemies to provide the kind of time we need.>

Tiberiax nodded. Deka slowly followed with his own understanding.

<My rangers will hold back the Iron Warriors,> 10-Victro Tiberiax streamed with grim acceptance.

<Leave the daemon engines to my killers,> Nalode Deka 871 said. <We'll take the forge.>

<And hold it,> Tiberiax agreed. <For as long as you need to execute the Fabricator Locum's imperatives.>

<Praise the Omnissiah,> Stroika said.

<Bless His construct-creations,> Tiberiax continued, the prayer sizzling phylactically between the skitarii officers.

<And death to those who are not part of His grand design.>

Stroika launched Phrenos~361 from his gauntlet, sending the servo-skull off into the darkness.

<Go!> the Primus commanded as he smacked his gauntlet on the shoulder plate of the departing Nalode Deka 871.

Haldron-44 Stroika and Tiberiax slapped metal gauntlets together, holding their bionics in a sparking grasp – their armoured knuckles forming the Holy Cog of the Cult Mechanicus.

SELECTED: DENTRICA II OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… +*MECHANISED EVIL*+

The underforge was ablaze.

Infernal fires spread through the chambers, while arcing energies from node columns savaged the surrounding sections. Radioactive rounds sang off railings and twisted architecture. Chains and cadaver-constructs jangled. Beams cut through the dungeon-darkness of the forge temple, searing into pits and channels of molten sentience, causing liquid iron to fountain and splatter. Servitor shells blasted from the upper platforms, turning possessed machinery into thrashing monstrosities that tore through walkways and support columns with their monstrous claws. Transuranic rounds punched through the infernal plate of forge fiends, newly crawled from their spawning iron.

Deka's ruststalkers had charged. The Sicarians flushed the underforge in a murderous machine wave. The spindly assassins swept through warpsmiths and their heretek hench-units, their transonic blades and chordclaws a blur. Stabbing. Shearing. Cleaving. Decapitating. The ruststalkers tore through the degenerate tech-priests, their spoiling flesh and the fell radiance of their inner workings. Hench-units smashed the cybernetic assassins down into the flooring but within moments, Deka's killers had powered up out of the cratered meshing. With hydraulic slickness, the ruststalkers dismembered wicked appendages and slit throats. Thrashing through malevolent magi with their shivering blades, the assassins lopped off warp-fuelled weaponry and kicked rancid servitors back over railings and into the thundering forge.

Firing their galvanic rifles, Stroika's skitarii leapt down from their platform and into the slaughter in the underforge. Servitor rounds slammed through the armour plating of daemon engines, turning mounted weaponry into detonating appendages. Still the monstrosities charged on. Bereft of their warpsmith handlers and knowing only pain in the short time since their daemonic birth, the infernal machines rampaged through the underforge. Blasting about them with the raw interface of weaponry, while tearing at the walls, floor and twisted architecture like demented machines, the daemon engines unleashed their abyssal fury.

As Haldron-44 Stroika moved through the havoc, leading his vanguard skitarii, he blasted things of monstrous, mechanised evil with alternating streams from his arc pistols. The underforge was a vision of rancorous devastation. Struts and support girders spun through the smoke of the chamber. Walkway wreckage rained down upon the battle. Molten iron splashed, raged and blasted forth from channels in curtains of scalding fury. Phrenos~361 bobbed, weaved and swooped through the carnage, leading its master and the skitarii that followed towards the magnelevator on the other side of the forge level.

Stroika's skitarii were dying. Biometric readings faded on his filtered overlays, telling of the terrible price the Machine God's holy soldiers were paying for facing the temple's daemon engines. Vanguard skitarii were blasted apart by huge, hunched walkers that still dripped with molten iron. The butcher cannons of the daemon engines decimated the soldiers, shredding through cybernetics and war-plate. Siege claws thrust forth through the furnace mist, impaling Stroika's vanguard troops. The walkers' weapons revolved horribly, hurling limbs and appendages in all directions.

Monstrous crawlers came forward on their stabbing, spidery legs, shearing through skitarii combat chassis as servitor shells and transuranic bullets thudded through hellforged armour plating. Bringing

their infernal flamers up, the defiler engines added to the unnatural fires sweeping up through the forge. Blasting hellfire up through the platform grating and catwalks, the daemon engines turned rangers into thrashing shapes whose base organics were roasted within their war-plate.

Mauling engines decked in thick, barbed plate charged through throngs of Sicarian ruststalkers. The quadruped abominations thundered their diabolical fury as their metal, cloven hooves trampled the spindly assassins. As the ruststalkers were smashed aside and torn appendage from bionic appendage by the passing barbs, one machine beast reared and stamped down on the armoured shells of Sicarian heads. Ruststalkers swept in under magna-cutters and the daemon engine's lasher tendrils. Drawn to weaknesses between the clinkered plates, Nalode Deka 871 and his assassins closed on the monster, stabbing and goring the metal beast.

<Down!> Haldron-44 Stroika yelled, sliding down onto the forge floor. A forge fiend reared from a pit of molten metal, streaming with sickly liquid iron. Glowing like a hellish, armoured hound, the thing brought forth the ectoplasmic cannons mounted on its shoulders. Two of Stroika's skitarii rolled aside but the three others filing across the forge floor disintegrated in the spectral path of ectoplasma that thrashed through the cybernetic soldiers. The forge fiend jumped from the pit, standing over Stroika like a monstrous scavenger guarding a half-eaten corpse.

The Primus wasn't finished yet. <Caliver!> Stroika streamed as molten iron dribbled over him, burning his war-plate and greatcloak. Stroika thrust his outstretched gauntlet at the forge fiend, sending his arc pistols back up their rails.

A vanguard skitarius surrendered his plasma caliver to his Primus, sliding it across the roasting mesh of the forge floor. As the daemon engine watched the weapon skitter and bounce along and into Stroika's grasp, it opened its armoured mouth and roared the hellish heat of a furnace at him. The monster's ectoplasmic cannons clunked around in their mountings, aiming straight down at the prone Stroika.

Bringing the plasma caliver up and settling the weapon against the leaking wound in his midriff, Stroika yanked back on the trigger.

'Back, abomination!' he vox-hailed with modulated fury. A stream of blue sunfire globes blasted forth from the plasma gun, hitting the forge fiend in the chest. Blazing like novae, the successive orbs of plasma energy hammered into infernal plate and molten daemonflesh. The infernal engine roared in unearthly agony, scrabbling back. Stroika got to his feet, indomitable in his advance.

'Back, I say – back to the accursed dimension from which you came!'

The skitarii commander leant into the bulk of the heavy weapon, unleashing a fresh salvo of plasma at the thing. Radium rounds joined the onslaught, driving the beast back. Like his vanguard skitarii, Stroika wouldn't relent. In an effort to escape the radioactive storm and the searing agony of Stroika's plasma gun, the daemon engine retreated. Feverishly hauling itself back over the lip of the pit, the bestial machine took another blinding blaze of plasma fire into its hunched, clinker-plated back. Slinking into the liquid metal of the pit, the forge fiend's fearful form disappeared below the molten surface.

<Hydrogen flasks,> Stroika transmitted, prompting skitarii to throw him ammunition for the caliver, which he mag-locked to his belt. Stroika smashed a shrieking warpsmith aside with the butt of his plasma gun, sending the heretek to the deck in a shower of workings. Fat-bellied servitors, built into yoke-like augmentations that bore heavy lifting claws, turned black with the hails of radium shells crackling into their spoiling flesh. Stroika barged them aside in his hurry to get to the temple

magnelevator. Signatures were dying all about him and up on the platforms of the overforge, 10-Victro Tiberiax and his rangers had been forced to turn the merciless accuracy of their galvanic rifles and transuranic arquebuses on approaching Iron Warriors.

<Doors,> Stroika ordered.

Two skitarii soldiers got the bionics of their fingertips into the crack between the magnelevator's closed doors. Hauling with hydraulic force, the skitarii prised the doors open, allowing Stroika to peer up and down the abyssal shaft beyond. The freight-car seemed to have been taken down into the bowels of the forge temple – deep into the infotombs and data crypts of the Magnaplex Maximal. Although the car was supported on magnetic fields, a thick, oiled cable ran from the car-roof to a winch set in the top of the shaft. It was only an auxiliary system in the event of a power outage, but it suited Stroika's needs perfectly. Phrenos~361 drifted through the doors, the servo-skull disappearing into the gloom as it descended through the shaft.

<Cable, go!> the Primus ordered. One by one, his vanguard skitarii soldiers shouldered their carbines and arquebuses. Holding the slick cable in the vice-like grip of their bionic gauntlets and wrapping the augmentations of their legs about it, the cybernetic soldiers slid down the shaft.

Looking back across the scene of diabolical carnage unfolding across the flame-swirling underforge, Stroika saw 10-Victro Tiberiax draw a phosphor serpenta and blaze a volley of blinding phosphoric bolts into a charging monstrosity of the Iron Warriors Legion. As the chemical fire raged about the Traitor Space Marine, the guiding light of its fury drew servitor shells in on the same craterous wound, sending the brute crashing down to the floor.

Nalode Deka 871 was up on the back of an infernal engine whose plate-fused daemon body was set in a nest of arachnoid legs. Deka's transonic blades were buried in the shoulders of the diabolical thing, shivering their way through its daemonflesh. Using one as a handhold on the back of the thrashing machine, he drew the other across the abomination's throat. Rolling clear of the dropping daemon engine, the spindly princeps gave Stroika the briefest of nods before cleaving his blades back through an attendant ward engine.

Shouldering the plasma caliver, Haldron-44 Stroika grasped the oily cable and slid down into the abyssal darkness of the shaft after his skitarii.

1100

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF I
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+INFOTOMB+*

Stroika dropped down through the maintenance hatch and into the magnelevator car. The heavy-duty doors to the temple infotombs were open. Beyond, the skitarii commander found the dusty darkness of a data crypt, darkness lit only by the sickly glow of corrupt machinery. Phrenos~361 drifted out into the chamber.

Vanguard skitarii dropped down into the freight-car two by two, their radium weaponry crackling with radioactive lethality. Stroika sent them off in two columns, left and right out of the doors and in opposite directions about the huge circular chamber. Banks upon banks of corrupted cogitators hummed to themselves, rancid with the glow of their fell calculations. Like concentric stacks in a labyrinthine library, the runebanks sat upon a set of cogs – smaller cogs sitting within the teeth of larger wheels. At one time, the infotomb mechanism had been intended to honour the Omnissiah. Now, the architecture and colossal workings were warped and black. The teeth of the cogs were barbed and the walls of the crypt were decorated with the crowded iconography of dread gods.

The floor cogs turned back and forth within the madness of one another, with the *clunk* of colossal gears at work beneath the circular infotomb chamber. Warp-encrusted cabling, lines and datalooms ran from each foetid bank to a towering, static unit at the heart of the crypt like ribbons on a festive pole. Phrenos~361 led the way, and the cybernetic soldiers followed.

Filing through the maze of runebanks – supercogitator units that chuntered to themselves in their code-corrupted madness – Stroika and his skitarii moved around, in and out of the ever-changing labyrinth. As the vanguard skitarii worked their way through the data crypt they came across ghoulish transmechanics. The things were cut off at the waist and trailed interface cabling from their ragged trunks, while their spindly arms and long fingers went to work at baroque spools that trailed filthy scrollprint. They floated through the infotombs like evil spirits, hissing static and blurting deranged scrapcode as they happened upon Stroika and his cybernetic soldiers. With conservative blasts from their radium carbines, the skitarii dropped the fell mechanoids.

As Phrenos~361 led Stroika out of the maze of machines and across the central floor-cog, the skitarii felt the chamber rumble and shake with the sound of detonations and heavy weaponry. Pict streams from the remaining skitarii in the underforge told the Primus that time was running out. Scrolling updates and fading biometrics told Stroika that caught between the daemon engines of the Magnaplex Maximal and the monstrous Iron Warriors, his skitarii were being slaughtered.

Of note, amongst the flow of data, was the death of 10-Victro Tiberiax – skitarii officer, recipient of the Crux Mechanicus, survivor of 4,372 enemy engagements, loyal construct of the Omnissiah. Friend. The data filled Stroika with a cold fury buried in the logic of imperatives and protocol. Skitarii existed only to prosecute the will of the Machine God Incarnate. In such an undertaking, losses were expected. As many as were necessary.

Stroika had lost legions of skitarii soldiers during the doomed assault on Velchanos Magna. While such astronomical losses did not eat away at the cybernetic commander as they might an officer of the Astra Militarum or even the Adeptus Astartes, Stroika still suffered some anxiety over how he was to be represented in the mission record. Would the hard data on the Dark Mechanicum forge world judge him to have been a commander fighting impossible odds with a force insufficient? Or would he be judged as one who failed not only his skitarii soldiers but also his magi and Machine God?

Advancing on the central unit, Stroika found himself facing a fell piece of machinery. A towering, baroque meme-bank of dark brass piping, twisted form and corruption, lit by the hellish light of its own lamps, buttons and screens. It was the forge temple's High Altar of Knowledge, warped to machine madness by the heretekal data that it stored. As Haldron-44 Stroika approached he saw that the abominate machine was a slowly melting mess, heated from within by the stream of molten sentience carried up from the daemon core. It was powered by the liquid iron of the Abystra-Dynomicron that flowed up through the dark altar and forge temple underforge.

Stroika's imperatives flashed up on his optical overlay. The sacred knowledge of the forge temple principal – the eternity of secrets Engra Myrmidex had sent Stroika to secure – lay inside the corrupted meme-banks of the dark altar. The prize that the skitarii commander would deliver instead to Omnid Torquora, should the magos explorator ever appear from the warp.

<Secure the artefact,> Stroika ordered, prompting his skitarii to assume formation about the dark altar. <Phrenos.>

Summoned, the servo-skull drifted in on the blur of its magnetic cog. Landing on the gauntlet of the Primus, the drone waited. Approaching the dark altar, with its suppurated ports and warp-encrusted interfacia, Stroika brought up his arm.

<Interface and downstream,> Stroika commanded. The skitarii commander could not risk the virulent code-corruption of linking himself to such a foul machine. Without codescrubbers or the Fabricator Locum's magos catharc, Stroika had no choice but to sacrifice his servo-skull to the duty.

<Scan and retrieve artefact-data, code vermillion or above. File, reverse chronological.>

Depositing Phrenos~361 in an interface-alcove, Stroika took several steps back. Above, the temple underforge rocked with the thunder of heavy weaponry and death. He turned as the magnelevator doors closed and the car began its journey up through the temple. The skitarii were running out of time.

Feeling with its mechadendrites and cabling, the servo-skull interfaced with the High Altar of Knowledge. As Phrenos~361 did so, its optics *clunked* to an infernal red. The hololithic projector set in the dome of its skull crackled to life.

Stroika stepped back as the drone emitted an excruciating howl of machine suffering. The hololithic projection danced with the exquisite torment of corrupted machine-spirits. These bled away to pict and hololithic captures as file after tainted file was downloaded. As Phrenos~361's optics grew darker and more infernal, Stroika found his own mesmerised by the technological treasures and hoarded secrets that flashed up before him. The discoveries, both terrible and amazing, that had been made by the Adeptus Mechanicus of Velchanos Magna in the thousands of years before the Great Gyre swallowed the forge world.

Dust rained from the ceiling as the battle in the forge above intensified. The floor-cogs turned and the runebanks and corrupt cogitators circled the skitarii commander. Even as a mere soldier of the Cult Mechanicus, Stroika could see the wondrous knowledge that Velchanos Magna had accumulated through experimentation, exploration and recovery. The dark altar may have been corrupt but it still held in the forgotten depths of its meme-cores a priceless hoard of hard data. Hard data that would have made Engra Myrmidex the Fabricator General of his own forge world. Hard data that might make Omnid Torquora that still.

Then Stroika saw it. The briefest flash of a hololithic schemata.

<Back,> Stroika ordered, amongst the din of battle several levels above. Phrenos~361 let out a tortured hiss of displeasure before halting the download. As it moved back through pict captures of lost, vellum-scrawled knowledge and arcane technological wonders, Stroika streamed, <Stop.>

There, sizzling and warping in the hololithic haze, Stroika saw the schemata for the Geller Device – the aethyric bomb that the magi of Satzica Secundus had constructed and Engra Myrmidex had tested in the warp storm of the Great Gyre. Stroika's feeds scrolled with data and confirmations. Cross-referencing the STC designations and plate signatures, Stroika calculated a 98.567 per cent probability that he was looking at exactly the same artefact that Magos Torquora's survey teams had found on board the *Stella-Xenithica*.

The infotombs echoed with the sound of rancid laughter. It was a mocking but miserable sound, laced with corrosion and age. As the floor-cogs moved and runebanks parted, a tech-priest of the Dark Mechanicum approached from his hiding place. Surrounded by so many corrupt devices moving about them, Stroika and his skitarii had taken the power signature of the monstrous magos to be a dying transmechanic or a runebank.

<Hold your fire,> Haldron-44 Stroika ordered. It seemed that there was more hard data to gather and the dark altar could not give him the answers he needed. The skitarii kept their crackling carbines on the interloper, moving their barrels in unison as he approached. Stroika held his plasma caliver up, ready to blast the ancient to oblivion should the Dark Mechanicum tech-priest give any indication that he was going to attack.

The tech-priest was tall, stabbing the cog-floor with stilt-like legs, but hunched in his circuit-laced black robes. Like a mantid construct, the tech-priest ventured forth. His modulated laughter transformed as he approached Stroika and the dark altar. Within gangly steps it had become the roar of existential doom and some kind of machine sobbing. Stroika's cogitator coils arrived at a calculated guess.

'Far enough,' the skitarii commander told the Dark Mechanicum abomination, 'Arch-Fabricant.'

The corrupted magos knelt down, the flesh-fused hydraulics of his long legs bending and his knees crashing into the floor. Pulling back his hood with cruel claw-appendages, the Arch-Fabricant revealed the little that was left of him. A warped spinal column leading to a cancerous brain, that

itself was stored in an interfaced jar of sickly suspension.

'Lord Prophetechnos,' Stroika said. 'Ulcan Gnostramari – former Fabricator General of Velchanos Magna.'

There were bits of Gnostramari that remained in the mantid mechanoid that knelt before the dark altar. In the nest of twisted optics, vanes and augurs that gave the Arch-Fabricant the appearance of a withered insect, Stroika could see a misty eyeball. The remnants of corrupted flesh threaded through the nightmare of the construct's spiny workings. It appeared to Stroika – despite the horror of its augmented form – to be a thing that knew it had lived long enough. A scavenger of forbidden technologies, of lost knowledge and heretekal desires, whose ongoing existence was fuelled by the warp and whose gangling form was crafted in hellfire.

'Speak,' Haldron-44 Stroika commanded, his gauntlet digit hooked around the caliver trigger.

'We are doomed, you and I,' Ulcan Gnostramari said. His voice was a modulated whisper – a hiss that was vented with a black steam from vox-grilles set in his mandibular cheeks.

Haldron-44 Stroika pointed to the STC schemata that warped and flicked in the servo-skull's hololithic projection.

'You have this artefact – the original STC file for this arcane device – stored in a reliquary or vault?' Stroika put to their prisoner.

'No,' Gnostramari corrected him with a brief puff of black steam. 'It was taken from this temple without my permission.'

'By whom?' Stroika pressed, leaning in with his plasma caliver.

'Who else?' the Arch-Fabricant wheezed. 'Idriss Krendl of the Iron Warriors.'

'The monsters who attack your forge world?' the skitarii commander clarified. As Ulcan Gnostramari nodded his repulsive head, Stroika's mind whirled. His cogitator coils burned with the processing of probabilities. Odds that the warped Iron Warriors warsmith Idriss Krendl had already run and put in play.

Krendl, who had taken the STC file and deposited it on board the *Stella-Xenithica* just ahead of the *Maestrale*'s survey of Perborea. Who had allowed the Adeptus Mechanicus to recover the wonder of the Geller Device in the predictable expectation that such a find would be constructed and tested on the nearest warp storm anomaly in the sector – the Great Gyre.

'We are undone,' Ulcan Gnostramari said. 'Betrayed. Mechanicum and Mechanicus both.'

'Silence, traitor,' Stroika warned.

'Your magi by the bottomless appetite for knowledge that plagues both our kind. Like Velchanos Magna, Satzica Secundus doomed itself.'

'Explain,' Haldron-44 Stroika demanded, his armoured digit tapping at the caliver trigger.

'You think that you were the first to construct the Geller Device?' the Arch-Fabricant mocked. 'The wonder was ours. We built the aethyric bomb and test-detonated the device in the nearby Mawstorm. We foolishly hoped to drive the storm and the things that inhabited it back into the warp. A single device reduced the Mawstorm by half.

'We were eager to get back to Velchanos Magna to build another bomb to finish the job. What we hadn't realised was that in strengthening the interdimensional bonds of reality in one place, we weakened them in another. Travelling up the warptrails of our arkships, back to Velchanos Magna, a new storm erupted. The real space anomaly you call the Great Gyre. The magi and citizens of Velchanos Magna welcomed a new age. A dark age of enlightenments. As Satzica Secundus will do

also.'

'Never,' Haldron-44 Stroika said, but his vox-hailed announcement rang hollow.

'Perhaps you are more right than you know, simple skitarius,' Ulcan Gnostramari decided. 'You betrayed yourselves. I have been betrayed by traitors with whom my forge world traded. By those it called allies. Velchanos Magna should have chosen better ones – the bitterness of betrayal runs in the Iron Warriors' blood.'

The Arch-Fabricant gestured at the dark altar and the molten sentience of the Abystra-Dynomicron that ran through its corrupted workings. 'Iron favours iron. The daemon-patron of my world wishes to spread its pollution beyond the confines of Velchanos Magna. It wishes to infect the core of Satzica Secundus and the hundreds of forge worlds beyond. Idriss Krendl and the Iron Warriors of the Obliteratii will see to it that the Abystra-Dynomicron gets its wish. The warsmith will be rewarded with an empire of iron. Forge worlds whose industry will drive a conquest of the galaxy, with Idriss Krendl and his Obliteratii Iron Warriors at its head.'

A shrieking sound made Stroika turn. It was Phrenos~361. The servo-skull's optics burned to blackness with the corrupt data passing through its workings. Its cog-blade began to whir to searing acceleration, while the bone of its skull trembled. Horns and spikes grew from the skull as it changed shape to assume the ghoulish visage of some daemonic creature. The shriek threatened to damage equalisers but before it could, Phrenos~361 exploded. Pieces of warped skull, polluted workings and shards of spinning magnetic cog-blade shot out in all directions.

As pieces of cog-blade slashed through Stroika's war-plate like frag, Ulcan Gnostramari took his opportunity. Bringing his plasma caliver back up, Stroika levelled the weapon at the Arch-Fabricant. Gnostramari suddenly lurched for the skitarii commander.

Stroika couldn't calculate whether it was a feverish attempt on his life by the corrupt magos or some last offering to the Abystra-Dynomicron. There was a good possibility, the Primus reasoned, that Ulcan Gnostramari simply wanted to end it all. The scathing effects of the Geller Device. The betrayal of his daemon-patron. The loss of Velchanos Magna to Iron Warriors riding in on the invasion of the Adeptus Mechanicus. These were all reasons why a magos who had lived well beyond even a cybernetic lifespan might welcome the end.

<Execute,> Stroika streamed.

As Ulcan Gnostramari's stilt-appendages took him across the cog-floor at Stroika, radium rounds crackling with radioactivity blasted the wasted construct to robe-shredding pieces.

As the Dark Mechanicum Arch-Fabricant shattered across the floor of his infotomb, a moment of silence descended. Stroika pulled pieces of Phrenos~361's cog-blade from where they were embedded in his back and side. Tossing the fragments to the floor, Stroika noticed how quiet it truly was – even on the levels above.

<Teleportation signatures,> he streamed as his overlays told him of incoming materialisations. <Skitarii – take cover!>

The leaden smear of materialisation assumed form about the infotombs, the shapes of malformed Traitor Space Marines towering over the runebanks. Stroika knew that they were all dead once the Iron Warriors arrived. They had silenced the skitarii above. Haldron-44 Stroika, conversely, aimed to make as much noise as possible.

<Fire in the hole!> Stroika warned.

Snatching a hydrogen flask from where it was mag-locked to his belt, Stroika threw the spare

container at a shimmer of materialisation several stacks back. Bringing the plasma caliver up to his cheek, Stroika fired. The ball of plasma struck the flask, detonating its contents.

The blast knocked vanguard skitarii off their feet and Stroika back into the dark altar. Several Iron Warrior monstrosities assumed form inside the detonation. Two were lost in the globe of raging obliteration that ballooned from the exploding flask. Other Iron Warriors were caught in a furious backwash of heat and plasma, turning them into monstrous infernos.

As Iron Warriors appeared, they raised the horrific clubs of malformed limbs and pointed the metal barrels of mutating weapons at the skitarii. The brutes were small mountains of warped flesh and plate, while their arms were nests of fused weaponry. Ducking low behind possessed cogitators and warp-encrusted runebanks, the skitarii soldiers returned fire with their radium carbines, radioactive bullets punching through fleshmetal and aged plate. The Iron Warriors cared little for the cover the infotombs afforded, sweeping the monstrous weaponry of their altered bodies back and forth. Bullet-shattered runebanks exploded before the streams of heavy gunfire and cybernetic soldiers were blown limb from limb.

<Fire in the hole!> Stroika called again, a second hydrogen fuel flask in his gauntlet. As a hail of cannon fire shredded through the foil of his greatcloak, the Primus turned. Several Iron Warrior monstrosities were stomping through demolished runebanks at him. Bouncing the flask across the floor at the mutated Space Marines, Stroika blasted the container at their armoured feet.

The infotombs rocked with the blast. The hydrogen detonation had not only enveloped the Traitor Space Marines in an expanding blaze, it had decimated the cog-floor of the chamber, shattering the great mechanism below. The floor collapsed. The raging glow of the daemonic core filled the data crypt as flooring, mechanism and Iron Warriors disappeared. Displaced rock tumbled with wreckage and flaming bodies into the chasmic damnation of the Abystra-Dynomicron. As the cogs continued to turn, floor plates and cogitator banks toppled over the edge and down towards the daemonic planetary core.

The air thundered with the storm of shot and shell directed at the skitarii commander. Sliding down across the floor, Stroika scrambled behind moving runebanks as a path of shredded destruction followed him. The Iron Warrior gunfire was merciless. Cybernetic soldiers were blown apart before Stroika and one by one he saw the last biometric signatures of his skitarii legion fade. As the sparking shells of possessed cogitators toppled before the onslaught, Stroika found that he was without cover and the target of multiple flesh-weapons.

It was the leaden smear of a materialisation that saved him. Even the Iron Warriors wouldn't shoot through one of their own number. Appearing before Stroika and drowning him in his shadow, an armoured abomination bled into the reality of the infotomb.

Stroika suddenly realised that the Iron Warrior had a Sicarian ruststalker on his back. He brought up his plasma gun but could not fire for fear of hitting his remaining soldier. As the Iron Warrior turned around, attempting to throw the cybernetic soldier from his hunched back, Stroika recognised the Iron Warriors officer from the platform. The warped Chaos Space Marine whose face had slipped through the wire mesh of a cage and down onto his bulging neck and shoulder like a melted sculpture. Idriss Krendl – warsmith of the Iron Warriors and leader of the Obliteratii.

Krendl gave a half-snarl as he reached for the ruststalker with his colossal, malformed claws. As the Iron Warrior did so, Stroika saw that it was Nalode Deka 871 who had leapt on the monster's back just moments before he had teleported. Stabbing his transonic blades furiously into the fleshmetal of

the Iron Warrior, Deka was suddenly enveloped in the thing's daemonic claws.

Seizing the princeps in a vice-like grip, Krendl peeled the skitarii assassin from his hunched back. Bringing his monstrous arm down with otherworldly force, Krendl smashed Deka into the metal floor of the chamber. Seconds later, Nalode Deka 871 was a broken pile of shattered bionics and splattered flesh. With annoyance, Idriss Krendl plucked the transonic blade that was still shivering through his flesh and flung it away.

As Krendl looked up, he saw how close Stroika was. The skitarii officer was holding his plasma caliver on the Chaos Space Marine. Blasting him back, Stroika heard the satisfying roar of a Chaos Space Marine in pain. Balls of plasma seared and flashed as they struck the monster's armour-embedded flesh. The warsmith stormed straight back at Stroika, his heavy footsteps quaking across the infotomb floor.

'Whether I live or die,' Stroika vox-hailed at Krendl, 'today, you die, monster.'

Before the Iron Warrior could reply, Stroika pulled his final hydrogen flask from his belt and threw it up at the ceiling. He blasted the flask with his plasma caliver, and the air above them blazed and expanded like a nova. Being much taller, Krendl was hit first, the force of the explosion knocking him back through a column of cogitators. Stroika was smashed straight into the floor, his bionics clattering as he was blasted head-over-appendages away.

With his optic-array flickering and overlays sizzling from striking his head on the floor, Stroika suddenly felt the ground fall out from under him. Snatching out with a gauntlet, the skitarii officer grabbed for the edge of the demolished floor section. Hanging by his fingertips, Stroika looked down at the swirling patterns of sentient hatred raging through the molten iron of the daemon core. The Abystra-Dynomicron hungered for Stroika. It wanted his flesh and iron. It desired his soul.

Hauling himself up, Stroika latched onto the edge with his other gauntlet. Pushing up with his arms, and with his metal legs still dangling above the infernal core, the skitarii commander saw Idriss Krendl stumble back through the wreckage of runebanks and wave off his trigger-happy Iron Warriors.

'I've been stabbed, burned and shot, tin soldier,' Idriss Krendl told him. The warsmith's voice surprised Stroika. It was a deep rumble, like the distant thunder of guns on the breeze. It was still the voice of an officer, however, not a monster. Krendl looked down at the scorched stump that remained of his arm. Pursing his half-lips, the Iron Warrior blew out a flame where his flesh was burning. 'I was on board the *Stainless* when she crashed into Balzac Minora. I was at the Eternal Fortress when the sons of Guilliman rained fire from orbit. On Lesser Damantyne, my brothers tried to bury me under a mountain of metal, stone and corpses. Yet, here I am. A word of advice to you, then. If you're going to kill me – you'd better kill *all* of me.'

Krendl gave Stroika a nasty half-smile. From the smouldering stump of his arm, Stroika saw the fleshmetal of muzzles emerge. Like plants competing for sunlight, a nest of cannon barrels grew from the roasted ruin of the monstrous arm. Before the mutating arm had time to finish its transformation, the weapons began to fire.

With shells raining about him, Stroika rolled across the cog-floor. Unlocking appendages from his back-cradles, the skitarius brought his arc mauls to life. By the time he had completed the roll and was storming towards the Iron Warrior, his pistols had hydraulically deployed along their rails and were blasting a voltaic storm at Krendl. Stroika's overlays flashed the urgency of evasive actions and streamed the hopelessness of engaging the vile form of a Chaos Space Marine in battle. In defiance of

such warnings, Stroika surged on, knowing he had to close with the monstrous Iron Warrior.

As shells sparked off the alloy of his appendages, one of his newly deployed arc mauls was blasted away. Rotating his shoulder joints and turning in his torso cradle, Stroika rained arcstreams and the merciless thud of his remaining maul down on the monstrosity. Krendl crackled and spat, his obscene form a spidery cage of arcing energies. The maul sparked off the Iron Warrior's ancient plate but Krendl was like a small mountain of flesh, iron and ruin. He was both immovable object and unstoppable force. Within moments, Stroika came to understand in brutal reality what his overlays had only been communicating in theory. The inevitability of defeat. He was a holy warrior of the Omnissiah, however – last of the skitarii on Velchanos Magna – and he fought on.

The Iron Warrior moved with otherworldy grace and speed, despite his size and monstrosity. He fought with the strength and precision of a killer ten thousand years in the crafting. He was a corruption of the Emperor's ideal but a demigod all the same. A princely perversion of genetic engineering, driven by the bitterness and rage of an empire denied.

Stroika felt Krendl's cannons chew through the hydraulics of his leg. The skitarius smashed and blasted at the towering monstrosity, with movements as slick as his battered workings would allow. He could not avoid the backhand of the Space Marine's mighty claw that sent him staggering through wreckage. The barbed teeth of a chainfist spat gobs of flesh from the edge of the Iron Warrior's outstretched palm as the blade emerged from the monstrous claw. The fleshmetal of the weapon and Stroika's bionics met in a spectacular fountain of sparks – the Iron Warrior shearing the skitarii commander's arm and maul appendage off at the rotating shoulder joint.

Stroika limped and tried to turn, bringing his remaining arc pistol up to meet his enemy. His overlays flashed warnings and streamed data that he could barely process. Before his targeters could get a fix on the warsmith, Krendl stamped down on a runebank, sending its bulk at Stroika. Smashed between the polluted machine and the chamber wall, the skitarius staggered this way and that. His leg was a mangled mess and his acquisition reticules a blur. His calibrators refused to answer. Arcstreams seared across the decimation of the infotomb but hit nothing. He could hear the throaty satisfaction of Idriss Krendl – a dark chuckle that built from within the Iron Warrior's chest.

Krendl grabbed Stroika's battered combat chassis in one huge claw, turned and launched him into the wall. The skitarius could feel little but his systems sizzling away as workings shattered and his helm smashed into the cracking rockcrete of the wall. As Stroika tried to get up, he found that his overlays and streams were gone. Targeting was not functional. His cracked optics flickered with the static of system trauma. He got the blurry impression that the Iron Warriors of the Obliteratii were gathering about him like a darkness closing in. He could hear their grim mirth and the bitterness of their hatred.

Stroika tried to bring his arc pistol up but Krendl pinned the workings of his remaining arm against the wall. The skitarius couldn't move. Stroika saw Krendl up close, his half-face leering through its wire cage. He felt the nest of barrels against his midriff. As they fired in unison, the blasts shredded through the workings of Stroika's torso socket. As his metal legs fell away, Krendl gunned the chainblade, shearing through Stroika's remaining arm at the elbow joint. Grabbing him by the alloy stump of his ruined hydraulics, Idriss Krendl threw Stroika at the feet of his Iron Warriors – like a lump of meat to dogs.

He lay on the floor. Bereft of the Machine God's blessings. The blessed energy of the Motive Force bled away. The ruined war-plate of his chest rose and fell with the rattle of each doomed breath. Helpless, Haldron-44 Stroika worked the stub of his arm. He lay in a growing pool of his own blood

and oil, his smashed optics crackling with the silhouettes of closing Iron Warriors.

The skitarius felt the quake of Idriss Krendl's footsteps. The warsmith towered over him. As Haldron-44 Stroika felt his systems slipping away and his Machine God abandon him, the warsmith contorted his half-face around an ugly sneer.

'Flesh? Iron?' Idriss Krendl said. 'You are unworthy of either, tin soldier of a tin god.' Then finally to the Iron Warriors gathered about him, Krendl commanded, 'This one lives – if you can call this living. He thinks he honours his Maker with the gargle of each drowning breath – but we shall show him what it truly is to suffer for his god.'

1101

Omnid Torquora disconnected from phylactic communion. From the data-tethered screams and the suffering.

The archmagos explorator sat in his interface throne aboard the *Maestrale*, surrounded by the tech-priests of the diagnostiquorum. The throne accommodated the bulk of Torquora's augmented frame and weaponry, and was set in a nest of cables that ran between the archmagos, his tech-priests and everything else in the Mechanicus fleet.

A fleet that had arrived before Engra Myrmidex. That had remained hidden and on station, just outside of the Velchanos system. Observing. Recording. Monitoring. Phylactically experiencing the doom of the Mechanicus mission – the Fabricator Locum's part of the mission.

Omnid Torquora had not revealed himself as Engra Myrmidex tested the Geller Device or pressed on predictably with his assault on Velchanos Magna. He had not intervened when Myrmidex sent his skitarii legions into a battle they could not hope to win. He stayed silent as thousands of skitarii soldiers fought and died on the forge world's surface for the greed of a single construct. He remained unmoved as the Fabricator Locum's fleet was caught between the Dark Mechanicum and the arriving Iron Warriors. As the Ark Mechanicus *Opus Machina* plummeted to its doom.

Hard data. Torquora had watched and waited as the data he required to succeed in his mission flooded in. The corrupt magi and servants of ruin thought that they prevailed. That they had beaten the Machine God's servants. That they had won – but they had not. The battle had barely begun. Omnid Torquora had come to understand – through Engra Myrmidex's lust for power and the sacrifice of thousands of the Machine God's skitarii soldiers – the true nature of his enemy. He had learned, through the loss of others, how to win. It was cold but it was necessary.

<Phylactic streams from the surface?> Omnid Torquora put to the tech-priests of his diagnostiquorum.

<Dead, my lord.>

<Have we catalogued the data from all test-engagements?> Torquora asked.

<Including the effects of enemy weaponry, their favoured tactics and the success ratios of strategies employed by our skitarii soldiers against them. Yes, my lord. All data-locked.>

<What about astrotelepathic returns from Satzica Secundus?> Torquora asked.

<None, archmagos. All contact with the forge world is lost.>

<Summon my Lords Militant,> the archmagos explorator ordered. <The ranking skitarii alpha. Tech-priests of the Ordo Reductor and Auxilia Myrmidon. The magi cybernetica. My lords of the Centurio Ordinatus. The Legio Grand Master of our Collegia Titanicus detachments. The tech-priest captain of the *Maestrale*. Have them all assemble in the tactical oratorium.>

<Yes, archmagos. Is it time?>

<The time for gathering data is at an end,> Omnid Torquora told the diagnostiquorum. <Now is the time for war.>

TECH-PRIEST

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SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF III
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+DATA STORM+*

Omnid Torquora waited for the heavy elevator doors to shudder aside. As they did, the darkened diagnostiquorum chamber was revealed to the magos explorator. The bridge of the *Maestrale* was the nexus from which the arkcruiser was controlled, but the might of the Adeptus Mechanicus army that fought on the world below was coordinated here.

Torquora strode from the elevator, the car sighing as the tech-priest's monstrous metal form departed. With the *clunk* of heavy steps, Torquora crossed the chamber.

While the magos explorator's organic body was but a cable-interfaced sack of spoiling meat, the Machine God had made Torquora much more. As he had explored the most lethal corners of the galaxy and fought the enemies of the Omnissiah over trinkets and ancient technologies, the tech-priest had indeed become less and less of a man. He had not only lost limbs and the function of flesh – he had been stripped of his humanity. But what the xenos had taken from Omnid Torquora, the Omnissiah had replaced and enhanced. The magos explorator was no longer human. He had become something beyond such constraints. He had transcended the limitation of base organics to assume an aspect of the Machine God Himself.

The ghoulishness of Torquora's cadaverous features sat within the darkness of his robes, hidden by the blinding intensity of his blaze-blue optics. His butchered body had travelled to the far reaches of the galaxy and had been chewed up and spat back at the Adeptus Mechanicus for augmentation. Now it was a punctured nest of cables, pipes and lines. About the stench, the withered flesh and wired bones, Omnid Torquora wore the glory of metal and intricate workings. Like an armoured sarcophagus, a suit of clinker-plate and heavy hydraulics enveloped him. Mechanical legs carried the deck-denting progress of his form. Brute appendage-cradles supported the weight of stowed heavy weaponry. An armoured hood of overlapping plates extended over his cranium like a mechanical headdress.

To some, Omnid Torquora was a metal monster, a servant of the Omnissiah so consumed with the

holy Quest for Knowledge that he had forsaken much of his mind for the processing power of supercogitators, auspexes and meme-banks. He had become a stomping, whirring, crackling priest-machine, whose reactor, when it fired, drowned out the insignificance of lesser constructs with its thunder. To others, Torquora was exactly what the Great Maker intended for the galaxy. An itinerant idol. The brutal fusion of flesh, feeble from the womb, and the Omnissiah's glorious workings.

As the baroque tech-priest wound his way between the runebanks and phylactic console interfaces, he trailed the oil-stained length of his accommodating robes. The chamber was a silent hive of god-fearing industry. Servitors, masked and robed, moved about the nests of runebanks, running cables and plugging their masters into the labyrinthine network of feeds that draped from the ceiling and snaked through the consoles. Cyber-cherubim descended in a small flock about Omnid Torquora. The drones swooped about the monstrous magos on engineered wings, attending to his needs. They varied in size and appearance, from infant cherubs to flapping, foetal constructs. Each dragged an interface or length of cable and began porting their master into the phylactic of information that flowed through the diagnostiquorum.

Magi, logistae and the tech-priests of the diagnostiquorum were hard at work, their minds connected to those of the Mechanicus's servants throughout the fleet and fighting on the planet below. The dark chamber boasted no ports or windows, for the priests of the diagnostiquorum saw the bloody wonders of battle through thousands of optics, omnispectrals and interfaced eyeballs. Through their runebanks, they devoured the hard data fed to them from vane arrays, tethers and stream umbilicals. The thoughts of skitarii soldiers were theirs to know. The havoc of battle, victory and death was to them a torrent that reduced the pict-streamed, the chemical and experiential to cold data. Data to be processed, amassed and collated.

Unlike the runebank-interfaced tech-priests, Omnid Torquora did not require a throne and console. He was his own walking runebank. His auxiliary appendages slipped out from his robes, and their multi-digits went to frenetic work across the cogitators and logic engines housed within the armoured pulpit that projected from the priest-machine's chest.

With his flock of cherubim circling, porting and interfacing, the magos explorator came to a halt at the hub of the dark chamber. As his diagnostiquorum of priests monitored the battle below – from every apocalyptic cannon crash to the flash of each targeting reticule – Omnid Torquora in turn monitored *them*. Through the cybernetic forces of the Adeptus Mechanicus, the priests saw all, felt all and knew all. Through the diagnostiquorum, Omnid Torquora came to know even more. Through them he advised and guided skitarii soldiers. He became a conduit for the Motive Force and – when the occasion demanded such measures – he would become one with the servants of the Adeptus Mechanicus. He was a puppet-master for whom the cybernetics of skitarii officers and soldiers were armour to wear and weapons to wield.

<Engage neural congress,> Torquora announced through the priestly consciousness of the chamber. <Wireless autoshunt acquired. Upload…>

Torquora's mind became a feverish constellation of thoughts, imperatives and raw data. The tech-priest's supercogitators tamed the torrent of infostreams, the blizzard of pict feeds and omnispectral miasma. It was a searing privilege to experience the Machine God's holy war through so many optics, augurs and targeters. To comprehend the Motive Force through an unfolding data-storm of events, both planet-shattering and inconsequential. It was how Torquora imagined the Omnissiah experienced the galaxy – through the hallowed workings of all true constructs at once and in glorious union.

It had been half a year, Martian-standard, since Omnid Torquora had initiated the attack on Velchanos Magna. As the warp storm of the Great Gyre had retreated, the forge world had been revealed like a treasure over which the Dark Mechanicum and the Traitor Space Marines of the Iron Warriors had fought. Now, the indomitable forces of the Adeptus Mechanicus contested the world. Furnished with the precious data of an expendable and exploratory attack, Torquora's forces now fought both the subjugated Mechanicum and their Iron Warriors overlords. For 344 days, the Adeptus Mechanicus had taken the fight to the tainted, the machine-corrupted and the Chaos-pledged. For 344 days, Omnid Torquora had taken his station in the diagnostiquorum of the arkcruiser *Maestrale* and led his skitarii legions, his engines of mass destruction and his priests-militant in battle.

Like plucking a star from a cosmos of consciousnesses, Omnid Torquora selected one of his soldiers. The tech-priest could immerse himself in the skitarius, while at the same time monitoring all others.

Ballistarius First Class Unix 77-Endocek was a gunner riding out the undulations of his Ironstrider engine. The walker, its monotask servitor-driver and Endocek belonged to the Novo Nine-Two Saggitariaq. The unit was making progress through the assembly avenues of the Graia-Mactoria. As the walkers stalked past the wreckage of half-constructed battle tanks and the possessed macro-machinery assembling them, they were fired upon by warped gun-servitors and hench-units of the Dark Mechanicum. Still responding to the darkness of their active protocols, the polluted constructs tried their best to defend the smouldering, battle-smashed installation.

Leading the column of Ironstrider engines, Unix 77-Endocek's roving omnispectral beams stabbed through the smoke and darkness, searching for targets. Dark Mechanicum followers were taking cover behind the shattered shells of tanks, sheltering among the corrugated roof tops and taking aim from within stilt-mounted observation pods that still stood along the length of the assembly avenue. Acquiring each in turn, 77-Endocek despatched them with cold precision.

The Graia-Mactoria echoed with the lonely blast of single autocannon shells. The twin barrels of the cognis weaponry had the capability to turn vehicles and buildings into shot-shattered wrecks with fully automatic streams of devastating gunfire. Such tactics were considered a waste of time and ammunition without necessity, and the ballistarius first class opted for the searing accuracy of single shots, blasted alternately from each barrel. Each round tore through the mangled metal of cover, through buckled doors and the spiked barricades of roof-mounted forts and emplacements.

The rabid gunfire and code-shrieks of the enemy fell silent as, one by one, the rounds turned the tainted into streaks of streaming gore across metal and rockcrete.

Hunchbacked installation thralls burst forth from a reinforced control cabin at the Ironstrider engine's feet, blasting sickly beams up at Unix 77-Endocek from their baroque lasrifles. The Ironstrider ballistarii would not be stopped, however. Hauling their grips and triggers up and pushing the barrels of the autocannons down towards the ground, the Novo Nine-Two Saggitariaq chewed up the miserable thralls with monstrous gunfire. Urging his servitor-driver and Ironstrider engine on, 77-Endocek stepped down on a malformed menial who was slapping his malfunctioning rifle with a palm. Leaving the mound of pulverised bone and flesh in its wake, the engine strode on with the ballistarius blasting gun-servitors from overhead wire walkways.

Omnid Torquora allowed himself to drift, his phylactic presence moving from construct-consciousness to construct-consciousness. Blinking between the optics and augurs of skitarii soldiers, the magos explorator saw a planet at war. From the ground, through the shaky pict streams and

spooling data, Torquora watched the servants of the Dark Mechanicum die. He watched skitarii macroclades stoically advance through the twisted metal, demolished structures and cybernetic cadavers of the ruinous forge world. He monitored the progress of spindly Sicarian ruststalkers and infiltrators as they silently picked their way through the shattered industriascape, stabbing Dark Mechanicum hereteks in the back of their power packs, slitting feeds and cutting hooded heads from the shoulders of code-polluted tech-priests.

Two leagues to the south, the Onager Dunecrawlers of the V Column Adamanica-Phractora had closed on Dark Mechanicum battle tank contingents. The area had been the fabricator districts of the leaning Noctroi Hive but now was a cratered, cannon-blasted wasteland of drifting smoke and crackling energies.

Within the Dunecrawler designated *Arachsus-440*, Omnid Torquora willed himself into the electro-amniotic tank of the vehicle's driver. 1-Lotun Cacheca was interfaced with the crawler and its machine-spirit, spearheading an Onager attack on a ramshackle armoured division. The Dark Mechanicum ranks were made up of smoke-belching battle tanks, dozer-bladed conveyers and spider-legged walkers. As the Dunecrawlers made flaming shells of the enemy tanks, scuttling over the derelicts with their crab-like legs, Torquora moved between 1-Lotun Cacheca and Ipsota 6-Dramski, the Onager's designated gunner.

Rotating his gatling launcher, Dramski hammered rocket after rocket into a battle tank whose lightning cannon had glowed to readiness. Successive explosions tore through the tank, a final blast sending the wreckage skyward in a raging fireball. As the derelict landed and bounced back through the Dark Mechanicum lines, 1-Lotun Cacheca followed it through the flames.

Leading the slow, leg-stabbing crawl of a charge, *Arachsus-440* breached the enemy lines, drawing the fury of Dark Mechanicum tank fire down on itself. The vehicle's Emanatus force field became a globe of rancid light as Dark Mechanicum walkers and battle tanks turned the monstrosity of their energy weapons on the Onager Dunecrawler. Omnid Torquora felt the field integrity of the vehicle's defences drop even as 1-Lotun Cacheca did.

The Dunecrawler had greater problems, however. As well as the putrescent energy of the heavy beam storm, the Onager's augurs had picked up an armoured conveyer, thundering towards it at ramming speed. A nightmare of spiked track, serrated dozer blades and cyborg shock troops clinging to its twisted architecture, the conveyer bounced up and over the lips of craters before accelerating straight for the spearheading Dunecrawler.

Stepping back and lifting a single arachnoid leg, 1-Lotun Cacheca allowed the armoured conveyer to pass before his hallowed vehicle. As the conveyer back-tracked, the skitarii driver brought the tapering talon of the leg down to skewer through the conveyer's roof and troop compartment. Cybernetic shock troopers began to clamber up and across the spiked wreckage of the transport. Ipsota 6-Dramski cycled from gatling launcher to cannons on the turret array before hammering the enemy into blood, oil and frag.

Suddenly, another vehicle was amongst them. While the *Arachsus-440* attempted to extricate its leg and blast boarding shock troopers to oblivion, a spindly spider walker had mounted the enmeshed vehicles. The dish of an irradiator burned into the Onager's armoured shell from a mounting on the walker's underbelly, while the vehicle's single, monstrous claw slammed through the side of the driver's compartment.

Omnid Torquora felt the breached tank empty of its electro-amniotic fluid. The crooked, crackling

pincers of the spider walker's greatclaw had pierced the armour plating. Extended, they arced and spat either side of 1-Lotun Cacheca's sagging form. The compartment interior showered Cacheca with sparks. Above, Torquora lived the horror of Ipsota 6-Dramski's death, as a corruption-leaking cyborg stood over the gunner on the roof of the Dunecrawler and ran its rifle-mounted heavy chainblade through him.

With 1-Lotun Cacheca's biometrics faltering, Torquora assumed control of the skitarius's workings and failing systems. In his last moments, the driver felt the Machine God's presence. The Motive Force acted through him, and Omnid Torquora through the Motive Force. As the crackling pincers closed about him, Torquora willed the bionics of Cacheca's arm up towards the Onager's controls. With automotive power and hydraulics fading, every second was a mechanised agony as Torquora reached out with a dying gauntlet.

Slamming a bank of switches down and stabbing at a thick button with an armoured finger, Torquora willed 1-Lotun Cacheca to carry out a final duty. Hauling down on a pair of plunger handles, the skitarius initiated the vehicle's destruct sequence. Torquora would deny the Dark Mechanicum even the derelict scrap of the vehicle. The tech-priest felt the machine-spirit of the *Arachsus-440* purge its precious banks of collected battlefield data along a stream umbilical and up towards the *Maestrale*. Overloading the vehicle's power core, Torquora felt the searing pincers of the claw arc-sizzle and close, cutting 1-Lotun Cacheca in two.

Withdrawing, Torquora found his way to Rota Volatis-22, gunner of the Dunecrawler *Hermektris-600* that was making its way up behind. As *Arachsus-440* exploded, a nova of detonating fuel-rods, ammunition and power enveloped the surrounding vehicles. While the pinned conveyer and a closing battle tank erupted in a chain reaction of detonations, the scaffold structure of the decimated spider walker skittered and sparked in the flames. As the driver of the *Hermektris-600* took the Onager on and Rota Volatis-22 ended the enemy walker with a neutron laser stream, the column of Adeptus Mechanicus Dunecrawlers stalked on through the opening in the Dark Mechanicum lines.

SELECTED: DENTRICA II OF III
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+COLD WRATH+*

Omnid Torquora travelled the dread freightways of Velchanos Magna in phylactic communion with his warriors: vanguard skitarii whose ranks crackled with the radioactivity of their radium weaponry, rangers who climbed up through the shattered floors of hab-blocks and took aim at Dark Mechanicum priests with their transuranic arquebuses. He lived the death-dealing charge of Sicarian ruststalkers as they carved a path through hordes of corrupt skitarii temple guard. The scrapcode-chuntering constructs defended the contested ruin of Gamma Hydrax to the last warped soldier.

While the killclades and legions of Torquora's skitarii fought on, the machine that was the Traitor forge world maintained its fell production. While habs, entire hives and cratered deserts of orbitally-bombarded ruin were given up to the Adeptus Mechanicus advance, clusters of Dark Mechanicum forge temples and assembly yards toiled night and day to reproduce the forces sacrificed to Torquora's invaders. For every warped cyborg, cult-thrall and weaponised servitor the hereteks lost, the gene-mills and forges of Velchanos Magna brought forth ten more replacement abominations.

Worse, such invaluable installations were guarded by daemon engines that savaged attacking skitarii

cohorts and tore through columns of Ironstrider engines. Even Onager Dunecrawlers struggled to survive the otherworldly savagery of these infernal machines and the droves of possessed battle-automata that supported them. Above the forge temples were twisted Dark Mechanicum cruisers, maintaining their suicidal station in surface-grazing orbit. The monstrous vessels blotted out the stars, replacing the light with a fell glow of their own from flight decks and holds.

Repaired and sustained by the forge world's mighty shipyards, which remained in Traitor hands, the disfigured cruisers protected the key production centres on Velchanos Magna from Adeptus Mechanicus arkcruisers and skitarii ground invasions alike. Visiting warp-fuelled bombardments, scything plagues of Hellblades and the air strikes of fighter-bombers on advancing legions of cybernetic soldiers, the twisted vessels ensured that clusters of forge temples maintained their horrific rates of production.

Omnid Torquora, conversely, had but a few forge ships to repair and maintain his cybernetic forces, their vehicles and their weaponry. He had nothing in the way of shipyards for the vessels of his battle-scarred fleet or temples to provide him with reinforcements. It had been the reality of this equation that had created a stalemate scenario between the Adeptus Mechanicus and the corrupt constructs of the Dark Mechanicum for the last 344 days.

Torquora's skitarii legions were battle-hardened veterans, whose sweeping victories honoured their magos explorator but whose numbers he could not replace. The Dark Mechanicum forces were made up of corrupt constructs, polluted tech-priests and freakish fusions of daemon and machine. They could not stand against the indomitable onslaught of Torquora's forces, but they did not have to. Moments after they fell, their warped forms were replaced by something that had been engineered, dreadfully augmented and infused with daemonic malignance in a forge temple but an hour before.

With every loss and every moment the Dark Mechanicum held their production centres on the dark side of the planet, the odds turned against Omnid Torquora.

The far side of the planet was a blasted mess. Tidally locked, one half of the forge world was bathed in eternal night while the other half suffered the perpetual bleakness of day. For Omnid Torquora, blinking between skitarii soldiers fighting daemon engines in the infernal twilight between, the daylight seemed worse.

In the dull glow of the distant star, the full twisted horror of what warp storm isolation had done to the once magnificent forge world was clear. The proud industry of the planet was now a twisted malaise of crooked tower-stacks and ventscrapers that poured the poison of corruption into skies once tarnished only with honest industry. The very architecture was twisted and tangled – a labyrinth of barbed buildings and razored wire, lost in soul-draining mists of damnation. The warp-saturated metal and stone assumed mind-aching shapes that honoured the dark creators of the world and afflicted the servants of the Omnissiah with their perversion.

Reactors arced otherworldly energies that crackled across the serrated roof tops. Where chemical seas had long dried up, the air shivered above the fiery blaze of liquid metal lakes. Canals of molten iron criss-crossed the globe with a patchwork of daemonic malevolence. Gene-mills spawned a never-ending horde of corrupted freaks, while the temple forges – once bright centres of technological achievement – were now architectural abominations dedicated to daemon overlords and the Ruinous Powers of the galaxy.

It was in these palaces of mighty craft and endless industry, originally built to honour the Machine God, that the worst atrocities had been committed against the sanctity of the machine. Temples had

been turned into warp-spawn forges, fusing daemonic entities to tainted workings of diabolical design. The resultant abominations stalked the forge world, eager to indulge their hatred of everything pure and visit the destruction of their obscene weaponry upon the forces of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

In the south, entire quadrants of the forge world's industriascape had been decimated, leaving behind mangled architecture, flame-cleansed sand and cratered waste. There, giants ruled. The arkcruisers of the Adeptus Mechanicus had blasted installations, forge temples and construction yards from the face of the planet with apocalyptic accuracy, and the great war machines of the Centurio Ordinatus trundled through the death and destruction, their colossal tracks mulching constructs and buildings alike into the quaking ground.

The Ordinatii were grand expressions of the Omnissiah's will. Towers and sky-scraping chimneys trembled and collapsed at their approach. The beams of lesser weaponry sparked harmlessly off the great, globed surfaces of dispersion fields and the supra-armoured forms of the holy machines themselves.

Horizons were lost in the blinding flash of blessed weaponry delivering the wrath of the Great Maker. Missiles raged up into the sky from the war machines before dropping like thunderbolts towards their targets and blanketing enemy sectors in a catastrophic carpet of flame. The great dishes of sonic disrupters bathed forge districts in powerful energies that quaked buildings to rubble and split the earth asunder.

The forge world was not without its own warped versions of such machines. Twisted behemoths trundled and crawled across the field of battle like ancient monsters, mindlessly decimating loyalist and Traitor forces alike with streams of energy drawn directly from the warp. Nova cannons blasted explosive shells between the war machines of both forces, crashing through shield and plate at near approaching the speed of light. Derelict giants ground to a halt, wreathed in flame with tech-priests and soldiers spilling from emergency exits. Several even detonated, turning entire battlefields of warring constructs into frag storms of fiery destruction.

Through such utter decimation, delivered from orbit or visited upon Velchanos Magna by the behemoth clashing of the Ordinatii war machines, walked the god-machines of the Collegia Titanica. While Ordinatii Minoris and ferocious Scout Titans stalked the southern ruins, ripping through regrouping cohorts of troops and tank formations, Battle Titans of the Legio Interfectra and the Ironoclast clashed.

Warlords and Reavers of the Legio Interfectra flanked colossal Imperator Titans as the Adeptus Mechanicus god-machines demolished hab-towers with their passing and turned sub-hives into decimated pyres of metal, rockcrete and corpses. As Omnid Torquora's skitarii legions advanced in their mountainous shadow, the Titans of the Legio Interfectra engaged the monstrous deviancy of the Ironoclast. Formerly the Legio Fortiori, the machines of the Ironoclast were now warped giants of heretekal design that burned with an infernal inner fire. The ground shook with their feral charge. Huge storms of dust and soot enveloped the gargantuan clashes. From within the murky maelstrom, the heavens cooked with the beams and blasts of turbolasers and plasma annihilators. Scrap and shrapnel rained as the possessed god-machines of the Ironoclast tore through Warhounds and Reaver Battle Titans with chainfists and crackling claws.

From the fleet arkcruisers, to the gargantuan war machines of the Centurio Ordinatus and Collegia Titanica, all were under Omnid Torquora's command. The archmagos had plenipotentiaries and skitarii aides attending on his tech-priest captains, the Grand Master of the Legio Interfectra and the

Lords Ordinatus. His word and the determinations of the diagnostiquorum were carried through the ranks of the Legio Cybernetica, the siege-smiths of the Ordo Reductor, the war savants of the Auxilia Myrmidon and the tech-priests dominus who warred in the name of the Machine God. All were Torquora's to command through the word of his machine emissaries or interfaced actions of his own. A powerful fleet and an Adeptus Mechanicus army were at his fingertips. The cold wrath of the Omnissiah was his to wield.

And yet, Velchanos Magna had not fallen to the Cult Mechanicus.

SELECTED: DENTRICA III OF III
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… +*CORDON*+

With his skitarii legions, his tech-priests and an army of the Omnissiah's finest war machines at his disposal, Velchanos Magna should have been Omnid Torquora's months before. He had the hard data, the materiel and the indomitable will to conquer the forge world – yet still it remained in the hands of the Traitors.

The Dark Mechanicum and hereteks of the forge world were skilled in their dread arts and determined to the last construct. But it was not their fell faith that had sustained them against Torquora, nor their worship of the Abystra-Dynomicron, the daemon entity that possessed the liquid iron core of the planet. It had been the Iron Warriors that had upset Torquora's estimates, undone his equations and pushed his probabilities to their limits.

The warsmith Idriss Krendl had once led his Iron Warriors to Velchanos Magna for supplies, infernal weaponry and repairs. Stealing ancient knowledge and techno-artefacts from the forge world's vaults and revealing to the Adeptus Mechanicus of Satzica Secundus the wonders of a Geller bomb, the warsmith had waited for the Machine God's servants to damn themselves. Testing the terrible weapon, the tech-priests of Satzica Secundus had not only weakened the Dark Mechanicum of Velchanos Magna but also plunged their own forge world into a warp storm of their own making.

Now Idriss Krendl had not one forge world beneath his merciless boot, but two. Two centres of colossal industry to produce armies of slave-constructs, infernal engines, weapons of mass destruction and daemonships for the Iron Warriors fleet. Omnid Torquora could not know what such a maniac would do with such resources, but the Iron Warriors were born conquerors and their warsmiths brutal tyrants. Whatever Idriss Krendl had planned for the galaxy, it would be celebrated in blood and iron. Of that, the magos explorator was sure.

For now, Torquora had blockaded Velchanos Magna, but Satzica Secundus was a rich prize waiting to be plucked by the warsmith. The archmagos aimed to deny Krendl the bounty of his tainted forge world and the dark blessing of reinforcements.

<Archmagos,> a tech-priest said from a nearby console. <Blockade runners. Sector 34.>

Torquora blinked back to the deck of the diagnostiquorum, with its humming banks and silent priests in communion with the forces on the planet's surface.

<Give me a visual feed,> the archmagos ordered.

Within moments his mind was filled with the glorious vista of the *Maestrale*'s forward lancet screens. He could see what Tech-priest Captain Cyntreq Voltram was seeing on the arkcruiser's command deck. The blackness of space, besmirched with the aethyric static of the nearby warp storm.

The nightmare of Velchanos Magna rolling beneath the cordon of Adeptus Mechanicus warships, a patchwork of monstrous industry and utter destruction. Gaping like a blazing wound in the forge world's surface, Omnid Torquora could see the vast rift that uncovered the daemonic planetary core, exposed and raging with infernal brilliance.

Across the colossal chasm, Torquora saw the scaffolding of dry docks and shipyards. In their warped and tangled midst, Chaos cruisers were being constructed. The skeletal frameworks of new raiders and escort ships were visible, while system ships, Dark Mechanicum arkfreighters and Iron Warriors strike cruisers sat suspended over the molten fury of the Abystra-Dynomicron in various states of repair and augmentation. Daemonships sat in scaffold webs of fell significance that marked out patterns and ruinous symbols about the possessed craft. It was from the shipyards that the blockade runners had departed.

'Tech-priest Captain Voltram,' Torquora said, but his words proceeded from the lips of a servitor stationed on the bridge. The consular unit was embedded into a column beside Voltram's throne.

'Archmagos,' the tech-priest captain voxed back.

'Identify.'

'Dark Mechanicum corvette, my lord,' Voltram said, 'running behind a pair of adamanticlads. They aim to test us.'

'There will be no test,' Torquora told his tech-priest captain. 'You will see to it.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Trajectory?'

'They're heading for the Mandeville point, archmagos.'

'Predictable. Magnify…'

The *Maestrale*'s screens brought up the blockade runners in searing detail. The Dark Mechanicum vessels were twisted perversions with little regard for pattern or grace. Their sub-light engines stormed behind them, leaving ghostly, glowing trails in the vessels' wakes as they rocketed up from the shipyards and out of orbit. The adamanticlads were system ships with no warp capability to speak of. Their bulk was dedicated to armour plating, defensive fields and batteries designed to hold off pursuing craft. Such vessels had been constructed and augmented with one purpose in mind: to break the Adeptus Mechanicus cordon surrounding Velchanos Magna.

Torquora knew from experience of boarding such vessels that they carried little in the way of crew. They were battering rams designed to soak up all Torquora's fleet had to throw at them, ensuring the safe delivery of the precious corvette to the Mandeville point where the vessel would translate into the warp. At least, it would if Omnid Torquora ever failed in frustrating such an attempt.

Blockade runners had become a regular challenge, the heavily defended shipyards vomiting forth vessel after rank vessel with the intention of one day finding an opening in the cordon. Like the vessels that had preceded it into certain destruction, the corvette undoubtedly carried representative tech-priests from Velchanos Magna, sent by Idriss Krendl to establish a Chaotic concord with Satzica Secundus and secure a fleet of reinforcements. Most of the time, single attempts were made to breach the line of Cult Mechanicus ships stationed around the forge world. Occasionally, several attempts were mounted simultaneously to stretch the coverage of Torquora's fleet.

'Receiving messages from the *Quantica* and the *Motive Force*, my lord,' Tech-priest Captain Voltram reported. 'Blockade runners breaking from the surface.'

'Where?' Torquora asked.

‘The poles,’ Voltram said.

Omnid Torquora allowed himself to drift through the constellation of augmented consciousnesses. Blinking into the minds of skitarii storming an immobilised Chaos Titan in the southern districts, Torquora saw second-hand the Dark Mechanicum vessels rising from gargantuan pit-hangars at the pole. In the north, the archmagos saw the surface from the perspective of a spindly Sicarian infiltrator. The princeps was directing his murderous skitarii to butcher the tech-priests and artisans manning an arc reactor crowning the northern pole. Prompting the infiltrator to look up from his blades and the mauled hereteks crawling away from him, Torquora saw a heavily armoured monitor vessel rise from a hidden dry dock ahead of a black, spiny raider.

Torquora was suddenly there, on the bridge of the *Motive Force*, the *Quantica* and the *Maestrale*, his modulated orders erupting from the withered lips and vox-hailers of consular units.

‘Engage! Nothing gets through. *Nothing*.’

As the blockade runners surged up from the forge world, the arkships of the Adeptus Mechanicus opened fire. In the silence of space, macrocannon batteries and banks of super-heavy lasers blazed in a staggered blast that worked its way down the length of the vessels. The shields of monitors, adamanticlads and armoured system ships took the onslaught, crackling and glowing to a furious nimbus of light.

‘Again,’ Torquora ordered. ‘And again.’ The archmagos knew that in the gunnery sections deck-priests would be orchestrating the labours of monstrously augmented servitors and the priming of the cannons whose barrels protruded from the sides of the arkcruiser.

As the *Maestrale* and her flanking escort ships fired again, the shielding of the adamanticlads flashed to overload and critical failure. The vessels took the beams and blasts head-on, the apocalyptic energies punching through the reinforced plating of prows and down through the length of the ships.

One detonated, a beam cutting through its superstructure and triggering the explosion of its raging sub-light engines. As the blinding flash momentarily bleached the void and then subsided, the second adamanticlad disintegrated, falling away from the corvette in blazing sections. Fearlessly, the Dark Mechanicum corvette surged on towards the *Maestrale*. Torquora knew why. The tech-priests and hereteks on board would rather face the doom of the arkcruiser’s broadside than report failure to their merciless Iron Warriors overlords.

‘Grant them the Machine God’s absolution,’ the archmagos ordered. Torquora watched as the twisted corvette disappeared in a blanket of white. The blaze of cannon fire enveloped the ship like a storm. As filters and screens compensated and the energy blast of the broadside faded, Omnid Torquora saw that the blockade runner was gone, wiped clean from the darkness of the void.

‘*Motive Force*,’ Torquora said, ‘*Quantica*, report.’

‘Blockade runners neutralised,’ Tech-priest Captain Verrid of the *Motive Force* reported.

‘*Quantica*? Respond.’

‘Defence monitors destroyed, archmagos,’ Parsimon of the *Quantica* told him. The tech-priest captain hesitated. ‘But an Infidel-class raider made it through the cordon.’

‘Parsimon…’

‘It has sustained damage and is currently being swarmed by interceptors from the carrier bays of the *Haptis*.’

‘Nothing gets through, captain,’ Omnid Torquora warned Parsimon.

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Have the *Haptis* break station,’ the archmagos ordered, ‘and authorise Tech-priest Captain Byterius to run the raider down and destroy it.’

‘Affirmative, my lord.’

The diagnostiquorum faded. The static of vox-feeds bled away. Omnid Torquora sank back into communion with the servants of the Omnissiah, fighting for their lives and functionality down on the planet below. The forces of Chaos were not only testing the Adeptus Mechanicus in the void. The war for Velchanos Magna raged on.

The once-sacred soil of the forge world had been bathed in the corruption of the warp storm that had enveloped it. The very core of the planet was possessed by a monstrous entity of the aethyr, its molten pollution running through every furnace and forge. It was a part of everything. Every weapon, vessel, building and cybernetic soldier had been blessed with iron from its daemonic form. The contaminated priesthood of the Dark Mechanicum had poisoned the planet further with their hereteknologies and worship of the Abystra-Dynomicron. Now the Chaos Space Marines of the Iron Warriors Legion held sway, Idriss Krendl bending the daemon, the possessed planet and the Dark Mechanicum to his unbreakable will.

Torquora moved from skitarius to skitarius. From officer alphas and princeps to the cybernetic soldiers who fought their way across the planetary surface. From crawler columns to Sydonian Dragoons, charging through clouds of incense on their Ironstrider engines. Holy warriors of the Machine God, their gleaming war-plate and crimson cloaks were no more. Their armour was dented and beam-scorched. Their greatcloaks were tattered remnants, streaming behind them like battle standards that refused to fall. Their workings were shattered and their bionics exposed but on they fought, their indomitable steps taking them from battle to battle. For half a year they had striven to return Velchanos Magna to the rust-red empire of Mars. For half a year they had fought beside tech-priests, battle-automata and colossal war machines for the glory of the Great Maker. However, they had never before faced enemies like the Iron Warriors.

What once had been an industriascape that covered the planet with its endless toil and production was now a warzone. Omnid Torquora had blasted entire sectors to oblivion with the apocalyptic weaponry of his arkcruisers and Ordinatii. He had walked with the god-machines of the Collegia Titanica, through his consular units on the command decks of Reavers and Warlords, razing hives and temples to the ground. His legions of skitarii soldiers had mulched cadaver-constructs into the ground with the cold determination of their progress. In their wake the cybernetic soldiers left a mangled wasteland of blasted buildings, warped wreckage and flesh-fused scrap.

Between the cratered expanses of flame and wreckage-strewn wilderness, the Iron Warriors had laid their claim. Bringing the tactical genius of their daemon primarch and the experience of an eternity of sieges fought and won, the Chaos Space Marines had been quick to secure the forge world’s key strategic sites: the forge temple principal, shipyards, space ports, reactor complexes, forges and assembly yards. The hab-stacks and hives of Velchanos Magna were allowed to burn along with the blasted devastation of districts and installations deemed not worth defending.

While the production powerhouses of the capital forges continued to spew out the corruption of Dark Mechanicum skitarii, gun-servitors, battle-automata and daemon engines, Idriss Krendl and his Obliteratii warband oversaw the transformation of the Traitor forge world. Forge temples, ports and gargantuan assembly yards became mangled fortresses, these key installations now surrounded by

colossal embankments of scrap and demolished rockcrete.

Possessed giga-machinery, dozers and heavy-duty hump-freighters toiled round the clock to build mountainous bulwarks of twisted metal and smashed stone about strategic sites of ongoing production. Bodies, bones and the mangled workings of smashed constructs filled the gaps between macrogirders and shattered wall sections. Cementing the sloping walls of wreckage was molten iron that welled its daemonic way up through the towering mounds of warped destruction, cooling to a metallic, scrap-embedded shell.

From orbit, such fortifications appeared like clusters of fat, dormant volcanoes, housing forge temples and monstrous installations within. On the ground the similarity was even more striking, with bubbling springs of molten metal erupting from the mountainous scrap-faces and streaming down the slope towards the Adeptus Mechanicus forces mounting uphill assaults.

Torquora had lost so many cybernetic soldiers on those slopes. Streams of molten iron had carried them away in deluges of daemonic fury. Twisted gun emplacements opened fire upon ascending cohorts from elevated positions, camouflaged by the surrounding scrap. Artillery rained down on them from siege mortars, cannons and bombards launching their salvos of warped death and destruction from within the embankment walls. When Torquora's skitarii cohorts and killclades did manage to reach the summit ridge, they found the inner slopes to be swarming with Dark Mechanicum constructs.

The archmagos had even lost Titans and colossal Ordinatus war machines to assaults on the fortress forges. The monstrous and ancient form of the Ordinatus *Helicon* was a shattered wreck smouldering in the shadow of one such embankment. The demolished god-form of the *Bellum Indomitat* lay at the foot of another, the battle for the Titan's hallowed scrap being fought by skitarii from the 10/17 Auxilliex-Itinerarii and a small sea of code-screeching tech-thralls that spilled over the rim of the ridge to claim the wreckage.

Idriss Krendl and his Iron Warriors orchestrated their side of the devastation from their strike cruisers, destroyers and the battle-barge *Forgebreaker*. Such vessels, along with the daemonships and twisted arkcruisers of the Dark Mechanicum, held perilous station above the monstrous fortifications. From low orbit the vessels added the apocalyptic firepower of their cannon batteries to the defences, felling the Titan god-machines and colossal weaponry of the Centurio Ordinatus upon approach.

Through the optics of skitarii soldiers about to die, Torquora had watched smoke-spewing gunships and rusted landers descend from the Iron Warriors vessels. When the Adeptus Mechanicus forces made headway against the code-shrieking hordes of Dark Mechanicum constructs, the Obliteratii would descend.

Bearing a warped curse of the flesh, Krendl's Iron Warriors were monsters indeed. Brutally malformed, the Chaos Space Marines had outgrown the limitations of their armour. Shattered helms revealed the smeared flesh of ghastly faces. Muscles and sinew had burst obscenely from the tarnished ceramite of their power armour, giving the Iron Warriors a hunched and savage appearance. Their arms were great grotesque claws of fleshmetal or club appendages, from which erupted the gaping barrels of heavy weaponry spawned straight from the ruinous temples of their own bodies. Armoured plate seemed embedded in the horrific brawn of their forms. They were abominations, hulking perversions of what they had once been. Enhanced. Afflicted. As one with their weapons.

When they took to the field of battle they killed with a bitter, hate-fuelled ferocity. For the Obliteratii it was not enough to end a foe. Torquora's doomed skitarii were crushed, torched and blasted to

shreds. Targets were not executed with the economy of a single shot but were utterly annihilated, hammered into the ground by a storm of iron. The long-lost nobility of the Iron Warriors' hideous features contorted about the insanity of battle roars and bellows. Within the warped flesh of their faces, however, their eyes burned with a dark intelligence. Like all servants of havoc and ruin, they were out of their minds, but Krendl's Obliterators were precision monsters. Angles were estimated. Cover was utilised. Strategies were employed to devastating effect.

As vanguard skitarii were clawed into butchered bionics and bloody workings, Omnid Torquora withdrew. The archmagos took with him the last moments of alphas and their cybernetic soldiers as they were lost in the shredding hail of gunfire, las-beams and storm fronts of tainted flame. There was still a lot to be learned, and much data to be gathered, from such deaths. Tactics could be adapted and future approaches calibrated. For Torquora it was still not a pleasant experience, living the last savage moments of a life. Feeling the Iron Warriors simultaneously indulge their ancient hate and the physical power of their warp-diseased bodies.

The archmagos was not the only one to study his enemy's strategies. While the Iron Warriors fortified the districts and temples they needed to keep Velchanos Magna and hold off the Adeptus Mechanicus, their own assaults demonstrated skill and dark calculation. Monitoring the frequency and outcome of such offensive manoeuvres, Torquora came to the conclusion that Idriss Krendl was not to be underestimated. Most of the time hordes of rancid constructs were despatched to frustrate the regrouping of skitarii legions and delay the colossal machinery of war. Krendl did not waste materiel and the foetid lives of Dark Mechanicum creations on retaking target installations and areas that had no strategic advantage.

The Ortorqus Chasma deep core mines were different.

0010

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF III
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+ILLOGICAL+*

‘Captain Byterius of the *Haptis* for you, archmagos,’ a diagnostiquorum priest informed Torquora.

‘Patch him through.’

‘At once, my lord.’

Torquora waited for his vox-channel to switch frequency.

‘Captain Byterius,’ Torquora said. ‘I sincerely hope you have good news for us.’

‘I was not aware failure was an option, archmagos,’ Tech-priest Captain Byterius said, the metallic drone of his voice warped and crackling with the vox-relay.

‘Report.’

‘The *Haptis* managed to draw level with the blockade runner,’ Byterius said. ‘There was a brief engagement, my lord. I regret to inform you of some minor damage sustained by this blessed vessel.’

‘The blockade runner, captain,’ Torquora said, urging Byterius to complete his report. Amongst the cascade of code scrolling down before his optics – every imperative issued, casualty suffered and victory secured on the battle-ravaged planet below – the tech-priest had identified something that demanded his immediate attention. ‘Be brief.’

‘The Infidel-class raider is no more, my lord,’ Captain Byterius said finally. ‘She was crippled by our interceptors. My vessel’s cannons delivered the judgement of the Omnissiah. I would like to nominate my gunnery crews and servitor-pilots for Class II file commendations and…’

‘That vessel breached the cordon and almost made it to the system’s Mandeville point,’ Omnid Torquora warned Byterius. ‘If it had succeeded, it would have carried missives to Satzica Secundus, establishing a concord and requesting reinforcements. Think on that, tech-priest captain, before you begin allocating recognitions.’

‘Yes, archmagos.’

‘Have the *Haptis* return to her station,’ Torquora ordered.

‘As you command, arch–’

Torquora cut the channel dead and returned to his feeds, the deluge of data in which his cogitators were drowning: servo-skull pict feeds, skitarii voxmissions and binaric codestreams uploaded from the planet's surface. One particular piece of data drew his attention.

'Sector 77 again?' Torquora said, the cold modulations of his voice carrying across the darkened chamber.

'Skitarii rangers report a build-up of troops on the Euphracta Fossae,' a tech-priest said, standing and pulling back his hood to reveal the baroque mask and rebreather within. Another took to his feet before his console, and then another.

'The Drastok 4-14 Radiphracts laying siege to Forge Temple Pharatoi have identified a large column of vehicles leaving the installation,' the second diagnostiquorum tech-priest said. 'They did not engage our skitarii. Alpha Konduis could not spare forces to pursue. He reports them taking a south-southwest heading at speed.'

'Air support?' Omnid Torquora put to the third. He had seen this pattern before in the same sector.

'A temple wing out of Autolica disengaged from battle with Marauders from the Tarantis 8/70,' the tech-priest said, his tri-optics blinking. 'Servitor-pilots identified the manoeuvre as illogical, given the temple wing's successes.'

'Heading?' Torquora asked.

'Inbound, sector 77,' the tech-priest said before all three resumed their thrones.

'They're coming for Ortorqus Chasma again,' Torquora said. 'Advise your charges in the area. There is going to be an attack.'

SELECTED: DENTRICA II OF III
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+THE OMNISSIAH FORBIDS IT+*

There should have been nothing unusual about the Ortorqus Chasma deep core mines. The Planum Ortorqus was an ancient mining field, its surface riddled with vast, gaping holes as black as the depths of space. Long exhausted of their mineral bounty, the deep core mines were all but abandoned.

Omnid Torquora had made it a priority to take the district early in the war and secure its colossal main shaft. The Ortorqus Chasma was an ancient excavation that ran deep into the forge world's rocky crust and mantle. As a target, it was without strategic merit and yet Omnid Torquora fortified the derelict mining operations with some of the best skitarii soldiers and Adeptus Mechanicus materiel at his disposal. The fortification of a worthless site had not gone unnoticed by some of Torquora's diagnostiquorum priests and the skitarii officers with whom they maintained phylactic communion. It had intrigued the enemy also.

Routinely, the forces of the Dark Mechanicum were sent to breach the defences around the Ortorqus Chasma. Thousands of code-corrupted constructs marched on the trenchworks about the deep core mines, only to join the mangled carpet of warped flesh and rusted bionics belonging to units that had failed before them. Omnid Torquora did not know why such repetitive attempts were made. Only he knew the significance of the mines. Perhaps Idriss Krendl had come to understand the vulnerability they represented. Perhaps the Iron Warriors warsmith was siege-fevered and simply wanted the installation and gaping entrance to the Ortorqus Chasma because Torquora denied it to him. Either way, the Iron Warriors and their Dark Mechanicum allies were coming to claim the mines as their

own.

'Authorise the Marauders to pursue,' the archmagos ordered. 'What else do we have in the sector?'

'The *Canis Corporalis* and supporting skitarii lay siege to the hab-stacks of Metra-Minoria, my lord,' a diagnostiquorum tech-priest nearby announced.

'Have Princeps Venedict break off his attack,' Torquora said, 'and take station over the trenchworks.'

'As you command, archmagos.'

Torquora felt his way through the blizzard of minds fighting on the planet below. Blinking from one experience to another, the archmagos found himself once more amongst the searing beams and stub-chewed nightmare of the Traitor forge world.

Ultic-11 Quistron was ranking alpha of the 51st Tenna-Noitraloid. The rangers of the Noitraloid had been stationed in the Ortorqus trenchworks for half a year. As Torquora established phylactic communion with the skitarii officer, he found Quistron on his rounds. Accompanied by a trio of servo-skulls that orbited him like a system of moons, Quistron trudged through the ash and soot of the outer trench. From orbit the trenchworks appeared as concentric cracks about the colossal openings of the deep core mine shafts, with accessways dug between the outer trench and the crescents of reserve trenches running within. It was the ranger alpha's daily duty to patrol the length of the trenches, auditing ammunition and recording the service requirements of equipment, emplacements and skitarii soldiers alike.

The 51st Tenna-Noitraloid wore the burns and punctures of battle on their war-plate with cold pride. Regardless of Ultic-11 Quistron's unvoiced assessment of the deep core mines and their strategic pointlessness, the rangers had secured the excavated trenchworks and held them against increasingly savage assaults.

But for the sound of distant battle, the outer trench was quiet. As the hydraulics of Quistron's long legs took him up the length of the excavation, his servo-skulls monitored, audited and assessed the battle-readiness of each section. Skitarii manned emplacements, surrounded by crates of ammunition and heavy-duty power packs. The barrels of heavy stubbers, autocannons and eradication beamers reached out from the outer trench, creating an overlapping kill-zone of fire arcs in the blasted wasteland beyond. Cybernetic soldiers peered over the edge of the trench, their telescoptics extending, while their comrades made adjustments to mortars.

Columns of rangers clutching galvanic rifles moved up and down the line, saluting their alpha with noospheric blurts. Their bionics were smashed and jury-rigged, their filthy red trenchcloaks ash-stained rags. As Ultic-11 Quistron passed, he acknowledged the uplinked status reports of sub-alphas and the sightings of skitarii soldiers leaning into transuranic weaponry, their optics screwed into scopes and long barrels aimed across the trench top.

<Alpha Quistron, listen to me carefully,> Torquora intruded.

The skitarii officer stopped, his servo-skulls gliding round about him.

<Archmagos,> Quistron acknowledged, feeling Torquora's presence like the channelled intervention of the Machine God Himself. <You honour my workings and my trench.>

<In a little under three minutes, your trench will suffer what appears from orbit to be a very determined attack. The enemy is on the move, Quistron-unit. They must not be allowed to take the Ortorqus Chasma. I forbid it. The Omnissiah forbids it.>

<I understand, archmagos,> Quistron transmitted. <Shall I send for the tech-priest dominus, my lord?

>

<Do so,> Torquora ordered. <I fear we shall need him.>

SELECTED: DENTRICA III OF III
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+SYSTEM SHOCK+*

By the time Tech-priest Dominus Theronymous Gant returned with the servo-skull the skitarii alpha had sent, trench augurs had picked up signals of the approaching horde. An army of corrupt constructs was on the march, the ghoulish light of afflicted workings like a rash on the diseased darkness. Lifting his head above the trench and focusing his telescoptics, Ultic-11 Quistron saw the silhouettes of the enemy approach. Through the derelict remains of once great factories and production complexes, the Dark Mechanicum troops advanced. Spindly automata. Warp-fevered skitarii. Bloated gun-servitors with horrifically-augmented heretek priests driving them on.

While Torquora had entrusted the tech-priest dominus with the security of the deep core mines, Gant had entrusted Alpha Quistron with the fortification of their position. 'Well?' the ancient tech-priest asked crabbily, his cable-shot torso and the spidery hydraulics of his legs hidden beneath his cloak.

'Looks like the bolstered ranks of the Geronteus Forge temple guard,' Quistron informed his master.

'Did I not read that the Geronteus Forge was destroyed?' Gant said.

'It seems, my lord, that what remained of their number have been salvaged and infused with further corruption and dark purpose.'

'Something's not right, archmagos,' Gant said. Torquora concurred.

'The archmagos agrees, master,' Quistron said.

'The enemy would not mount an attack on this site with such remnants,' Gant said, almost to himself. 'Alpha Quistron, ready your skitarii. I want this horde of walking detritus disassembled and returned to the scrap heap as soon as they are in range.'

'Affirmative, dominus.'

Gant turned and extended the long metal talon of a spindly bionic hand out towards a pair of robed servitors that followed him.

'You had better fetch my weapons,' the ancient said. 'It seems there will be bloodshed.'

The servitors did not have bottom jaws and simply nodded their obedience before making for the trench accessway.

<Avengers out of Autolica,> Omnid Torquora said, his words echoing through Alpha Quistron's brain and cogitator coils. <Inbound.>

Moments later, the dish arrays set in the remains of the derelict surface mining installation confirmed number and heading. Tech-Priest Dominus Gant had already heard the throaty rumble of the fighter wing's approach.

<Rangers,> Quistron ordered, <take cover. Aerial assault.>

'They wish to soften us up, eh?' Gant rambled on. Switching vox-channels, the tech-priest relayed his orders to the ordnance officers and priests of the Ordo Reductor waiting amongst a nest of weapons platforms situated between the deep core mine openings. 'Targets inbound. There's a storm coming. I can feel it in my workings. Make it so.'

The strike fighters bled from the darkness of the night sky. Their black fuselages were adorned with

spikes and razored wire that wound itself about the lengths of the aircraft. Wings were mounted with blades and serrations while their engines choked and guttered, leaving behind a trail of warp-scorched vapour.

As the tech-priest dominus's servitors returned with their master's ornate weaponry – the drones weighed down with extra ammunition – Torquora heard the boom of Ordo Reductor cannons with Quistron's ears. The sky above the trenchworks turned into a maelstrom of lightning and thunder. The heavens were rocked by the flash of detonating explosive shells and the electromagnetic pulse that crackled through the air like a firework, dissipating in the smoke and shot.

As the first Dark Mechanicum strike fighters descended for an attack run, several of the front runners were torn to fiery pieces. Ordo Reductor cannonry blitzed through the sky, turning Avengers into fireballs of unnatural flame. Other aircraft banked to avoid the shell storm but crackled with electromagnetic resonance. As the warp-encrusted workings of their engines died, the strike fighters began to plummet and spin, thunderbolting into the ash and ruin of the battle-torn wasteland below.

'Intensify,' the tech-priest dominus ordered, prompting the ordnance officers to drive their servitor crews on to swifter clearance and firing.

As the first wave of Avengers turned to fiery streaks and raining scrap, the flesh-fused servitor-pilots of the following strike fighters accelerated into a dive. Bringing the swarm of Dark Mechanicum aircraft into a ground-hugging column, the lead Avengers howled across the trenchworks. As they did so, their bolt cannons roared to life.

<Take cover,> Alpha Quistron ordered, grabbing a nearby cybernetic soldier by the shoulder. The skitarius had been tempted to take a blast at the passing aircraft but Quistron had pushed him back to his post. <Your targets are out there,> Quistron told him, slamming his greatcloaked back against the earthworks of ash and stone.

As the rotor cannons tore up the trench, blitzing through the stepping-stone walkways and boggy shallows, the tech-priest dominus was unmoved. The crabby ancient stared up at spiked fuselages as they flashed overhead. He had activated a stasis field that enveloped his form with a globed shimmer. Several skitarii crossing the trench from an accessway were bolt-riddled into thrashing corpses that came to rest awkwardly in the shallows. One of Gant's servitors disappeared in a shredding storm of bolts and a lascannon emplacement detonated, sending skitarii flying and bathing the trench in the arcing crack of unleashed energies.

As the timer on Gant's stasis field expired and deactivated the device, a shower of arrested bolts cascaded into the shallows of the trench, dropping before the tech-priest dominus. Lifting an eradication ray and aiming it after the swarm of fighter aircraft, Theronymous Gant blasted an Avenger out of existence.

<Enemy in range,> a sub-alpha reported. Amongst the ruins, the corrupted had broken into a charge. Soot and ash billowed about them as gangly automata strode and cybernetic abominations of the Geronteus temple guard charged.

Omnid Torquora moved from skitarii ranger to ranger, experiencing their opening salvos as his own. Transuranic arquebuses bucked as they delivered their monstrous shells. Automata dropped in a shower of shattered workings and rancid bio-plastic. The chatter of heavy stubbers filled the air while the searing beams of emplacement weaponry cut across the field of battle.

<Present,> Alpha Quistron ordered, prompting the rangers of the 51st Tenna-Noitraloid to rest their galvanic rifles on the top of the trench. As they did so, the Dark Mechanicum skitarii accelerated,

chewing up the ash and rubble with their hydraulics.

'Mortars cleared to fire,' the tech-priest dominus voxed back to the reserve trench, and the bombards behind him launched their shells into the sky. Descending ordnance rocketed rubble and dust upwards, blasting bionic limbs from the advancing temple guard. Fat gun-servitors, ripe with corruption, exploded and deadly automata were knocked from their feet.

<Lock your targets,> Ultic-11 Quistron commanded. Torquora felt the calibration of targeters as the skitarii rangers zeroed in on the charging constructs.

<Fire!> Quistron said, his cogitator measuring the range to the closing enemy.

In fearful unison, servitor shells blasted from the barrels of the galvanic rifles. As though a stretched wire had swept across the battlefield, the temple guard were yanked back. What followed was a sequence of explosions as the servitor shells overloaded the power cells and reactors of the wounded cybernetic soldiers. With corrupt skitarii falling and detonating about them, code-mad temple guard ran on with suicidal abandon. Mortars rocketed metal and warped flesh up at the heavens. Heavy stubbers and cognis autocannon emplacements cut through corrupt constructs, bullet-streams scything through them in swathes.

<Fire at will,> Quistron transmitted, authorising his soldiers to pick off temple guard who, by some miracle, had negotiated the unfolding havoc of the approach.

Omnid Torquora felt skitarii slip from his phylactic communion as the Autolican Avengers came around for another pass. As the archmagos felt the skitarii die, he moved from the cold perspective of one to another. The battlefield was total pandemonium. Mortar fire tore up the ground. Cannons split the sky asunder. The beams of lasguns stuttered down into the trenches while servitor shells blasted cybernetic soldiers into paralysed wrecks. Bolts shredded through rangers and their ash-stained cloaks. Heavy stubbers punched slugs through the ripe vat-flesh of gun-servitors.

As insane constructs leapt into the trench, feverishly attempting to climb up the other side, Ultic-11 Quistron levelled his phosphor blast pistol and enveloped a scrambling cybernetic soldier in a blaze of chemical brilliance. A gangling automaton – all scything limbs and madness – appeared at the foot of the trench, reaching down with mechadendrites to seize a pair of rangers aiming their rifles up at the robotic nightmare. Grapnel-stabbing them through the chest, the possessed machine tossed the skitarii's bodies back into the advancing Dark Mechanicum constructs.

Lifting his eradication ray, Theronymous Gant blasted the mechanical monstrosity, turning the automaton's appendage-weaponry into searing absence. With every spreading stream of energy, the tech-priest dominus stripped the possessed machine of the devastating tools of its trade. Finally, Gant took the automaton's legs out from under it, allowing its barrel torso and head to crash uselessly to the ground.

While skitarii fought for their lives against the suicidal rush of Dark Mechanicum troops, Omnid Torquora had the luxury of detachment. To Quistron and his rangers, the battle was a blizzard of tracked trajectories, the flash of warnings and spooling data. Torquora could see the battle beyond the frenzy of impending death and the code-shrieking constructs of Chaos. He saw Marauders from the Tarantis 8/70 roaring in overhead, and the thunderous approach of Omnissian god-machines.

Transmitting coordinates for an air strike with surgical accuracy, Torquora watched through skitarii optics as a wall of flame erupted along the trench line. With the deep chunter of Marauder bombers passing above, charging constructs were lost to the inferno. As the flame cleared and charred cybernetic remains rained down on the field of battle, Quistron peered through the settling

devastation.

<Enemy armour on the approach,> the skitarii officer announced. Phylactically blinking into Quistron's experience of the battle, Omnid Torquora could see a column of armoured personnel carriers bouncing over and through the ruins, their tracks pulverising the rubble. The Rhinos were battered and streaked with rust, their exhaust quads streaming black smoke. Spiked dozer blades smashed through the stunted remains of buildings, while barbed tracks mulched through the bones and corroded bionics of the dead.

'Pass the word,' Theronymous Gant called to an injured skitarii soldier. 'Mortars to adjust for armour approach.'

Torquora ordered the bombers around for a second run but his calculations swiftly told him that they would be too late. The armoured personnel carriers were stopping for nothing. Spreading out, they smashed through the rearguard of their own infantry. With constructs and the bodies of Dark Mechanicum skitarii impaled on spiked dozer blades and bouncing broken off armour plate, the archmagos realised that the Rhinos intended to breach the trenchworks at any cost.

Servitor rounds and stubber slugs sparked off the dented shells of the Rhinos as they tore on towards the trench. Lascannons seared beams through the hulls of the carriers but failed to bring them to a halt. Smashing through Dark Mechanicum forces and leaving a haze of blood and oil in their wake, the Rhinos' supercharged engines roared. Smoke raged from their exhausts as the rusted carriers accelerated up the mounds of dead. Thrashing their barbed tracks up the ramp of mangled combat chassis, bionics and charred bodies, the Rhinos accelerated into a messy jump.

Tracks raged overhead as Quistron and Theronymous Gant lowered their heads. Most of the armoured carriers failed to reach the other side of the trench. Their speed and mounting had been sufficient but the trench wall of mulched ash and rubble simply collapsed under their weight. As the tracks spun, the wall fell away, allowing the vehicles to slide back into the trench.

'Axe,' the tech-priest dominus said. His remaining servitor, laden down with ammunition and weaponry, presented his master with the cog-serrated blade of his power axe.

<Grenades,> Ultic-11 Quistron commanded, drawing several skitarii rangers to his side.

Scuttling across to the closest Rhino, Theronymous Gant swung his axe at the vehicle. Burying it in the metal of the rear access hatch, the tech-priest dominus tore the door aside. Quistron brought up his pistol. Whatever attempted to exit the vehicle would die. The rangers prepared to lob their grenades through the opening, persuading the vehicle's occupants to emerge into certain death.

Omnid Torquora took in the interior of the Rhino. Through the optics of the skitarii and Alpha Quistron he had every angle possible. He only required one to confirm what he was looking at. Within the armoured personnel carrier was a single servitor, a miserable thing savagely wired into the vehicle. Its hands and feet were fused to the controls and its thighs had been power-riveted to the seat. The armoured transport carried no additional troops. The space was taken up by a monstrous contraption, counting down on a series of chrome dials. Omnid Torquora knew a bomb when he saw one.

<Get out of there!> the archmagos transmitted, his warning like a shot through the minds of surrounding skitarii and their officers.

Tearing his power axe from the mangled hatch, Theronymous Gant scuttled into a retreat. Quistron pushed his skitarii rangers away from the trap, but a few seconds later everything turned to flame. Torquora flinched as the bomb detonated. Safe in the diagnostiquorum, high above the battlefield, it

was surprising how much it affected him. For a moment, phylactic communion was broken.

The archmagos could see the brief flash of detonations from orbit. Pulling feeds from the Marauder bombers high above the battlefield, tormented by swarms of Autolican strike fighters, Torquora could now appreciate the enemy's plan. He watched the glorious dread of its execution as Rhino after Rhino, rigged to blow, blasted craters into the earthworks and sent rivers of flame through the network of trenches.

Establishing communion with a ranger designated Ansis-86 Oltega, Torquora found the skitarii soldier stumbling about the decimated trenchworks in the daze of system shock. A trenchcloak trailed him aflame and the cybernetic soldier limped, a piece of shrapnel embedded in the workings of his knee.

Watching through the soldier's remaining, cracked optic, Torquora saw the skitarius's vision flicker with different filters and the hiss of static. His overlays streamed with data and emergency protocols. Through the miasma of information, Torquora saw that many of the Rhinos had not detonated. Helping grievously wounded skitarii soldiers to their feet, Ansis-86 Oltega found Theronymous Gant on the ground before one such vehicle. Reacting to his imperatives, Oltega grabbed the tech-priest dominus and dragged him from the shallows. He was heavy, even with half of his spidery legs blasted free.

The Rhino was a rust-eaten wreck of a transport. One of its tracks was broken while the other thrashed off the ground where it had become trapped in the collapsing trench. Its colouring was the same as the others, dull grey bar a peeling stripe of black and yellow chevrons. It bore some kind of faded iconography on its flanks. Leering at Oltega was a slender metal skull atop an eight-pointed star. The symbol of the dreaded Iron Warriors.

The side of the vehicle suddenly crumpled, as though some monstrous force had struck the hull from the inside. Oltega pulled the tech-priest dominus through the boggy shallows and up against the far wall of the trench. One of Gant's arms was a tangled mess of servos and cabling, but he managed to draw back his scorched hood with the sparking talon of the other. His face was a mask of baroque augmentations and burned flesh. His optics faded in and out as he pulled himself up to see what was happening within the crashed Rhino.

The impacts continued, warping the hull out of shape. Simultaneously a great, crackling claw stabbed up through the rusted metal of the compartment roof, tearing aside the plate as though it were foil. Like hulking monsters, the Iron Warriors erupted from the armoured personnel carrier. Clawing, stamping and barging their way out of the shattered wreck, the flesh-cursed Obliterators destroyed the vehicle from within. The foremost unholy fusion of man and weapon bellowed his bitter jubilation. The clubs of his hands had long breached the confines of his plate and gauntlets. Splinters of plate sat embedded in his warped flesh, while the clubs themselves were weighted with the barrels and nozzles of heavy weaponry.

A skitarii ranger stumbled and splashed in the shallows of the trench, desperately trying to prime a damaged rifle. Slapping it with the palm of a gauntlet, the skitarii struggled to get some life out of the sparking weapon. Lifting his arms, the first of the Iron Warriors blasted forth a sub-atomic stream of agitation from nozzles set in his fused fists. The superheated blast enveloped the ranger, who never got to fire his weapon, instead turning into a thrashing madman enveloped in sickly flame before drifting away on the breeze as vaporised dust.

Another Iron Warrior barged past with a snarl, his armour barely holding the abominate brawn of his form. The fleshmetal and warped muscle of his arm glowed as he fired streams of searing energy. The

beams cut skitarii soldiers in half and blasted injured rangers into the ground.

Torquora couldn't believe it. He was going to lose the Ortorqus Chasma deep core mines. Like fireships set amongst a flotilla, armoured personnel carriers had been rigged to blow, blasting the trenchworks into a waterlogged mess and obliterating the skitarii who held them. Then, the Iron Warriors had arrived in a second wave. Unleashing themselves on the Adeptus Mechanicus in their moment of disorientation, the Iron Warriors intended to force their way to the mines. Perhaps more Chaos Space Marines and corrupt constructs of the Dark Mechanicum would arrive by gunship or lighter once the brutes had dealt with the Ordo Reductor and their artillery pieces.

The Iron Warriors seemed to get some dread pleasure from killing the wounded skitarii of the outer trench. It was not a thirst for blood, Omnid Torquora decided, ever studying the ways of his foe. The Obliterators seemed to enjoy the horror and anarchy of battle, the violent indulgence and merciless exercise of their considerable abilities, which only victory allowed. The mutated Iron Warriors were like bitter monsters of old, things that lived in the bowels of the earth, only venturing to the surface to bring destruction to those who stood in their way. Torquora watched as the hulking horrors clawed the skitarii of the 51st Tenna-Noitraloid into chunks of raw flesh and dismembered bionics. He saw one beast stream furious gouts of green flame from nozzles set in his monstrous palms, turning the demolished earthworks into an inferno. All along the line, Chaos Space Marines were bursting out of Rhinos and unleashing their abomination on the skitarii soldiers.

Tearing his burning cloak from his back, Ansis-86 Oltega limped a few steps back and fell to his knees beside the tech-priest dominus. Torquora heard the skitarius offer a prayer to the Machine God, an appeal for assistance, for victory in His hallowed name. Grimly watching the havoc unfold, the archmagos thought to answer such a prayer.

Stripping away the skitarii soldier's humanity, Torquora dialled back the emotional framework of his operations. Searing Oltega's focus to a narrowing set of concerns, Torquora blessed the cybernetic soldier with ignorance. He was an empty vessel, like a weapon without ammunition. Ready for the Machine God's intervention. As the voice of the Omnissiah, Torquora intended on taking Oltega's body for his own: the beating of his heart, the powerful hydraulics of his augmented limbs and the capabilities of a construct bereft of fear.

Something huge kicked the shattered frame of a burning Rhino aside. Behind it was a monstrous Iron Warrior, hideous of features and bristling with weapons whose barrels protruded from the huge clubs of his fists. Many of the Obliterators had forged on towards the reserve trenches, clawing, stamping, streaming and blasting their flesh-spawned corruptions down at the skitarii there. The rifles of rangers, in turn, barked and flared, thudding servitor shells into warped flesh. The thing standing before Oltega and Theronymous Gant had held back to enjoy the killing.

Resting an armoured boot on the back of a ranger's head, the Iron Warrior pushed the skitarius down into the shallows, waiting for him to drown. The barrels of rotary autocannons turned within the splayed fleshmetal of the Chaos Space Marine's arms as he willed them to whirring intensity. With a belt of ammunition spawned from his monstrous flesh and feeding the weapons, the Iron Warrior blasted autofire into dying skitarii attempting to crawl away. The thing seemed to take a dark pleasure in playing with its victims' expectations before ripping through their bodies with short streams of fire.

Two murderous executions along, the Iron Warrior found Oltega and his tech-priest dominus. Torquora reached down into the priest's burned robes. He knew he could not drag Gant to safety. Fading in and out of operative consciousness, the tech-priest dominus could not help himself. Inside

the scorched material, Torquora found Gant's stasis field generator. The device was battered and shorting. Setting the defence field to maximum strength and length of time, Torquora had Ansis-86 Oltega limp backwards. As a personal defence, the field could not protect two and it activated only as soon as the skitarii soldier was clear.

Hobbling back, the piece of shrapnel still embedded in the workings of his knee, Torquora saw the hulking Obliterator notice him. The Iron Warrior raised an arm, his mouth wrapping itself around a crooked grin. Willing his rotary cannon to blurring revolution, he aimed the weaponised limb at Oltega and the tech-priest dominus.

As the revolving barrels blazed with a cone of rapid fire, a shell-storm erupted. Torquora looked about in desperation. Death was but seconds away. There was little time for any plan more complex than snatching up a piece of armoured plate from where it sat half-submerged in the shallows.

Originally part of a detonating Rhino, the fragment was quite large. Holding it up before him like a shield, Torquora just got it between Ansis-86 Oltega and the furious stream of shells. The projectiles pranged and sparked off the armoured plate. The skitarius was knocked this way and that as the force of impacts turned him left, right and stumbling back.

As the Iron Warrior swept back and forth with his blazing cannon, Gant's stasis field stopped the swarm of shells mere inches from his smashed body. Sparking and shorting within his robes, the damaged field generator began to falter. The globed shielding spat and dissipated, showering the ground with shells that had been suddenly arrested in their deadly path. Fizzling on and off, the stasis field caught much of the second stream of fire blasted Gant's way. Several shells got through, however, slamming into the tech-priest's cable-threaded torso. Gant went to grunt but was frozen moments later in his ongoing agony as the field re-established its integrity.

As the Iron Warrior brought both arms up and unleashed the full fury of his warp-spawned weaponry, Torquora was blasted back against the demolished trench wall. Autofire hammered into the plate and blasted several fingers from the gauntleted hand with which the skitarius held it. Dents and pits began to appear in the back of the armoured plate, indicating that it could not take much more of a mauling.

Waiting for a moment's respite and with the Iron Warrior stomping through the shallows towards him, Torquora heard the rotary autocannons whir to a stop. As he flung the armoured plate away, the skitarii soldier leapt for the trench wall. This was not as easy as it appeared with shrapnel embedded in the workings of his leg. Hauling the skitarius's body up with the hydraulics of his arms, Torquora heard the Obliterator splash through the demolished trench towards him, his cannons rotating with a sickly whine. Any second, the Iron Warrior would thrash him with autofire.

Pulling himself up, Torquora reached down for the skitarii soldier's damaged leg and hauled it over the edge. Gunfire tore into the trench wall, ripping up the rubble, ash and sludge that crowned the trench top. Omnid Torquora kept his head down as the Chaos Space Marine roared his frustration, gunning his rotary cannons into furious blurs.

Hiding on the far side of the trench, Torquora found himself amongst the mangled malaise of the smouldering dead. Rolling away from the gunfire, the archmagos was soon tangled in bodies and charred bionics. Lying flat on the ground, with his cracked optic pointing up into the sky, he saw the last of the Marauder bombers shot out of the air by the swarming Autolican strike fighters. As the rotary cannon fire died away, Torquora could hear the Iron Warrior sloshing back and forth through the trench waters, attempting to re-acquire him.

Lying still, Torquora felt something tighten about his throat. It was in fact, Ansis-86 Oltega's throat that was being throttled. A warp-corrupted temple guard, burned and blasted by the air strike, was still driven by some rancid imperative or foetid desire to destroy in the name of his overlords. He had the smouldering servos and skeletal framework of his single operative arm-appendage clamped around Oltega's neck like a vice.

Torquora monitored the failing life signs of the skitarius as the Dark Mechanicum soldier hissed static and hauled for all it was worth. Fortunately for Torquora, it was not worth very much and he felt the scorched servos begin to give. Slamming his armoured elbow into his adversary's chest, Torquora felt something break beneath the burned flesh. Repeating the savage manoeuvre and bringing Oltega's entire weight down on the code-corrupted soldier, Torquora felt the hold give way as something split within his foe's ripe torso. Like a fruit, he burst, leaking blood and stinking innards out onto the battlefield.

Crawling arm over augmented arm, Torquora dragged Oltega's body along the trench and away from the Iron Warrior. A little way up, he found himself staring up the gaping barrel of a heavy grav-cannon. The weapon belonged to a trench emplacement. Slumped against it, with his gauntlets still wrapped around it, was a skitarii gunner. Trying his best to be silent, Torquora slithered down into the emplacement like a serpent. Pulling the bolt-mauled gunner away from the grav-cannon, the archmagos checked the weapon's power and priming.

Torquora suddenly heard the stamping splash of the Obliterator coming towards him. Grabbing the swivel crank, he thrashed the handle round and around, feverishly turning the weapon's mounting. As the Iron Warrior reached Torquora, he brought up the fleshmetal of his appendage cannon. The monster snarled his frustration away, thinking that he finally had his hiding target.

Instead the Iron Warrior found himself – as Torquora had moments before – staring down the barrel of the heavy grav-cannon. Charging the weapon, the archmagos tugged on the trigger. The Chaos Space Marine was broken in two by the gravitic force of the cannon. Smashing the monstrosity back into the shallows, Torquora blasted it again, hearing the breaking of metal-fused bones and the rupture of warped organs. Feverishly yanking back on the trigger, the archmagos pulverised the abomination, crumpling armour, splattering brawny flesh and smashing the Iron Warrior into a broken, shrieking thing half buried in the trench.

Swiftly releasing it from its mounting, Torquora slid the length of the grav-cannon back down into the trench. Hobbling backwards through the waters, the skitarius dragged the deadweight of the weapon with one bionic hand while carrying the cabled power pack with the other. There was no way that the skitarii ranger could wield the weapon without assistance, but Torquora wasn't going to let that stop him.

As the Iron Warriors stormed the reserve trenches, smashing and blasting the cohorts of skitarii defenders there into oblivion, Torquora hauled the grav-cannon back to Gant. Checking the tech-priest dominus, he found that the stasis field generator had finally failed. The ancient tech-priest sat in a small mound of interrupted shells and was quietly dying from those that had found their way through.

Heaving the length of the grav-cannon up onto a partially demolished wall, Torquora rested the barrel on the rubble. Dropping the power pack and cable into the water at his feet, the archmagos knelt down and rested his shoulder against the weapon. The skitarius's targeter was malfunctioning but with the Iron Warriors taking their monstrous appetite for death and destruction into the reserve trenches, Torquora had the hulking abominations' backs to him.

Peering down the length of the barrel, Torquora fired the heavy grav-cannon. Pulling on the trigger and angling the balanced weapon on the wall, Torquora sent force blasts searing across the trenchworks at the Chaos Space Marines. Like the impact of invisible boulders, the grav blasts demolished Iron Warriors and broke their backs. The Obliterators were knocked from their feet and had their armoured legs swept out from under them. Several lost weaponised appendages and even heads to the irresistible force of the grav-cannon.

Torquora ducked as the Iron Warriors returned fire. The wall lit up with lascannon beams and balls of flesh-spawned plasma. Crawling away, the archmagos felt the wall collapse and the grav-cannon blasted to uselessness. Dragging himself next to the tech-priest dominus, Torquora sat against the trench wall and waited for death. The death of Ansis-86 Oltega. The death of Theronymous Gant. The death of the skitarii soldiers in the reserve trenches. It was only a matter of time now. The deep core mines would belong to the Iron Warriors.

Torquora felt the thunder of approaching footsteps through Oltega's battered frame. The trench waters rippled with the impact. Torquora saw that three hulking Iron Warriors had returned to finish Oltega, each of their flesh-tangled arms a nest of spawned weaponry.

It ended here for him also, the archmagos told himself. Without the deep core mines and the possibilities for victory they offered, Torquora knew that the war for Velchanos Magna was lost. The Adeptus Mechanicus fleet could not go on forever without resupply and reinforcement. Idriss Krendl could simply wait them out, holding out for the inevitable tipping point to come.

Then he saw it. A smoke-sheened silhouette coming out of the darkness. As Oltega's filters continued to cycle, Omnid Torquora could make out the colossal shape of a Warhound Scout Titan. The recalled *Canis Corporalis*, under the command of Princeps Venedict. It was the approach of the Titan that Torquora had felt.

'…archmagos?' Theronymous Gant managed next to him, his smashed modulator reducing his voice to a wheezing hiss. The tech-priest knew that Torquora was with them there, guiding the actions of Ansis-86 Oltega.

'Yes, tech-priest dominus,' Torquora said, the words spoken in the voice of the skitarii soldier.

'Do… what has to be… done,' the ancient said, lifting the spindly talon of a finger and pointing up at the *Canis Corporalis*. Torquora realised that Gant had also seen the Titan approach.

As the hulking Iron Warriors lifted their warped weaponry, Omnid Torquora relayed his orders to Princeps Venedict on the cramped command deck of the towering Warhound Titan. As he spoke, Ansis-86 Oltega's lips moved also.

'Princeps Venedict, this is your archmagos,' Torquora told him. 'Target trenchworks breach and enemy insurgents. Exercise extreme prejudice. Collateral losses are not a factor. I repeat, defending forces are expendable.'

Like a giant metal predator, the Warhound Titan turned on its identified targets. Presenting the vulcan mega-bolters it mounted on each arm, it locked them forward of the thrusting command deck. Torquora heard the roll of thunder that was a pair of gargantuan firing mechanisms clearing.

Suddenly everything was ear-splitting sound and the rumble of massive shells thundering into the earth. The trenchworks disappeared as rubble and ash rocketed skyward. Gargantuan bolt rounds eviscerated the earthworks, emplacements and derelict carriers. The skitarii of the 51st Tenna-Noitraloid rocketed upwards in fountains of blood, oil and shredded workings.

Torquora watched as the stormquake of magna-bore bolt shells ripped up through the reserve

trenches. Within moments the Iron Warriors were lost in a maelstrom of death and destruction that not even they had foreseen. The archmagos watched as the Obliterators aiming at him were blasted from existence. Within thunderous seconds of apocalyptic horror, Theronymous Gant and Ansis-86 Oltega had joined them.

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SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF I
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+ELECTROMANCER+*

Omnid Torquora woke. He had been dreaming.

It was unusual for a tech-priest of his augmentation and lineage. So much data flowed through his receivers and cogitator coils, however, that it was almost impossible for him to be truly at peace. Spooling code and information triggered odd fragments in his meme-banks. Relayed pict feeds sometimes ghosted their way into his sleeping mind, like the spectral layering of crossed channels. Spending so much time in phylactic communion with others, living their thoughts and experiences, meant that sometimes Torquora unconsciously returned to past engagements. Past victories. Past failures. Past deaths.

He had been dreaming of Ansis-86 Oltega and the skitarii soldiers of the 51st Tenna-Noitraloid. Servants of the Omnissiah that Torquora had personally sanctioned to death. The apocalyptic gunfire of the *Canis Corporalis*. The decimation that ripped through the trenchworks of the Ortorqus Chasma. Ash and dust. Blood and oil. The maelstrom of monstrous bolt rounds shredding reality about them.

The archmagos had done only what was necessary. He had no doubt of that. Greater guilt than that weighed upon his conscience. Dark responsibilities. The unravelling fates of entire worlds. Torquora's bottomless appetite for data and secrets ancient and terrible had led him to Perborea and the *Stella-Xenithica*. Into the trap laid by Idriss Krendl.

The recovery of the Geller bomb STC template. The construction and testing of such a device and the intended doom it had visited upon Torquora's home world. None of this would have been possible without the archmagos and the eternal Quest for Knowledge – a quest Torquora had come to question.

As the static of his optics cleared and his reactors warmed to operation, Torquora found himself in front of the baroque viewing port of his personal chambers. Through the armourglass screen, busy with hololithic overlays and annotations, he saw the forge world of Velchanos Magna. Even from orbit, the price of war was evident. Entire districts were aflame. The twisted magnificence of temples had been swallowed by mountainous fortifications. Through the devastation, canals and furnace

channels criss-crossed the mauled planet, burning to daemonic brilliance as the Abystra-Dynomicron fed Dark Mechanicum forges and the never-ending demands of the tyrannical Iron Warriors.

Omnid Torquora's personal servitors moved about the chamber in silence, fearful of waking their master from a fitful slumber within his hulking, sarcophagal suit. While he had slept, his servitors had silently obeyed their maintenance protocols, polishing the burnished clinker plates of Torquora's armour. The magna-hydraulics of his legs and the heavy weapons cradles of his arms had been anointed with unguents of the holiest grades, while the monstrous weapons themselves had been blessed with consecrated oils. The tech-priest's reactors had been charged and his power cabling stowed, while what remained of his long-butchered organics had been sustained with protein pastes, intravenously fed through a network of torso-plugged pipes and lines.

As his systems came back online, dependent sub-systems returning to life also, Torquora's chest-mounted multi-digits went to work within the pulpit. Even in the short time the archmagos had been asleep, much had happened on the planet's surface. A world at war never slept. Objectives had been taken. Sieges had been broken. Thousands of warriors had died. Torquora's overlays became crowded with scrolling data reports, tether requests, pict feeds and codestreams.

Cutting through them was the signature of a voxmission in waiting. The communication bore the priority authorisations of the skitarii sentinels standing on either side of his chamber's entryway.

<Proceed,> Torquora transmitted.

<I have members of the Luminen here requesting an audience, my lord,> the skitarii sentinel outside the doors informed him. <Should I admit them?>

Torquora should have been expecting the electro-priests of the Holy Luminen. The brotherhood routinely demanded the archmagos's attentions, having one problem or another with the way in which he was conducting war on the Omnissiah's enemies or utilising the resources of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Originally advisors to the Fabricator General on Satzica Secundus, he had assigned them to the office of the Fabricator Locum and his mission to test the Geller Device. Such a move suggested to Torquora that Voricar Trega did not trust his Fabricator Locum.

During the manufacture of the Geller Device, the Luminen had advised Engra Myrmidex on techno-spiritual matters, guiding him through their interpretation of the Motive Force and the sparks of life. Torquora suspected that the Fabricator Locum hadn't valued their input and creed-thumping insistence as much as the Luminen thought he needed it. Upon leaving Satzica Secundus at the head of the Adeptus Mechanicus fleet, Myrmidex had arranged for the convocation of electro-priests to be accommodated in chambers aboard the *Maestrale* rather than the Fabricator Locum's flagship. With the death of Engra Myrmidex, the Luminen had become Torquora's problem.

<Admit them,> the archmagos ordered.

The air hummed about Torquora with the energy flux of his reactors. Hydraulics and pistons fired, turning the tech-priest and his sarcophagal suit around. From the cadaverous face hidden in the depths of his hood, Torquora's optics burned.

The bulkhead door shuddered upwards and the party of Luminen entered. The electro-priests wore their full robes, the folds accommodating their dorsal generators and electrostatic halo-capacitors. They drew back their robes out of respect, revealing heads that were shaven and flesh that glowed with charged subdermal circuitry. About their heads they wore blindfolds to hide the empty sockets of their eyes, for their eyeballs had long boiled away with the intensity of bio-electricity coursing through their bodies. Instead they experienced the galaxy as a crackling vision of the Motive Force.

They claimed to see only truth through such a gift, but Torquora knew them to be as manipulative and power-hungry as any other priest in the ranks of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

'Master Diodemus, Master Piezon, brothers all,' Torquora greeted the Luminen. 'How can I be of assistance to you?'

The electromancers entered as a convocation but soon split off to stand about their masters. Having the Luminen on board was trial enough for Torquora, the electro-priests attempting to advise, guide and question as they had done when meddling in the Fabricator Locum's affairs. Worse still, however, the convocation of priests was divided by faction. This meant that the Luminen – who claimed to see the true light of the Omnissiah's intention – could not agree amongst themselves, let alone with Torquora.

Attica Diodemus and Candesca Piezon stepped forward, making the sign of intersecting knuckles in honour of the Machine God. Master Diodemus was known as the Taketh. He was a Fulgurite by creed and, like his priests, carried a capacitor stave that could leech machines, constructs and base flesh alike of the power that sustained them. Batteries drained, bionics died and hearts stopped beating at their command.

While Diodemus was a miserly pedant, who favoured the gathering of strength and the power of potential, Candesca Piezon was a vessel of barely restrained righteousness. As Master of the Corpuscarii, he was known as the Giveth. Along with the priests of his faction, he wore electrostatic gauntlets within the flared sleeves of his robe. With these the Corpuscarii could visit the holy rapture of electrocution upon the Machine God's foes, delivered through a living lightning that proceeded from the gauntlets.

'You can plot a course for Satzica Secundus,' Attica Diodemus said.

'Why would I do that, Master Diodemus?' Torquora asked him. 'Our enemies are here.'

'Our allegiance is to Satzica Secundus and the Fabricator General,' Diodemus said. 'Our forge-kin require our return and assistance.'

'Satzica Secundus is lost to us,' the archmagos said. 'It may have been our home once but now it lies at the heart of an erupting warp storm.'

'An anomaly you created, archmagos,' Diodemus accused.

'That the Fabricator General created in ordering the construction of the Geller Device,' Torquora returned. 'That the Fabricator Locum created with his hasty deployment of the device.'

'You allowed the Fabricator Locum to perish,' Candesca Piezon said, his words burning on the air, 'as you allow our forge-kin to perish now.'

'Hard data, Masters Luminen,' Torquora said. 'The servants of the Machine God live or die by it. The Iron Warriors would have destroyed us all in their surprise attack. Through the sacrifice of the Fabricator Locum–'

'And half of our fleet and skitarii legions,' Piezon snapped.

'–I have averted disaster, learned much of our enemies, and taken advantage of both factors to visit the wrath of the Omnissiah upon our foe.'

'You have had half a year to prove such advantage but here we are, archmagos,' Attica Diodemus interjected. 'Fighting over a polluted world of darkness and ruin.'

'Which is what we will find if we attempt to return to Satzica Secundus,' Torquora said.

'We have consulted the logi,' Diodemus informed the archmagos. 'We have heard the numbers speak. They tell us the same that they tell you: that the Iron Warriors cannot be defeated by a force of our

size. By a force ten times our size.'

'And the logi are right,' Torquora said, 'but they are not in full possession of all the variables.'

'Meanwhile the Fabricator General and the loyal constructs of the forge world might be fighting for their souls. Awaiting our return and reinforcement.'

'It's too late for them.'

'How can you know?' Candesca Piezon asked.

'You agree with Master Diodemus?' Torquora put to the Corpuscarii priest.

'I agree that the Machine God's light needs to be brought to the darkness that lays siege to our home world.'

'Once we have defeated our enemies here – the architects of our collective ruin,' Torquora said, 'then I promise you we shall return to Satzica Secundus. But not as liberators. We shall return to purge it of corruption.'

'You would war against your own people?' Piezon asked in outrage, 'and turn against your Fabricator General?'

'Yes,' Torquora told the convocation of priests. 'For it would be heresy not to do so. Do you think the priesthood of Velchanos Magna chose their fate? I can keep blockade runners from escaping the system and keep those who would twist our forge-kin to their dark will from Satzica Secundus. The Iron Warriors and the Dark Mechanicum will not be their undoing. But our forge world turns beneath tainted stars, saturated by the corruption of the storm. Like the priesthood of Velchanos Magna, they are lost. Flesh. Iron. The very dirt of the forge world's surface will have been warped by the dread forces of the warp storm. We cannot save our compatriots' workings or their souls, for they are already part of the madness that infects the unreality in which they are immersed.'

'Where is your evidence?' Attica Diodemus said.

'While I can blockade the planet,' Torquora said, 'I cannot prevent messages being passed from Velchanos Magna to our lost forge world. The Frater Astropathica has intercepted such messages being sent from the planet below. He has lost two astropaths to the mind-twisting madness of these communications and their interpretation. He believes, however, that they signify a suggested accord and a sharing of dark secrets and knowledge between the two fallen forge worlds. The Iron Warriors want both forge worlds under their boot. More importantly, the Frater Astropathica believes that he has intercepted an affirmation from Satzica Secundus in return.'

'I don't believe it,' Attica Diodemus said, looking to Master Piezon.

'The Fabricator General would never give in to corruption,' Piezon said. 'He would not become a thing untrue and lead his people into damnation.'

'Perhaps you're right,' the archmagos said. 'Perhaps Voricar Trega no longer rules Satzica Secundus in the Machine God's stead. Ultimately, it really doesn't matter what you believe.'

'You cannot come between a construct and the Motive Force,' Candesca Piezon warned Torquora.

'No,' the archmagos agreed, 'but we can come between the Iron Warriors and Satzica Secundus. Help me destroy our enemy. The forge world might be lost but if Idriss Krendl and his Obliteratii reach it, our people will forever be slaves to darkness. We can save them from that.'

'By murdering our forge-kin?' Piezon said.

'Perhaps you have been fighting the Iron Warriors long enough,' Diodemus added. 'It seems you have developed a taste for wanton bloodshed.'

'They cannot be saved,' Torquora told them.

‘Then construct another Geller Device,’ Diodemus said. ‘A weapon to cleanse Satzica Secundus of the warp storm that afflicts it.’

‘Aye,’ Piezon agreed. ‘Deploy the weapon.’

‘And suffer further for our dauntless enterprise?’ Torquora said. ‘I will see an end to this madness, once and for all. There is a reason the Geller Device was lost to the Adeptus Mechanicus. It is a failure. We are experimenting with forces we will never understand, punching holes in reality all over the galaxy. The warp cannot be controlled or eradicated. As a medium it is defined by its mutable unpredictability. I will not unleash such forces again. Artefacts such as the Geller Device are the harbingers of doom.’

‘You speak against the holy Quest for Knowledge,’ Master Piezon accused.

‘I speak against the foolhardy Adeptus Mechanicus,’ Torquora told them, ‘whose priests roam the galaxy like carrion crows, picking the past clean of dangers long lost and ushering them into the present. Nevermore. Nevermore. Such artefacts should be uncovered only so they can be destroyed and plague the galaxy no more with histories repeated.’

‘We cannot be part of this,’ Attica Diodemus said, shaking his head. ‘You ask us to indulge technoheresy…’

‘You ask us to break with Mars,’ Piezon said.

‘Your Fabricator General is lost,’ Torquora said, ‘and your Fabricator Locum is dead. All that was once cold and pure of Satzica Secundus exists here in this fleet, of which I am ranking tech-priest. I speak with the authority of the Machine God Incarnate. You speak with the authority of the dead and the damned.’

‘You are mad…’ Diodemus said.

‘No. I am resolute,’ Torquora said. ‘Your forge world and Fabricator General have turned traitor. If you insist upon serving them still you shall force me to charge you with heresy.’

Piezon and Diodemus looked to one another, reading the electrostatic charge of each other’s presence. Piezon nodded, to himself and the Fulgurite priest. He turned to leave the chamber, with his electromancers behind him. The Fulgurites followed. As Attica Diodemus made to depart, he stopped and leant on the shaft of his stave.

‘There are many forms of heresy, my lord,’ he told Omnid Torquora before leaving the chamber. The bulkhead door rumbled closed behind him, locking with a heavy *clunk*.

The archmagos stood alone. He felt the self-inflicted bite of recrimination. Burdening the Luminen with truths that were not theirs had been imprudent. Unwise. *Dangerous*. Then, of course, there had been the untruths they had forced him to tell.

‘Security authorisation: 1/22/00/4. Accept,’ Omnid Torquora announced to the chamber, following the sequence with a blurt of binaric code.

The deck section upon which the archmagos was standing cleared its seals with a jet of pressurised gas. The section descended at a slow rumble into the chamber below.

Situated beneath the archmagos’s private quarters was a hidden laboratorium. Artisans, magi aethyricus and servitors moved about the chamber, hard at work. At the descent of their archmagos, the tech-priests stopped to acknowledge the one who was both their Mechanicus master and the magos overseeing their clandestine project. In the centre of the chamber was a Geller Device, an aethyric bomb constructed according to the STC template specifications. It was twice the size of the device crafted on Satzica Secundus and calibrated at Torquora’s command to deliver ten times the

immaterial payload.

'Status report,' Torquora put to the priests.

'Construction of the Geller Device is almost complete, my lord,' a magos aethyricus told his master, 'and it awaits a target of your designation.'

'Excellent, magos,' Omnid Torquora replied. 'I have one in mind.'

0100

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF I
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+THE SANCTITY OF THE MACHINE+*

It began with the phylactic signature.

Omnid Torquora had been making his way down to the diagnostiquorum. He had been alerted to a fresh attack on a skitarii operations base on the Ash Wastes of Cytonia, a downed Titan god-machine in the Targaria Mountains, a column of Dunecrawlers hit by gunships on the Numinsk freightway and yet another determined assault on the deep core mines of the Ortorqus Chasma.

The archmagos cursed himself. He should have done a better job of hiding the site's significance, perhaps by fortifying other seemingly unimportant targets. Now Idriss Krendl smelled a strategy, a site Torquora desperately wanted to hold on to. This only convinced the Iron Warriors warsmith – whose tactical instincts were demonstrated all over the planet – that it was necessary to deprive the archmagos of it.

As Torquora marched down the passageway, the broad frame of his armoured suit requiring passing deck servitors, skitarii soldiers and tech-priests to hug the opposite wall, his supercogitators and runebanks processed the torrent of information being relayed to him. Troop movements. Casualty audits. Data-tethers. A Titan manifold interface. Observational data from infoslaves, scryer drones and servo-skulls drifting through the myriad warzones of the Traitor forge world.

All this the archmagos processed through the supercogitators housed in his armoured chest pulpit. With slender multi-digited appendages feverishly at work at runescreens and glyph-keys, Torquora allowed himself to become distracted by a phylactic signature. It simply wasn't possible. The identification belonged to Ansis-86 Oltega.

Omnid Torquora had been with the skitarius when he had died. He had sanctioned the cybernetic soldier's death for tactical advancement and the assurance of a successful enemy attack thwarted. Oltega's identification showed up first at the Cytonia operations base as part of the Advensis VI Regnaulticon – a ranger cohort to which the soldier did not belong. Torquora had one of his diagnostiquorum attempt to establish phylactic communion with Oltega but was informed that no such

data-tether existed.

From there Oltega boarded the troop compartment of a lighter bound for the forge ship *Steropes* with a hold full of skitarii soldiers in need of repairs and cybernetic surgery. He was not listed among those in need of maintenance. Directing a security-automaton to investigate aboard the forge ship, Torquora detected the briefest suggestion of a struggle in the automaton's feeds before the machine went abruptly offline.

By now convinced that he was monitoring the progress of an infiltrator, the archmagos had a demi-clade of Sicarian ruststalkers assembled on the flight deck of the *Maestrale*, waiting for a cargo-hauler Oltega had commandeered from the hangar bay of the forge ship. A search of the cargo-hauler revealed only a servitor pilot and an open airlock hatch. The infiltrator had left the vessel early, leapt for the hull of the arkcruiser whilst exposed to the void and gained entrance by way of a maintenance hatch.

Grinding to a halt in the passage, his deck-crumpling footfalls slowing to a hydraulic sigh, Torquora scanned the feeds and local vox-channels for unusual activity. The infiltrator had made it aboard the *Maestrale* without raising an alarm. He seemed familiar with the systems, identification and organisation of skitarii contingents about the fleet and demonstrated some knowledge of the *Maestrale*.

Torquora, ever eager to gather data, test contingencies and learn from his enemy, had allowed the infiltrator the freedom to demonstrate his strategies. This would only assist the archmagos in identifying vulnerabilities and addressing weaknesses in the fleet's security. The infiltrator had got much further than Torquora had anticipated. Now, aboard the arkcruiser, the archmagos was loath to let him get much further. Oltega's identification signatures had disappeared. His wasn't the only one. Several skitarii sentinels and a deck sub-alpha's feeds died – one near the maintenance bays and two on the upper barracks decks.

Omnid Torquora turned and made his way back towards his personal chambers, his hydraulic legs thudding into the deck. Feeling his way through the ship, its section logs, runebanks and skitarii vox-channels, Torquora made a discovery that tested the logic coils of his cogitators. While the identification signatures of Ansis-86 Oltega had disappeared, the authorisations of an unregistered skitarii alpha had replaced them. At a sentry-point, a security bulkhead and under the scrutiny of a patrolling infoslave servo-skull, the infiltrator had used authorisations and clearances that Torquora had known well.

Biometric profiling at a barbican leading to the refectorium deck just beyond Torquora's chambers confirmed the identity of the infiltrator. His flesh couldn't lie.

<Sub-Alpha Ethtech,> Torquora transmitted to the duty officer charged with the ship's security. <Place the upper decks on alert, then report to my chambers with a sentinel squad – heavily armed, if you please.>

<At once, archmagos,> the skitarius returned.

By the time Torquora reached his chambers, Ethtech and his skitarii were already there. The sub-alpha was checking the life signs and data returns of the two skitarii sentries stationed at the archmagos's chamber bulkhead. They were dead. Torquora was less surprised than the sentinel squad, who immediately fell to covering the open bulkhead door with their arc rifles. Torquora had felt their deaths and even caught a glimpse of their killer in the pict feeds of their final moments. Having access codes to the refectorium deck and the archmagos's personal chambers sealed it for

Torquora. There could be no doubt as to the identity of the infiltrator now.

<Omnispectrals,> Sub-Alpha Ethtech ordered.

<Scanning,> a skitarii sentinel told him. Then confirmed, <One signal.>

<Sub-Alpha Ethtech,> Torquora said. <We have an enemy intruder on the ship. A saboteur. Possibly an assassin. I want him taken alive – do you understand?>

<Yes, archmagos,> Ethtech said, before addressing his squad. <Re-calibrate weaponry. 7-Modifex Betoc, Garmonic-4 Fectra: remain with Lord Torquora.>

Filing into Torquora's chambers, the skitarii sentinels hugged their arc rifles to their shoulders. Their optics peered down the length of their barrels as they aimed this way and that – scanning corners, clearing alcoves and side-chambers as they searched the room.

The intruder did not wait.

The side of a skitarii sentinel's head erupted in a shower of brain and cranial augmetics. Before the warrior had time to hit the deck, two others were down – one cybernetic soldier clutching a blasted throat and rebreather, another taking a round in his mask.

The chamber filled with light and storm as Sub-Alpha Ethtech and his sentinels blazed streams of lightning about them. The torrent tore through runebanks and raged in spidery arcs across burnished walls. Baroque furniture was blasted across the room and shattered while podium hololithics and port-screen overlays were scrambled into static.

<Lock on target and–> Sub-Alpha Ethtech announced, but he got no further. The infiltrator came out from behind a sizzling column with pistols blazing. Ethtech took round after round to the chest, his war-plate providing little or no protection. As the skitarii officer hit the chamber floor, Garmonic-4 Fectra opened a channel.

<Reserve sentinels to the refectorium decks immediately,> the skitarii transmitted.

<Follow us please, archmagos,> 7-Modifex Betoc told Torquora, retreating with Garmonic-4 Fectra back up the passage. Torquora stood his ground, watching as skitarii stumbled before the open chamber door. As they fell back onto the polished metal of the floor, the silent *whoosh* of pistol fire finished them.

<Archmagos,> Garmonic-4 Fectra said. <This is not something we will discuss. We have to get you to safety.>

<No,> Torquora said as arcstreams seared wildly across the chamber, even feeling their way through the open bulkhead as skitarii sentinels were executed and fired their last. Laying gauntlets on Torquora's weapons cradles, 7-Modifex Betoc and Garmonic-4 Fectra pulled at the tech-priest's monstrous frame.

<Archmagos, please,> 7-Modifex Betoc said. <There is protocol.>

It was futile, however. Omnid Torquora might just have been the withered, cable-shot remains of an old man, but his armoured suit was as broad as an Adeptus Astartes Dreadnought and weighed as much as an armoured personnel carrier. There would be no removing the archmagos to safety.

As the last of the skitarii sentinels were dropped by expert pistol fire, the infiltrator stepped out where Torquora could see him. He was dressed in the shattered war-plate and rags of a skitarii ranger. The scavenged, bolt-shredded uniform and warped combat chassis bore the identifications of Ansis-86 Oltega – killed in action on the planet below. The cybernetics were a perversion of the ranger's form, half-hidden beneath the ash-stained, bolt-savaged trenchcloak that the infiltrator held about him.

In a pair of black metal claws, he carried what appeared to be radium pistols that glowed with a fell illumination. The barrel of each pistol tapered into a baroque silencer. Torquora's rad-censers told him that the pistols weren't crackling with radiation but with something much, much worse. As the infiltrator stepped forward, his weapons pointed downwards, he spread the brains and workings of the felled sentinels across the polished floor.

Betoc and Garmonic stepped forward to protect the archmagos, blazing streams of electrical fury at the infiltrator. The nightmare figure became a globe of sizzling brilliance as the arcstreams met the energy interference of a Dark Mechanicum field generator. As the fire died away and the spherical shielding spat with the last of the dissipating energy, the infiltrator advanced, lifting his pistols. Adapting aim and targeters, the dark figure pulled on the triggers, unleashing round after round into the cybernetic soldiers. Their war-plate was as nothing to the passage of the cursed slugs.

Their life signs and returns faded away on Torquora's overlays as the archmagos's targeting reticules danced across the analysed vulnerabilities of the infiltrator's twisted form. The squad of skitarii sentinels was dead. The tech-priest's augurs only detected one biometric signature in the chamber. Beneath the rags of his disguise and the infiltrator's scavenged, jury-rigged cybernetics, was flesh that Torquora's runebanks recognised.

'Stroika-unit…' Torquora said, the modulations of his voice echoing along the passage.

The infiltrator said nothing. With the warping defence field shimmering about him, the cybernetic abomination that had been Haldron-44 Stroika, alpha primus of Torquora's skitarii legions, shrugged off his trenchcloak. The stolen war-plate of the dead Oltega, recovered from the ruined trenchworks surrounding the deep core mine, slipped from his combat chassis like a second skin. With the identifications of Oltega's bionics, the biometric returns of his flesh and the codes of an alpha primus, Stroika had made it into the presence of an enemy commander.

Ejecting his pistol magazines and allowing them to clunk to the floor, the twisted thing that had been Haldron-44 Stroika reloaded his warped weapons and slipped off his shattered helm. Without his disguise – which had been enough to give the impression of a horrifically wounded skitarii soldier in need of maintenance and cybersurgery – Stroika was a butchered mess. The pallid sickliness of his skin was threaded with warp-encrusted cables and lines pumping a black treacle of intravenous corruption into his flesh.

Oltega's recycled workings had been modified by Dark Mechanicum hereteks into the mangled brilliance of cybernetics all spikes, serrations and razored appendages, with the barbed frame of the twisted combat chassis stretching Stroika's feverish skin to transparency. The hunch of a warp-fuelled reactor erupted from the former skitarius's mauled back, powering his bionics and the field generator that enveloped his heretical form in a sphere of immaterial energy. His warped flesh bore the horrors of torture and merciless experimentation while the impassive mask of his face sat over cranial augmentations that sparked and sizzled, causing Stroika to twitch and contort his features. His eyes were covered by the black glass of goggles which lent the infiltrator the inhumanity of a predatory insect.

Torquora reached out for the former alpha primus, attempting to establish phylactic communion with the wretched construct, but found nothing. Whatever Dark Mechanicum butcher had presided over his transformation had torn such capabilities from Stroika's brain.

For a moment, confronted with the horror of what Haldron-44 Stroika had become and what Idriss Krendl and his heretek priests had put him through, the archmagos felt a pang of regret. The warsmith

had twisted Stroika into a ruinous weapon. An assassin, driven by cursed workings, warped flesh and a bitterness born of newly discovered hate. Torquora could almost feel the cankered hostility of the warrior he had left to suffer at the hands of Krendl and his infernal priests.

Responsibility. It was a redundant concept, buried deep within a humanity that the archmagos had long thought lost. He was not built for the processing of such sentiment. Like white blood cells attacking the source of an infection, his protocols and imperatives zeroed in on the emotion. Appropriated it. Modified it for purpose.

Omnid Torquora felt responsible for Stroika. For the thousands of skitarii soldiers he had allowed to die on Velchanos Magna in the name of data collation. For the billions of forge worlders on Satzica Secundus who were now slaves to darkness – all because of his feverish need to explore, discover and appropriate the perilous technologies of old. All in the name of the Great Maker. Responsibility found expression in resolution.

The Machine God needed serving in ways anew. The Adeptus Mechanicus had lost its way. Like a runaway monitor train, armoured and uncaring, running at full speed but with no one at the controls, the Adeptus Mechanicus would soon run out of track. They would be derailed of their holy purpose – if they hadn't been already – and crash spectacularly in some apocalyptic accident of their own making. Destroyed by appetite and greed.

Omnid Torquora would bring the runaway ambitions of the Adeptus Mechanicus to a halt. The Martian empire would be saved from itself. It would be like the machine and endure, rather than tear itself to pieces with destructive demands and discoveries.

'By all that is cold and pure,' Torquora announced, 'by the sanctity of the machine, all things logical, true and Omnissian – I compel the corruption of this construct to release his soul, caged as it is within the confines of heretical augmentation.'

Stroika's face twitched and his cranial bionics sparked with unnatural brilliance. He brought up a pistol and aimed it at his former master.

'Great Maker,' the tech-priest said, 'whose Motive Force infused this servant once with the spark of life and service to the machine. Whose blessed algorithms guided, whose oils consecrated and whose augmentations made more of this once-true construct than he could ever have been…'

The silencer muzzle of Stroika's pistol wavered and shook with the Machine God's benedictions. It did not stop the infiltrator's clawed talon pulling back on the trigger in bitterness, silent rage and pain.

Torquora felt the round pass hot through his workings. Bathed in the immaterial power of the warp, the shells were simultaneously part of the moment – the physical presence of metal casing and force – and the unreality of the beyond. Torquora's systems alerted him to the fact that the pistol slug had passed straight through his conversion field, through the clinker-plate of his armoured shell and into the hydraulics, cabling and workings of his suit. His optic overlays flashed with diagrammatical data, damage reports, power readings and diagnostics. Ignoring the hololithic miasma, he took a thudding step towards Stroika and his raised pistol.

'… embrace the glorious workings of this, Your servant, and admit him once more to the wondrous interface of godly communion.'

Stroika fired again. The trembling silencer jumped twice, three times as the weapon thudded shells into the approaching tech-priest, two into the pulpit and one in Torquora's armoured hood. Overlays warped and sizzled as the supercogitators and runebanks of the pulpit reported battle damage to their

own systems. One of the shells had plucked at the hood of Torquora's robes, right next to his corpse-face, burying itself in the suit plate clinkered about his hairless, age-mottled head. Another warp-irradiated slug had ripped through his workings and passed hot through the flesh of his cable-ported torso. Automedicae subroutines took over and elixirs of alchymic regeneration flooded the body socket, going to work at the ragged wound in the tech-priest's side.

It was a feeling of searing immediacy. For so many years, Omnid Torquora had fought the foes of the Omnissiah with the wonder of his technologies and through the phylactic manipulation of his warrior-servants. It had been a long time since Torquora had actually fought an enemy face to face.

'I ask you, God of the Machine,' Omnid Torquora continued, each weighted step taken with the righteous determination of a priest invoking his deity, 'Omnissiah Incarnate. He who hears all, sees all and knows all. Call unto him – this tempered tool, this weapon of Your holy arsenal. Cleanse him of callings untrue. Untwist what has been twisted. Flush the pollution of false belief from flesh and iron. Bring forth in his workings the protocols of blessed operation and the doctrinal imperatives of mechanical obedience. Manifest in him the cold strength of iron true and the spark of service once known in his wayward flesh.'

Torquora watched Haldron-44 Stroika struggle against the blessings and benediction with which the tech-priest showered him. Stroika's pallid flesh steamed at the words, while the black curd of the taint pumping through his body dribbled down his chin at the Machine God's invocation. He bent double and vomited forth a stream of bubbling corruption onto the polished floor of the chamber.

As Torquora closed on him, the afflicted construct's pistols came back up, rattling in his metal claws. As his cranial augmentations sparked, energies crackling about his head, Stroika tried to fight all but forgotten protocols, subroutines and the cold tyranny of imperatives – the inflexibility of orders passed down from the Omnissiah Himself. The very word of the Machine God.

With each shower of sparks and cranial crackling, Stroika's expression of blank hatred contorted to spiritual agony. The pistols lowered and then came up. They dropped with Stroika's struggle before being thrust back at the tech-priest with a murderous desire drawn from the very bottom of his polluted soul.

'Enough…' Stroika spat from corruption-spattered lips. His claws tightened about the suddenly still pistols.

'Yes,' Torquora told him. 'Enough, Stroika-unit.'

As Stroika yanked back on the triggers, intending to riddle Torquora with warp-charged shells, Torquora enacted his aegis protocols. The tech-priest's armoured suit suddenly came to life. Magna-hydraulics and chunky pistons fired, bringing stowed heavy weapons around in their appendage cradles. Two monstrous, hydraulic arc-claws opened at the ends of heavy cybernetic arms like the petals of a metal flower. The brute barrels of a torsion cannon slid down a carriage rail to lock into place beneath one claw. On the other arm a squat weapons array slotted into position, the revolving barrels of its gatling arrangement sitting between the outstretched talons of the crackling arc-claw.

Stroika's pistols bucked as shell after cursed shell rocketed towards the tech-priest. Torquora returned fire with the autocannons of his Icarus weapons array, sending a blizzard of slugs at Stroika. The shells flashed the unnatural colours of the warp as the assassin's shielding did its best to soak up the blistering autofire. The immaterial rounds from Stroika's pistols hammered through the workings of Torquora's armoured suit, thudding into his withered shoulder and through his gut. Cycling the Icarus array about the thick hydraulics of his weapons appendage, Torquora fired rocket after rocket

at Stroika. The warp-fuelled shielding seemed to hold against the blinding detonations, though Stroika was driven back with every colossal impact.

Stomping forward, Torquora kept the devastating barrage up, rockets reloading with every clunking revolution of the gatling array. Stroika was blasted back and forth by the rocking explosions, the exotic energies of the Dark Mechanicum field generator collapsing under the onslaught. As the smoke and glare of detonations faded, Torquora found Stroika coughing up corruption, half bent over. His energy shielding flickered on and off before fizzling to a shimmer, while his flesh was scorched by rocket fire. One of his pistols had been knocked from a blasted claw, and Stroika fought to reload the other.

'Submit as a true construct of the Blessed Omnissiah,' Torquora said, autoloading rockets and aiming the tri-barrels of his torsion cannon at Stroika. 'The Motive Force compels you!'

Stroika howled his spiritual agonies at the deck while his flesh seared to blackness about the cursed metal of his combat chassis. Slamming a fresh magazine of warp-irradiated bullets into his pistol, Stroika went to shoot again. Charging his torsion cannon, the tech-priest blasted a force-stream of particles at him from the weapon's flared muzzles. As the gravitational fields hit Stroika, the torsion cannon's barrels began to turn and rotate about one another. Knocking him back with their frame-smashing force, the locked fields of each barrel mercilessly tore and twisted at Stroika: shearing an arm off at the joint, crumpling the metal of his combat chassis within his tortured flesh and shattering the automotive hydraulics of his legs.

Hitting the far wall, Stroika landed as a shattered mess of ruptured flesh, twisted limbs and leaking corruption. Behind him, Torquora heard the synchronous fall of footsteps as skitarii sentinels arrived on the refectorium decks.

<Stand down,> the tech-priest ordered, drawing the cybernetic soldiers to a halt. As Stroika coughed, choked and roared the fury of his decimated flesh, Torquora stood over the broken warrior. Drawing his heavy weaponry back up their carriages and cradling his hydraulic claws and appendages, Torquora looked down at Stroika. He had caused the alpha primus untold agony on top of agony, and would cause him more still to right the construct he had once wronged.

Stroika gagged and spat the filth of corruption up at Torquora's armoured boots, the maniacal laugh of a soul twisted beyond endurance working its way out of his ruined form. He reached for a line of grenades that were pinned through the mauled flesh of his shoulder, about the shattered frame of his combat chassis. Clasping one in his metal claw, Stroika tore at it, ripping the pin from his pierced skin. His laugh became a dark chuckle of satisfaction as he held the grenade and detonator pin between them. He intended to release the warp-primed grenade and blow the pair of them to oblivion.

'No, Stroika-unit,' Torquora told him, bringing up a filth-speckled boot and crushing claw, grenade and pin between his heavy metal sole and the floor. 'I intend to make you whole again.' Torquora announced to the chamber, 'Security authorisation: 1/22/00/4. Accept.'

The floor section beneath them both began to shudder. On its hydraulics, the floor descended into the laboratorium below. Artisans and magi hard at work on the Geller bomb's final preparations looked up at their master, their attention already long since attracted by the gunfire and explosions coming from the chamber above.

'Magos aethyricus.'

'Yes, my lord,' the tech-priest said, looking at the broken construct at Torquora's feet.

'The Geller Device is ready for transportation and deployment?' Torquora asked.

‘Yes, archmagos,’ the tech-priest replied. ‘With the Omnissiah’s blessing.’

Tearing at his trapped claw and the unprimed grenade held within, Stroika’s gaze lit upon the newly constructed Geller bomb. Stunned for a moment, the corrupted construct suddenly began thrashing and shrieking like a thing possessed.

‘One final test,’ Torquora ordered. ‘Engage the phase-fielding as a stage one build-up to detonation.’

‘But, archmagos,’ the tech-priest said. ‘The device has already passed that test.’

‘Indulge me,’ Torquora ordered.

As servitors cleared the chamber, artisans and magi stepped across the cabling that snaked its way in swarms across the laboratorium floor. Taking position behind console banks and screens, the tech-priests fell to initiating the Geller Device’s detonation sequence.

‘My lord, would you rather not view the test from–’ the magos aethyricus asked, but Torquora cut him off.

‘Proceed.’

As Stroika thrashed in his frame-shattered agonies, Torquora keeping the polluted construct and his warp grenade in place, the baroque bomb at the centre of the laboratorium clunked to life. Within its transportation scaffolding, the device made an ominous hum that unsettled the stomach and rattled the ear. The magos aethyricus narrated his test steps, but Torquora wasn’t listening. He simply watched the Geller bomb come to dreadful life, field capacitors humming to charge within the weapon.

‘Phase-field initiation,’ the magos aethyricus announced. Torquora filtered his overlays as the Geller Device blazed to sudden brightness. The blinding light twinkled with an intensity that drove shadows away and scalded the walls, equipment and laboratorium personnel to whiteness.

At his feet, Stroika had fallen to filth-dribbling silence. He looked fearfully at the Geller Device, as one might stare into the jaws of death.

‘Field has achieved integrity,’ the tech-priest announced over the din of the device. ‘Perimeter expanding.’

As the blazing twinkle became a bubble of searing reality, expanding as a sizzling sphere about the Geller Device, Torquora felt Stroika attempt to tear his trapped claw away. As the archmagos pressed down with his armoured boot, Stroika roared his fear and repugnance for the Geller field. His soul was going to burn, and the corrupt construct knew it.

Torquora let the bubble of reality envelop him, allowing the purging static of the device to hiss off his armour. He heard Stroika scream. His flesh scorched and the exposed metal of his butchered cybernetics burned with an ethereal fire. Corruption gushed from his nose, his wounds and flesh-plugs, steaming away as it came into contact with the Geller field. As the phase-field test allowed the bomb to reach full intensity, Stroika screamed again. This time it wasn’t the cry of a demented puppet – some plaything of ruinous monsters – but the scream of a man. It was agony, honest and true.

As Torquora held him there, bathed in the intense reality of the Geller field, the archmagos watched Stroika undergo a transformation. The cursed metal of his augmentations melted to pools that bubbled and evaporated. Corrupt workings sizzled, sparked and blew like fuses while his goggles melted down his cheeks in rivulets of black, molten glass. With the filth of corruption gone and dirty lines lacing his field-bleached flesh, Stroika was but a surgery-mangled torso and head. Unconscious now, his features had relaxed, enjoying a peace he had not known for a long time.

Torquora nodded at the magos aethyricus, who ordered his priests to shut down the Geller Device’s phase fielding. As the sizzling bubble of reality collapsed and the humming bomb fell quiet, Torquora

removed his armoured boot. The warp grenade, like the twisted claw that had held it, had melted away.

'It's ready,' Torquora told the magos aethyricus. He looked down at the unconscious Stroika. 'But as of now we are not the only ones to know of its existence. It is imperative we deploy the Geller Device immediately. Have the bomb loaded for transportation. Now.'

'As you wish, archmagos.'

'And have the magos cybernetica assemble his priests and bless his laboratorium,' Omnid Torquora said, looking down at what remained of Haldron-44 Stroika. 'I have a subject for his surgical slab here.'

0101

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+WARP TRANSLATION+*

Omnid Torquora once more surveyed the decimation of war through the optics of the cybernetic soldiers fighting it. The Drastok 4-14 Radiphracts had been pulled from their brutal siege of Forge Temple Pharatoi to defend the ruined trenchworks of the Ortorqus Chasma. Joining the remaining skitarii manning the trenches and a killclade of Sicarian ruststalkers, it became their duty and the duty of their alpha primus, the scorch-faced Algor-14 Gallium, to secure the site against further attack.

Landing excavators and dozers from arkfreighters stationed overhead, Gallium and his vanguard skitarii had worked in record time to repair the defensive network about the deep core mining facility. With bombards, mortars and Earthshaker cannons trained on the approach and the Warhound Titan *Canis Corporalis* drowning them in its sentinel shadow, the Radiphracts worked hard to establish themselves. It was not to be, however.

At 2700 hours, the arkfreighter *Silicos* identified the movement of three Dark Mechanicum war machines. Like the great creations of the Centurio Ordinatus the heretek machines were colossal, their towering weaponry obscene in its size and warped design. They crushed everything in their path, mulching fire-gutted buildings to dust beneath their monstrous tracks. Escorted by Dark Mechanicum armour contingents and small armies of rabid tech-thralls that rode on the mighty hulls of the machines, the closing war machines aimed to join forces and take the Ortorqus Chasma.

Torquora only had one order for Primus Gallium: to hold the Dark Mechanicum off for as long as possible. With the Geller Device being loaded on board a transport bound for the planet's surface and an escort force being assembled, the archmagos only asked for a few hours more – but Omnid Torquora was not granted that wish.

Through Primus Gallium's optics, Torquora watched the fall of the Ortorqus Chasma. With a range that Torquora had failed to appreciate, the gargantuan war machines of the Dark Mechanicum opened fire on the *Canis Corporalis*. Smashed from side to side by fat beams of aethyric energy, the Warhound's void shields shattered and the god-machine's consecrated plating erupted with the

scalding passage of warping energy streams. The *Canis Corporalis* blasted its mega-bolters at the war machines on the horizon, but even the god-machine's great weaponry could not achieve the same range. Marching on one war machine, the Titan suffered the plate-carving attentions of the other two in the horror of a coordinated attack. As Gallium watched and Torquora with him, the Titan's crew abandoned their god-machine, leaping to their deaths as the main body of the Warhound detonated.

Readying his vanguard skitarii as they manned the trenches with their radioactive weaponry, Gallium watched as the escort contingents of the three mega-machines stormed towards them. With gibbering tech-thralls sitting on the armoured shells of the baroque battle tanks, riding in trailers and clinging to track plates, the vehicles blasted electromagnetic streams of lightning at the skitarii in the trenches.

Moving between the Radiphracts, the crackling of their censers a constant reminder of the way in which their weaponry was slowly poisoning them, Torquora watched the Dark Mechanicum troops advance. Those vanguard skitarii who had lost their helms in previous battles wore grim expression on faces raw with radiation burns.

As a seeming afterthought, Gallium reported gunships pacing the battle tanks' approach. Through the primus's eyes and a pair of magnoculars, Torquora identified the gunships as belonging to the Iron Warriors, the canopies of the rusted craft glowing with balelight and their engines spewing black smoke. The Chaos Space Marines had not risked an aerial assault on the Ortorqus Chasma before – not with Ordo Reductor artillery stationed amongst the ruins of the deep core installation. Something had emboldened the Iron Warriors – who didn't require much of an excuse at any time to brazenly storm an enemy stronghold. Omnid Torquora thought he knew what that something was. With the knowledge that the Cult Mechanicus fleet had constructed a Geller Device, Idriss Krendl wasn't leaving anything to chance. Torquora suspected that Krendl now fully understood the strategic value of the deep core mines and wanted the installation in Traitor hands.

Before long, streams of lightning launched from Dark Mechanicum battle tanks were hammering into trenches and electrifying the shallows in which the vanguard skitarii stood. Gun emplacements blasted vehicle-riding thralls from their purchase, while radium jezzails and transuranic arquebuses punched holes through armour, shredding through the monstrous engines of the tanks. With artillery raining down on the Dark Mechanicum armour, it appeared for precious minutes like the Drastok 4-14 Radiphracts might hold the trenchworks. That was until the gunships broke away.

Splitting the air with the thunder of their engines, Thunderhawks, Stormbirds and Fire Raptor gunships hit the trenchworks hard. Avenger cannons and heavy bolters rained death down on Radiphracts, forcing them to split fire from their radium carbines between the suicidal charge of shrieking tech-thralls and the booming swoop of gunships. Battle-scarred Thunderhawks, rivet-plated with fortified armour, smashed the Ordo Reductor forces with bombs that tore the artillery pieces up and detonated bombard ordnance stocks. Meanwhile, ancient Stormbirds with stuttering engines and patched hulls came in to land behind the trench lines, delivering their cargo of Iron Warriors. As the Obliteratii hit Gallium and his skitarii from behind, the battle tanks rolled in with their manic thralls. Caught between lightning streams, the stabbing beams of lascarbines and the warped weaponry of the diseased Iron Warriors, the vanguard skitarii were blasted to pieces, their cybernetic bodies lying bolt-riddled in the shallows.

As Algor-14 Gallium reported his failure to Omnid Torquora, the alpha primus turned. The monstrous shape of a flesh-mangled Iron Warrior towered over the skitarii officer. Bringing up his radium pistol, Gallium blasted several radioactive rounds into the abomination's chest before the

thing rammed the flesh-metal digits of a malformed claw straight through his body. Lifting him off the ground, the crooked-faced Iron Warrior stared into Gallium's fading optics, his own eyes burning with jubilant hatred.

'Tell your priest that this world is ours,' the Iron Warrior spat through twisted lips. 'And that his own is next. You hear me, don't you, priest? Krendl comes for you. Take your tin soldiers and run…'

With that the Iron Warrior unleashed a fleshmetal cannon that was part of his monstrous arm. Blasting the life out of Algor-14 Gallium, the Iron Warrior launched the body of the alpha primus across the corpse-strewn trenchworks. Gallium died in mid-air, allowing Torquora to see the Iron Warrior's ugly grin and the horror of the skitarii officer's last moments.

'My lord,' a priestly member of Torquora's diagnostiquorum said, breaking the archmagos's phylactic communion. 'Tech-priest Captain Voltram for you.'

Transferring his interface to the consular unit station of the bridge, Torquora addressed the Mechanicus captain.

'Tech-priest Captain, you have new information for me?' he said, his words proceeding from the consular unit's lips.

'Archmagos,' Voltram said, 'our long range augur arrays have detected vessels entering the system.'

'When?'

'Warp translation happened within the hour,' Voltram said.

'Number?'

'I'd estimate about thirty vessels of various classes and tonnage,' the tech-priest captain said.

'Thirty vessels…'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Designation?' Torquora asked.

'They are too far out for a visual, archmagos, although my priests are working on that. My impression from the augur readings and array of vessels is that they are an Adeptus Mechanicus battlefleet.'

'From Satzica Secundus?' Torquora asked.

'A distinct possibility, my lord.'

'Keep me informed, tech-priest captain,' the archmagos transmitted. 'I want designation and visuals as soon as you have them.'

'Yes, my lord.'

SELECTED: DENTRICA II OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+EXECUTE+*

The doors to the diagnostiquorum parted. Omnid Torquora turned. It was unusual. The priests of his diagnostiquorum were permanently stationed there, with only the archmagos coming and going. As servitors swept in to remove his communion cables, Torquora angled the bulk of his armoured suit around. From the doors came a convocation of priests – members of the Luminen, following their masters into the diagnostiquorum chamber.

'This is… irregular,' Torquora said.

The Giveth and the Taketh stood side by side, with their electromancers spread out behind them to

give the impression of numbers.

'This matter could not wait,' Candesca Piezon said, his words falling clipped from his crackling lips.

'What could not wait?' Torquora demanded of the electro-priests.

'We convened,' Attica Diodemus said. This did not surprise the archmagos, since it was all the Luminen seemed to do. 'Fulgurite and Corpuscarii are in agreement.'

'Unusual, wouldn't you say, masters?' Torquora said.

'If the history of the Martian empire demonstrates anything,' Diodemus said, 'it is that great threats can reveal the truth that there is more that unites different factions than divides them.'

'Well, Master Diodemus, Master Piezon,' Torquora said. 'We already face a great threat on the planet below.'

'Archmagos,' Tech-priest Captain Voltram announced across the vox.

'Yes, captain.'

'We have identified the largest vessel, my lord,' Voltram reported. 'It is the *Encoronada* – an Ark Mechanicus of ancient lineage, hailing from…'

'…Satzica Secundus,' Torquora said.

'Supported by eight or so cruiser-class vessels, with the rest escorts, troop carriers, forge ships and Collegia Titanica temple barges. A battlefleet, as I suspected. A visual will confirm.'

'Thank you, tech-priest captain,' Torquora told him. 'That visual, as soon as you have it. Torquora out.'

'So,' Attica Diodemus said. 'Reinforcements from Satzica Secundus.'

'Yes,' Torquora agreed, 'but reinforcements for whom?'

'You believe the Fabricator General would send a fleet of his finest vessels to support our enemies?' Diodemus asked.

'I am almost sure of it,' Torquora said. 'Now, masters, time is pressing. I expect to be engaging those vessels in battle within the hour. As you said yourself, we face a great threat.'

'The threat to which we were referring,' Candesca Piezon told him, 'is you, archmagos.'

Torquora looked up. For the first time he realised that the electro-priests were not wearing their ship robes. Instead, they were stripped to the waist, their subdermal circuitry glowing beneath their muscular flesh.

'Masters Diodemus, Piezon,' Torquora said, 'what are you really doing here?'

'We cannot support your prosecution of this war,' Diodemus said. 'We are the check.'

'The balance,' Piezon said.

'The Fabricator General trusted that we would watch over the Fabricator Locum,' Diodemus said. 'With him gone, we look to guide you – but you will not be guided, by us or the light of the Motive Force. You speak against the holy tenets of the Quest for Knowledge. You threaten Satzica Secundus and its people. You speak against the Fabricator General himself, interpreting what little evidence you have to suit your ambitions.'

'Ambitions?' Torquora marvelled.

'You are an explorator,' Candesca Piezon accused.

'An outlander.'

'A loner.'

'A radical, who walks his own path rather than the one set out for him,' Diodemus said. 'You pervert

the divine stratification of our ranks, using the resources of the Adeptus Mechanicus to prosecute your own will.'

'Some might say you have gone rogue, Omnid Torquora,' Piezon said. 'That your battles with the renegade and the xenos have given you a taste for subversion.'

'For conquest,' Diodemus added. 'Even of your own.'

'You have the gall to lecture me on subversion and conquest,' Torquora rumbled. 'Priests of the temple court. Keepers of the Fabricator General's faith? Those who cog, weave lies and whisper behind his back to advance themselves or those to whom they are allied. You call me a loner. In that much at least you are right, since I would favour the cold emptiness of the void, with only the distant stars for company rather than priests like you. Men who kill by committee. Which is exactly why you are here today – with a war half-fought and an enemy fleet at our backs, you choose *today* to judge me?'

'Omnid Torquora,' Attica Diodemus said. 'Archmagos explorator. The Luminen judge your actions extreme and your objectives questionable. You are to be taken from this place and placed in chrono-containment until such time as you can be judged by a chamber of your priestly peers. Will you submit?'

'Or will you force us to destroy you in the attempt?' Candesca Piezon said, the electrostatic gauntlets about his hands and the cabling leading to his spinal capacitor crackling with power.

Torquora looked from Piezon to Diodemus. He allowed his optics to move across the convocation of priests. The Corpuscarii with their node-sizzling gauntlets. The Fulgurites leaning against their power-leeching staves. In turn, Torquora sensed that all eyes and optics of the diagnostiquorum were on him.

'I fear, masters,' Torquora said, 'brothers of the light, that it is easier to judge a construct in the darkness. You have no eyes to see the innocence in his.'

Torquora fired the hydraulics on his appendage cradles, opening his claws and allowing his suit's heavy weaponry to lock into place. As he did so the Luminen attacked. Faces of priestly calm twisted in open hostility. The Corpuscarii lit up in a spidery blaze of arcs and snapping energy, the nodes of their halos and electrostatic gauntlets glowing to brilliance. Moving their hands in sacred gestures, their cabling draped like wings, the electromancers blasted columns of raw energy at the archmagos.

With streams of electrical power slamming into his armoured suit, overloading systems and paralysing hydraulics, Torquora was forced back. Grunting his exertions and with smoke drifting up from his chest pulpit, the tech-priest stumbled back into a phylactic interface, demolishing the empty console. Thrusting his open claw forward, Torquora blasted his array of autocannons at the convocation, the hail of rounds taking off heads and shredding through the bare chests of electro-priests.

Suddenly a Fulgurite priest was before the archmagos, turning and spinning the length of his stave. He smacked the weapons appendage with the cog-ends of the leeching weapon, and Torquora's autocannon stuttered to a stop as the cradle autoloaders lost power. Sparks flew from the plate of Torquora's chest pulpit as another came in, weaving expertly under his brother's spinning weapon to smash and stab with his own crippling stave.

Torquora lunged with the outstretched hydraulics of his claw but the Luminen were too fast and coordinated. As the Fulgurites ducked and leant expertly out of the arc-claw's path, they struck it aside, bringing their staves around to smash the back of the suit's knee joint. With lightning striking

the tech-priest from the advancing Corpuscarii, scorching its exploratory way across his armoured plate and hammering him back, Torquora realised that there were simply too many of the convocation to face alone.

The priests of his diagnostiquorum were unarmed but tore themselves from their communion cables and data-plugs, charging the electro-priests with nothing more than their bare hands and interface bionics. Jumping from runebanks and going to grab the Luminen, they found themselves horribly outclassed. The smell of roasted flesh filled the air as Corpuscarii blazed streams from their electrostatic gauntlets into the bodies of intervening priests. Electrocuted and with their life-sustaining augmentations melting within them, priests were thrown back over consoles by the shocking power of the streams. The Fulgurites, meanwhile, turned and spun their staves elegantly about them, draining constructs with every impact. Stabbing and back-slashing, the electro-priests siphoned power from bionics but much worse was the way their attacks leeched the very electrical impulses that kept hearts beating and brains functioning. They moved with deadly grace through their dropping victims, a slaughterous dance of light and motion.

With armour plating and greater reactors to drain, Omnid Torquora was lasting longer but faring no better. His explorator suit and augmentations had been developed to counter the brutality and physical superiority of the alien: creatures of size, strength and speed. With magna-hydraulics and the broad suit of clinker plating, Torquora was more than a match for attacking xenos breeds. Things that moved with alien swiftness and superhuman reflexes still could not outrun rounds shot from a cannon or avoid the blast of a detonating rocket.

The gifts of the Luminen turned Torquora's own capabilities against him. While he was engineered to destroy alien monsters, even he could not hope to counter the dizzying speed and grace of the warrior priests who both drained and overloaded his monstrous workings in equal measure.

With overloaded cabling alight and the power of his bionics fading, Torquora attempted to assert his supremacy. His optics and overlays lagged and crackled to static with every strike of a Fulgurite's leeching stave, while within his lightning-scorched suit he could smell burned wiring and feel his own flesh cooking.

With one arm frozen in the crackling embrace of an electrical stream, his interfaced shoulder joint convulsing with shock, Torquora swung the other around with clumsy effort. Knocking the head clean off a Fulgurite priest with his arc-claw, the archmagos bludgeoned another by bringing the weight of the monstrous hydraulics down. As electro-priests hacked at the pistons and carriages of the appendage with their draining staves, systems went haywire. Rockets fired wildly across the chamber, demolishing sections of interface consoles and blasting craters into the decking.

Two Corpuscarii priests turned charging tech-priests into blackened, augmented skeletons by laying their electrostatic gauntlets on them and pumping energy streams point-blank into their bodies. As the remains fell away, they went to turn their wielded lightning on Torquora. Shaking the crackles and arcs of the last attack from an arm over which he once again had control, the tech-priest aimed his torsion cannon at the pair, blasting them across the room with the gravitic force of the weapon. Bones broke and spines snapped as the cable-tangled Corpuscarii were twisted and fashioned into terrible and bloody new shapes.

Suddenly, Piezon and Diodemus were before him, the pair unified by the great threat presented by the priest-slaughtering Torquora. The archmagos blasted round after stuttering round from his autocannons at Attica Diodemus but the Fulgurite wheeled out of their path, using his stave to balance

his centre of gravity.

Piezon brought his hands around in a mystical configuration, charging his capacitor before thrusting his electrostatic gauntlets at Torquora. Twin streams of electrical fury slammed into Torquora's armoured chest. Plate burned to whiteness while sparks flew, runescreens shattered and supercogitators shorted with the raw power flowing through the pulpit. Piezon's Corpuscarii priests joined him, aiming their own columns of lightning at Torquora. The archmagos stumbled back so as not to topple, stamping through the precious workings and interface cabling of phylactic communion banks. It was all he could do to hold out his hydraulic claws to shield his suit from the worst of the streaming energy.

Diodemus and his brother Fulgurites leapt consoles and stepped gracefully through the wreckage. While electro-priests pressed their attack with spinning staves, smashing draining impacts into Torquora's armoured suit, Attica Diodemus thrust the serrated cog-head of his stave straight through the magna-hydraulics of Torquora's leg. Ordinarily the mighty pistons in the bionic limb would shatter the stave and its capacitor but with the jammed weapon constantly leeching automotive power from the limb, the knee became paralysed. Forced to pivot around the frozen joint, Torquora felt his world become the howling agony of electrical torture and the dread of dying systems. Trapped in his sarcophagal suit, Torquora would die.

Nobody had noticed that the chamber doors had parted. Not the diagnostiquorum priests who were dying in their droves. Not the Corpuscarii who coursed lightning through their enemies with their searing touch. Not the Fulgurites who drained the very life from constructs with their leeching staves.

Haldron-44 Stroika had returned to his master as ordered. Fresh from the magos cybernetica and his small army of adepts, cybersurgeons and artisans, Stroika was a construct anew. His flesh had been purged of corruption and his butchered body stripped of his tainted workings. No longer a skitarii officer outfitted for command, Stroika's days at the head of a legion were done. What the Iron Warriors and Torquora had left of him – his head and upper torso – was now part of a monstrous machine. A holy annihilator. A kataphron destroyer.

Lobotomised, Stroika knew nothing of his past sufferings or expectations of his future. As a living weapon, there was little beyond the immediacy of battle that he needed to think on at all. With his torso and cabling set in a turret and his body protected by demi-plate, Stroika entered the diagnostiquorum chamber on a monstrous set of tracks. Like a small tank or mobile artillery piece, he had been crafted into a fearful machine of single-minded death and destruction. Heavy-duty weapons cradles mounted a plasma culverin on one shoulder and a flamer on an underslung appendage. His head was a nest of targeters, scopes and augurs, what little face flesh was exposed fixed in a mask of blank obedience.

Casting his optics and overlays across the diagnostiquorum, Stroika processed the scene of the battle. The flashing outlines of electro-priests and zig-zag of targeting reticules led him through the bodies of tech-priests and the devastation of the chamber to Omnid Torquora. Immediately recognising the designations of the archmagos's armoured suit, Stroika calculated that his master was under attack. Aegis protocols and the battle wetware that had replaced much of his brain led him to conclude that without assistance Omnid Torquora would die.

Authorising intervention, his systems allowed power to run from his hull-mounted reactor to his plasma weaponry. As the cannon glowed a brilliant blue it radiated unbearable heat that scorched the pallid flesh of Stroika's shaven head and blank face. A pilot flame whooshed to life, dancing from the

caged muzzle of the underslung flamer fed from fuel lines runnning down into promethium tanks that were set within the armoured protection of his plated hull. Allowing his imperatives to upload, Stroika blinked.

'Execute,' he droned to himself, his voice a doom-laden modulation.

Grinding his tracks down the steps of the chamber and into the diagnostiquorum, Stroika ran straight into the convocation of electro-priests. Barely comprehending his arrival, Fulgurite and Corpuscarii brothers turned in horror to see the monstrous machine coming at them. Dropping their staves and being dragged under the tracks with a scream, electro-priests were left behind the hench-unit in bloody mounds of crackling flesh and cables.

Seeing that a machine had come to Omnid Torquora's rescue, Fulgurite priests turned their wrath on Stroika. Jabbing at the destroyer and swinging staves across their backs, they aimed to smash the power from the monstrous creation. Turning in his turret as he track-battered electromancers aside, Stroika doused the bare-chested priests with dribbling gouts of promethium flame. Their crisp flesh scorched to torturous blackness, the priests rolled about on the deck. Spasming and thrashing in their agony, they attempted to put out the blazes raging about their robed skirts and melting flesh.

As Fulgurites ran at Stroika with their staves, the destroyer turned in his turret, angling the scorched muzzle of his flamer and burying his attackers in great balls of flame. Everywhere priests were dying. Through the smoke and stench Corpuscarii brothers kept their distance, backing away from the murderous machine as it thrashed its tracks back and forth, whirling an inferno about it. Lightning streams cut through the flames to scorch and crackle off Stroika's plate. Streams hit the destroyer from the front, back and side, the electromancers compounding their efforts. It was the worst thing that they could have done.

With reticules tagging the Corpuscarii threats on Stroika's overloading feeds and the outlines of the priests flashing in confirmation, the destroyer locked in his targets.

'Execute.'

Stroika turned in his turret with the jolting assurance of a machine, his plasma culverin glowing to brilliance. Globes of raging hydrogen gouted from the barrel's magnetic accelerators. Punching holes through the smoke, the blinding balls of energy blasted the priests one after another, back through the diagnostiquorum.

With the acrid smoke of the smashed chamber thinning, Stroika scanned for targets. He saw his master hobbling in his armoured suit, his systems sparking and his plate scorched. As the destroyer turned in his turret, searching for target acquisitions, Attica Diodemus climbed up onto Stroika's hull. Having recovered one of his brother's electroleech staves, the master proceeded to stab it into the demi-plate of the destroyer's back.

Stroika felt his overlays and optics fade with each impact. Turning around and around, still he could not acquire the tech-priest. As Diodemus worked the cog-head of his stave through the armour of Stroika's back, the destroyer's weapon systems cut out. Moments later, power was leeched from his automotive cortex, bringing his tracks to a halt.

With Stroika held there by Diodemus, a half-roasted Master Piezon stumbled out of the smoke and charged his electrostatic weaponry. With the nodes of his halo and gauntlets blazing with crackling fury, the Corpuscarii priest prepared to launch a lightning stream at the immobilised Stroika.

A rocket suddenly screamed across the chamber, hitting Candesca Piezon squarely in the back. The the priest exploded, scraps of flesh and metal crackling to nothing as Omnid Torquora limped up

behind. Bringing a hydraulic claw down the side of his leg, he smashed the leeching stave that was jammed in his knee joint in half, shattering the weapon's capacitor. The magna-hydraulics of the limb shredded the rest.

Looking between the electromagnetic presence of both the paralysed Stroika and the advancing tech-priest, Attica Diodemus stepped down from the destroyer. Leaving the stave in place he backed towards the diagnostiquorum doors. As Torquora stomped towards the electro-priest, Diodemus turned and ran for the parting doors. Bringing up his torsion cannon, Torquora blasted a stream of gravitic particles at the Fulgurite that broke him in half and carried his screams out of the chamber.

As Omnid Torquora wavered slightly in his sarcophagal suit and the smoke began to clear in the diagnostiquorum, several of the archmagos's priests emerged from hiding and ventured forth. As the din of battle fell to silence, Torquora could hear Tech-priest Captain Voltram over the vox.

'Archmagos?'

Torquora directed his remaining priests to the smashed vox and the communion cables snaking their way across the destruction of the chamber.

'Proceed, captain.'

'Our magnascopes have a long-range capture for you, my lord,' Voltram told him.

As the priests screwed communion cables into the interface ports of his battle-scarred suit, Torquora phylactically reached out for the bridge consular unit. As the unit opened its eyes, Torquora could see the capture up on the bridge lancet screens. It was blurry and pixelated but unmistakable. The capture showed the Ark Mechanicus *Encoronada*. The capital ship had been a stately vessel of colossal size and destructive power. An interstellar weapon of pedigree and grace. What Torquora saw now, even at such a distance, was an abomination of modified architecture and grotesquely augmented weaponry. Its command deck and hangars glowed with the dread illumination of warp light while its beautiful, baroque lines were now a mess of spikes and serrations.

Torquora had to be sure, though.

'Sub-light engine emissions, tech-priest captain?'

'Engine trails contain chemical signatures unknown to our instruments, archmagos,' Voltram told him. 'Plus, they're communicating – only not with us.'

'On hailer,' Torquora said.

The vox suddenly erupted with the cacophonous din of code madness. A shrieking, binaric cant overlaid with infernal blurt-chants of mind-aching corruption.

'Destination?'

'Velchanos Magna, my lord.'

Torquora looked across the smoking ruin of the diagnostiquorum as his priests set about righting toppled runebanks and clearing the bodies of their peers. The time had come. There was little wonder the Iron Warriors were pushing their advantage on the planet's surface. With a fleet of Dark Mechanicum reinforcements from Satzica Secundus arriving in-system, Idriss Krendl would move from a defensive disposition to an offensive one, letting his Iron Warriors off the leash. Torquora could expect movement on all fronts. With the Adeptus Mechanicus fleet caught between the warsmith and the colossal *Encoronada*, it was to be a slaughter.

'Tech-priest Captain…'

'My lord?'

'The gunfreighter *Onus* waits on the flight deck with a cargo, associated tech-priests and a heavily

armed escort, bound for the planet's surface.'

'Yes, archmagos.'

'I want you to authorise the launch of the *Onus*,' Omnid Torquora told him, 'and then announce a planet-wide recall. I want all skitarii cohorts, heavy materiel and craft off the surface and brought back to the fleet. Use my authorisations. Within two hours I want every one of our forces back on board their cruisers.'

'The Ordinatus weaponry and the Collegia Titanica god-machines will take longer than that, my lord,' Voltram told him.

'They don't have longer than that,' Torquora told him. 'Tell them to expedite their rituals and do whatever it takes to get their orbital barges loaded as soon as possible. Tell them two hours, tech-priest captain. In two hours this fleet breaks orbit and we're not coming back. Inform the other tech-priest captains.'

'My lord, is this a withdrawal?'

'Yes, captain,' Torquora admitted. 'But a tactical one. Sometimes you need not win the battle to win the war.'

'Yes, archmagos.'

'Torquora out.'

As the channel went dead, Torquora turned to find his priests pulling the Fulgurite stave from where it had been stabbed into the workings of Haldron-44 Stroika's back.

Within moments, Stroika's optics and targeter began to glow blue. Tracks began to move and the destroyer's turret with them as Stroika turned, his returning overlay static-laced and still blazing with targets. The monstrous plasma culverin mounted on his shoulder hummed dangerously to priming and the pilot flame returned to the nozzle of his underslung flamer. Turning three hundred and sixty degrees on his heavy-duty tracks, Stroika came to a stop before his tech-priest master – satisfied that all threats had been neutralised.

Preparing to enter phylactic communion, with the decimated runebanks and interface consoles of the diagnostiquorum all around, Torquora had his remaining priests jury-rig a connection that could reach the planet's surface. The archmagos looked to the silent destroyer and the corpses of the Luminen scattered about the chamber.

'Nothing gets through that door,' Omnid Torquora ordered, his priests moving about his armoured form with lines and cables. Haldron-44 Stroika gave the tech-priest an expression of blank obedience as the kataphron destroyer processed the order.

'Execute.'

0110

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+ENGINEER THE COLLISION+*

With priests working on the damage to the delicate phylactic instrumentation of the diagnostiquorum, Omnid Torquora tried to acquire Princeps Datric 31-Thermochron of the 4.7 Sigmus-Sicariax. The archmagos had assigned 31-Thermochron's killclade the responsibility of escorting the magos aethyricus, his priests and the Geller Device down to the forge world's surface. 31-Thermochron's orders were clear: protect the device at all costs and deliver it safely to its detonation site.

It was strange viewing the interior of the Mechanicus gunfreighter *Onus* through the bug-eyed optics of the Sicarian princeps. Like all of his kind, he was a step removed from other skitarii. Boasting the augmentations of a veritable cybernetic assassin, 31-Thermochron and his clade were cold and calculating even by the standards of the skitarii legions. Standing like a spindly statue in the cargo hold, 31-Thermochron scanned his ruststalkers, his systems running endless diagnostics and auditry in preparation for battle. While the magos aethyricus and his staff were strapped into wall-seats, the skitarii surrounded a tracked ark containing the precious Geller Device.

<Princeps, report to the cockpit,> Torquora ordered, as the gunfreighter rumbled through its descent.

Passing wired servitors who were set in the gunfreighter's weapons alcoves, 31-Thermochron headed for the cargo bay ladder. As the *Onus* lurched and trembled, the princeps reached out to steady himself on a hulking battle-automaton. For extra insurance, Torquora had assigned the mission a Kastelan robot maniple. With their carapace-mounted weaponry nearly scraping the ceiling of the compartment, the Kastelans were towering relics. As the princeps's chordclaw tapped against the plate of the automaton's fist, the robots' datasmith, Dynostrii, craned his head around suspiciously. With his helm optics extending, Dynostrii watched 31-Thermochron ascend the bay ladder before polishing the robot's great fist with the skirts of his robe.

The Sicarian ignored the datasmith and made his way up to the cockpit. As a Mechanicus armoured transport, ordinarily outfitted for ordnance drops and the conveyance of materiel too bulky for a lighter, the gunfreighter boasted a crew of two servitor-pilots and four interfaced gun-servitors. The

gunners manned multi-lasers and 31-Thermochron could see that they were going to need them. The descent was going to be a rocky one.

Through the princeps's optics, Torquora could see the twisted industriascape and cratered devastation of the forge world below. Like a swarm of disturbed flies, Dark Mechanicum craft crowded the skies. Freighters. Sky-claws. Barges. Gunships. Fighters. Atmospheric drones. The craft were black and bristling with spikes, like sea urchins. The cockpits of the vehicles glowed with the dread light of daemonic possession. Dark Mechanicum forces were on the move – as Torquora had suspected. The Iron Warriors had given orders to attack in a coordinated and decimating wave that would have smashed the Adeptus Mechanicus forces on the planet's surface. There were very few cohorts and contingents left there to attack, however.

As Torquora had commanded, skitarii soldiers had fallen back to extraction sites whence gunships, lighters and fat drop-ships were ferrying them back to their troop carriers stationed in low orbit. Despite the havoc of evacuating in a warzone, with beams and bolts blasting about them, the skitarii embarked with order and silent discipline. They demonstrated no desire to fight on or relief at leaving the murderous stalemate of the Traitor forge world. They simply carried out their orders and awaited new ones.

Skitarii sentinels attached to the Collegia Titanica and the Centurio Ordinatus, meanwhile, were holding back hordes of Dark Mechanicum constructs. The code-fevered thralls, bloated gun-servitors and daemon engines had descended upon the retreating skitarii while orbital barges attempted to load great war machines and the god-machines of the Legio Interfectra. With every moment that passed, the cybernetic soldiers bought time for their mighty charges.

While Adeptus Mechanicus transports blazed away from the planet's surface pursued by the daemon-infused craft of the Dark Mechanicum, every piece of orbital ordnance on Velchanos Magna hurled rancid beams, fat bolts and warp-fuelled missiles up at the sky. The *Onus* veered this way and that as the pilot-servitor and his co-pilot banked and spiralled through the havoc wearing sickly, rictus grins.

A sudden brilliance shone through the top of the canopy, prompting 31-Thermochron to peer up through his bug-eyed helm. The Adeptus Mechanicus arkcruiser *Logarita* had detonated over the equatorial ash wastes. Omnid Torquora felt the deck of the diagnostiquorum tremble as the shockwave knocked the *Maestrale* several degrees off station.

Idriss Krendl had wasted no time in manoeuvring his flotilla of Iron Warriors vessels and Dark Mechanicum cruisers. Torquora tried to view the unfolding events from the warsmith's dark perspective. For half a year, while battles had raged through the busy industriascape and across the wastelands of past destruction, the Adeptus Mechanicus fleet and the ships of the enemy had held station in low orbit. While supporting their respective armies with monstrous orbital bombardments and watching over key strategic sites, the two fleets had largely monitored one another from a distance, silent weapons batteries trained on one another. Such vessels were precious beyond calculation. Torquora's fleet boasted no access to shipyards in which to make repairs, while Krendl's docks and yards were constantly under attack. With the vessels taking many months to build, Krendl was loath to waste their potential. Beyond maintaining a blockade of the Traitor forge world and trying to break it respectively, both sides had largely avoided orbital engagements.

For Idriss Krendl, Torquora calculated, with reinforcements from Satzica Secundus entering the system and skitarii forces evacuating the surface, there had never been a better time to attack the

Adeptus Mechanicus fleet.

31-Thermochron watched as the *Logarita* turned into a raging hulk, trailing flame, disintegrating sections and flailing bodies. As it tumbled he could see an Iron Warriors battle-barge, the vessel Omnid Torquora knew to be Krendl's flagship – the *Forgebreaker*. The *Logarita* had attempted to engage the oncoming barge battery for battery but the Iron Warriors vessel had closed to suicidal range and delivered a devastating, point-blank broadside into the venerable arkcruiser.

In the skies about Velchanos Magna, 31-Thermochron could see similar engagements – the vessels of the Adeptus Mechanicus fleet attempting to simultaneously hold station, receive heavily-laden transports, and engage attacking strike cruisers, system ships and Dark Mechanicum defence monitors.

The *Onus* banked, forcing 31-Thermochron to steady himself once again. Below them a quad of tower emplacements that was part of a ruinous forge temple had opened to reveal a bank of orbital turbolasers. As the gunfreighter pulled up and lurched savagely to the right, a furious column of tainted light reached up from the surface. Levelling out, the gunfreighter gave its intended descent vector a wide berth as the emplacements seared las-beams into the troop carrier *Modulus* and the vessel returned fire from its meagre weaponry.

As the gunfreighter turned aside, it attracted the attention of something dark and predatory searing through the crowded skies. Noticing that it was descending while every other craft on the planet seemed to be rocketing for low orbit, a daemon engine smashed into the *Onus*. Collision alarms sounded in the cockpit, accompanied by flashing runescreens as the infernal fusion of daemon and aircraft tore the engine casing from the roof of the gunfreighter.

With the *Onus* thrown into a spin, the pilot-servitors hauled at their sticks, attempting to break out of the plunge at the same time as avoiding other craft, both skitarii and Traitor, as they surged for the sky.

With 31-Thermochron in the cockpit, Torquora could see the stuttering flash of multi-lasers as the craft's gun-servitors attempted to engage the machine predator. Casting its darkness through the skies, the armoured daemon manoeuvred with infernal grace through the rising traffic and ground-launched rockets and tracer fire. Spinning through the helical spray of slashing multi-laser beams, the daemon engine latched on to the gunfreighter with great hydraulic talons. Opening its machine maw, the engine revealed the proboscis-like barrel of a hidden weapon. Blasting warpflame over the roof of the gunfreighter and down across the canopy, the diabolical machine tried to tear the craft open with its talons. As the stream of fiery corruption cleared, 31-Thermochron could see that the *Onus* was heading straight for a Dark Mechanicum haulage brig. The servitor-pilots went to evade the oncoming craft.

<No,> Omnid Torquora said to the princeps. <Have them engineer the collision.>

'Hit it,' 31-Thermochron ordered, pointing his chordclaw at the brig and its spidery derricks. 'Brace for impact. Secure the cargo,' the princeps ordered across the gunfreighter's vox-channel.

Drifting back into the path of the craft, the *Onus* grazed the brig's swollen haulage container. The daemon engine was not so fortunate, smashing into the vessel. As the gunfreighter spiralled towards the surface the daemon engine screeched its fury, the thing's armoured wings tangled in the industrial hooks and chains draped from the brig's derrick.

<Correct your course,> Torquora ordered.

'Bring us back to the descent vector,' 31-Thermochron told the pilot-servitors, watching as the gunfreighter left the airspace of the forge world industriascape, with its temples, forges and twisted architecture. Below, the princeps could see gargantuan black holes in the planet's surface, the deep

core mining site that was their destination. About the gaping pits, 31-Thermochron analysed the abandoned skitarii trenchworks and captured artillery. The sky about the gunfreighter rocked with the blaze of exploding shells. Torquora couldn't believe it. The Dark Mechanicum thralls were using their own Earthshaker cannons against them.

<Don't let them fire the airbrakes,> Torquora warned the princeps, who relayed the order. <Maintain speed and descent vector. Aim for the main shaft.>

As the gunfreighter dropped out of the sky towards the deep core mine shafts of the Ortorqus Chasma, shells detonated about them. Rocking with the turbulence and rolling with the quakes, the pilot-servitors guided the *Onus* into alignment with the gaping blackness of the main shaft. As the forge world's surface rose up to meet them, the spatter of gunfire sparked off the gunfreighter's hull. Seconds later the *Onus* was descending through the starless oblivion of the deep core mine shaft.

'Lights,' 31-Thermochron ordered. As hull lamps flickered on, the princeps could see the rocky wall of the shaft stream by, replete with the rusted stairwells, companionways and scaffold elevator cars of the ancient mining works. Exhausted of its mineral bounty and with only satellite excavations still producing ore, it had been hundreds of years since the deep core shaft had known light in its depths.

Looking up through the canopy, 31-Thermochron noticed something in the darkness. The faint glimmer of landing lamps. They were not alone in their descent.

<Archmagos,> the princeps transmitted. <We are being followed.>

SELECTED: DENTRICA II OF II
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+DEEP CORE+*

The darkness seemed to stretch forever. As the gunfreighter *Onus* descended down the length of the rocky shaft wall, its lamps illuminated the different strata of exotic minerals that made up the forge world's mantle and its outer core. All the while, 31-Thermochron was conscious of their pursuers. Relying precious little on its landing thrusters, the *Onus* was literally plummeting towards the centre of the planet. Increasingly confident that a descending craft would not surpass such a speed in the darkness and danger of the shaft, the princeps's mind and cogitators fell to preparations for their enemy's arrival.

Unlike the pursuing craft, which could have little idea how close the bottom of the shaft lay, Omnid Torquora had despatched probes months before to gather the essential data. Torquora had the princeps check in with the magos aethyricus as to the status of the Geller Device and his ruststalkers. Already, the mission had changed. With enemy contingents in the mines, the Geller Device could not be primed and abandoned, as initially planned.

Omnid Torquora had had his priests construct a second aethyric bomb – many times more powerful than the first. In doing so and in adapting the sacrosanct technologies of the Omnissiah, he had already invited accusations of technoheresy. The tech-priest had made his peace with such realities, knowing that he would never again be able to set foot on the hallowed soil of a forge world. Then again, two forge worlds he never intended revisiting were Velchanos Magna and his own, Satzica Secundus. Their scourge had become his dark responsibility. He could not allow Idriss Krendl and his Iron Warriors to plunder their monstrous potential.

Constructing the Geller bomb and selecting the deepest place on the planet as its detonation site,

Torquora aimed to do what the Luminen could not conceive of doing. He would destroy both worlds together. The long-corrupted forge world of Velchanos Magna would suffer the explosive force of the Geller bomb first hand, taking as many hereteks and Traitors with it as Torquora could engineer. The destructive energies would travel back along the warp trails the Satzican reinforcement fleet had left in the immaterium, just as they had done with Torquora's own. This time, however, with the greater destructive capabilities of the second bomb, the archmagos hoped to bring forth from the warp a storm of such catastrophic intensity that his fallen home world would be blasted apart.

The Geller Device could not be abandoned, therefore, to be stopped by the enemy forces following them down into the bowels of the forge world. 31-Thermochron and the ruststalkers of the Sigmus-Sicariax understood this. As did the quiet Dynostrii, who along with the priests who had constructed the bomb, would see the wonder of its detonation first hand. Such considerations were beyond the gunfreighter's servitors and the Kastelan battle-automata.

31-Thermochron felt the landing thrusters fire and the *Onus* begin deceleration. As he arrived back in the cockpit, he could see that the gunfreighter was no longer in the shaft. The ship's lamps illuminated a wall of polyhedral crystals, growing from the rock of a colossal cavern.

Using the original probe's data, the servitor-pilots gently slowed the *Onus*, turning the gunfreighter to take in the glorious vision of the crystal pocket. As the beams criss-crossed the cavern bottom, the princeps could see that it was covered in a strange, undulating landscape, created by angular, crystalline shafts like smoky red quartz. Drifting the gunfreighter across the wonder of the deep core cavern, the pilot-servitors searched for a landing site.

'There.' 31-Thermochron pointed with his claw, indicating a crystal shelf near the pitch darkness of a drop-off. The shelf jutted out from beneath the peak of a mountainous pyramid of crystal columns, reaching up into the murk of the cavern.

The pilot-servitors brought the *Onus* around the crystal mountain. Extending the landing gears and firing the descent thrusters, they brought the gun-freighter down gently to the shelf. Climbing down the bay ladder, the princeps watched the cargo compartment door open on its hydraulics and crash down onto the crystal, shattering it.

Using the door as a ramp, 31-Thermochron advanced, flanked by ruststalkers of the Sigmus-Sicariax. The spindly cybernetic assassins carried transonic blades in their appendage cradles.

'Cut engines and kill lamps,' 31-Thermochron voxed to the servitor-pilots. Moments later the landing site was plunged into a comforting darkness. The princeps listened to the silence. His equalisers had never recorded such an absence of noise. 'Filters,' he ordered his Sicarians, his overlays cycling through his own. In the silky green of his nightvision, the landscape of crystal columns looked like an alien world or something imagined in a fevered dream.

Then he heard it. The distant boom of an engine. Their pursuers had arrived in the cavern. In the blackness, the princeps could make out the suggestion of light coming from a canopy and descent lamps.

With the trundle of tracks, the magos aethyricus and his priests led the itinerant ark out of the cargo bay.

'We should begin the rituals,' the magos said grimly. 'We can set the device up here.'

'No,' 31-Thermochron said. The priests glared at him. 'Beg your pardon, my lords, but as we circled I saw a natural hollow, a minute or two that way. You can begin your rituals there.'

'Why not here?' one of the priests demanded.

‘Because here is where we are going to welcome our guests,’ the princeps said. ‘And I want some distance between them and your wondrous creation. The hollow looks sheltered from this side, with no line of sight.’

Listening to the princeps and his reasoning, Omnid Torquora did not object.

‘As you wish,’ the magos aethyricus said finally, not knowing if the suggestion had come from the skitarii princeps or the archmagos himself.

<Ephrok, Zulton, Koda, Altris – go with them,> the princeps ordered, motioning four of his ruststalkers to accompany the priests and the Geller bomb. <Whatever happens, you are to defend the device and see that it fulfils its god-given purpose.>

As Ephrok-7 led the column of priests and the Geller bomb into the forest of crystal columns, the princeps looked up at the approaching glimmer of lamps. Even without lights giving their location away, the ship’s augurs would eventually find them. As the only living things down in the colossal cavern, they could hardly hide their life signs from auspex sweeps. He turned to address his skitarii and the datasmith, Dynostrii.

‘We don’t have much time,’ he said, his words a modulated hiss. ‘And we have to give the priests as much time as they need. Sicarians, I need you here, amongst these columns. Keep out of sight and attack only when I give the order.’

‘What of my maniple?’ the datasmith Dynostrii asked.

‘My lord datasmith, we shall need your robots further up the shelf – out of sight also, and ready for your protocols,’ 31-Thermochron said. ‘I require your assistance, however, aboard the gunfreighter.’

As the servants of the Omnissiah went about their grim preparations, Omnid Torquora moved between the cold consciousnesses of the Sicarian ruststalkers. Each as stoic as their princeps, the spindly skitarii waited with their backs to the crystal columns lining the expanse of the shelf. Through their filtered optics, Omnid Torquora watched the craft of their pursuers close in. Closer now, its engine made a monstrous din, and its tarnished hull was patched and riveted. As it swept in with search lamps, Torquora could see that it was an Iron Warriors Thunderhawk. After they reported the descent of the gunfreighter down the deep core shaft, Idriss Krendl had no doubt ordered the Obliteratii stationed there to pursue.

With the gunship’s augur array leading it and the search lamps confirming sight of the gunfreighter on the shelf, the Thunderhawk idled around, its weapons silent. As the craft put down further up the shelf and opened its bay doors, Torquora realised how much Idriss Krendl had understood of what had been seen through his assassin’s eyes. Krendl knew that Torquora was constructing a new bomb. The warsmith wasn’t stupid. Like the tech-priest, he had seen as much of a vulnerability in the deep core mine as Torquora had seen opportunity. With the possibility of a Geller bomb on board the gunfreighter, the Iron Warriors had been careful not to blast the craft to oblivion.

Watching the Thunderhawk through one set of night-filtered optics and then another, Torquora saw the hulking Obliteratii disembark their gunship. Both revelling in and suffering from their warp-born disease, the Iron Warriors were mutated monsters that had outgrown their plate. Small mountains of unnatural brawn, their faces were twisted masks of hate. Their arms, like the rest of their dread kind, bore the curse of fleshmetal – clubs and malformed claws, from which sprouted warped weaponry.

The Iron Warriors might have been monstrosities but centuries being warped to the will of dark powers had not dulled their skills. They were Space Marines. Sons of the primarch Perturabo, war ran in their blood. It was part of their genetic inheritance. As they trudged heavily across the crystal

shelf, their ancient eyes were everywhere. Though corrupted of flesh, the Iron Warriors had not lost their sense of who they had been. Their reflexes were swift for creatures of their size and their flesh-mangled weaponry was everywhere, checking every angle and opening.

From behind a crystal column, 31-Thermochron watched the Chaos Space Marines. Every second that he could buy the magos aethyricus was a precious one. With several of the Obliteratii standing about the Thunderhawk, three of their monstrous brothers approached the gunfreighter. As the princeps had calculated, their Thunderhawk's augurs had told them that there were life signs on board – and life signs had to be investigated.

As Torquora observed the Iron Warriors, they seemed to be cautious. Even with their unnatural bulk and the curse of their weaponry, they knew they were not immortal and had a keen sense for the tactically unsound. Fortunately for Torquora, in sending them after the Mechanicus vessel, their own warsmith had placed them in an impossible situation. The gunfreighter would have to be searched. Finally ascending the ramp, their warped weapons aimed into the darkness of the vessel, two of the Iron Warriors ventured inside. The third waited on the ramp, casting a permanent squint about the forest of crystal columns.

Listening in on the onboard vox, 31-Thermochron could hear the heavy steps of the Obliteratii and the scrape of their plate against compartment walls. He could hear the fleshy *thunk* of weapons priming and the preparatory spin of rotor cannon barrels. 31-Thermochron was ready.

<Archmagos?>

<Proceed, princeps,> Torquora told him.

'Go!' 31-Thermochron ordered over the vox, his voice echoing about the interior of the gunfreighter. The pilot-servitor pushed the chunky switch that stirred the freighter's fuel tanks.

As a tech-priest, Dynostrii had knowledge of a wide range of machinery. Although he had specialised as a member of the Legio Cybernetica, he had already spent a lifetime using his skills to maintain, rig and repair the sacred technologies of the Machine God. Such knowledge, if applied in reverse, could compromise, irreparably damage or even destroy the selfsame technologies. At the princeps's suggestion, he had spent precious moments aboard to engineer a catastrophic accident. Stirring the fuel tanks was the first stage in a chain reaction that moments later resulted in the gunfreighter's engines detonating.

The crystal shelf quaked as the destruction of the *Onus* briefly lit the colossal cavern and sent shrapnel and shattered parts pranging off crystal hundreds of metres away. There was furious shouting from the Iron Warriors standing about the Thunderhawk, the Chaos Space Marines turning and aiming their horrific weapons all around. The unfortunate Obliterator who had been standing on the gunfreighter ramp had lost most of his hideous hunch and had landed near the crystal columns, his diseased flesh on fire. Leaning his head back, he saw 31-Thermochron edge out from behind the column before he died.

'Now, datasmith…' the princeps voxed.

Smashing through the columns of crystal, Dynostrii's maniple of Kastelan robots lumbered with purpose out onto the shelf. Finding a target at last, the four Obliteratii out front were joined by a fifth grotesque Iron Warrior from within the Thunderhawk's troop bay. Their fleshmetal answered and their spawning weaponry opened fire. Closing on the wall of robotic ceramite charging towards them, the accuracy of the Iron Warriors was astounding, with sparks showering off both the Kastelans' refractor fields and carapace plating. Obeying the bio-plastek wafers sitting in their cranial wetware,

the battle-automata carried out their datasmith's sequence of instructions.

Unphased by the merciless gunfire of the Iron Warriors, the six Kastelan robots slammed their armoured shoulders into the side of the Thunderhawk. With such coordinated force levelled at the gunship, its landing gears slipped on the smooth surface of the shelf. Placing one crystal-shattering foot behind another, the Kastelan robots did as their doctrinal imperatives demanded. With the determination of Iron Warriors gunfire overwhelming their grid shielding and hammering off their metal hides, the maniple pushed the colossal weight of the Iron Warriors Thunderhawk towards the drop-off.

Inside the gunship, a Chaos Space Marine pilot tried desperately to fire the engines but it was too late. As the landing gears slipped from the crystal, the gunship toppled over, wing first, then the momentum dragging the rest of the Thunderhawk with it. The craft smashed down the side of the drop-off, shattering crystal and barrel-rolling into a tumble that tore off its wings. The derelict Thunderhawk, if it hadn't been classed as that before, now plummeted through the darkness, a crumpled wreck. Seconds later it was a rancid explosion, tearing back up the drop-off from the cavern floor below.

The Iron Warriors roared their fury and disbelief, spitting the curses of their daemon primarch. With multiple weapons spawned from each disgusting appendage, the Obliteratii became small tanks, firing everything they had at the robots. Turning, with sparks dancing off their chests, the ponderous metal giants engaged their supplementary imperatives. As they did so, fat las-beams and orbs of flesh-spawned plasma slammed into them, burning through ceramite and the solid metal below.

Being closest to the Chaos Space Marines when toppling the gunship, Two Beta-Brontarius soaked up the worst of the Iron Warriors' punishment. Faltering, the Kastelan went down on its knees, globes of plasma coring out its already demolished chest, before finally toppling forward and cracking the crystal with the impact of its heavy metal form.

Caring little about the plight of their compatriot unit, the robots of the maniple stomped on towards the Iron Warriors, their carapace-mounted incendine combustors blasting forth in unison, creating a wall of furious flame. As the Iron Warriors retreated, they riddled the firestorm with beams, bolts and bullets of their own.

<Sicarians, attack!> 31-Thermochron ordered.

Streaming out from between the crystal columns, the ruststalkers made a spindly sprint for the distracted Iron Warriors. Bringing the blur of their transonic blades to life, the skitarii trailed their weapons after them. Accelerating off powerful hydraulics mounted on the light frames of their unguligrade legs, the cybernetic soldiers slashed the Iron Warriors across their grotesque suit-bursting humps and thrust the shredding nightmare of their shivering blades into the Obliteratii's sides.

Turning the fury of their warp-spawned weaponry on the charging skitarii, the Iron Warriors managed to blast Ghertz 777-Telecon into shattered pieces. As the ruststalkers stabbed and slashed, knocking the fleshmetal of barrels aside and elegantly dodging the spasmodic blasts of spawned weaponry, the huge power gloves of the Kastelan robots reached through the evaporating curtain of flame.

Twice as tall as even the Obliteratii, the battle-automata reached out for the Iron Warriors. One managed to grab one of the mutant Space Marines, the powerful hydraulics behind its crackling glove pulverised his shoulder. As malformed bone splintered and warped, bloody flesh spilling out between thick metal digits, the Iron Warrior bellowed his rage. Seconds later, his head was spinning

off the edge of the crystal shelf as Seven Vardna-Rhondus detached it with the back of its power fist.

Batting the chunky outstretched gauntlets of the battle-automata aside with their own horrific limbs, the Chaos Space Marines instinctively assumed a defensive formation. Closing ranks, the Iron Warriors fought as one. Like a small citadel of ceramite and fortified flesh, they angled the grotesque barrels of their weapons over and between each other. Hammering the Kastelan robots with concentrated and almost continuous fire, the monsters slammed the light combat chassis of the skitarii back with their heft.

Cornered, the Iron Warriors were furious close combat fighters. Unlike the Kastelans, whose size and strength seemed to come at the protocol-processing expense of their reactions, the monstrous Obliteratii fought with frenzied speed and a trained warrior's precision. Ducking the ponderous path of crackling power fists, the Iron Warriors hit back. With each swing of their misshapen claws they fired sub-atomic blasts of energy from barrels set in the backs of their huge hands. Knocking the skitarii back, an Obliterator blazed a las-beam through the slender, armoured torsos of not just Ultro 14-Phanti but Xann-8 Regulon who was standing behind.

As another Kastelan crashed to the crystal floor, its armoured faceplate and the synthetic cortex behind it a bullet-mauled mess, Dynostrii appeared from behind a jutting crystal pillar. Running and sliding down onto the shelf floor beside his fallen charges, the datasmith fired a particle stream of deadly radiation from his gamma pistol up into the chest of the nearest Iron Warrior. As the Chaos Space Marine fell back dead, the datasmith slammed the pistol down on the smooth floor and fell to attending to his robots.

Carving ragged gashes through an Iron Warrior's exposed brawn with his transonic blade, 31-Thermochron had the bionic appendage holding the weapon blasted clean off by a hideous Obliterator. Experiencing the battle through the princeps's eyes, Omnid Torquora realised moments before 31-Thermochron that the Iron Warriors had worked around to put the Kastelan robots between them and the razor-sharp shelf edge. As the archmagos transmitted a warning to the skitarii officer, 31-Thermochron called out to the automata. It was too late however, as an Iron Warrior aimed his barrels at the crystal between them and blasted part of the shelf away. The weight of the three Kastelans did the rest.

'No!' Dynostrii yelled, his modulated cry echoing about the cavern with the gunfire.

Suddenly, the robots were gone, tumbling down the drop-off with gigantic shards of crystal cascading about them. 31-Thermochron went to look off the new cliff edge but had to step back out of the path of 6 Autal-Sentinox, who cannoned into the Iron Warrior that had done for its compatriot units, taking both him and itself over the edge.

With his reticule following them down, the princeps – and Omnid Torquora – came to realise that they had more significant problems. When the Thunderhawk had exploded at the bottom of the drop-off, the raging inferno lit up the crystal cavern with its glare. Only now did 31-Thermochron realise that the glare had never faded. Bubbling up from the core below was the molten iron of the Abystra-Dynomicron. The daemonic core had sensed the threat of the Geller Device and was now furiously filling the cavern, its sentient metal splashing up the crystal sides with otherworldly ire.

The princeps turned to find two of the remaining Iron Warriors had broken away, while the last of them had been intercepted by Inval 7-Statica. From the hollow, 31-Thermochron could see the blazing light of the Geller Device through the forest of crystal columns. With a sea of daemonic liquid iron filling the canyon and raging up the drop-off, and the Iron Warriors charging for the baroque bomb, the

princeps had no choice but to follow them.

'My lord datasmith,' the skitarii officer called, but Dynostrii was done. If he was to die, the tech-priest would die with his machines.

As Inval 7-Statica hacked the ghoulish spawn weaponry from the arms of the Iron Warrior with his blade, 31-Thermochron leapt on the monstrosity's hunched back. Latching the cracking talons of his chordclaw about the Iron Warrior's face, the princeps tore it off. As 31-Thermochron slipped off the Obliterator's back, Inval 7-Statica butted the Iron Warrior square in the skull, knocking the abomination to the ground.

'Go!' the princeps ordered, sending the spindly assassin off at speed towards the hollow. Turning, 31-Thermochron saw the molten iron crash over the edge of the crystal shelf like a wave. Claiming the datasmith and his Kastelan charges, the malevolence of the liquid iron washed up the crystal towards the princeps.

<The device, Thermochron,> Omnid Torquora said. <The device must realise its purpose…>

Running through the crowded crystal columns, the princeps heard gunfire and unearthly shrieks. As he reached the hollow he saw the bodies of the magos aethyricus and his priests, gunned down by the monstrous Iron Warriors. Also there were three of his Sicarians, their armoured heads blasted from their cybernetic bodies.

The Obliteratii were dead, however. Forced back by the expanding phase-field of the Geller Device, the warped Chaos Space Marines had felt the excruciation of the Machine God's purifying touch. As the expanding field enveloped the corrupted Iron Warriors, Inval 7-Statica had buried his transonic blades in the back of one. The second transfixed monster had obligingly fallen to his knees and had his throat slit by Pax-60 Kriode.

Standing in the expanding field of the Geller bomb, the two Sicarian ruststalkers placed themselves between the device and the molten iron raging from the daemon core. Their weapons were useless against such an enemy but they followed their archmagos's imperatives regardless.

<Just a few seconds more> Omnid Torquora prayed. <Omnissiah Incarnate – for the love of Your glorious workings, just a few seconds more…>

As the deluge of molten iron crashed up against the forest of crystal columns, it vaulted up into the open darkness like a scorching, infernal tsunami. Through 31-Thermochron's optics Torquora watched the glowing malevolence of the daemonic iron rain down towards them. Behind the skitarius he heard the Geller Device achieve supercritical actuality. In the princeps's final moments, the tech-priest felt the explosive force of scathing reality unleashed at the heart of the planet.

0111

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF I
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+THE GELLER EFFECT+*

‘Screen aft,’ Omnid Torquora said as he arrived on the command deck.

‘Screen aft, aye,’ Tech-priest Captain Voltram echoed, having the pict feeds from the rear of the arkcruiser brought up on the lancet screens.

The tech-priest stomped across the bridge in his armoured suit, shaking servitor-manned runebanks as he passed. In his wake followed his hench-unit, Haldron-44 Stroika. Eating up the deck with his tracks, the destroyer waited patiently for orders. The deck priests, transmechanics and servitors might have noticed the arrival of their master on the command deck but for the apocalyptic scene that afflicted the bridge lancet screens.

The aft pict feeds showed a world undone. Like the *Maestrale*, Adeptus Mechanicus cruisers and frigates had broken orbit and were blazing away from Velchanos Magna at full speed. Skitarii troop carriers, forge ships, Mechanicus arkfreighters and Collegia Titanica temple barges followed in their sub-light wake. Some were leaving orbit while others, like the giga-barges and arkfreighters, had barely left the planet’s surface with their Ordinatus war machines and Titans minutes before.

Torquora’s fleet was not the only one to be leaving. With the battle-barge *Forgebreaker* coming up behind and Iron Warriors strike cruisers and destroyers joining the capital ship, it seemed that Idriss Krendl had given the order to abandon the Traitor forge world. Torquora could only imagine the warsmith’s fury. A powerful and productive forge world taken, contested and lost.

The tech-priest took in the catastrophic spectacle of the dying world. The Geller Device had successfully detonated at the bottom of the Ortorqus Chasma deep core mines, close to the daemonic heart of the planet. At the test detonation of the original device, the Geller effect had spread rapidly through the warp storm of the Great Gyre, imposing the stability of a fortified reality on the area and driving back the rift of immaterial intrusion.

Torquora could only hypothesise that detonating the Geller bomb within the confines of a planet had delayed or contained the effect. Surveying the dreadful demise of Velchanos Magna, the archmagos

did not believe that such containment would last long. The planet was turning itself inside out.

Quakes and chasms were visible, even from the void. Huge swaths of the planet's surface – its twisted industriascape, its forge temples devoted to otherworldly entities and the cratered wastelands across which the servants of the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Dark Mechanicum had fought – were gone. At the core of the planet there was an elemental battle for supremacy, with the irresistible force of the Geller effect asserting its reality over the infernal presence of the mighty daemon. The entity had indeed been powerful but could not hope to survive the explosive intensity of an expanding bubble of reality opening up within its very core.

The seething, thrashing, hissing iron had raged up the walls of the great chasm that ran like a scar across the forge world's surface. Swallowing the shipyards whole, with vessels under construction and daemonships blessed in its name, the Abystra-Dynomicron broke its banks. Crashing across heretek forge temples, the mighty factory complexes and production centres, the daemon submerged the world that had worshipped it in a hellish flood of molten metal.

Unlike the Iron Warriors, the priests and corrupt constructs of the Dark Mechanicum – who had served the daemon as they served themselves – remained to become one with the apocalyptic deluge of liquid metal. They gathered in the freightways, about the forge temples and on the banks of the furnace channels that criss-crossed the planet. They waited for their literal baptism of fire. Iron returning to cursed iron. Hoping to be reborn in the aspect of some daemon engine – powerful, infernal and forever. They did not know their world was dying and they were to die with it.

As the arkcruiser *Maestrale* surged away from the fallen forge world, its Adeptus Mechanicus fleet blazing behind it, Velchanos Magna glowed the rancid yellow of molten iron. Its daemonic core had spewed out onto the surface of the planet, covering the forge world in an endless ocean of liquid metal. Then suddenly the raging, spitting fury of the molten iron stopped. Omnid Torquora watched as Velchanos Magna cooled in an instant, the furious radiance dimming to the dull grey of a solid metal surface.

'By all that is holy and true,' Tech-priest Captain Voltram said. 'Archmagos, what is happening?'

'The daemonic entity that possessed the heart of the forge world is banished,' Omnid Torquora said. As the tech-priest watched, glowing cracks began to rip through the iron shell of the planet's surface. Splits and rents worked their way across the planet, joining one another. The iron surface was shattering, like the shell of an egg.

'We may yet pay for our victory,' Torquora said, his mind and supercogitators whirling with equations, possibilities and probabilities. 'We'll never reach the Mandeville point.'

'My lord…' the tech-priest captain said.

Velchanos Magna glowed once more. The tessellated insanity of the crumbling metal surface blazed to intensity.

'Brace for impact,' Torquora said. 'Captain!'

Voltram opened a channel across all decks of the *Maestrale*, patching through to the trailing vessels of the Adeptus Mechanicus fleet.

'Brace for impact, I repeat, brace for impact!'

And then, the forge world exploded.

The aft pict feeds died and the bridge lancet screen sizzled with static before failing entirely. The blackness of the void intruded once more on the bridge, blindingly deep and dark after the infernal glare of Velchanos Magna.

Standing next to the pulpit rail, Torquora reached out with one of his suit's great hydraulic claws. As he locked it to the thick metal balustrade, the impact hit. The detonation of the bomb and the spreading intensity of the Geller effect would be denied no more. Thrown violently forward, Torquora smashed the clinker-plated hood of his suit on a nearby runebank, caving in the side of the instrumentation. A quake ripped through the arkcruiser, throwing every construct on board forward and back. The decks, walls and superstructure of the vessel trembled as the Geller shockwave passed through it.

As it began to die away, the tech-priest was thrown away from the rail and then back at it as something else hit the *Maestrale*. Not a blast wave, or an expanding bubble of reality finding violent realisation. Something had physically struck the ship.

With his hydraulic claw still anchored to the pulpit rail but the battered rail itself coming away in his grip, Omnid Torquora staggered across the rumbling command deck in his armoured suit.

'Stroika-unit?' the archmagos shouted, turning his suit about. He found that the destroyer had used his tracks to brace his armoured form between two consoles. Torquora looked around. 'Tech-priest Captain?'

Voltram didn't answer.

The command deck was bathed in the red of emergency lighting. Klaxons on different decks competed for shrieking supremacy. Banks and consoles were fountaining sparks while instrumentation had fallen from the bridge ceiling, hanging by wires and cables. Most of the runescreens were blank. Hololithic displays projected a miasma of static. The chamber was laced with an acrid smoke and small fires had broken out.

Surveying the ravaged command deck, Torquora found that many of the bridge servitors had been torn from their interface podiums. Deck priests stumbled amid the wreckage of their consoles and runebanks.

'Voltram,' Torquora called.

'Here, archmagos,' the tech-priest captain said, pulling himself up past his demolished throne and hobbling along what was left of the pulpit rail for support. He held the smashed and sparking bionics of a single arm to his chest.

'Deck priests,' Torquora said, 'to your stations. Status reports. We need to know how badly we're damaged.'

'Enginseers to the bridge!' the tech-priest captain called across the vox.

As the archmagos looked up at the bridge lancet windows, he saw colossal chunks of planetary rock drifting past the ship. Since the *Maestrale* had been maintaining maximum sub-light speed, Torquora reasoned, the giant fragments of rock must have been blasted through space even faster. The entire planet had detonated in one apocalyptic burst, sending pieces of the doomed forge world rocketing in all directions. The tech-priest calculated that it was most likely that the arkcruiser had been struck by such a piece of planetary debris.

That was until he saw what else was surging ahead of them. Tumbling through space along with the colossal fragments of Velchanos Magna were derelict vessels and demolished sections of ships that had been ripped apart. Examining the damage, the glowing hot metal of shattered decks, the trailing debris and bodies, it was difficult to say what had caused the ships' destruction. It could have been the blast wave of the Geller effect. The ships could have been struck by gigantic chunks of rock or by other vessels caught in the force of the detonating planet. It was entirely possible that the *Maestrale* had been hit by the mangled section of an Adeptus Mechanicus ship that was drifting past them now.

‘Tech-priest Captain Voltram,’ Torquora said across the smashed bridge. ‘Establish communications with the other vessels of the fleet.’ Looking back at the demolished section tumbling ahead of the *Maestrale*, it could have belonged to any of them.

The next few minutes were filled with doubt and confusion. Enginseers and maintenance servitors appeared on the bridge, working to get the runebanks and consoles on the command deck operational. Damage reports from the lower decks revealed that augur arrays had been knocked out by the Geller blast wave and the *Maestrale*’s starboard cannon batteries had been smashed by the colossal impact the arkcruiser had suffered. Sections of the vessel had lost pressure, atmosphere and gravity, forcing the priests present to lock off the evacuating sections – abandoning the crew trapped beyond. As cracked runescreens and hololithic displays returned, as well as the tactical overlays that warped and crackled over the lancet windows, data began to flood in.

‘What about the engines?’ Torquora demanded of Tech-priest Captain Voltram and the chief enginseer, who was on a vox-channel in the engineering section.

‘Minor damage to the sub-light engines, archmagos,’ Chief Enginseer Zertec crackled over the vox, his voice a harsh, metallic reverberation. ‘The warp drive will need tests and diagnostics to ascertain the degree of shockwave trauma.’

‘That’s not acceptable,’ Torquora told him. ‘This fleet needs to translate into the warp. Our very survival might depend upon it.’

‘My lord,’ Zertec said across the vox, ‘forgive me if I have not been clear. I am not stating that the warp engines are damaged. I’m saying we will only know the extent of any damage suffered upon their engagement.’

Stomping about the decimated command deck, with servitors and priests swarming about him and the shattered instrumentation, Torquora shook his head.

‘Have your priests begin their rituals, enginseer,’ the archmagos said. ‘The Navigator is working on the aethyrical solutions as we speak. Upon reaching the edge of the system, we will be engaging the warp drives, Omnissiah help us. We have no choice. Torquora out.’

‘I have collated the data you asked for,’ Tech-priest Captain Voltram said from his pulpit, snatching a length of vellum from a subordinate tech-priest.

‘Which vessels haven’t called in?’ Torquora demanded.

‘The forge tender *Dentric*,’ the tech-priest captain told him, ‘the temple barge *Ultimatum* – with the loss of three holy god-machines, the arkfreighter *Misericordia*, the arkcruiser *Omnissian Pride*, arkcruiser *Irradial*, the troop carrier *Adamantiq* and the *Deus Conduis* – I don’t know about the forge ship. At the very least, the tech-priest captain reports critical damage to her drives. I think we’re going to have to leave her behind.’

It was a horrific list of losses. Torquora looked up at the warping lancet screen overlays.

‘Aft screens,’ the archmagos ordered. ‘Anything the pict feeds can manage.’

As the screen crackled to a fuzzy vision of the destruction behind the fleeing *Maestrale*, Torquora saw that the forge world was gone. The Geller bomb had not just blasted some section of the planet into space. Velchanos Magna had been utterly blown apart, its legacy a lethal rock storm of tumbling boulders and ship-smashing fragments.

Behind the *Maestrale*, Torquora could see what remained of the Adeptus Mechanicus fleet, barely keeping pace with the flagship. Horrifically impact-scarred arkcruisers. Bulk freighters pushing their damaged engines to the limit. Frigates with shattered containment, trailing deadly energies and

irradiating their crews. Troop carriers limping on through the void.

And behind the remains of the fleet, Torquora could see the smashed Iron Warriors flotilla. While Space Marine vessels were built to withstand everything the galaxy could throw at them, the strike cruisers were ancient and the Iron Warriors had been closer to the planetary detonation. Torquora noted that the Chaos Space Marines had lost a number of their own vessels and were leaving the daemonships and the damaged craft of many of their twisted Dark Mechanicum allies to the wrath of the forge world's streaming debris.

Amongst the rusted belligerence of the Iron Warriors flotilla, Torquora watched the battle-barge *Forgebreaker* smash her way between two heavily armed Dark Mechanicum freighters. The ships were all ornamental spikes and monstrous, ill-fitting weaponry. Peeling away from the battle-barge, one ran afoul of a black Dark Mechanicum cruiser. The *Forgebreaker* actually struck the second, caving in the freighter's armoured flank as it barged its way to the front of the flotilla. The mighty hammer-shaped prow and shock-absorbing macro-hydraulics had already claimed their first victim – the *Misericordia*, whose wreckage still trailed from the battle-barge's mighty reinforced ram.

'She's gaining,' Tech-priest Captain Voltram told Torquora. 'She shouldn't be that fast. Especially considering her age. I don't know what those Iron Warriors have done with the engine column – perhaps something to give extra thrust to the ram – but she means to have us.'

'She'll catch us?'

'Well before the system's edge,' Voltram admitted grimly. He ordered the hololithic overlays changed to forward pict feeds. 'And then there's this,' the tech-priest captain said, increasing the magnification.

Torquora didn't need the ship's augurs to tell him what he was looking at. The Dark Mechanicum fleet from Satzica Secundus. Thirty tainted vessels carrying the corrupted constructs of Torquora's home world between the insanity of their decks. Presenting the cannon batteries of their starboard flanks, the Dark Mechanicum reinforcements were running down on the *Maestrale* and its rag-tag train of vessels, accelerating to cut the Adeptus Mechanicus ships off before they reached the Mandeville point. Out in front, Torquora could see the heretekal magnificence of the Ark Mechanicus *Encoronada*, the flagship a grotesquely augmented abomination.

'Archmagos, what are your orders?' the tech-priest captain put to him.

Torquora's withered lip curled into a snarl. As a priest of the Adeptus Mechanicus, he had long attempted to purge himself of superfluous sentiment and emotion. While the logic coils of his supercogitators and runebanks wrangled with the nightmarish predicament, he felt the hot grip of inevitability squeeze the heart that still beat beneath his ancient flesh. A fury ate away at him, burning to be acknowledged. He had destroyed the Abystra-Dynomicron that polluted Velchanos Magna with its presence. He had destroyed the Traitor forge world and its millions of corrupted denizens along with it. Like Idriss Krendl, however, he had paid for such victories. And, blazing up behind the *Maestrale*, the warsmith intended Torquora to pay the ultimate price.

While Omnid Torquora battled with emotions and drives of the flesh that his priesthood had long abandoned, the archmagos could not help but take some consolation in the fact that his enemy would be doing the same. Torquora imagined Idriss Krendl's bitter fury. Velchanos Magna, its armies of warped constructs and the incalculable worth of its dark industry, lost to the warsmith forever. Torquora could feel the Iron Warrior's desire for revenge in the cavalier handling of the ancient battle-barge and the blazing ire of the *Forgebreaker*'s engines, pushed beyond the sane extent of their

capabilities. Torquora knew that Idriss Krendl would stop at nothing to run down and destroy him and his fleet. That the warsmith and his Iron Warriors, who had plagued the galaxy for thousands of years, would hunt him down, destroy him and all true constructs that stood with him.

As Torquora contemplated Krendl, the warsmith out of his mind with rage and the cold desire for swift vengeance, the archmagos began to wonder how such a weakness might be exploited. With the thought helping to calm the thud of his own heart in his wizened chest, Torquora answered the tech-priest captain's question.

'We will look to our allies,' the tech-priest told him.

'Our allies, my lord?'

'Those among our enemies that we can count upon,' Torquora said, 'to be predictable and consistent. Something that we ourselves shall not be. Contact the ship's Navigator. Have him transmit his aethyrical solutions and the location of our rendezvous to the rest of the fleet. The tech-priest captains will need that information now, since we won't be with them to provide it.'

'We won't, archmagos?' Voltram asked carefully.

'Calm yourself, captain,' Torquora said. 'I do not intend to take the *Maestrale* on a suicide run.'

'I think I speak for all servants of the Omnissiah on this ship when I tell you that is a relief, sir.'

'I only want it to appear that way,' Torquora told him. Before the tech-priest captain had time to process what he was saying, the archmagos asked, 'Status report: what is our offensive disposition?'

'Of our principal weaponry, the prow nova cannon awaits your orders,' Voltram said. 'The macrocannons of the portside battery are primed and ready to engage. The starboard battery is inoperative, with only the forward sections even able to fire.'

Torquora nodded his cadaverous head inside the folds of his hood, his optics a pair of furious red dots burning within.

'Shielding?'

'Void shields currently operating at sixty-three per cent,' the tech-priest captain informed him, 'although I cannot guarantee how long that will last. Enginseers report shield generator integrity as fragile.'

Torquora wasn't surprised. The arkcruiser's shielding had ultimately saved the lives of those on board, but the planetary detonation and blast wave had taken their toll nonetheless.

'Force disposition?'

'That data is still coming from the lower decks,' Voltram admitted. 'Medicae and maintenance sections report large numbers of damaged and injured.'

'Best estimate?' Torquora pressed.

'The ship's complement of skitarii sentinels and boarding servitors, down twenty per cent,' the tech-priest captain said. 'Plus the manifest records battle-automata of the Krondyne Zeta Second, Third and Eighth Maniples, and a skitarii cohort evacuated from the forge world surface – the Oriak Scintillians IV Column, under the command of Primus Vintegar-4 Phobal. There are, of course, two to three hundred priests who could abandon their stations and take up arms in the name of the Omnissiah.'

'Have our forces assembled, ready to repel borders on the starboard gun decks,' Torquora said.

'What about the port batteries?' the tech-priest captain asked.

'Deck priests and servitor crews only,' the archmagos said. 'We shall only be engaging with our port batteries, not fighting there. Any sane captain would try to board from the poorly protected flank

without fear of a broadside waiting for them. It's a veritable invitation.'

'Invitation, my lord?' Voltram said.

'The Iron Warriors will board this vessel, have no doubt of that, captain,' Torquora said.

'Not if I can help it, sir.'

'Where and when that happens,' Torquora told him, 'is about the only thing we get to decide. Inform the other captains that we will be breaking off from the fleet.'

'How do you know the Iron Warriors will follow us?' Voltram asked.

'They'll follow us,' Torquora assured him, thinking of Idriss Krendl snarling on the bridge of the monstrous battle-barge. 'We'll give them no choice. Once we change course, have the tech-priest captains make a run for the Mandeville point. They are not to assist us. They are not to wait for us. The fleet needs to translate into the warp as soon as possible. Make sure they understand.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Now,' Omnid Torquora said. 'The Iron Warriors led us into a trap in building and testing the Geller Device. Let's see if we can't entice our enemies and spring a trap of our own.'

1000

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF I
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+NECESSITY BEGETS INVENTION+*

With Velchanos Magna gone, the system was the haunt of green gas giants and rocky outliers. As the *Maestrale* banked, taking a new course around the bulging belt of the system's largest planet, the rest of the ragtag fleet of Adeptus Mechanicus vessels held their trajectory, negotiating the disruption of the gas giant's minor ring system and body of icy moons. While the giant seemed plain and serene from a distance, storms of hundreds of kilometres an hour raged in the green maelstrom below. Flashes streaked across the surface of the gas giant, as rocketing planetary fragments the size of spacecraft tumbled in the green monster's gravitational embrace.

As the *Forgebreaker* maintained the incredible sub-light demands of ramming speed and holding course, tense minutes passed. Torquora held his breath and counted. His optic overlays danced with headings, trajectories, times and distances.

'And… now, Captain Voltram,' the archmagos said.

'Cut power to engines,' Voltram ordered. 'Fire braking thrusters, quarter burn.'

Suddenly the blaze of the arkcruiser's engines died – a sign that was not lost on the Iron Warriors aboard the *Forgebreaker*. The *Maestrale* drifted and slowed while the battle-barge thundered on, showing no such signs of decreasing speed.

'She's coming around,' Torquora said, watching the battle-barge pitch into a turn, following the Adeptus Mechanicus vessel around the gas giant. With any good fortune, Torquora hoped, the flotilla of Iron Warriors vessels would follow them.

'She's going to try to ram us,' Voltram said, watching the Iron Warriors battle-barge grow in size on the aft screens.

'Come on, come on…' Torquora mumbled to himself, his overlays sizzling with diagrammatical data and spooling equations. For an age it seemed as though the arkcruiser wasn't going to stop at all. The *Forgebreaker* surged on like a juggernaut, its hammer prow filling the aft screen.

'Archmagos…'

‘Not yet,’ Torquora said, his supercogitator scrolling a cascade of numbers down before his eyes. Too soon and Krendl would have time to correct his course. Too late, as the tech-priest captain feared, and it would break the arkcruiser in two. ‘Not yet…’

‘My lord, we must–’

‘Braking thrusters, full burn,’ Torquora ordered.

The *Maestrale*’s thrusters, usually only employed for braking and docking manoeuvres, flared. The arkcruiser was huge, but at a standstill in the blackness of space, the thrusters began to gain traction.

The bridge collision alarms began to ring once more. Hoping against hope that his calculations were accurate, Torquora could only wait as the colossal battle-barge surged up the side of the arkcruiser. With the thrusters at full burn, the Adeptus Mechanicus ship edged backwards with glacial speed, drifting with inertial silkiness out of the ramming path of the *Forgebreaker*.

‘Prepare for collision,’ Torquora said.

The tech-priest captain’s voice crackled across the arkcruiser’s decks: ‘All hands, prepare for collision.’

As the Iron Warriors realised that they had missed their slowly reversing target, they fired, braking thrusters of their own. It was too late, however. The *Forgebreaker* was going too fast. In preparation for the ramming action, the Obliteratii cult serfs, servitors and automata making up the gun crews were unprepared and missed their opportunity to fire on the arkcruiser. Since he had engineered his own opportunity, however, Torquora certainly wasn’t going to miss it.

As the hammerhead ram of the *Forgebreaker* clipped the prow of the reversing *Maestrale*, deck priests and servitors were thrown to one side. The glancing strike smashed the baroque ornamentation of the prow, shattering the superstructure and deck braces at the arkcruiser’s bow. Torquora felt the impact buck through the vessel. Like the deck priests and servitors, he was dragged to one side, the great metal boots of his armoured suit sliding across the deck as he steadied himself with a hydraulic claw.

The angles shortened and the digits marking distance on Torquora’s overlays dropped. With the prow batted around by the oncoming force of the battle-barge, the arkcruiser’s portside cannon batteries were thrown towards the side of the *Forgebreaker*. Torquora’s overlays flashed with urgency.

‘As one,’ Torquora said. The tech-priest captain nodded.

‘Portside gun decks,’ Voltram voxed across the ship. ‘Fire!’

Torquora felt the *Maestrale* quake with the synchronised blast of macrocannon. Explosive cannon fire ripped through the side of the battle-barge at point-blank range. More collision alarms sounded across the command deck as the *Maestrale* and the *Forgebreaker* almost smashed into one another. With the force of the broadside pushing the arkcruiser away and the impact on the prow still turning her away from the battle-barge, the *Maestrale* fell clear.

The Iron Warriors battle-barge surged on, the momentum of its ramming run carrying it at speed towards the green gas giant. Its starboard gun batteries were a devastated mess of mangled architecture and internal explosions still ripping through the decks. Trailing debris and the obliterated bodies of gun crews, the *Forgebreaker* initiated a full burn of its own braking thrusters.

Riding out the turn, the *Maestrale*’s prow came around and the arkcruiser found itself facing the oncoming flotilla of Iron Warriors vessels. While some of the Chaos Space Marine craft had been intent on running down the fleeing Adeptus Mechanicus fleet, now they turned to support their

warsmith.

'Nova cannon,' Torquora ordered, 'as you bear.'

'Prow crews, prime gravimetrics,' the tech-priest captain voxed. 'Fire cannon.'

Torquora watched the blazing shell stream away from the *Maestrale* heading straight for the Iron Warriors' lead strike cruiser, an ancient vessel of fortified plating and architectural crenellations. Moments after the arkcruiser fired, the strike cruiser did likewise, its colossal bombardment cannon blasting a magma bomb in return.

'Intensify forward void shields,' Torquora ordered.

As the nova warhead hit the strike cruiser's shielding, the vessel was enveloped in a crackling plasma storm. The furious detonation reached about the front of the craft, sending shockwaves through the cruiser's void shields. As the blazing explosion faded, the ship's defensive fields collapsed.

'Brace!' Torquora said, with Voltram echoing the order across the vox-channels.

As the magma bomb hit the *Maestrale*, a pulse ran through the void shields. The void was bleached to an infernal brilliance as the explosion ravaged the defensive fields.

'Void shield integrity at forty-two per cent,' a deck priest announced. 'Twenty-seven per cent… Eleven per cent.'

As the void shields failed, the last gasp of the magma bomb's raging destruction washed over the *Maestrale*'s prow, scorching hull plating and melting vane-sensors. Torquora was still running numbers and flashing trajectories across his overlays. For the tech-priest the battle would be won and lost with numbers – not fury.

'Sub-light engines, full power,' Torquora said. 'Everything this venerable vessel can give us.'

With her prow still coming around, the *Maestrale*'s blinding engines fired.

'Portside cannon batteries, prime your weapons,' Torquora ordered. As the macrocannon-bristling flank of the arkcruiser drifted to presentation, squat Iron Warriors escorts fired torpedoes at the Adeptus Mechanicus vessel.

With his overlays plotting the course of the torpedoes, Torquora stepped towards the lancet windows.

'They're going to miss,' the tech-priest announced confidently. He turned his great suit around to regard Voltram, who was standing at his half-demolished pulpit rail. 'As long as we maintain our speed.' Voltram nodded. 'Tech-priest Captain,' Torquora told him. 'You may order your gun crews to fire as they bear.'

One by one the macrocannons of the portside batteries blasted shots at the oncoming Iron Warriors destroyers. Several flashed off the vessels' shielding, creating ripples in their defensive fields. One shot smashed into the unshielded side of the leading strike cruiser, mauling the craft's ancient hull plating. Most of the cannon blasts found nothing but the blackness of the void, but they had at least thrown the flotilla into confusion. Obliteratii captains ordered course changes this way and that – some to follow their flagship, others to run down the fleeing Adeptus Mechanicus fleet, while others still employed evasive manoeuvres to prevent their vessels cruising straight into the *Maestrale*'s waiting broadside.

'Archmagos?' Tech-priest Captain Voltram said.

'Make for the Mandeville point,' Torquora replied. 'Best possible speed.'

As time slipped away, the arkcruiser raced through the black silkiness of space. The Mandeville point on the system edge had never seemed so far. The bridge fell silent, nobody needing or wishing

to speak for a while. The distant rumble of the *Maestrale*'s mighty sub-light engines felt like a comfort, as though the blazing columns spoke the word of the Omnissiah in their raging thunder.

Coming around the gas giant, the *Maestrale* negotiated the planet's crowded system of icy moons. The Iron Warriors flotilla had rallied and were now running down on the arkcruiser with some semblance of seething discipline. Their manoeuvres had cost them, however, and beyond the optimistic launch of a torpedo, Torquora was confident that the *Maestrale* could now outrun them.

What concerned the archmagos more was the Dark Mechanicum fleet from Satzica Secundus. Holding on the edge of the system, undoubtedly as Idriss Krendl had ordered, the Ark Mechanicus *Encoronada* was on the move, attempting to cut off the escaping Adeptus Mechanicus ships. From Torquora's calculations, it was going to be close. Once at the Mandeville point, the vessels could engage their warp engines and flee the system. Before that, though, the procession of rancid ships and twisted baroque behemoths presented a wall of cannons that they intended on putting between the Adeptus Mechanicus and the freedom of the warp.

'She's back,' Tech-priest Captain Voltram announced.

The lancet screens showed the blazing trail of a warship surging around the green gas giant. With the intense friction of the manoeuvre wreathing the battle-barge in flames, the *Forgebreaker* streaked around the colossal planet, using the gravitational pull of the giant to slingshot out towards the system rim with the extra speed required to catch the *Maestrale*.

Torquora nodded to himself.

'Necessity begets invention,' he told Voltram.

'They have us?' the tech-priest captain asked.

'They have us,' the archmagos confirmed, his overlays extending the *Forgebreaker*'s course at present speed. 'But at least they have us on our starboard side. Vox Primus Phobal: tell him that a boarding action is imminent and to ready our resistance.'

'Yes, my lord. Would you like me to initiate evasive manoeuvres?'

Torquora looked from the searing progress of the Iron Warriors battle-barge, rounding the planet like a fireball, to the distant fleet of Dark Mechanicum cruisers attempting to cut the remains of the Adeptus Mechanicus off. His supercogitator hummed with the possibilities.

'No,' Torquora said. 'Correct course, point zero, zero, two. Maintain orientation.'

'That takes us towards the enemy battle-barge,' Voltram warned.

'But away from the *Encoronada*,' the tech-priest said. 'I don't much relish the idea of falling under the mighty guns of an Ark Mechanicus. I wager our chances of survival would be better running down on some of the smaller cruisers further down the line.'

'And the battle-barge, my lord?'

'We're going to grapple it,' Torquora said.

'We're going to board the enemy vessel, my lord?'

'Praise the Omnissiah, no,' Torquora said. 'That would be suicide. They're Iron Warriors. We're going to grapple with the battle-barge and let the Iron Warriors board – which is what they are going to attempt anyway. Let's not disillusion them.'

'My lord?'

Torquora turned his armoured suit around.

'Captain Voltram,' the tech-priest said, approaching the pulpit. 'The only way this ship is going to make it through the Dark Mechanicum blockade is grappled to an enemy ship. Ensnared with the Iron

Warriors, the Dark Mechanicum fleet won't be able to fire on us without hitting their new allies – and I don't think that they are going to do that.'

The tech-priest captain nodded his hood in silent agreement.

'Captain Voltram, the bridge is yours,' Omnid Torquora said. 'Keep your vox-channels open. If you need me, I'll be on the starboard gun deck with Primus Phobal and his men.'

'Wouldn't you rather remain here on the command deck, archmagos?' Voltram asked.

Taking thudding steps towards the bridge elevators in his armoured suit, Torquora paused to consider the captain's question. 'No. We'll buy you as much time as we can. As soon as you reach the Mandeville point, have the Navigator input the aethyric solutions and translate into the warp.'

'Yes, archmagos,' Tech-priest Captain Voltram said.

Torquora looked at the monstrous machine form of Haldron-44 Stroika waiting nearby, his tracks and heavy weaponry at the ready.

'Stroika-unit,' Torquora said. 'With me.'

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SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF III
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+HONOUR YOUR IRON+*

As Omnid Torquora and Haldron-44 Stroika made their way down the passageways of the arkcruiser, the destroyer's heavy tracks chewing up the decking and the tech-priest's steps a punctuating boom, the boarding klaxons went off. With the shrieking alarms and the sodium lamps flashing the vessel's state of emergency, Torquora's vox-channel crackled to life.

'The battle-barge is drawing level, my lord,' Tech-priest Captain Voltram told him. The tech-priest found it within himself to feel sympathy for the captain. Up on the command deck, with pict-streamed views of the closing *Forgebreaker*, the atmosphere would be tense. The hammerhead prow drawing closer, metre by agonising metre. The tarnished expanse of rivets and plating. The gaping batteries of cannons.

'She's engaged her tractor fields and magnetic locks,' Voltram informed him.

'Engage ours,' Torquora said. 'Any power signatures from their cannonry?'

'None, my lord.'

'Then they certainly mean to board us,' the archmagos said. 'They are the Iron Warriors. They were famed siegemasters, even before their fall to darkness.'

'Well, from here, it appears they certainly aim to lay siege to this ship,' Voltram said.

'What about the fleet?' Torquora asked.

'All of our vessels are clear of the system,' the tech-priest captain informed him. 'The last of them is translating to the warp as we speak.'

'Praise the Omnissiah,' Torquora said.

'Aye,' Voltram replied. 'Thricefold. We can only hope He shines a little of His light on the darkness facing us. We're running up on the Dark Mechanicum fleet's line of battle… With no void shields.'

'No shields?'

'The chief enginseer and his diagnostic conclave are still working on it, archmagos.'

'It won't matter,' the tech-priest told Voltram. 'The Satzican priests will not open fire on the Iron

Warriors – not in the heat of battle where intentions and allegiances can be misunderstood. That's why we have to keep them close.'

'They're certainly close,' Voltram assured him. 'It looks like they're preparing boarding torpedoes – and just about everything else they can throw at us.'

'We'll be ready for them.'

'Engaging tractor fields and magnetic locks now,' Voltram said.

'Torquora out.'

Stomping out on the cavernous length of the starboard gun deck, Omnid Torquora took in the scene. The hull and port enclosures were a mangled mess of twisted plating and collision damage from where the *Maestrale* had been struck. The phase fields, at least, seemed to be holding, maintaining pressure, temperature, atmosphere and gravity on the gun decks. Without the crackling energy screens, the great macrocannons sat in their recoil railings could not run out and fire without compromising the integrity of the ship. The cannons sat amongst mangled rails and shattered decking where the collision had torn along the starboard side of the arkcruiser, decimating the cannon batteries.

The expanse of the long gun deck was still covered with fat power cables, powerlifters and ordnance-hauling tractors. The deck priests and servitor gun crews were amongst the sea of constructs assembled there. Standing on the giant ruin of a mangled macrocannon was Alpha Primus Vintegar-4 Phobal. The skitarii officer stood in his battered war-plate and cog-plumed helm, the air about him almost shimmering and sizzling with radiation from Phobal's long service with cohorts of skitarii vanguard. His rad-censer crackled furiously as he spoke, overlaying his modulated voice with a background static.

Sub-alphas stood about him, their gauntlets resting on the radium pistols in their belt holsters. At the foot of the smashed cannon, officers of the ship-bound skitarii sentinels took their place also. Sacrificing overall command to the alpha primus, who would lead the defence against the boarding action, their sentinels mixed with cybernetic soldiers of Phobal's own Oriak Scintillians – a veteran construct-cohort that had seen a half a year's worth of action against the enemy on the surface of Velchanos Magna. Their numbers were made up of battle-scarred vanguard veterans, rifle-toting rangers and spindly Sicarians.

Magi reductor and senior deck priests hovered nearby in their robes and optic-lit hoods, lending the primus unspoken authority among their own combat-servitors and drafted deck crews. Towering above the small army were ballistarii gunners, mounted on servitor-interfaced Ironstrider engines, and Kastelan battle-automata of the Krondyne Zeta standing silently with their datasmiths.

As the skitarii parted to admit the deck-thumping arrival of Omnid Torquora, with Stroika his track-trundling shadow, the tech-priest saw the monstrous *Forgebreaker*. Through the sizzling phase-field screens of the gun deck, the Chaos Space Marine battle-barge loomed. Drawing closer. Gun deck to gun deck.

Enhancing focus with his optics and his overlays pict-magnifying the terrible vision, Torquora could just make out the monstrous assembly taking place opposite. Legionary thrall-serfs. Grotesquely corrupted servitors. Daemon engines. Monstrously-augmented cybernetic shock troops and possessed battle-automata. All of the dread constructs and twisted bionic blessings the Dark Mechanicum hereteks of Velchanos Magna could provide. Moving through the machine madness and code-shrieking corruption were the hulking forms of the Iron Warriors. Their embedded plate, the curse of their fleshmetal and their obscene weaponry made them appear like warp-crafted Dreadnoughts or

tanks.

<Archmagos,> Primus Phobal said, breaking off from his instructions. <You honour us with your presence but surely your place is on the bridge with the captain. There is no construct here who would not rather lay down his life and sacrifice the sanctity of his augmentation than see an archmagos of the Adeptus Mechanicus come to harm at the hands of an enemy of Mars.>

Torquora bowed his head within his hood, dimming his optics in respect. He turned the towering breadth of his armoured suit around to address the small army of skitarii, servitors and priests gathered on the gun deck.

'It is you that honour me,' the tech-priest told them. 'With your words, your thoughts and deeds. With every cog, servo and piston. With every beat of your indomitable hearts and every drop of precious blood.'

He knew that the servants of the Omnissiah did not require speeches. They had imperatives, protocols and canticles. They were part of the great Martian machine, extending through the galaxy. An automated empire. A civilisation cybernetic. And yet, as well as living technological wonders driven on by the spark of the Motive Force, they were also men. Somewhere beneath their augmentation and bionic gifts, they were all beings of flesh: mortal, fallible and flawed. While the iron of their workings might endure without reason, without question – it was the flesh that responded to inspiration. As a priest of the Adeptus Mechanicus, he spoke the word of the Machine God. Power ran through their automotive systems and data through their processors. The least Torquora thought he could do was put fire in their bellies and hope in the hearts of men who had sacrificed so much of their flesh already for the Great Maker.

'I have experienced the wars of the Omnissiah through your discipline, your endurance and the final moments of your lives,' Torquora said. 'It has been a privilege to have been the Machine God's emissary – to have been the conduit through which construct and Maker could meet. To have been the answer to your questions and the question to your answers.

'I have done this from this very vessel, while the Machine God's servants found service in sacrifice and battles won and lost. Now war has come to this hallowed ship. The consecrated iron of one of the Omnissiah's technological wonders. I will not – I *cannot* – fight this battle through the perils, the deeds and the workings of another. I make this stand with you – side by side with you – with my own flesh and blessings of the Great Maker to lose.

'Traitors come to claim our iron. The iron that flows red through our veins. That lends our limbs and weapons strength. That forms the plate that protects us from bolt, beam and the hostile void. Blessed iron that sits pure in the rock and dirt of forge worlds we call our own. They call themselves the Warriors of Iron but they know nothing of its true value. We celebrate iron as a medium through which man and god might become one. It is holy. It is the Omnissiah's strength, taken into our bodies. Where we break, iron makes us whole. Iron makes us *more*. We fuse iron to our flesh in the sacred act of interface, so that we might someday transcend the frailties of mortality and serve the Machine God beyond our years. Through iron we become part of forever.

'The abominate wretches that come for us serve no one but themselves. They are hereteks and monsters. Engineered angels who have sold their souls to bidders from the beyond. To the untrue and aberrant entities of the warp, whose prophets twisted them with lies longed for by the heart and for which their ears were ready. Brutes who live to indulge their appetites, who war without reason and live for death alone. They honour only what iron can do for them. They enslave it to their purpose and

consider themselves its master. In their state of degenerate corruption they have turned their grotesque bodies into forges no less heretekal than those we have destroyed in the Machine God's name. Temples warped of purpose. Flesh from which proceeds an iron unholy and untrue. Weapons without spirit. An affliction from which we shall release them, granting death to those who come here in search of it.

'So this is what your Maker asks of you. To endure. To honour your iron. To punish those who pervert the purity of its purpose. To end all that is not part of the Machine God's great design. I will stand with you. Fight with you. Die with you, if necessary, to see the blessed Omnissiah's will be done. I ask you to do the same.'

Omnid Torquora looked to Vintegar-4 Phobal. The skitarii primus nodded his helm in a slow and meaningful acknowledgement. There would be no cheers. There would be no clapping or shooting in jubilation. It was not the way of the Machine God's servants. The Motive Force flowed through their workings. Now it flowed through their flesh, their hearts and their minds.

'Positions, my comrades.'

The crowd of skitarii, servitors and priests dispersed in silence. There was an electricity in the air. Something that could not have proceeded from the issuing of imperatives or the passing of protocols. The forge-pledged, the cybernetic and those of flesh and iron needed to feel the presence of the divine. They needed to know that the Machine God was with them. Not as some abstract concept or avatar but there, on the deck, fighting side by side with His chosen constructs – for if that were true, how could they possibly lose?

SELECTED: DENTRICA II OF III
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… +REPEL BOARDERS+

The *Forgebreaker* closed with the arkcruiser *Maestrale*. Tractor fields and powerful magnetic locks fired by both vessels drew the two colossal ships together in a deathly embrace. The silence and stillness of the *Maestrale*'s gun deck was unsettling, even for a construct like Omnid Torquora.

With every second the entangled vessels ploughed on towards the system's edge. The boundary that would mean annihilation or survival for the tech-priest and the Adeptus Mechanicus arkcruiser, for there waited the warships of their home world – tainted constructs they had once called forge-kin. Beyond the Dark Mechanicum line of battle, a cordon through which Idriss Krendl had commanded no escape, lay the freedom of the warp.

The Iron Warriors warsmith had wanted to be the one to run the *Maestrale* down. To bring down the Adeptus Mechanicus arkcruiser, not with fire and the fury of cannons, but face to face. The Iron Warriors were bitter, twisted monsters for whom grudges were the unbreakable oaths of their black souls. Haldron-44 Stroika had stood between Idriss Krendl and the forge world he desired to make his own. For that he had suffered unimaginable torments as the Iron Warriors' prisoner, their victim and then their puppet. Omnid Torquora was sure that Krendl planned the same or worse for him – the construct who had stripped the warsmith of his forge world and the future victories that it would have guaranteed.

<Incoming,> Vintegar-4 Phobal informed his troops. <Assume cover. Isolate and destroy.>

The *Forgebreaker* had blasted a broadside of boarding torpedoes at the arkcruiser's starboard side.

The line of tarnished torpedoes broke away from the battle-barge – brute, snub-nosed capsules that appeared like stub-gun slugs. They made short work of the frozen void in between the two vessels. Within the space of a blink the torpedoes had breached the silky static of the phase-field screens and smashed into the already mangled architecture of the arkcruiser's starboard flank.

Unlike the ship-to-ship torpedoes fired by destroyers and escort vessels, there were no detonations – only destruction. One moment the gun deck was an area of discipline and calm with skitarii soldiers taking cover behind shattered wall sections, crates and machinery. The next it was havoc. The boarding torpedoes hit the gun deck with the blunt force of a metal tsunami. Powerlifters and automaton-loaders were smashed to raining frag. Crates and unprimed ordnance went flying before clattering down onto the deck. Macrocannons were demolished on their rails, with some being torn from their mountings and sent crashing back across the deck. Heavy duty cabling was torn up out of the deck and pulpits smashed aside. The flesh and bionic body parts of cybernetic soldiers rained about the deck while hastily established gun emplacements were crushed into mangled ruin.

Alarms shrieked across the section, indicating a phase-field breach, while the length of the gun-deck rear wall became as buckled and smashed as the damaged hull of the arkcruiser's exterior. As the smoke cleared and skitarii soldiers reassumed cover and angles on boarding torpedoes, a ringing silence descended once more.

Torpedoes were everywhere. Some sat embedded in the thick metal of walls and in demolished expanses of dark metal stairs. Others had ripped up decking, shearing their way through plate and mesh before coming to rest half buried in wreckage. Boarding torpedoes sat battered and buckled on the deck where they had bounced off the arkcruiser's superstructure. The reinforced noses of some were splattered with blood and oil. Others were caved in entirely like a bullet recovered from a wall.

Omnid Torquora reared to full height in his armoured suit, a small mound of wreckage falling away from his imposing form. A torpedo had sailed over his clinker-plate hood and smashed through one of the many giant deck claws set in hydraulics that hung from the ceiling. The demolished workings of the claw had rained down on Torquora, while the torpedo smashed through the wall of the starboard gun deck and into the magazine chambers beyond.

The tech-priest cast his optics across the destruction and the armoured tubes that steamed where they had come to a stop in the walls, the floor and rolling across the decking. Looking across at the *Forgebreaker*, he could see that the brutal wave that had crashed into the arkcruiser's side was the first of several. Armoured lighters, assault boats, boarding skiffs and orbital barges – all twisted craft produced in the Dark Mechanicum shipyards – were blasting across the open space under their own propulsion. Torquora had no doubt that each craft would be packed to the hatches with corrupt constructs and gene-bulked serfs ready to charge, maim and kill. Beyond the slowly advancing line of vessels, Torquora could see hordes of augmented assault troops embarking yet another wave of ramshackle craft in the battle-barge's great hangars. There were even constructs assuming bulky environment suits with the intention of jumping between the two mighty vessels. The Iron Warriors intended to overwhelm the *Maestrale* with wave after assault wave of boarders.

While the rust-pitted boarding torpedoes sat on the gun deck, the squeal of turning pressure wheels could be heard inside them. Pressure vented from hatches in the rear of the battered tubes, while hydraulics began to judder the crushed nose cones of the torpedoes upwards to allow disembarkation.

Primus Phobal had no intention of waiting to see what, in turn, was waiting for them inside. He gave

the order to open fire on the boarding torpedoes. The disposable craft began to shower with sparks and the pranging of servitor shells and radioactive bullets. Lightning streams crackled across the surface of the tubes while energy beams seared into the plating. Orbs of plasma melted their way into cratered hatches and rockets fired from emplacement arrays blasted torpedoes into buckled derelicts that spun on the deck. Priests directed hordes of servitors and gun crews to descend upon opening torpedoes near the mangled edge of the deck and put their backs into rolling the boarding craft back out into the zero gravity beyond.

Before Omnid Torquora saw a single boarder emerge from a torpedo, his augurs detected exotic energy signatures in the vicinity. He stomped around trying to get a fix on the signals until his runebanks isolated the nature and position of the energy patterns.

<Teleporters!> Torquora warned Phobal and his skitarii soldiers. <The signals are coming from the magazines and ammunition depots.>

Within moments everything changed. The Iron Warriors' timing was perfect. Stomping out from depot entrances and the chambers that stored macrocannon ordnance adjacent to the gun deck, the Obliteratii had arrived. With the static of teleporter transference still crackling off their grotesque forms, the hulking Iron Warriors came forth from the shadows of the archways. Standing atop the flights of stairs that ran the length of the deck, the small mountains of malformed fleshmetal and corrosion-pitted armour extended their weaponised limbs. From the nests of barrels and tendon-tangled nozzles spawned from their clubbed limbs and claws, the Iron Warriors opened fire on the Adeptus Mechanicus forces below.

With Torquora's forces surrounding the boarding torpedoes and throwing their firepower at the twisted things about to emerge from them, the Chaos Space Marines found themselves aiming down at skitarii, gun-servitors and priests in exposed positions: cybernetic soldiers with their backs turned and ignorant of the fact that they were about to die.

Fat, sickly las-beams seared through entire columns of skitarii, three in a row. Autocannon fire shredded priests within their robes and splattered combat-servitors all over their masters. Iron Warriors blasted black balls of tainted plasma into gun emplacements that had been created from empty barrels and ordnance crates. Heavy weaponry, skitarii gunners and servitor ammunition feeders sizzled into glowing craters.

Skitarii sentinels stationed near the rear of the gun deck were hammered into their cover, their war-plate and trenchcloaks exploding in fountains of gore, oil and workings. Those who managed to turn and fire their shotguns, pumping and blasting suppression fire up the stairs, did not fare much better. The Iron Warriors stormed down the steps to meet them, their hideously deformed faces displaying their furious glee. Clenching their fists, they blasted the skitarii with dribbling nozzles that tore forth from the backs of their hands. Stinking flame streamed into cybernetic soldiers, turning them into thrashing infernos. While the fire from boarding shotguns punched into the diseased brawn of the Obliteratii, sub-atomic blasts of energy vaporised skitarii unfortunates, transforming them into shimmering streams of ash.

'Bridge, be aware,' Omnid Torquora voxed to Tech-priest Captain Voltram. 'Enemy boarders have breached our lines with teleporters. Secure the command deck and engineering.'

'Affirmative, archmagos,' the tech-priest captain said. While scores of Iron Warriors lumbered from the magazines and depots to decimate the Adeptus Mechanicus forces on the gun deck, countless more could be working their way into the ship to sabotage the arkcruiser and frustrate its escape.

‘Stroika-unit,’ Torquora said, bringing his weapons cradles up into attack position. ‘Destroy the Iron Warriors.’

Haldron-44 Stroika processed his master’s command. The hench-unit did not require telling twice. Before Torquora had even completed the order, protocols allowing the priming of weaponry had been enacted. His tracked form rumbled up the decking, taking the steps with ease.

‘Execute,’ Stroika droned. He might have been lobotomised, but Torquora could see that some deep-seated hatred of the Iron Warriors still resided in a dark corner of his mind. A part of him that replayed the horrors of torture, experimentation and indoctrination in an endless, terrible loop.

As Torquora stomped after him in his armoured suit, Stroika reached the top of the stairs. His plasma culverin shimmered with the extreme heat of its operation, the weapon glowing blue with potency. Blasting orb after orb of crackling plasma into advancing Iron Warriors, the kataphron destroyer demolished the hulking monstrosities. Balls of energy burning like miniature novas through ancient ceramite, warped flesh and fused carapace, the Iron Warriors crashed to their armoured knees. With the ricochets of assault cannon rounds slashing across his demi-plate, Stroika streamed gouts of fire from his cognis flamer, setting fire to Obliteratii monsters whose afflicted flesh melted about their fighting forms.

Erupting from a depot archway, an Iron Warrior slashed Stroika across the side of the head with a crackling claw. Rocked back on his tracks from the impact of the attack, Stroika turned in his turret and hammered the Chaos Space Marine back with an explosive blast of flame. As the Obliterator was knocked off his feet, his face flayed from the bone of his skull by the intense heat, Stroika slammed two blazing orbs of plasma into the prone abomination and rolled across his quivering corpse with his heavy duty tracks.

Swivelling in his turret, Stroika cast his targeters and augurs across the ceiling-stacked crates of macro-ordnance stored in the connected depots and magazines that ran parallel to the gun deck that they supplied. His reticules came to rest on an info-plaque set in the metal of the wall – a stencilled warning regarding safety procedures within the highly volatile environment of the ammunition dump.

‘Execute,’ the destroyer said, his protocols aligning fully with the archmagos’s orders.

Powering the plasma culverin mounted on his shoulder, Stroika reversed his tracks, taking him back out of the access archway. As he did so, the hench-unit blasted a stream of plasma orbs back into the magazine chamber.

The ordnance depot detonated.

The explosive macro-shells stored within went up with extraordinary force. The gun deck quaked beneath the armoured boots of Omnid Torquora’s suit, causing the tech-priest to stagger. A chain reaction of explosions rippled down the length of the starboard gun deck, tearing through the ship’s superstructure. Decimating blasts roared from archways and breaches in the wall, enveloping the Iron Warriors who had just emerged from them. As the explosions worked their way, one by one, down the gun deck, some of the Obliterators were blasted apart by the power of the detonations. Some found a storm of shrapnel thudding into their armoured backs and hunches while yet others were lost in roaring columns of flame.

Omnid Torquora thudded across the deck. About him furious fighting had broken out as corrupt constructs finally spewed from boarding torpedo rear hatches and rising nose cones.

Monstrously deformed gun-servitors wearing yokes of twin-linked heavy bolters came blasting out of the capsules. Iron Warriors thrall-serfs, brutally augmented, emerged with boarding shotguns

pumping on bionic carriage-appendages. Genetically altered slaves, their brawn enhanced further by the warping powers of ruin, swung crackling siege hammers. Cybernetic shock troops ventured from the torpedoes with their chunky chain bayonets thrusting ahead of them, blasting rancid energies into skitarii defenders who got too close.

Omnid Torquora stamped across the deck towards the recovering Iron Warriors, who were getting back to their feet and shaking the apocalyptic *boom* of the detonating ordnance magazines from their skulls. With the Obliteratii having teleported behind the Adeptus Mechanicus troops and throngs of warped boarders pouring from battered capsules all across the gun deck, the skitarii were caught in between. Torquora knew that he had to build on Stroika's explosive intervention. If Primus Phobal's soldiers were to stand any chance against the monstrous Iron Warriors or their army of augmented boarders, then the skitarii had to be given a chance to regroup.

Torquora stomped through the criss-crossing net of beams and tracer fire, locking his heavy weaponry into position. A Chaos Space Marine, the flesh on his arm and across his hunched back still alight, blazed a sizzling las-beam of flesh-spawned energy at the tech-priest, but cut a chainblade-wielding combat-servitor in half instead. Aiming his torsion cannon at the Obliterator, Torquora used the twisting gravitation forces streaming from the cannon to tear up decking around the flaming monster. As the rising deck threw the Iron Warrior back into the wall and then down on his knees, two of Phobal's skitarii rangers swept in. The first launched a blistering arcstream into the Chaos Space Marine, pinning the warped thing to the deck. With spidery arcs of electricity cracking and sizzling across the disgusting fusion of flesh and warp-spawned weaponry, the ranger's compatriot came in with a transuranic arquebus. Pointing the length of the weapon at the Iron Warrior, the skitarii soldier yanked on the trigger and blew the Chaos Space Marine's skull apart.

With his feet buckling the deck with hydraulic insistence, the tech-priest turned to engage the Iron Warriors hulks coming at him. One by one they were blasted back, lost in blazing balls of superheated plasma that scorched through their chests. Keeping pace with Torquora was Haldron-44 Stroika, the destroyer's aegis protocols pushing his targeters into overdrive in an effort to keep enemy threats from his master.

The starboard gun deck sang with shrieking beams and bullets pranging off walls and wreckage. Sicarian ruststalkers slashed their transonic blades and chordclaws through the ripe flesh of gun-servitors, while possessed battle-automata – all bladed limbs and predatory pouncing – cut through skitarii soldiers. Conclaves of deck priests closed on hordes of corrupt constructs, streaming eradication beamers through them, reducing their number with every shot. A ballistarius blasted back an Obliterator with his mounted lascannon, only to have another charge at his walker from the side. Slamming into its legs, the Iron Warrior brought the engine down.

Rolling from the saddle, the rider drew his arc pistol and crackled a stream of energy at the Iron Warrior. His flesh still steaming from the gaping hole in his plate and shoulder, the Obliterator engulfed the skitarius in flame from a nozzle set in his other arm.

As cybernetic shock troops carved their way into swarms of drafted gun-crew servitors, their chainblades chewing up flesh and thrashing through heads, Torquora entered the fray, aiming his Icarus array down at the black-armoured nightmares. Unleashing a stuttering stream of fire from his autocannon, the tech-priest blasted back the warp-crazed cyborgs. While weapon appendages and spine-interfaced helms did fly off in the furious attack, the shock troops took the punishment well. With their black plate sparking and sizzling with impacts, the indomitable constructs marched on,

swinging and thrusting their chainblade bayonets at the backs of nearby skitarii.

Stamping up behind the battered tube of a boarding torpedo, Torquora lifted the hydraulics of a single leg and rested his boot against the hull. Heaving, the tech-priest used the strength of his armoured suit to kick the torpedo away, rolling the empty craft across the gun deck and into the protocol-polluted shock troops. As the capsule hit the constructs, it knocked them down. The momentum of the rolling boarding torpedo carried the craft over the cyborgs while its weight crushed their bionics and combat chassis. Skitarii sentinels swept in with their boarding shotguns to finish the abominations off, blasting at their shattered remains on the deck.

The din of battle rose to a crescendo. All about Torquora beams cooked the air and shells ricocheted with shrill insistence off plate and decking. There was the thudding boom of lighters and skiffs coming in to land on the gun deck. The continuous chunter of gun emplacements. The detonation of constructs riddled with overloading servitor shells. The sparking screech of chainblade teeth off bionics. Death everywhere.

Little could drown out the sound of the monstrous Obliteratii. Like walking tanks or artillery pieces they stamped through the dead and the dying, their spawned nests of rancid weaponry raised. Gunning down swathes of skitarii soldiers. Searing las-beams through Kastelan robots. Burying entire squads in roaring clouds of infernal flame. As priests and gun-servitors came at them, they were reduced to ash and screams by sub-atomic blasts. Black orbs of raging plasma turned Sicarian assassins into pools of flesh and metal bubbling at the bottom of deck craters. The Iron Warriors seemed unstoppable. For hulking monsters in heavy plate, they moved with purpose and precision, making the most of cover and hitting what they aimed at with a brutal accuracy.

Torquora lifted the boot of his armoured leg as a vat-grown slave soldier swung a sizzling siege hammer at it, and stamped down on the engineered monstrosity. Splattering warp-irradiated muscle into the deck, Torquora heard an otherworldly roar. Turning his suit, the hiss and sigh of hydraulics all about him, the archmagos saw a pair of daemonic eyes flash at him from the depths of a boarding torpedo. Vintegar-4 Phobal and his vanguard skitarii had a daemon engine trapped in the capsule, his skitarii soldiers firing radioactive shells down into the shadowy depths of the torpedo from their radium rifles.

The diabolical machine roared again as the sustained fire plucked at its plating and sparked off its infernal workings. Suddenly the thing charged, leaping with unexpected grace for a machine. As it exploded from the open pressure hatch it landed before the skitarii, who were backing from the torpedo. It appeared to Torquora like some mechanised predator – a quadruped engine with a thick cable-lined neck, a fanged jaw and a tail. Opening its hellish maw, it roared like a daemonic furnace, the blistering fury of the aberration's internal fires setting the trenchcloaks of rad-troopers alight. Lashing tendrils snaked and flicked about its mechanical brawn, burnished armour plating sliding with crafted ease to accommodate the beast-machine's hydraulic poise and grace.

Snapping a skitarii soldier up in its jaws, it crunched down with its adamantium teeth, cutting him in half. Slamming its crackling fists into the deck, it slashed out with its tendrils. As the stabbing points of the weapons thudded through the chests of vanguard skitarii, the soldiers began to rattle and convulse with otherworldly energies that felt their way through their workings and ended them.

Whipping the tendrils back, the mauling machine-fiend rounded on Primus Phobal. The skitarii officer buried two radioactive rounds in the daemon engine's plating before jabbing at it with his taser goad. As the twin prongs of the weapon hit the thing's armoured snout, there was a flash of

sparks. The daemon engine snorted furnace heat from its nostril vents and shook its head at the powerful electrical discharge.

As it recovered – infernal fury burning in its dead-metal eyes – the daemon engine charged at the alpha primus. Torquora brought up his autocannon, blasting a snaking stream of fire at the armoured fiend. The daemon engine was wreathed in a shower of sparks. Stomping towards it with hydraulic hostility, Torquora cycled his gatling launcher. Now he had its attention, the tech-priest sent a rocket shrieking at the metal beast. The explosion knocked the monster back into the boarding torpedo – back into the shadows. As the gatling launcher clunked around Torquora fired again, hammering the daemon engine with a blast that lit up the capsule and ravaged its interior. Firing a third time, the tech-priest's rocket blew the maulerfiend out of the torpedo nose cone.

With the daemon engine scrabbling its blasted metal body off the deck, Omnid Torquora surged on. Using a great hydraulic claw to grab the shattered torpedo and roll it aside, the tech-priest marched for the daemon. Smoking, sparking and bleeding some kind of molten metal blood on the deck, the infuriated beast charged. Before the tech-priest could cycle another rocket, the creature's deck-piercing claws had carried it straight at him. Slamming its armoured hunch into Torquora's suit, the daemon engine knocked the archmagos back. Torquora stumbled, his back hitting the wrecked boarding torpedo. The maulerfiend leapt, hooking its claws into the capsule and pinning the tech-priest to the tube.

Slasher tendrils came at Torquora like harpoons, forcing the aged priest to squirm this way and that inside his sarcophagal suit. Craning his neck left and right, he barely avoided the stab and crackling slash of the prehensile weapons. Looking up, Torquora was treated to a view down the maulerfiend's gullet. Within the metal deathtrap of its daggered jaws, instead of a tongue, was a magma cutter. The tip of the weapon was blinding. A searing beam blazed from it and began cutting through the armoured hood of Torquora's suit. Holding the daemon engine with his hydraulic claws, Torquora hauled the metal beast to one side, keeping the magma cutter beam from carving through the parchment flesh of his neck.

The maulerfiend howled in otherworldly agony as a pair of plasma blasts cratered the armour of its hunched back. Stroika was with him, but Torquora felt the need to end the metal beast himself. Bellowing a rasping roar of his own from ancient lungs, he lifted the daemon engine from his chest pulpit. Standing upright and lifting the fiend higher with his hydraulic claws, Torquora smashed the beast down into the deck. As the daemon engine shook its head, the tech-priest took several steps back and launched a rocket into the diabolical creature's armoured form. Blasting it across the deck, Torquora hit it again and again until the rocket-mauled shell of the daemon slid off the ragged edge of the gun deck and out into the frozen void.

Torquora felt the cold fury of the Omnissiah through both his feeble body and the magna-hydraulics and pistons of his interfaced suit. As a patched and dented assault boat landed on the deck nearby and its boarding hatch opened, the tech-priest fired a rocket straight into the crowded compartment beyond, sending detonations through the battered craft. Thrusting his hydraulic claws forward, he stabbed crackling talons into the shattered machinery of a deck macrocannon. Heaving with all his augmented might, he pulled the wreckage down on a repulsive Iron Warrior who was aiming his spawn-weaponry up at him.

Sweeping his torsion cannon across the deck, Torquora seized a descending skiff that creaked and buckled with the intense gravitic force of the weapon and hauled it down at the deck. Turning the

boarding craft and the corrupt constructs on board into a flaming derelict, the tech-priest sent the wreckage tumbling through a horde of warped gun-servitors.

'Omnid Torquora,' a voice hissed, burning over the vox-channels. It was the sound of steel thrust into ice water. The torment of iron. Ancient hate.

'Who is this?' the tech-priest demanded. It certainly wasn't Tech-priest Captain Voltram or Chief Enginseer Zertec.

'Archmagos,' the voice said, seemingly playing with the word – each sound a searing syllable spat from the lips. 'I know all about you.'

Torquora stomped about the deck with sickly beams of energy scorching before him and stub-rounds rattling off his plate and magna-hydraulics.

'Krendl…' Torquora said.

'Yes,' the Iron Warriors warsmith crackled across the vox-channel.

Torquora turned to face the *Forgebreaker*. Idriss Krendl had teleported across personally with his Obliteratii, but he was not on the gun deck. Torquora's supercogitator started compiling a list of the most sensitive and tactically advantageous locations on board the *Maestrale*. One flashed at the top of the list with the highest probability.

'You're on the command deck,' Torquora said.

'I am indeed,' Idriss Krendl seethed. 'Where I expected to find you – cowering and hiding. It seems we have both surprised and disappointed each other.'

Torquora took a step closer to the ragged edge of the deck. The *Forgebreaker* and the *Maestrale* were still grappled, the tractor fields and magnetic locks of both vessels still holding them together in a running battle and boarding action. Peering forward through the phase-field static, Torquora's optics didn't require magnification to see the Dark Mechanicum line of battle ahead. Tech-priest Captain Voltram had put the arkcruiser on a course between two Satzican grand cruisers, the vessels all warped architecture and ornamental spikes. The *Maestrale* and the battle-barge in their locked embrace were ploughing through the void at the twisted ships, running in under their presented guns.

'I have your bridge,' Idriss Krendl hissed. 'Your vessel belongs to me. *You* belong to me.'

'It seems a poor exchange, warsmith,' Omnid Torquora said. 'I took your forge world from you. Billions of constructs, yours to command – and you get… me.'

Idriss Krendl did not reply at first. Torquora could hear a furious intake of breath across the vox-channel.

'And yet, priest, I wait for you still,' Krendl told him. 'Some men simply have a greater capacity for suffering than others. I, for example, have endured death a thousand times over, only to claw my agonising way back to existence. Perhaps you will exceed even my example, and suffer for each of the billions of dark souls you stole from me. I am looking forward to finding out.

'I wait for you on the bridge. You have three minutes. If you are not standing before me in that time, my Obliteratii will start killing your officers and destroying the instrumentation – perhaps they will hit something critical and save us both the trouble. Three minutes, priest.'

As the vox crackled to silence, Omnid Torquora turned in his armoured suit. All about him constructs were dying. Shells cut through the air and streams of energy criss-crossed the deck. Explosions rocked the gun deck and boarder-crammed lighters landed. All nothing more than an ongoing diversion.

Before he knew it, the tech-priest was stomping across the deck. He wrenched aside wreckage with

his hydraulic claws and crushed corrupted constructs beneath his armoured boots. He didn't have to look behind to see his hench-unit, Haldron-44 Stroika, trundling behind him on his heavy metal tracks, the kataphron destroyer blasting furious orbs of plasma into anything unwise enough to attack the archmagos.

'Chief Enginseer Zertec,' Omnid Torquora voxed across an encoded channel. The tech-priest's supercogitators seared with possibilities.

'Archmagos?' Zertec replied.

'Is the engineering section secure?' Torquora put to him.

'Affirmative, my lord. All bulkheads sealed. Skitarii sentinels hold the approaches.'

Torquora nodded to himself within his armoured hood.

'I'm sending more skitarii to fortify the section,' the tech-priest said. 'The ship is under attack and the command deck has been taken.'

'Yes, my lord,' the chief enginseer said.

'I fear the enemy commander has underestimated the significance of your section,' Torquora said. 'From engineering, you can override the engines, both sub-light columns and the warp drive.'

'Yes, archmagos,' Zertec said, 'but without the helm we have no steerage way or immaterial course heading.'

'With a little good fortune, we shall not need steerage way,' Omnid Torquora said. 'I had the Navigator already input the aethyrical solutions. With the warp engines, we can at least make translation. The Navigator can take it from there.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Hold the engineering section, no matter what,' Torquora said. 'Maintain full power on the sub-light engine columns until we have reached the system's edge, then I want you to engage the warp drive. Do you understand what I am asking you, enginseer?'

'How will I know we have reached the Mandeville point, my lord?' Zertec asked.

'You'll know,' the tech-priest promised him. 'We'll all know. Expect the reinforcements. Torquora out.'

Torquora crossed the battle-ravaged gun deck, Stroika accelerating ahead of him, mercilessly blasting enemy constructs out of his path, and approached Vintegar-4 Phobal. A possessed combat-servitor was wildly swinging a chainblade at the officer, which Phobal was turning aside with his taser goad. Blasting the servitor aside with a short, stuttering stream of fire from his autocannon, Torquora towered over the skitarii primus.

<Yes, archmagos?> Phobal said, jabbing constructs away with the sparking flash of his goad and putting crackling rounds in their heads with his radium pistol.

<Primus, I want you to send your best sub-alpha with twenty of your men to fortify the engineering section immediately,> Torquora said.

<Yes, my lord,> Phobal said, stabbing the prongs of his goad into a thrall-serf and electrocuting the battle-fevered thing. As the tech-priest strode away, the skitarii primus said: <Where are you going, sir?>

<To retake the bridge,> Torquora told him.

SELECTED: DENTRICA III OF III
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED

UPLOADING… *+AS THE MACHINE GOD MADE ME+*

The route up to the command deck was littered with bodies. As Torquora stomped up the pipe-lined passageways, with Stroika trundling ahead on his tracks, the pair weaved around the cybernetic corpses of constructs that had been brutally put down by the Iron Warriors. Moving up through the arkcruiser, Krendl and his Obliteratii warband had killed every skitarii sentinel, priest and servitor they had come across. About the entrance to the section elevator, they found scores of skitarii bodies still smoking on the deck. They had been riddled with assault cannon fire and had holes blasted through their chests by searing lascannon beams. Some had been torn flesh from bionics by huge claw marks that ran from neck to navel but most had been torched with flamer fire, the mound of their corpses making a charred pyre on the deck.

As the elevator rose through the decks, Torquora said nothing. The car was filled with the sigh of his resting hydraulics and the crackling hum of Stroika's reactors. The kataphron destroyer cycled his tracks, his aegis protocols prompting Stroika to manoeuvre himself in front of his archmagos.

As the elevator doors opened, smoke drifted in from the command deck. Stroika moved forward on his tracks, targeters searching the bridge for enemy signals. As he left the elevator, the barrels of flesh-spawned weaponry drifted in from either side of the doors to rest before the hench-unit's head.

'Power down your weaponry, cyborg,' one of the Obliterators said.

'Do as he says,' Omnid Torquora ordered.

The hiss of Stroika's pilot flame died and the roasting pulse of his plasma weaponry faded as the barrels of both the kataphron destroyer's appendage weapons drifted to the floor with a dying whine.

Motioning Stroika on with a grotesque nest of weaponry, the Iron Warrior followed the hench-unit onto the murky command deck.

'You too, priest,' the second Obliterator said, pointing the fleshmetal of his warped weapons into the elevator car. Activating the magna-hydraulics on his weapons cradles, Omnid Torquora retracted his torsion cannon and Icarus array, collapsing the arrangements back into a dormant configuration. Indicating with the barrels of his spawn-weapons, the Obliterator motioned the tech-priest after his hench-unit.

As Torquora lumbered through the smoke-choked bridge chamber, he saw that runebanks had been smashed and consoles were sparking. Huge gashes ran through sizzling wall instrumentation where Obliteratii claws had savaged the terminals. Several console units danced with flame, while others crackled with spidery arcs of electricity. The command deck was littered with corpses. Servitors. Skitarii sentinels. Deck priests. All had been gutted, decapitated or had their heads blown clean off. It was a massacre.

'You're late,' Idriss Krendl said through the smoke. 'We started without you.'

Cycling through filters, Torquora saw the Iron Warriors warsmith standing at the far end of the command deck. He was a hulking monstrosity, even when compared to the rest of his cursed kind. The Iron Warrior's genetic perfection had been perverted and warped by the otherworldly disease that had ravaged and hideously enhanced the rest of the Obliteratii. Ancient and terrible, the warsmith was like a smashed mirror that had been put back together, leaving the reflection a twisted mess. His body was a scarred and stapled patchwork of muscle and bulging tendon. The tarnished mail of an officer's cloak was draped across his hunched back. While his monstrous, and once shattered, skull was held together by the frame of a wire cage, the smeared flesh of his face had half dribbled through the bars

of the cage and down the brawn of his neck. One of his arms was a colossal fleshmetal claw. The other was a tendon-tangled mass of spawned weaponry, the barrels of which he held against the only member of the bridge crew alive: Tech-priest Captain Cyntreq Voltram.

Krendl's Iron Warriors stood like monstrous phantoms amongst the smoke-writhing slaughter and sparking runebanks of the command deck, their spawn-weapons aimed at Torquora and Haldron-44 Stroika. Krendl, however, had pinned the tech-priest captain's hooded head against the thick armourglass of one of the bridge lancet screens. As extra assurance that Torquora and his hench-unit wouldn't try anything, Krendl threatened to simultaneously blow Voltram's priestly head from his shoulders and shatter the window port. If the lancet screen were to be breached and the arkcruiser hulled, every breath of air in the bridge would scream out of the shattered window – taking Torquora, Stroika and the Iron Warriors with it.

'We understand one another?' Idriss Krendl seethed.

The tech-priest slowed to a halt before the Iron Warriors warsmith. Stroika's tracks stopped likewise, with Obliteratii weapons aimed at them both.

Torquora looked about the smashed command deck. The hulking Iron Warriors. The hammerhead prow of the *Forgebreaker* extending beyond the arkcruiser's own, and the wall of Dark Mechanicum cannons under which both vessels were approaching.

'I understand you,' Omnid Torquora told him. 'All too well, Warsmith Krendl. You are a weapon that has fallen into the wrong hands. The product of 31st millennium genetic experimentation. A thing engineered. Mass produced. As expendable to your father as any skitarii soldier or servitor to my Machine God. As your father's son you are cursed with hubris, you are bitter and you are predictable. Do you understand, I wonder, the danger you have put yourself and your vessel in with your audacious boarding action?'

'Do you think you can enrage me any more than you already have, priest?' Idriss Krendl asked.

'Yes,' Omnid Torquora answered honestly. 'I think I can. I may have cost you Velchanos Magna but I can still cost you a great deal more. Your precious battle-barge, for example. You think you have taken this vessel with your boarding tactics but did you realise that you placed your own ship under my control when you did that?'

'You speak in riddles, priest,' Idriss Krendl hissed, the talons of his fleshmetal claw twitching. 'When I get you back to my ship your tongue will be the first prize I take. There you will see how little control you possess: over your miserable existence, your own flesh – even your death, for which you will daily beg. I shall twist you and your servants to my bidding like I twisted your skitarii commander.'

Torquora heard a pulse of power throb through Haldron-44 Stroika's plasma culverin. The destroyer's pilot flame re-ignited, his tracks edged forward and his weaponry began to rise. In some dark and shadowy corner of Stroika's mind, he remembered Krendl and the horrors the warsmith had put him through.

'Stroika-unit,' Torquora warned. The Obliteratii leant in, their barrels placed against the hench-unit's head. Slowly Stroika's weaponry descended.

'Stroika?' Idriss Krendl marvelled, his half-face forming a cruel smile of satisfaction.

'What you broke,' Torquora told the Iron Warrior, 'the Machine God restored and made strong.'

'Then I must be strongest of all,' Krendl hissed, but Torquora shook his head.

'You were made of the weakest of flesh to begin with,' the tech-priest told him. 'That is why you fell

from the galaxy's light and embraced the darkness beyond. The Omnissiah blesses His constructs with the fusion of flesh and iron. They become more than the sum of their parts – for iron is the strength He lends them. Your flesh is feeble, weak and polluted. It honours not the union and harmony of iron. It is a portal for the intrusion of iron untrue. You are but an emplacement of flesh: a chassis or vehicle of warped flesh and bone upon which this weaponry chooses to mount itself. You think you invited this curse, that its hideous boon serves you? These weapons are not yours. They chose you as their slave, so that they might claim souls here for their masters beyond.'

Idriss Krendl's half-mouth had formed an ugly snarl. His eyes burned into Torquora with an infernal hatred. He looked to the monstrous spawn-weaponry that had found a home in his flesh – then back at the tech-priest.

'Captain,' Torquora said, addressing Cyntreq Voltram. 'Did you set our course?'

'Yes, my lord,' the tech-priest captain said. 'The *Maestrale* shall pass between the Dark Mechanicum cruisers.'

Krendl pressed Voltram's head against the armourglass with the barrels of his spawn-weaponry. Then looked at Torquora.

'The battle-barge won't,' the tech-priest told him.

'Warsmith,' one of the grotesquely deformed Iron Warriors said. 'Vox-contact from our bridge. The cruiser ahead has warned the *Forgebreaker* to reduce speed.'

Krendl's face screwed up with anger and frustration, Torquora's words still scalding his mind. He looked up at the lancet port windows, at the cannon-bristling Dark Mechanicum cruiser that almost filled the screen.

'Krendl,' the Obliterator insisted.

'Order the bridge to fire braking thrusters,' Krendl said.

'It won't work,' Torquora told him, as the Iron Warrior relayed the order. 'Your braking thrusters, against the sub-light engines of this vessel at maximum power?'

Precious seconds passed. The *Forgebreaker* and the *Maestrale* surged on towards the Dark Mechanicum cruiser.

'He's right,' the Iron Warrior told his warsmith. 'The *Forgebreaker* is not slowing. The bridge reports collision alarms.'

'We must uncouple,' another Obliterator insisted. 'Now, warsmith.'

'Disengage tractor fields and magnetic locks,' Krendl ordered.

'You can disengage your own,' Torquora told him. 'But what about ours?'

About them the superstructure of the arkcruiser groaned. With the *Forgebreaker* attempting to break away but still grappled by the Adeptus Mechanicus vessel, the *Maestrale* suffered for its insistence.

Krendl's eyes flashed about the ruin of the bridge and the dead priests on the deck.

'You cannot override the tractor fields from here,' Torquora told the warsmith, 'not after destroying the bridge. You're running out of time, Krendl.'

The Obliterator turned to face the lancet screens.

'Impact in three…' the Iron Warrior reported, relaying the countdown from the bridge of the *Forgebreaker*.

'Slow this vessel down,' Krendl ordered, holding his spawn-weaponry at Tech-priest Captain Voltram's head.

'Two…' the Iron Warrior said.

‘No,’ Torquora returned.

‘One…’

A shockwave shivered down the length of the arkcruiser. The hulking Iron Warriors were thrown forward with the force. Torquora stumbled and crashed down onto his armoured knees. Idriss Krendl fell back against the lancet window. Alarms droned from several of the damaged runebanks. Through the bridge screens the *Forgebreaker*, held to the *Maestrale*’s side by the arkcruiser’s tractor field and magnetic locks, was run into the spiked prow of the cruiser. The prow of the great vessel shattered as the hammerhead ram of the battle-barge smashed it explosively from the ship.

The *Maestrale* groaned once more as the battle-barge was torn away from the arkcruiser’s tractor fields and magnetic embrace. As the Dark Mechanicum ship tumbled from the impact, explosions ruptured their way through the twisted vessel. The *Forgebreaker* fell away, free at last, its reverse thrusters dragging it agonisingly away from the Dark Mechanicum’s shattered line of battle. The *Maestrale* surged on between the cruisers, its sub-light engines blazing a trail out of the system.

‘Now, Stroika-unit,’ Torquora ordered. Bringing his weaponry up and charging his plasma culverin, Haldron-44 Stroika blasted orb after searing blue orb into Iron Warriors Obliterators who had turned and been thrown down on the command deck. As the superheated hydrogen scorched its way through their armoured chests, one after another of the monstrosities fell.

As the Iron Warrior behind unleashed his autocannon on the demi-plate of Stroika’s back, the kataphron destroyer whipped around in his turret, smashing the Chaos Space Marine aside with the length of his plasma culverin. The Iron Warrior stumbled back, and Stroika reversed his heavy-duty tracks and advanced. Blasting gouts of raging fire at the Iron Warrior from his flamer, Stroika hit him again and again, the furious *whoosh* of each blast sending the grotesque Obliteratii staggering back through the open doors of the elevator car. As the doors closed, the malformed Iron Warrior thrashed and kicked his agonies.

Dragging Cyntreq Voltram forward from where he had fallen on the deck, Idriss Krendl put the barrels of his fleshmetal arm to the tech-priest captain’s hooded head and blasted it off. Lurching at Torquora, who was on his armoured knees, the warsmith grasped his shoulder with a spawn-claw. Krendl tucked the myriad barrels of his spawned weaponry under the tech-priest’s chin.

Haldron-44 Stroika thrashed his tracks and closed on the Iron Warriors warsmith, his plasma culverin humming and shimmering its intention to blast Idriss Krendl into the void.

‘Execute,’ Stroika droned.

‘No,’ Torquora ordered.

‘Execute,’ the destroyer droned again.

‘No,’ the tech-priest told him. ‘The lancet windows. You will hull the ship.’

Idriss Krendl looked from Stroika and the gaping barrel of his plasma culverin, to the cold machine calm of the archmagos and then to the void-filled window ports. Stepping back slowly under Stroika’s guns but backing towards the thick armourglass windows, Krendl’s half-face was contorted with rage.

‘Damn you,’ Idriss Krendl spat, ‘you cursed machine.’

‘I am as my Omnissiah made me,’ Omnid Torquora told the Iron Warrior, before voxing, ‘Enginseer Zertec: you may engage the warp engines.’

The warsmith risked a glance through the lancet windows. With every moment the arkcruiser was taking him further away from the *Forgebreaker*.

‘All Obliteratii are ordered back to the ship,’ Idriss Krendl voxed to his Iron Warriors. ‘Immediately.’ With a half-snarl, the warsmith was obscured by a lead-coloured maelstrom. About him a hole was being torn in reality. The ferocity of the warp intruded momentarily as Idriss Krendl teleported off the bridge.

Getting to his feet, Omnid Torquora stomped forward towards the lancet screens. Haldron-44 Stroika remained still, his weaponry still pointing at the spot from which his Iron Warriors tormentor had vanished. Torquora looked out of the lancet ports, his optics zeroing in on the *Forgebreaker* sitting under the guns of the Dark Mechanicum grand cruisers after its betrayal and seeming attack upon one of their number.

<Archmagos.>

<Yes, Primus Phobal,> Torquora said. <Report.>

<The Iron Warriors are gone, my lord,> the skitarii commander said. <The rest of the boarders are fleeing in their craft.>

<Let them go,> Torquora said. The tech-priest saw the shimmer of the arkcruiser’s Geller field envelop the ship in a bubble of reality as an amaranthine vortex opened in the void before the *Maestrale*. <Prepare for warp translation.>

Moments later, the Adeptus Mechanicus arkcruiser was gone.

1010

SELECTED: DENTRICA I OF I
ENGAGE NEURAL CONGRESS – WIRELESS AUTOSHUNT ACQUIRED
UPLOADING… *+THE VIRTUES OF IGNORANCE+*

The orbital barge descended.

Below it, a colossal fragment of planetary debris tumbled through the blackness of space. Having punched through the immaterial static of a newly erupted warp storm, the gigantic shard of rock continued its journey through the dark and frozen void.

As the barge came in to land, it became apparent that the planetary fragment still possessed life. While the underside was rocky and frozen, the strip of surface still retained buildings, towers, vanes and even a reactor that sizzled and spat with unnatural energy. The shattered remains of forge temples crowned the accretion of crooked ventscrapers, dark installations and workshops that glowed with infernal industry. The Thunderfane was a derelict shadow of what it once had been, with half the temple palace missing and much of the rest a tottering wreck. Still, bleak lamps indicated that someone or something resided in its unhallowed halls.

The orbital barge's landing gears extended and with a roaring whoosh the baroque vessel put down on a shattered industrial mosaic – the kind that had adorned the quads and freightways of Satzica Secundus when the forge world had been whole. Steam hissed about the landed craft.

As the barge doors descended on their hydraulic struts to form a ramp, vanguard skitarii of the Oriak Scintillians, IV Column, streamed from the compartments with their radium carbines. As the skitarii exited the barge in two lines, fanning around left and right to surround and protect the craft, their rad-censers crackled with the lethal aura of radiation they carried with them.

With the barge secure, rangers of the Xerrawatt 6-17 Panoptrica moved out at a synchronised lope, their galvanic rifles up to their optics and their dispersal clean. Thunking down the ramp, Omnid Torquora followed them in his armoured suit. He was flanked by Haldron-44 Stroika trundling on his tracks on one side and Primus Vintegar-4 Phobal on the other.

With half of the crackling Scintillians remaining behind to hold a perimeter around the barge, the other half escorted the archmagos and their alpha primus. With the rangers criss-crossing shattered

freightways and moving through dark, derelict and twisted buildings, the Adeptus Mechanicus made their way through what was left of Satzica Secundus.

As Omnid Torquora had told the misguided electromancers of the Luminen, the forge world of Satzica Secundus had been lost. As soon as the first Geller Device had been detonated, their home world had been doomed. With immaterial energies travelling back down the warp trails of the Adeptus Mechanicus fleet, a warp storm had erupted around Satzica as the Great Gyre had done about Velchanos Magna. The appearance and allegiance of the Satzican fleet had confirmed that the forge world had fallen to hereteks and the influence of fell entities of the warp. The priests of Satzica Secundus had become what they had always detested – members of the Dark Mechanicum.

By the appearance of the twisted architecture that surrounded them and the ruinous glyphs and sigils that adorned the metal and stone, Torquora knew that he had done the right thing in detonating the second Geller Device. Calibrating the aethyric bomb to detonate with ten times the potency of the first, the archmagos had known it would intensify the warp storm around Satzica Secundus and destroy the planet at its epicentre. Torquora still had business however with what remained of Satzica Secundus, and had searched for shattered remnants of the planet being carried out of the warp storm by the force of its explosive destruction.

As the rangers moved through the twisted ruins, Torquora noted how fat cables running from the warp-fuelled reactor powered towering, heretek technologies that created an artificial gravity, regulated temperature and established an atmosphere. Torquora knew there must be priests on the tumbling shard but all his rangers seemed to find were hideously deformed feral servitors and plagues of gremlids.

Marching up the main freightway, Torquora had Phobal send the Xerrawatt 6-17 Panoptrica on ahead. As they explored the desolate shard they found servitors feasting on downed power cables and warped automata that stood frozen and lifeless.

<My rangers have found something, my lord,> Vintegar-4 Phobal informed Torquora.

<Lead on,> the archmagos said.

With the Oriak Scintillians crackling by their side and Stroika turning in his turret, watching for activity in the ruins, the Adeptus Mechanicus commanders came to the mighty doors of the half-demolished Thunderfane. One of the great doors was twisted half off its huge hinges and allowed access into the forge temple.

The Thunderfane's mighty industry was long gone. It was no more than a shattered ceremonial shell now. As the skitarii rangers had discovered, however, the forge temple's shell harboured life. The demolished halls and tottering staircases were haunted by shrieking priests. Things that hid the rewards of their daemonic pacts beneath their black robes and screeched corrupted code throughout the echoing ruins. Spider-legged daemon engines sat dormant in corners. Possessed cherubim flew through the demolished halls in small flocks, disturbed by the arrival of Torquora's skitarii.

Moving through leaning arches and under ceilings held up with warped braces, the Adeptus Mechanicus explored the temple of damned constructs. Following Primus Phobal, his hydraulic steps pounding the shattered marble to dust, Torquora arrived in a chamber he recognised. With wraith-like priests appearing briefly at balconies, crooked archways and derelict openings before code-shrieking away, the hall had the appearance of a throne room. While larger than the other semi-collapsed chambers, it was a mere vestibule compared to the throne room the Thunderfane once boasted.

In the centre of the chamber was a foil curtain, splattered with filth and oil, that ran on a scaffold

around a central feature. Warp-encrusted cables ran through the smashed flooring and under the curtain. Through the foil, Torquora could see the slightest crackle and glow of power. As two rangers pulled the curtains apart they revealed the twisted horror of a throne. Four fusion towers made up the corners of the throne and it was from these that Torquora had detected the faint traces of energy.

Suddenly the cables and lines through which one of the rangers stepped whipped around the skitarii soldier's boots. Like prehensile tendrils, the dark throne entangled the ranger's limbs and dragged him through the foil curtain.

As the second ranger lifted his galvanic rifle, Primus Phobal ordered him back. Inside the foil curtain there was screaming. A bloody steam rose from the enclosure and the fusion columns crackled to life.

Aiming his torsion cannon at the scaffold and foil curtain, Omnid Torquora tore the structure away. Within, the ranger had been pulled into the throne. The mechanism seemed to be feeding off the Motive Force that passed through the skitarii soldier's workings and base organics. Feasting on the energy stored in his chassis reactor and the very life force of the ranger, the damned technology of the throne drained the unfortunate construct and allowed the shell of his war-plate and helm to topple and crash in a steaming heap before it. The throne's fusion columns lit up, crackling with the scavenged energies. Lamps about the chamber came to life and grew in fell intensity.

'Omnid Torquora, is that you…'

The steel hiss of the voice was everywhere, crackling from dusty vox-hailers set in the vestibule walls.

'It is I, Fabricator General.'

Once Voricar Trega had ruled from the Thunderfane's temple throne. It had been his literal seat of power on Satzica Secundus – the rumour being that all of the forge world's power ran through the Fabricator General at one time or another. Torquora realised that the throne was all that was left of the ancient tech-priest now. A ruinous trap waiting to bleed unsuspecting constructs or scavengers dry of energy.

'It is good to see you, Omnid,' the mad machine hissed.

'I cannot say the same, Fabricator General,' Torquora told it before turning to Primus Phobal. <If Voricar Trega is here then so is what we seek. Have your skitarii search what's left of this palace. Go.>

As Vintegar-4 Phobal and his rangers ventured into side chambers and derelict halls, the throne spoke again.

'Come closer, my friend…'

'I think not, my lord,' the tech-priest said. 'In my absence it seems that you have been keeping company with others. Hereteks, otherworldly entities and Traitor Angels of the Iron Warriors.'

The throne did nothing at first but hiss through the vox-hailers and crackle unnatural energies from its columns.

'Omnid,' the Fabricator General said. 'My priests always warned me about you. They said explorators were wayward souls who bring doom on their home forges.'

'They were not wrong, my lord,' Torquora said.

'Omnid,' Trega hissed. 'What have you done?'

'I have destroyed two forge worlds of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Fabricator General,' Torquora admitted. 'Yours included – all in the name of the Omnissiah.'

<My lord,> Primus Phobal said, appearing at an archway. <We've found it.>

Torquora turned to Haldron-44 Stroika.

'If that thing moves,' the tech-priest said, 'destroy it.'

Following the skitarii officer through partially demolished chambers, Torquora was led into a vaulted half-hall, the shattered doorway flanked by two of his rangers. Inside Torquora found a reliquary of ruinous technologies and ancient data. At the heart of the hoard, dormant and disassembled, was the forge temple's towering High Altar of Knowledge. Warped and twisted now, it sat amongst other damned treasures that had been saved from the destruction of Satzica Secundus.

Toppled over and spilling its contents was a containment ark that Torquora knew. Directing Phobal, the tech-priest had the skitarii commander pass him the shattered STC template contained inside. The template used to create the Geller Device. The template the tech-priest had found on Perborea. The template Idriss Krendl had left aboard the *Stella-Xenithica* for Torquora to find.

<Have your men set their charges,> Torquora said to Phobal. <We're going to destroy all of this and blow the temple off this piece of rock.>

<Understood, sir,> the alpha primus said. <Permission to clarify.>

<Granted, primus.>

<Forgive my ignorance,> Phobal asked, <but does not that constitute an act of heresy, my lord? We are taught that the Machine God requires us to better ourselves for His coming. That the holy Quest for Knowledge is part of that and the data and technology retrieved is the supreme manifestation of His divinity. You hold there an STC template, one of the most valuable discoveries in the galaxy.>

Torquora looked down at the broken template. It contained the schematics of a technological boon that in the wrong hands could be – and had been – turned into a terrible weapon. Torquora could not allow such insanity to go on. Both the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Dark Mechanicum sought ancient technologies, forbidden knowledge and gifts long forgotten. The bottomless hunger for knowledge and power that afflicted both groups meant that their desire to unearth and experiment would one day destroy the galaxy.

Like the radicals he had encountered in the Emperor's Holy Inquisition who followed their organisations in spirit but whose extreme approaches led to them being branded heretics by members of their own kind, Torquora would have to endure such accusations.

<I believe in the Quest for Knowledge,> Torquora told the skitarii commander. <That is the Great Maker's path. But if it is heresy to save the galaxy from knowledge that would destroy it, then yes, I am a heretic. Think on this. The Omnissiah asks of us the virtues of both creation and destruction. There is virtue in knowledge but there is also virtue in ignorance.

<We must find these treasures before they are discovered by priests from our own ranks or those of the Dark Mechanicum. No priest or Fabricator is trustworthy enough; no vault is safe enough for some of these apocalyptic technologies. Only in destroying them can we ensure that the galaxy is truly safe for the servants of the Omnissiah. The data on this template has been destroyed on Velchanos Magna, it has been destroyed on the meme-banks of my own artisans and magi and now, Machine God willing, you will destroy it here.> The skitarii commander nodded as Torquora handed the template back to him. <Lay your charges, alpha primus.>

'Omnid, Omnid, Omnid, Omnid,' the vox-hailers hissed as the tech-priest made his way back through the throne room. 'You cannot leave me here…'

'My lord,' Torquora told the monstrous throne, 'you sent a fleet from my own forge world to aid your

Iron Warrior allies and destroy me. I have returned the sentiment. On the edge of the warp storm above, my ships have detected Idriss Krendl's fleet. I knew he would come. He is searching for Satzica Secundus – which he will not find. He will soon learn that I have deprived him of a forge world not once, but twice. He will also learn that as soon as I escaped him at Velchanos Magna, I sent astrotelepathic word of the Iron Warriors' presence here to the Imperial Fists Space Marines, stationed aboard the *Phalanx* near Ancient Terra and Mars. Their battlefleet should arrive on the outskirts of the warp storm shortly.'

Omnid Torquora looked to Haldron-44 Stroika's blank features. The destroyer returned the gaze. 'I estimate a seventy-two point four-seven-six per cent probability that Idriss Krendl and his Iron Warriors will be destroyed, which is better odds than you and that Traitor Angel gave me.'

<Charges planted, my lord,> Primus Phobal said, leading out his rangers. As Stroika and the tech-priest went to leave, flanked by vanguard skitarii soldiers, Omnid Torquora turned one last time to the thing that had been his Fabricator General.

'Despair not, my lord,' Torquora said. 'When contacting the Imperial Fists, I look the liberty of naming the storm that took our home world. It is called *Trega's Folly*. Your legacy lives on – even if you will not. As you correctly observe, I cannot just leave you here. Better that you are not here to leave at all.'

As the archmagos, his hench-unit and his skitarii escort made their way back to the orbital barge, what was left of the Thunderfane exploded. Bringing a little light to the blackness of the void, the derelict forge temple rained grit down across the shard. Fires swept through the ruins and the shrieks of burning priests could be heard some distance away.

Before filing back aboard the barge, Primus Phobal and his skitarii soldiers escorted the tech-priest back to the ramp. As Haldron-44 Stroika stopped his tracks on the incline, Omnid Torquora waited. It was the last time any of them would stand on the surface of Satzica Secundus. He looked at the decimated forge temple and thought of the dangerous knowledge burning there. Knowledge that could threaten the galaxy no longer.

'That's one,' the tech-priest told Stroika, as the pair of them ascended the ramp.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Sanders is the author of *The Serpent Beneath,* a novella that appeared in the *New York Times* bestselling Horus Heresy anthology *The Primarchs*. His other Black Library credits include the Warhammer novels *Archaon: Everchosen* and *Archaon: Lord of Chaos*, the Warhammer 40,000 books *Skitarius*, *Tech-priest*, *Redemption Corps, Atlas Infernal, Legion of the Damned* and various shorter tales for the Horus Heresy. He lives in the small city of Lincoln, UK.

An extract from *The Omnissiah's Chosen*.

The sky bled streamers of poisonous light over the grey-green morass of life below. Like the tentacles of some ethereal leviathan, the radiance touched and tested everything, questing for a foothold upon reality. The jungle shivered beneath its glare and the random chitter of numberless insects became a profane harmony. Like called to like and the tainted planet stirred towards wakefulness in the unclean dawn.

But Omnissiah willing, this world will sleep a while yet, Magos Caul reflected as he cancelled the blasphemous simulation conjured up by his cogitation engines. *I still have time…*

His carmine robes hung in loose folds about his skeletal frame as he floated above the concentric, whirling wheels of his data throne. His quartet of multi-jointed legs was furled up in arachnid repose and his myriad lenses had faded to dull green stains in the darkness of his cowl, disengaged while he gazed inwards at the infinitely malleable regions of the datasphere. The cogitator banks embedded in the wheels of his throne chattered as they saturated his nexus chamber with information from thousands of sensors across the planet.

<Canopus 30,> Caul clicked in binaric cant, switching his visual input to a defence servitor welded to the dome of his bastion. The position was optimised for the elimination of aerial predators and megaspores, and offered an unparalleled view of the contaminated sky. Through the servitor's eyes he saw the warp-spawned anomaly from his simulation as a numinous spiral behind the dirty clouds of Phaedra's troposphere. As night fell it would deepen into a multi-hued aurora that was vile, though only a ghost of the horror he predicted.

Ghostblight, whispered a voice. It came from the neural cage where the magos's instincts were interred alongside the rest of his humanity, smothered but not quite dead. He dismissed it as he dismissed every shadow of his former existence. His induction into the divine logarithms of the Omnissiah had elevated him above such emotionally charged nonsense.

Hypothesis: the anomaly encapsulates a binary reaction – a feedback loop of corruption, Caul speculated. *It draws current from the planet's taint and in turn galvanizes its host to greater virulence. Query: which is the host and which the parasite? Is this a symbiotic conjunction?*

The anomaly had first manifested in the sky twenty-seven days ago, invisible to the naked eye, but triggering dozens of Caul's sensor stations. He had failed to determine its origin, but it was growing stronger with every passing hour and building towards a Category Gamma warp storm. Could his fortress withstand a deathworld infused by the immaterium?

The magos redirected his focus to a servo-skull patrolling the perimeter of his base and trained its gaze upon the immense structure he had forged around his explorator ship nearly two centuries ago. The Iron Diadem was a tangle of manufactories and silos mounted upon a stalk of titanium pipes rising from a vast lake. Over the decades Phaedra had assailed the refinery with a tirade of spore

tsunamis, silt quakes and hurricanes, yet its lamprey grip on the lakebed had never faltered.

Unfortunately the imminent catastrophe was not one of Phaedra's paroxysms.

Phaedra. Even the name sounded subtly poisonous to Caul. He had remained here only to dissect and codify the planet – *the enemy* – until leaving had ceased to be an option. During his sojourn he had crossed lines that some would call heretical.

But my purpose has always been pure, Caul reasoned. *This world exemplifies the degeneracy of the flesh. Its jungles are an inconstant, decaying riot of rage entwined with lust. Know thy enemy and decode it well.*

Yet his crusade might soon become untenable, and if he were lost then research of incalculable value it would be lost with him. That was unacceptable.

<Initiating inload enhancement protocol Kappa,> the magos intoned.

A swarm of delicate mechafilaments uncoiled from his cowl, swaying as they trawled the data-charged air like the feeding tendrils of a cuttlefish – filtering, filing and cross-referencing readings from across his territory, devouring parameters of light refraction, particle density, atmospheric pressure, gravitic arrhythmia and scores of other variables to fuel the ferocious engine of his mind. Caul tore through it all in seconds, slicing and splicing facts into possibilities, rejecting or promoting those possibilities to probabilities, then cycling back to hone the most promising towards a single categorical *certainty*.

It was a sublime effort, yet the answer eluded him like some slippery, chimerical prey.

<Inconclusive.>

Caul withdrew his mechafilaments and intoned the seventh mantra of Algebraic Concord to dispel the spectre of frustration. Every time he tried to determine when the storm would break, his conclusion was different. Sometimes he settled on months, sometimes weeks, but just as often it was days or even decades. The degree of inconsistency invalidated every answer. Even for a magos the variables were too byzantine – too *chaotic*…

I will not make the attempt again, Caul vowed, but it was an oath sworn only to himself, not the Omnissiah, for he knew he would break it as he had done countless times before. It was the same obstinacy that had chained him to Phaedra – an almost pathological refusal to accept imperfection.

<Timeframe irrelevant/apogee event inevitable.>

My research will be preserved. This time the oath *was* for the Omnissiah because Caul intended to honour it.

Submerging himself in the datasphere, the magos cast his consciousness further afield, leaping from one relay beacon to the next, riding the datastreams that shadowed Phaedra's labyrinthine waterways, seeking the holy warriors he had entrusted with his fate.

The convoy of skitarii war galleys sliced through the slime-encrusted rivers of the Coil in orderly procession, their massive steel watercogs labouring against the ooze while their chimneystacks wheezed black smoke. The five vessels were identical in size and unmistakable in intent, their blunt, cannon-crowned prows and crenellated gunwales giving them the appearance of floating fortresses. Each had set out from the Iron Diadem bearing a maniple of one hundred skitarii warriors and their sacred war machines, together with a support crew of enginseers, bonded ratings and deck servitors. Still the voyage had taken its toll on their numbers. Some had been snared by Phaedra's lazy, lethal wiles – an incautious rating beheaded by overhanging razorvine; another snatched by a wyrmtree

lurking on the riverbank, and an engine crew lost to an infestation of swarming skrabs. And more had fallen to the true enemy, whose stealthy hit-and-run attacks had grown more frequent as the convoy neared its destination. The losses were regrettable, but sure to happen. Most importantly, they had been planned for.

Standing on the elevated observation deck of the leading vessel, Alpha Phaestus-IR01 swept the riverbank with his long-barrelled rifle. The wooden stock of the antique weapon was wedged into the crook of his right arm in the age-old posture of a marksman as he scanned the jungle. Night had fallen, but his ocular omnispex transformed the bioluminescent snarl of fungi and petrified coral into a high contrast abstraction – the white heat of scurrying animals and the passive grey of vegetation. It was all irrelevant noise to the veteran skitarius. He was searching for the shrewd motion of sentient life. Enemy life.

His bonded war brethren were deployed around him at equal intervals, each covering a different watch vector. An ignorant observer might have mistaken the skitarii rangers of Squad Irridio for identical clones or stylised simulacra of men. All wore hooded crimson robes over interleaved segments of dark armour, hiding their features behind jutting rebreather masks and bulbous goggles that gave them a pitiless insect-like cast. They had apparently suffered the same catastrophic trauma to their lower limbs, for from the knees down every warrior's legs had been replaced with sculpted titanium augmetics. Only initiates of the Cult Mechanicus would have recognised this stigmata as the Red Planet's due, a hallowed rite of passage shared by all skitarii. They were holy warriors so it was only fitting that they strode the land with the purity of the Omnissiah to guide their path.

Especially a land as corrupt as Phaedra.

<Contact: 1 unit/unidentified. Coordinates follow…> Ixtchul-IR04 reported from his position in the ship's watchtower. To outsiders the ranger's signal would have sounded like a random burst of static, but to his fellow cyborgs it was a data-rich message. Three acknowledgments pinged back instantly, then seconds later a fourth – Brok-IR05, always the slowest of the squad. Alpha Phaestus-IR01 felt no rancour, for this wasn't a lapse on his subordinate's part; Brok-IR05 was simply the least of them, which was why he was designated the squad's '5'.

Every cog has its consecrated place in the machine, he reflected.

His vision flickered momentarily as he interfaced with the lookout's optics, then the dark riverbank was replaced by an eagle-eye view of the river ahead. Through Ixtchul-IR04's eyes he saw a thin figure waiting on a coral outcrop. It stood in a pool of light cast by a saucer-like construct hovering above its head like a diminutive spacecraft. A pulse of pious revulsion spiked the Alpha's brain at the sight of the alien machine, for though it was barely four handbreadths in circumference and appeared to be unarmed the drone's mere existence was an abomination.

It is a mockery of the Omnissiah's sacred engines…

With an almost physical effort Phaestus-IR01 switched his attention from the machine to its master. The alien was motionless save for a slight billowing of its frayed, ankle-length robe. Its arms were crossed from shoulder to shoulder as if in repose, but its black eyes were open wide and seemingly staring right back at him, inscrutable and aloof. There was no mistaking its cobalt skin and the flat wedge of its cadaverous face: *tau*.

The long war between the Imperium and the Tau Empire for Phaedra had bled out years ago, but the last of the aliens were still here, abandoned alongside their Imperial counterparts when the conflict drifted elsewhere. Bitter and desperate, neither side fought for anything beyond survival anymore.

Only the holy warriors of the Iron Diadem still walked a true path.

Objective Skysight… The cohort's mission designation flashed across Phaestus-IR01's awareness with the insistence of pain. He neither knew nor cared what Objective Skysight actually *was*. It was enough to know that his magos demanded it and the xenos obstructed it. The rest would become clear in time.

<Initiate protocol Aegis,> Alpha Phaestus-IR01 transmitted to the bridge. Moments later the silent alarm was broadcast across the entire convoy, alerting sentries and rousing the dormant from their meditations. Engines fell silent and the war galleys drifted to a halt. The clatter of metal feet and the hum of activating weapons from the deck below told him that the skitarii vanguard had been summoned to their posts.

As he climbed the steps to the lead vessel's prow bulwark, Alpha Viharok-TH01 felt his mind recalibrating itself to battle mode. The abstract geometries spun by his meditation shift were fading beneath a flood of diagnostics from his squad and the strategic topography calculated by the cohort's Alpha Primus. The neural cogitator fused to his brain stem collated the data, and he frowned as Squad Thorium's tactical efficiency registered at 88.42 per cent. It was an acceptable performance, but acceptable was *unacceptable* to Viharok-TH01. The unit's tactical algorithms would require refinement.

My vanguard will demand perfection, he knew. *It is our duty to the Machine-God.*

'The Omnissiah purges!' Squad Thorium chorused as Viharok-TH01 joined them. Their bulky armour was painted black and striated with dirt and corrosion, their tabards stained with promethium and threaded with oxidised metal bolts and techno-fetishes. All wore sweeping sallet helms of dark iron inlaid with bronze and daubed with their squad rankings. Insects buzzed about them, drawn to the glow of their rad guns, only to pop or dissolve in the baleful energies that suffused the weapons.

Our presence alone brings death to the unclean, the Alpha vanguard observed with pride. *We wear the purifying fire of the Omnissiah like an invisible cloak.*

He frequently led his squad on absolution pilgrimages. They would march into the jungle chanting the Nine Canticles of Decontamination, leaving only stubborn death in their wake. The paths they walked became enduring scars across Phaedra's skin, for even her most tenacious fungi withered in their footprints. The vanguard bore a sombre blessing, yet they welcomed it despite the ravages it had wreaked upon their own flesh, for under their proud helmets the men of Thorium were cadaverous grotesques devoid of hair or teeth.

But they still had their strength. Nothing else mattered.

Catching sight of the waiting tau, Viharok-TH01 unslung his radium carbine and thumbed the power stud, offering its spirit his fealty. Like many skitarii, he revered his weapon as his master, believing his hands were merely tools to aid its will. In his case there was some truth to it, for his rifle was a priceless relic whose spirit had been stirred to permanent wakefulness by the magos. Such 'cognis' weapons hungered to fulfil their purpose, actively compensating for small flaws in a wielder's aim.

'By thy will I ignite thee and charge thee well,' Viharok-TH01 chanted in jagged lingua technis, leading his squad in the Seventh Litany of Liquidation.

<In thy light I smite with thee,> they reciprocated in reverent feedback.

'For thy spite I will slay or die for thee,' Thorium's Alpha concluded.

Neither fear nor doubt were functioning variables in the skitarii psyche. Where a common man might feel anxiety, the skitarii experienced only anticipation.

Phaestus-IR01's vision glitched again as the cohort's Alpha Primus joined the sensory chain to the watchtower. All Alphas could access their squad members' optics at short range, but the Primus could interface with every warrior in the force, even across great distances. Phaestus-IR01 held his breath reverently as he felt her icy assessment of the xenos.

<Positive identification: tau water caste,> the Primus relayed over the command band. <Threat level: indeterminate.>

'I bear no weapons,' the alien called, as if in answer. Its voice projected confidence, but Phaestus-IR01 detected a tremor of tension. 'My designation is Por'ui Ybolyan,' the tau continued. 'I am authorised to facilitate a conciliation with the respected warriors of the honoured Omnissiah.'

<Xenos morale broken,> Ptoltec-IR03 chittered from Phaestus-IR01's left. The ancient cyborg's contempt saturated his code with static. <We will attain their stronghold in 9.25 hours. Purgation imminent.>

'The enemy is most dangerous when it is cornered,' another ranger rasped through the rebreather pipe wedged in his throat. While skitarii rebreathers didn't prohibit mundane speech they certainly *inhibited* it, making flesh-speak a labour that many shunned; Rho-IR02 clung to it with obscure stubbornness. It was rumoured that the former Guardsman hadn't embraced the Omnissiah willingly, but his brothers knew that was irrelevant now, like every echo of their past lives.

'The losses our respective forces have sustained in this conflict are without purpose,' the tau envoy continued, extending open hands to the warships. 'The Wintertide Cadre and the Iron Diadem are the last significant forces of order on this malignant world. For the Greater Good of both our factions I urge you to cease this aggression.'

It was difficult to read the expressions of a tau, most of which lay in the precise dilation of the mouth and nostril slits, but sickness was a universal trait and Phaestus-IR01 had no doubt that Por'ui Ybolyan was *very* sick. Tau didn't sweat, but the rash of boils and weeping lesions mottling this one's face looked like splinterskin to him. He'd lost enough brothers to Phaedra's blights to recognise the signs – xenos, human or post-human, the flesh was always easy prey to her if left unsanctified.

'If you will communicate your grievance I shall endeavour to mediate an accord,' Por'ui Ybolyan offered. 'However…' The alien's words exploded into violent coughing and a perceptible shiver ran through its emaciated frame.

How is this creature still standing? Phaestus-IR01 wondered. *It isn't even one of their warrior caste.* He expected the retching tau to topple from its perch, but the coughing fit passed and when it spoke again its voice was steady: 'However, be advised that further incursion into tau territory will not be tolerated.'

<Contact: unidentified/west bank. Coordinates follow…> Rho-IR02 reported, slipping into code when precision was required.

Phaestus-IR01 switched to his comrade's viewpoint and caught a hint of movement on the riverbank. He crossed to Rho-IR02's position and squinted with a lidless eye, triggering the magnification mode of his omnispex. Was there a humanoid figure crouched in the pixelated skein of the jungle? His rifle trained on the spot as if of its own accord, but he urged it to patience as he relayed the sighting to the ship's nexus. Another alarm pulsed silently through the cohort.

'They're watching us,' Rho-IR02 said.

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