

A detailed miniature of an Iron Devil, a heavily armored and weaponized Imperial Guard vehicle. The model is primarily dark red and black, with intricate mechanical details and glowing blue energy effects. It features a large, multi-barreled gun on its right side and a smaller, glowing blue weapon on its left. The background is a blurred, industrial setting with bright light sources.

WARHAMMER
40,000

AN ASTRA MILITARUM SHORT STORY

IRON DEVIL

C L WERNER

The image is a cover for a Warhammer 40,000 short story. It features a large, imposing Iron Devil, a type of Imperial Knight. The Iron Devil is primarily dark red and black, with intricate mechanical details. It has a large, multi-barreled gun mounted on its right arm, which is extended forward. The background is a hazy, industrial or battlefield setting with some blue light effects. At the top, the 'WARHAMMER 40,000' logo is prominently displayed in a metallic, jagged font. At the bottom, the title 'IRON DEVIL' and the author's name 'C L WERNER' are written in large, bold, white letters. The overall tone is gritty and futuristic.

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Iron Devil – C L Werner

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An Extract from ‘Ciaphas Cain: Choose Your Enemies’

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IRON DEVIL

C L Werner

The crump of artillery, the shriek of rockets and the murderous rattle of heavy stub guns melded into a single thunder of violence as the enemy assaulted our position. The treads and tyres of the advancing orks ripped at the dunes as they howled across the desert.

Against the onslaught of the orks, the four hundred men of the 267th Cadian Infantry Regiment retaliated with everything we had. Krak missiles slammed into the carriages of vicious wartrakks, tossing them through the air in burning twists of wreckage. Plasma guns blazed into the ugly hulls of battlewagons, slicing through the crude armour plating to vaporise the mobs of brutish aliens packed onto their decks. The sharp snap of lasguns rang from every corner of our position as we tried to blunt the rush of alien infantry swarming behind their crude machines.

Then, from the left flank, what I had dreaded most came to pass. ‘They’re through! They’re out of the sand!’ The cries echoed across the regimental vox. The howls and roars of the orks as they came lunging up onto the plateau added a still more bestial and savage tonality to the violence.

‘Withdraw!’ I ordered, signalling the regiment to fall back to the ring of bunkers that formed our final line of defence. The troops of the 267th began to detach themselves by squad and platoon, extracting themselves from their forward positions in a remarkable display of efficiency and discipline. Even in the very face of their inhuman enemy, they were acquitting themselves as befitted men of Cadia.

‘Fall back to the bunkers!’ I repeated, but I almost choked on the words. A dark pall had spread across the battlefield, an atmospheric blemish that seemed to spread with cancerous rapacity. I knew that phenomenon, as did every man in

my command.

‘Cinder-fall!’ the cry went up. Men began to race for their bunkers, seeking the protection of those thick titanium walls against the malignant desert storm that was about to engulf the plateau. The rearguard, those maintaining the forward positions, held their ground, appreciating that they were dooming themselves to inescapable death but refusing to risk the lives of their comrades by disengaging from the advancing orks.

‘Captain Drakkan, you need to get to the bunker,’ my adjutant Sergeant Vane advised me when I lingered to watch the rearguard defend their line. Firmly, Vane turned me about and hurried me to the bunker.

‘Sir, the cinder-fall is liable to hit us any second,’ Corporal Huller, my vox specialist reported as I dashed inside the bunker. Vane dragged the heavy door close with the help of two Guardsmen. As the portal slammed shut, it sent a dull boom through the bunker. I couldn’t shake the eerie sensation of being walled up inside my own tomb.

‘These walls will resist the storm,’ I told my men. ‘The Ad-Mech has tested these alloys against just such conditions.’

Outside, the sounds of guns and artillery were becoming muted, drowned out by the loud, elemental roar of the storm. Faintly, the howls and roars of the orks could still be heard. After a moment, the alien voices rose in grunts of pain and terror. The cinder-fall had struck in earnest now and the greenskins were discovering that their greatest obstacle in conquering the planet Sanzu wasn’t the Imperial Guard, but the ghastliness of the world itself.

‘The storm will finish them,’ Huller asserted.

Vane looked anxiously at the walls of the bunker, listening to the raging tempest outside. ‘Let’s just pray it doesn’t finish us too.’

It was two solar cycles before the toxicity levels outside the bunker were reduced enough that we could dig ourselves out.

The heavy titanium roof hatch was our only means of egress; the shifting sand had all but entombed the rest of the bunker. My adjutant wrenched the portal open by main force and I followed him up into the orange glow of Sanzu’s daylight. Sergeant Axis Vane was a burly, grox-necked brute of a man, a veteran with more than thirty years in the 267th. The claw of a tyranid beast on Iolas IX had torn away most of his right shoulder and the augmetic replacement sometimes pained him if he put too much strain upon it. I was quite indebted to Vane – the claw that had ripped his shoulder could just as easily have taken my

head.

The sight that greeted our eyes was as bleak and desolate as anything I had ever seen. The long line of bunkers and tank emplacements was virtually obliterated, buried beneath tons of sand and dust. Here and there a roof hatch disturbed the dunes. Otherwise there was no trace of our fortifications. Of the orks, of that titanic armada of beasts and machines, only the corroded bulks of a few of their biggest constructions remained – reduced to little more than shapeless mounds of pitted metal by the cinder-fall’s caustic wind.

On Sanzu, a world scarred by the craters of a millennium of mineral exploration, a planet with its soil diseased and polluted by industrial run-off, the deserts of the Blight were especially feared. Great storms periodically raged across the trackless waste. A cinder-fall was composed not of dirt and sand, but toxic grains of pollution. Swirling and mixing in the violence of the storm, the pollutants became a tide of burning acid. Centuries of these storms had obliterated entire hive cities. Only a few hours had served to wipe out nearly every sign of the battle that had been fought here.

‘Sanzu’s biggest graveyard,’ Vane said as he scowled across the sand dunes that now covered the entire plateau.

‘The orks didn’t get past this point,’ I said. ‘The dead can rest knowing their sacrifice wasn’t futile. It’s by the grace of the Emperor that the cinder-fall came when it did.’

Vane gestured to the closest of our neighbours. The crack in the bunker’s roof was easily apparent, the result of an ork cannon. ‘The greenskins knew the only protection they could find was our bunkers. ‘It’s by the Emperor’s grace that they didn’t try to crack open our bunker and crawl inside.’

I turned to the soldiers climbing out from the cramped confinement below to join us on the roof. My gaze settled on the vox operator. ‘Corporal Huller, have you been able to raise anybody?’

‘There was no response to my hails,’ Huller answered. ‘The metallic sediment stirred up by the cinder-fall will make it hard to transmit any distance...’

‘Get back below and keep trying, corporal,’ I told him. ‘I want to know if we still have men out there.’

Vane waved his hand at the nearest bunker. ‘If we do, they aren’t in there, sir. Look at the sand spilling down into that hole. When these storms hit, the dust settles into the low spots. Any bunker the orks managed to crack open won’t have anything inside that’s still alive.’

‘Guardman Weir,’ I called to the trooper who had been entrusted with

stewardship of the regimental maps. The soldier hurried forwards and handed the sealed canister over to me. Unscrewing the top, I removed each map and made a careful study of it. I could feel the eyes of my men on me, expectant – wondering if it was hope or doom that was written on those maps.

‘We can’t stay here,’ I said, raising my voice so that all of my men could hear me. I gestured to the almost-buried roof upon which we stood. ‘One more storm and we’ll be buried so deep a Titan couldn’t dig us out. Without reliable communication to headquarters, waiting here to be lifted out isn’t an option either.’

‘What are your orders, captain?’ Vane asked.

‘We do what the men of the Imperial Guard have done since the God-Emperor walked among mortals,’ I told my soldiers. ‘We march. If we strike out to the east, we should come upon a mineral outpost within eight solar cycles. I want this fortification stripped of ration packs, water flasks and as much man-portable ordnance as we can carry.’

‘Ordnance, sir?’ Weir asked.

Vane snorted with a derisive laugh. ‘You want to trust that the cinder-fall buried all the orks? Because I don’t. Anything that made it through the storm is probably armoured like the engine core of a battle-barge, so get those krak mines in the sub-stores. We’ll establish a rotation on who gets to lug them around, but I don’t want a single one left behind.’ He cast his fierce gaze across the troopers. ‘Get moving, you dogs!’ One bark from the sergeant had the men clambering back down into the bunker.

‘I’ll keep these,’ I told Weir as he waited to recover the map canister. ‘You’ll have enough to carry.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Weir said, snapping a salute and hurrying down into the bunker.

‘It’ll take more than a dust storm to make them forget their discipline,’ Vane said.

I stared out towards the eastward horizon. Even with magnoculars, I could see nothing but the shifting dunes of the Blight. ‘That’s good. Because a lot more is going to be asked of them. The desert has no mercy in it. It will forgive no mistake. It will punish every error.’

‘Captain,’ Vane asked, following my gaze. ‘Exactly how far is this outpost?’ The question was so dire that he could only voice it in a whisper. ‘It’s more than eight days away, isn’t it? That’s why you’re keeping the maps. You don’t want anyone to know.’

I nodded. ‘Ten days is about the limit for how far we can get with the water we

can carry. That outpost is at least twelve days' hard march. But there's something between us and the outpost, about eight days from here. It's just a mark and a number on the map, but it's something man-made,' I said. 'Whatever it is, I'm gambling it has some source of water.'

'The men will march all the harder if they think there's a living outpost at the end of the line,' Vane said. 'Discipline and duty will carry a Guardsman until he drops, but a dash of hope will push him even further.'

'At any rate, we'll have nine, perhaps ten days before the men start to lose faith,' I stated.

There were thirty-eight of us when we set out from the 267th Regiment's graveyard. The staff within my command bunker and a group of survivors who emerged from one of the frontline bunkers. Thirty-eight men – all that was left of a regiment of four hundred.

'You live by the mercy of the God-Emperor,' Sergeant Vane barked at the troops. 'Do not forget that. He has spared you for some purpose, and by all the primarchs, I will see that you fulfil that purpose! Now march, you dogs!'

March we did, over the bleak wastes of the Blight. Across shapeless dunes of shifting sand, yard by yard we marched. Sand filled our boots, slithered into our clothes and hair. The rebreathers we wore to filter out the carcinogens of Sanzu's smog became foul with dust, requiring frequent purification with our precious, dwindling supply of water.

We marched in three-hour stretches, trying to keep to the tops of the dunes so that we could be afforded the best possible view of the terrain ahead. The polluted atmosphere with its traces of oxidised metal made any navigation impossible. The only dependable reference was the vicious sun itself – keeping dawn before us and dusk behind us was our only guide through the desert.

Three days we marched through the desolate monotony of the dunes. The men were holding up as well as could be expected, but the question of water was becoming one that couldn't be ignored. Worse, our progress had been impaired by frequent earth tremors. The dunes we marched upon would crumble beneath our feet as the seismic spasms rumbled through them.

On the fourth day, an especially violent quake set the dunes to shifting. In the midst of the rumble, a terrific shriek tore at us. Stumbling up onto my feet, I could see a Guardsman named Geiner being sucked down into the sand. Try as he might, he couldn't manage any kind of purchase to pull himself free from the sucking pit that had opened beneath him.

‘Geiner!’ Weir shouted. Vane caught the soldier before he could make the mistake of falling into the pit himself.

‘Don’t be stupid! Use your rope!’ Vane ordered. He reached to Weir’s belt and removed the coil of rope the soldier carried.

Keeping to the semi-stability of the dune, Vane threw the coil of rope down to Geiner. The trapped Guardsman missed the sergeant’s first cast, but on his second throw, Geiner’s hand caught the rope.

At that point, Geiner’s screams became shrill and ghastly. Instead of pulling himself up the line, he simply flailed about, his hands slapping at the sand.

‘Drag him out!’ I bellowed at the men. ‘Geiner! Try to get that rope around yourself!’

His face contorted in unspeakable agony, Geiner managed to get the rope tied about his chest. It was a tribute to his training, to his fidelity to discipline, that he didn’t scream again until the rope drew tight. When he did, bloody flecks accompanied that scream, spilling across the sand.

‘Help me pull him out!’ Vane shouted, half a dozen troopers rushing to catch hold of the line and render him aid.

Geiner’s screams grew more intense as he was slowly drawn from the sand. As his torso started to pull clear, bloody splotches appeared on his kit.

‘He fell into a pocket of pollutants!’ Huller gasped.

As the doomed Guardsman was dragged upwards by his comrades, Geiner’s sorry state was ever more apparent. His uniform had been burned clean through, his flesh raw and bloody, white bone poking out at hip and thigh. The corrosive sludge could be seen continuing its ravenous destruction, sizzling and steaming against his body.

Before he had been dragged more than a few feet from the hole, Geiner’s screams stopped. He looked straight up at the men striving so valiantly to pull him free. With a bloodied hand, he undid the knot tied about his waist and let himself slip back into the pit.

‘Geiner!’ the men who had struggled so to rescue him cried out.

‘We could have saved him,’ Weir muttered as the doomed man sank from view.

‘No, we couldn’t,’ I corrected him. ‘He knew that. If we’d pulled him out, he would have died anyway.’

‘More to the point, some of that corrosive sludge eating him might have got onto us,’ Vane said. ‘Geiner didn’t want to risk that.’

‘The Emperor protects,’ I said, staring down into the pit. The quiet prayer was taken up by the men around me.

The grisly death of Geiner was eclipsed the very next day by worse misfortune. A tremendous explosion ripped through our ranks as we marched. A plume of dust and debris billowed fifty feet into the sky. At the root of that plume was trooper Doran, or at least the splotch of scorched ground where he had been standing. The blast that had taken him had obliterated him completely, only the burns and gashes in the six men who'd been close to the explosion allowed me to piece together what had happened.

'The krak mine Doran was carrying,' I said. 'Its arming mechanism must have been triggered.'

'That breeze this morning as we marched in the shadow of the dunes!' Vane cursed. 'There must have been just enough corrosive particles in it to filter down through some fault in the casing and eat away at the wires inside.'

The troops heard Vane's grim theory. Those carrying mines visibly paled, but made no move to cast aside the ordnance despite the risk. Soldiers to a man, they waited for their orders.

I looked across at the men who'd been injured in the blast. Three of them had suffered only minor cuts and a little singeing. The condition of the others would have been precarious even with a field hospital a few steps away. Out in the middle of the Blight, there was little cause for hope.

'We'll have to leave the mines,' I decided.

'Begging your pardon, sir, but what do we do if we encounter more orks?' Vane asked. 'The mines are the only heavy stuff we've got.'

'I can't risk losing this entire command to our own ordnance,' I said. 'Get two volunteers to carry the mines. Share the rest of their kit among the men. Any man here should be able to manage three or four mines that way. Have the volunteers fan out twenty yards on either side.'

'So if something does happen, it happens only to them,' Vane said before turning away. 'Alright, I need two strapping lads to play ammo wagon!' he bellowed as he moved among the men.

When we resumed the march six hours later, two of the most severely injured troopers had died. Far off on the flanks of our column, Vane's volunteers, Eich and Meer, shadowed us, each man labouring under the weight of four mines. The rest of the arsenal was left behind. As we marched towards the distant horizon, the abandoned mines exploded, detonated by the timed charge Vane had fitted to them.

'I hope we don't need those,' Vane grumbled, almost in a whisper.

I pretended not to hear Vane's remark. At that moment, I had the same sense of

foreboding.

Dawn of the seventh solar cycle finally brought an end to the monotony. As we crested yet another mound of sand, a sight greeted our eyes that awoke our flagging hopes.

‘An outpost!’ Weir exclaimed. The other men hurried to the top of the dune, adding their own excitement to Weir’s.

‘Is this what we’ve been marching towards?’ Vane asked me as we climbed up to join the rest of the command.

‘No, unless something slipped past the surveyors – or was purged from the records,’ I said.

‘We’re near the last of our water and one more earthquake is likely to have every man in this regiment...’ Vane began.

‘That’s my point, sergeant,’ I said. ‘The tectonic activity has slowed us beyond my worst projections. We should be days away from the site marked on the map. Instead we’ve arrived earlier. Whatever this place is, it isn’t anything on the map.’

‘Then what is it?’ Vane wondered.

It was a structure, to be certain. A massive, monolithic construction of blackened ferrocrete that loomed up from the desert like a mountain rising from the sea. A sculptural aquila some fifty feet wide stretched across the wall facing towards us. Even at a distance, the sculpture’s disrepair was evident. Great cracks ran through its wings, one of its heads had been sheared away.

‘The orks beat us here,’ Weir cursed.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ I said. ‘This damage looks to be much older. Those breaks look like they were caused by tremors, not xenos artillery.’

‘This outpost is derelict then?’ Huller asked.

I wasn’t about to kill the surge of hope that had revitalised my men. There was no need to tell them this complex was only a dot and a number on the map, a cartographer’s enigma. ‘We’ll have to go in and see. There will be some sort of natural water supply for a facility that big.’

‘Yes, sir!’ Huller snapped a smart salute before joining the rest of the troops in an energetic sprint down the side of the dune.

‘They probably stripped this place when it was abandoned,’ Vane said once the other soldiers were out of earshot. ‘The vox would be the first thing they took away.’

‘Just hope that the water was the last thing they thought of,’ I said. ‘If that place

was fed by some channel that they blocked up, none of us are going any farther.'

The approach to the facility took the rest of the day. Our impressions of it from a distance proved woefully inaccurate. Without any frame of reference, we had misjudged the size and scope of the installation. It was enormous, as large as one of the Caducadean Islands. A Navy frigate could have landed on the roof if its slope had been less steep. To call the construction megalithic in its proportions was to give only the faintest impression of its awesome expanse.

Each mile that brought us nearer the facility not only made its scope more apparent but also its ruinous condition. Sand was piled high about its exterior walls. To the damaged aquila could be added dozens of smaller breaches in its walls and holes in its roof. A railway outside the structure's doors quickly faded into the dunes, its corrosive-resistant alloys unable to defy the crawling sand.

'Abandoned,' Huller gasped, the word taking with it the last embers of hope he'd been clinging to.

Weir waved his hand at a black, snakelike ribbon that crawled across the ground towards the structure. 'Volcanic fissure,' he said. 'See the smoke rising from it? That's from the sand spilling down into it and being incinerated by magma. They must have deserted this place when the ground became too unstable.'

'Deserted or not, we're going to check it out,' I said. 'There *will* be supplies inside.'

None of the men questioned my claim that they'd find food and water inside the derelict structure. It was the only thread of survival they had to cling to now. The alternative was accepting a slow death by thirst in the Blight. Better a fragile hope than a certain doom.

A fissure in the cyclopean walls afforded us entry into the outpost. Like slinking rats, we scurried through the crack, eager to put the hateful Sanzu sun behind us. It was a sixty-foot drop to the floor below, but it was a small matter to drive pitons into the ferrocrete with an entrenching tool and fabricate a ladder down the inside of the wall.

As though each man were some immense spider, the troopers climbed down the wall. Eich and Meer held themselves in reserve outside the fissure. Once the room was secure, their burden would have to be lowered down.

Vane was the first to reach the floor. 'Some kind of manufactorum,' he observed as he broke the spine of a chemical illuminator and sent the glowing baton skittering across the floor. 'Look at those presses and ore-crushers. Some kind of mineral refinement went on here. Maybe heavy metals.'

‘Whatever went on here, it was a long time ago,’ Huller said. ‘Look at the corrosion on this conveyance rail. You can distort the frame just by touching it.’

‘That could have been because of a cinder-fall,’ Weir said. ‘A pinch of those pollutants could melt armaplas.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I told the men. ‘We need water and we need supplies. Spread out and secure this room. Then we can start looking for what we need.’

The Guardsmen began to fan out, moving among the machinery. They deployed in pairs as they made their reconnaissance, each man supporting the other. The flashes of their illuminators made a strange light play across the derelict presses and crushers, exposing the jagged tears and rents in their faces.

I kept Corporal Huller with me near the makeshift ladder we’d created. Six teams of two surveyed the room, the rest of the command waited above for the order to descend. My laspistol was held at the ready as I watched my men work their way around the room. An indefinable sense of tension held me, causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end. Not since the fighting on Iolas IX had I felt that sort of nameless unease, that sense of something malignant and alien lurking just out of sight.

One of the lights suddenly went out. An instant later there was the bright flash of a lasgun and an inhuman bleat of pain. The trooper who had fired, Lanz, cried out. ‘Captain! Grots!’

‘Xenos!’ I shouted, my voice cracking through the room like the bark of a boltgun. ‘It’s an ambush! Fall back! Establish a perimeter on the ladder!’

From where I stood, I could see the glowing flash of the illuminators as they bobbed back and forth, the men carrying them hurrying to retrace their steps. Several times there was the brighter flash and loud crack of a lasgun, but only infrequently did the shrill whine of a dying grot accompany those hurried shots.

‘Kill the lights!’ Vane bellowed. ‘The filth are using our lights to follow us!’

Guardsman Lanz’s scream of pain followed the sergeant’s order, soon accompanied by a revolting rending and tearing sound. The illuminator from the fallen trooper rolled across the floor, casting the ghoulish shadows of his killers against the side of an ore-crusher. Two small, wiry figures with stabbing knives and hacking blades perched on the Guardsman’s body. The next instant, one of the grots was sent flying, blasted by the lasgun of Lanz’s partner, Tarn. The other grot’s shadow vanished as the alien scurried back into the shadows.

‘Tarn! Fall back!’ I called to the trooper. As the man moved to withdraw, a furious blast sounded from behind him. Tarn was thrown across the floor, his chest a gory ruin where one of the grots had shot him.

More of the aliens began scurrying out from behind the machinery. Diminutive, weedy creatures with big heads, long ears and dangling arms, the grots wore oddments of clothing and kit. Belts of tools, strings of nuts and bolts, loops of wire and chain, these and a hundred other bits of scrap and junk hung from the aliens' bodies as they charged towards us. Some of the grots bore ugly pistols and crude shotguns in their hands, others had bludgeons made from pipes and knives crafted from sharpened slivers of steel. The creatures glared at us with their beady yellow eyes.

'Morka-morka-morka!' the things chanted as they lunged to the attack.

'Killing Tarn and Lanz has made them bold,' I observed. 'Fall back. Establish the perimeter and let the scum have it!'

'Kill the xenos filth!' Vane roared as he turned the troops around. The sudden about face of their enemy was a shock to the grots. The concentrated fusillade of las-beams struck down half a dozen of the creatures in the first instant. Twice that number were killed before the grots tried to flee back into the safety of the machinery.

'Clear them out with grenades,' I ordered as I sent a shot from my laspistol searing into the head of an escaping grot. 'We lose no more men to these vermin.'

'You heard the captain!' Vane bellowed. 'Frag grenades! Blast the rats out of their holes!'

The boom of grenades thundered through the old factory as the men began their purge of the gallery. As the grots were exterminated, their cries of pain and death grew fewer. At last, they ceased to cry out at all.

'The gallery has been purged,' Vane reported at length.

'Good,' I said. 'Have the rest of the command join us. We'll need every man to look for water in a place this big.'

Moving through the darkened corridors of the outpost, the gigantic size of the place continued to impress itself upon us. We crept through refineries that seemed like small cities. We prowled beneath coils of conveyor rails large enough that a company of Cadian Interior Guard could have marched across them without breaking step. There were kilns big enough to swallow tanks, their mouths gaping wide like the maws of heathen idols. Gigantic loading cranes, their fingers like the talons of a Titan, towered above smelters large enough to melt the hull of a gunship.

What we most desperately wanted, however, was what was proving the most

elusive. Water.

Instead, we continued to find the marks of recent destruction on a scale vast enough to leave its mark even in such mammoth surroundings. Some of it was old, visited upon the facility by the seismic activity of a fractured planet. Fissures snaked across the floor in several of the halls, some of the crevices running deep enough that the glow of magma cast a hellish light through them.

In other areas, the destruction was far more recent and deliberate. Scorched and melted machinery, victimised by some concentrated blast of heat more intense than a flamer. Gantries ripped and torn from their moorings, crumpled into twisted knots of steel by some malefic force. Sections of ceiling stitched by the fire of high-calibre solid-shot weaponry – boltguns or stubbers of almost unbelievable power. Far more than the mob of grots we'd encountered could have managed. This had the marks of ork-work.

'The more I see of their handiwork, the less I want to run into them,' Huller muttered as we slipped through the sprawl of a processing plant.

'Then let's find that water supply first,' I said. 'Otherwise...'

A clattering sound ahead arrested my attention. It was metallic, like the scraping of a knife against a whetstone only magnified a hundred-fold. Mixed into this was a dull whirring, the crackle of gears and servos in motion. The noise came from the side passage that connected to the far side of the plant. Cautiously, I deployed five men to flank either side of the opening. Designating ten more to hang back as a reserve under Sergeant Vane's command, I arranged the others in such cover as could be found that would afford a vantage of the passageway. Appropriating Guardsman Ivar's lasrifle and taking two men with me, I made my way towards the strange sounds.

A faint red glow illuminated the interior of the passageway, a strobing hazard light mounted in the low ceiling. Revealed by the pulsating light was a hulking shape, a grotesquery of pallid vat-grown flesh stitched to a mechanical armature. A humanoid torso rose from a framework of steel, spider-like legs. Where its left arm should have been, there was only the mass of a heavy bolter, a ponderous ammo hopper implanted into the shoulder and running along the thing's back. The right arm was a multi-jointed steel rod that ended in claw-like pincers. The thing's head was a mass of wires and fibre-bundles, snaking across its body to connect its brain to the assorted cybernetic components grafted to its body. A narrow visor stretched across the front of its face, replacing the thing's eyes. A spectral blue light crackled within the visor.

'A servitor,' I said as I recognised the thing. The soldiers with me breathed a

sigh of relief.

But our relief was premature. When it heard the sound of my voice, the servitor swung around in our direction. The blue light in its visor became a violent yellow. The heavy bolter shuddered as it pivoted towards us. The servitor's mouth flopped open, a blast of hostile-sounding binary issuing from the speaker implanted in its throat.

'Wolfram! Abortion code omega!' The cry came from a voice that sounded almost as inhuman and mechanical as the servitor's binary. From a small doorway set into the side of the passage, a robed figure scurried into view. At his command, the servitor, Wolfram, powered down its weapon and the light in its visor returned to a calm blue colouration.

'Very unwise,' the stranger muttered. 'You shouldn't get so close to an Octavian-pattern combat servitor unless it knows you.' The robed man paused a moment. 'Though I did give Wolfram orders to protect this doorway. It probably would have shot you anyway in that case. I don't think the magos would appreciate such a needless expenditure of ammunition. We have such strict protocols for such things, you understand.'

As he spoke, the robed man stepped further into the light. I could see the cog-wheel insignia of the Adeptus Mechanicus sewn into the breast of his clothes. The face that projected from beneath his hood was disfigured by an array of cybernetics. Red lights glowed where his eyes had been; nose and mouth were absent and replaced by steel pipes and copper wires, pneumatic hoses and blinking diodes.

The man we had inadvertently stumbled upon was a tech-priest, a disciple of the Machine-God's cult.

'Praise the Ommissiah that you are here,' the tech-priest said. 'Though you should have come sooner. Yes, much sooner, captain. We sent a distress call days ago.' The man paused a second, tilting his head to one side. 'No, that isn't right. We didn't call for you. We decided that would be imprudent. You shouldn't be here.'

'But we are here,' I said, keeping my lasrifle trained on the combat servitor. 'The question is, where is "here"?''

'This is an Adeptus Mechanicus hermitage,' the tech-priest declared. 'Only those chosen by the magos to help him in his great experiment are allowed here.' An edge crept into his voice and he waved a pale, gnarled fist at me. 'You must leave here... and take the other one with you!'

'I am Captain Cyro Drakkan of the 267th Cadian Infantry Regiment,' I told the

tech-priest, not without some irritation of my own. 'I have thirty-two men with me. Our position was overrun and destroyed. We've been seven days on foot in the Blight. We need supplies and access to a vox-transmitter.'

'Seven days in the Blight?' the tech-priest mused. 'You are fortunate you weren't caught in a cinder-fall. Still, you can't be here. This is a hermitage. Only those the magos has sent for can stay here. You'll have to leave and take the other one with you.'

'What other one?' I asked.

'Why... the ork of course.'

The tech-priest's name was Vettius. He was an engineeer, one of a number of junior priests attached to Magos Olaus to help him in his research. The Adeptus Mechanicus had chosen this abandoned mining facility on Sanzu as an ideal location for Olaus' hermitage: near enough to the planet's spaceport at Eizo Station, yet remote enough from habitation that it might have been buried inside an asteroid at the far side of the Segmentum Obscura.

Vettius was cagey about revealing what kind of research he and his brethren were conducting, but he was more forthcoming with questions about water and food.

'I will see to your immediate needs, captain,' Vettius promised. The prospect of food and water, even such fare as would sustain the semi-mechanical tech-priests, was enough to make every man in the command groan with expectation. I tried to focus on anything else, any other topic, to keep from thinking about my own hunger and thirst.

'This is an immense facility,' I observed as Vettius guided us through the mammoth halls and factories of the plant. The engineeer's servitor trundled behind us, its spidery claws clacking and clattering against the ferrocrete floor. 'Your research must be exceedingly important to require such resources.'

'All knowledge is important, captain,' Vettius replied. 'Every question has a solution. If only we are wise and perseverant enough to find it. Truth, captain, is written in each riddle the Omnissiah lays before us.'

'Some of this machinery looks functional,' Vane commented as he passed the actuation terminal for a gravity feeder. The terminal was festooned with a parchment purity seal and its gears glistened with the sheen of recently applied sanctification oils.

'It is obscene to dishonour the spirit of any machine by neglect,' Vettius declared. 'It is the machine that sets man apart from lesser organisms. It is in the

machine that we gaze upon eternity, for the caprices of biology are never satisfied. Only the perfection of design and function embraced by the machine is unchanging.'

'Yet you are conducting research here to improve upon your machines,' I pointed out. 'Is that not the purpose of this hermitage?'

Vettius stopped in his tracks, his hooded head nodding, the proboscis waving from side to side. A mutter of low, indistinct speech dribbled from the speaker set into his throat.

'What's wrong with him?' Vane whispered.

'I'm not sure,' I confessed. 'I think maybe he has been isolated here too long.'

'He may be communicating with the rest of the tech-priests,' Huller offered. 'There might be a short-range vox-unit buried in all of his cybernetics.'

'If he's talking to his boss, then it can only be about us,' Vane said.

'We serve the same Imperium,' I reminded the sergeant.

Vane's tone darkened. 'When they replaced my shoulder, the tech-priest attending the medics kept pressing them to remove my arm. Not because it was damaged, simply to see if the machine-spirit of the prosthetic would harmonise with that of my new shoulder. You'll forgive me if I don't trust any of these cog-heads.'

Vettius stopped nodding and fixed me with the unblinking glow of his mechanical optics. 'You will follow me.'

'Corporal Huller is my vox specialist,' I told the engineer. 'He thinks you've been in communication with your brethren. If that is the case, then I want to speak with Magos Olaus. If he will supply us with water and food, then we can discuss removing this xenos infestation from your hermitage.'

'You will follow me,' Vettius repeated. 'I will take you where you need to go.'

The engineer was deaf to any attempts to get any further details out of him. With almost the same automated precision as his servitor, Vettius led us through the deserted facility, past the shadowy sprawl of disused boilers and abandoned stacks of ingot moulds. Our footsteps echoed through the emptiness, the merest whisper from one of the men booming through the silence like thunder. I could see on the faces of each of my men the same expression of haunted unease that I felt clawing at my guts. There was something uncanny – wrong – about this place, something beyond its long abandonment and the polluted desert just beyond its walls. It was something that wasn't sensed with the mind, but by something more primitive and primordial locked away deep in the genetic fabric of human biology. It was the ancient instinct of the hunted when it feels the

hunter is near.

‘The xenos, have you seen them?’ I asked Vettius.

‘Oh, yes. Quite distinctly,’ as he spoke, Vettius’ voice trailed off into another stream of semi-articulate muttering.

‘How many are there?’ Vane asked. Like the rest of us, he’d rejected the engineer’s intimations that there was only a single ork. The destruction we’d seen would have had to indicate a mob numbering into the hundreds.

‘Only one. Yes, only the one,’ Vettius said, breaking away from his muttering. ‘You have a significant numerical advantage over the creature.’

‘Can you put us into communication with your magos?’ I asked once more. ‘It is imperative that I formulate a plan of action with him.’

‘You really think that will help?’ Vane asked. ‘What if the magos is as... disordered as this one?’

‘Then that’s something we’d be better knowing now rather than later,’ I said. ‘It’s bad enough knowing there’s an ork force somewhere in here. If this “hermitage” is actually an asylum, that might demand an adjustment in our tactics.’

‘Vettius, you will lead us to Magos Olaus,’ I told the engineer.

Vettius bowed his hooded head. ‘I will take you to what you need. It is not far now.’ Turning away, the tech-priest strode into the industrial gloom of the factory, his servitor scuttling after him.

‘Keep an eye on him,’ I warned Vane.

‘I’ll keep both eyes on him,’ Vane said, hefting his lasrifle.

‘If it comes to it, shoot to wound. Vettius is the only one who...’ My orders to Vane were drowned out by a raucous tumult ahead of us. The sound of tortured steel, the metallic groan of bolts being ripped from ferrocrete moorings, the clamour of immense weight crashing to the floor – all of these erupted from the shadowy hall just beyond the factory we were in. Guardsmen cried out in alarm as the ground beneath their feet shuddered.

‘Earthquake!’ I shouted. ‘Find something solid and get under it!’ Whatever havoc the tremor was causing in the next gallery, the machinery in this one was proving stable.

‘It’s like giant footsteps!’ Weir cried out.

‘Get to cover!’ Vane cursed the soldier, pushing him in the direction of a steel stairway. The damage of Weir’s observation was already done. Men froze into place for a moment, shocked at the realisation that there was indeed a pattern to the shudders coursing through the floor, a pattern that was unsettlingly like

ponderous footfalls.

‘Get to cover!’ Vane repeated, rushing among the men and shoving them towards whatever protection was nearby.

‘Vettius!’ I cursed. ‘Get to cover!’ Leaving my men in Vane’s hands, I ran towards the engineer. The tech-priest and his servitor stood poised near the great steel shutters that served to separate the hall we were in from the one beside it. As I ran towards him, what I had imagined to be a blackened splotch of corrosion on the shutters proved itself to be a vast and gaping hole, a ragged tear in the metal sixty feet tall and half again as wide.

I froze for a moment, shivering as I recalled that other breach in the exterior wall. My mind rebelled at the connection, at the only reason the orks would have to create such similar openings. The floor beneath me continued to shudder, shivering with those steady tremors that were so like the impact of giant feet.

‘Here is the ork, captain,’ Vettius declared. ‘Please eliminate it quickly. The hermitage is only for Magos Olaus and those assisting him in his research.’

‘You weren’t leading us to water or the magos!’ I snarled at the engineer. ‘You led us to the orks!’

Through the tear in the shutters, a gigantic shape now lurched into view. It was barely able to press itself through the enormous hole it had gouged for itself. Towering to a height nearly five times that of a man, the thing was like a lumbering mountain of iron and steel. In overall form, it was like some mammoth metal ork, two stumpy legs jutting from the sides of a broad, bulky body. The head thrust directly from between the shoulders, a fanged lower jaw jutting outwards from the face. A skirt of armour plates hung from the belly of the machine, slapping against the stumpy legs with each step it took. The machine’s torso was a confusion of steel plates marked with crude glyphs and a riot of vents, pipes and hoses. As the thing moved, steam and smoke belched from a dozen exhausts scattered about its hull.

In lieu of arms, the hulking alien effigy had great mechanised claws. The leftmost of these giant steel limbs ended in a triangular array of vicious steel talons. The right arm was fitted with what might once have been an industrial loading claw looted from some conquered spaceport. All across the thing’s shoulders, a motley array of missile launchers and rocket tubes had been welded to the armour plate, exposed wires snaking away from each weapon to connect it to the metal monster’s head. From the breast of the machine’s torso, a murderous-looking gun array had been mounted. As the ork machine cleared the breach, the murderous mega-blasta shuddered and began to track towards me.

From vox-blasters set into the monster's belly, the feral roar of its pilot thundered.

'Morka-morka-morka-morka!'

Lunging behind an ore cart, I was just able to reach cover before the ork's guns began to chew apart the floor. I felt their impact against the cart as they pursued me.

The men opened fire, las-beams striking out from a dozen weapons as the hulking brute lumbered towards me. Grenades came sailing out from further back in the hall, arcing low as they hurtled towards the metal giant. The las-beams weren't hot enough to do more than blacken a few spots on the machine's hull, lacking the violence to pierce its armour plate. One of the grenades rattled against the thing's leg, bouncing away before detonating among some ingot moulds. A second detonated in mid-air, arrested by a weird blue energy burst that emanated from a whirling, gyro-like contraption mounted to the top of the monster's head.

The ork pilot bellowed again and the machine raised one of its huge arms. A stream of withering shots exploded from a battery of linked guns fitted to the framework of the thing's claw. Six men were cut down by the merciless barrage. Before the monster could fire again, I lobbed one of the grenades I was carrying at it. Like the one before it, my grenade was caught by the strange blue pulse, detonating before it could hit the machine. The brutish head, however, swung in my direction. I'd managed to divert its attention away from my men and back to me.

'Fall back!' I screamed at my men. 'Fall back to the last gallery!'

I put words to action, scrambling from my temporary refuge an instant before the ork's gigantic claw came punching downwards. The shriek of ripping metal raked across my ears as the talons ripped the cart apart. 'Fall back!' I shouted. 'Redeploy in the last gallery!'

The fire of the ork's guns pursued me as I fled, raking the floor behind me as I wove between the dusty boilers. I could hear the sizzle of the high-calibre rounds as they punched through the tanks and exploded against the ferrocrete walls behind them.

'Captain!' Vane's shout struggled to be heard above the ork's violence. 'Keep left! We've placed a mine in the middle of the floor!'

At the sergeant's shout, I spotted the explosive charge lying on the floor. With the ork in pursuit, I decided upon a bolder course than the one Vane suggested. Nerving myself, I spun around and snapped off a shot from my lasrifle at the

metal giant. Nothing was more guaranteed to arrest an ork's attention than a show of force.

'Morka-morka-morka-morka!' the vox-blasters roared. The floor around me became pock-marked as the ork's guns continued to chase me. The ground shuddered as the huge machine charged after me, the armoured skirt slapping against its stumpy legs.

Ahead of me was the mine. Throwing my body forwards in a desperate lunge, I cleared the waiting explosive and raced to gain the shelter of a recessed maintenance annex. An instant later, I found myself being thrust back into the corner of the tiny annex by Vane as the sergeant leapt in after me.

'Keep your head down and cover your ears!' Vane yelled. 'That thing's going to hit the mine!'

The detonation of the krak mine within the cavernous hall was deafening, the sonic vibration slamming into us like a physical blow. A burst of blinding blue light crackled around us, setting our hair on end with a powerful static charge. An instant later I was flung back against the wall, my rebreather pushed back against my face with such violence that I felt blood streaming from my nose. Vane slammed against the floor, his helmet bouncing against the unyielding ferrocrete.

Our heads were still swimming with the turmoil of the explosion, our ears ringing with the ferocity of the detonation. Nothing, I was certain, could have withstood such violence. Yet my confidence was shattered when I emerged from the annex. A deep, smouldering crater marked the floor of the factory now, dozens of boilers had been crumpled and twisted by the fury of the explosion, scaffolding sagged from the walls where it had been knocked free from its moorings. On the other side of the crater, the ork machine still stood, its hull dented in several spots, one of the plates hanging askew from its armoured skirt, but still very much operational.

'God-Emperor!' Vane cursed, his oath barely registering in my ringing ears.

'That pulse of blue energy must have detonated the mine before the ork could step on it!' I told Vane. 'At least it looks like the ork inside was shaken up by the explosion.'

'Then let's get out of here before it recovers!' Vane stated. I didn't need any further urging and followed the sergeant as he ran for the doors at the far end of the hall. 'The rest of the command dispersed in the next gallery,' he explained. 'They have orders not to come looking for us if we don't join up with them.'

We both turned as we felt the floor under our feet shudder. A low, bestial

grinding sound rumbled through the hall. I risked a glance over my shoulder to see the gigantic ork machine rumble back into life. Guns mounted in the frames of its clawed arms opened up, shooting in every direction. Rockets went sizzling away from the tubes on its shoulders to pulverise a row of boilers. An iris opened in the metal monster's left eye and from it a curled rod of copper topped by a bulbous nodule of some reflective alloy wobbled into view. For a moment, the weird device crackled with flashes of electricity, then a bolt of energy went streaking away from the strange weapon to zap a section of iron gantry into a molten, dripping mess.

The ork was firing in blind fury, uncaring what it destroyed so long as something suffered. Before the xenos could acquire more animate targets, Vane and I were scurrying into the previous gallery.

As I dashed through the service door leading into the gallery, I saw several of my men crouched behind archways and support columns, their guns trained on the immense loading gates that opened into the hall where the ork now held dominion. The punch of a lasgun might do little against such a monster, but Cadians aren't the sort to just lie down without a fight.

'Withdraw!' I called out to my men. 'That thing's playing ten kinds of havoc back there. While it's working out its frustrations, we have a chance to lose it in this complex.'

Guardsmen Weir managed to look disappointed as he pulled back from the column he'd been hunkered behind. 'We're letting it go?'

I laughed at the soldier's deliberate over-estimation of our tactical situation. 'Only until we're ready to face it. All the guns, armour and power are on the ork's side.'

'What's on our side?' Huller wondered.

'Brains,' I said. 'That thing can outshoot us, but it can't outthink us.'

At Vane's gesture, the men began to fall back through an old service corridor much like the one we'd found Vettius hiding in. The corridor would lead into another gallery of some kind, the enginseer had led us down enough of those to make such an expectation reasonable. The more twists and turns we put between ourselves and the ork, the more time we'd have to draw up some kind of plan to destroy it.

As I followed my men into the corridor, I could hear the roar of the xenos machine as it stomped its way towards the loading gates. I felt the impact of its claw as it attacked the gate from the other side, its huge talons beginning to peel away the steel plates covering the doors.

Feeling more than ever like some creeping rat, I scrambled down the corridor before the ork could batter its way into the gallery.

Time had become an abstract concept to us as we hurried from one gallery to another, trying to put ground between ourselves and the ork. It was easier – and more comforting – to reckon by distance. In our retreat, we'd canvassed four service corridors and half a dozen different assembly plants and processing centres. The men had kept a hard pace, right up until that final moment when I at last called a rest.

'Who did we lose?' I asked Vane once the command was bivouacked behind the thick steel shells of some ore loaders and sentries had been deployed.

'Guardsmen Laern, Tiero, Vallier and Degas killed outright,' the sergeant answered. 'Ivar from wounds during the retreat. Two men missing, Solk and Muir.'

'Solk was helping Muir,' Huller said. 'Muir had a piece of shrapnel in his leg.'

'They were lagging behind,' Weir said. 'We must have lost them somewhere along the way.'

'Damn that Vettius!' Vane growled, slamming his fist against the galvanised support strut of a suspended walkway. 'That cog-head led us straight to the ork!'

'You outnumbered it by a magnitude of thirty-three.' All of us spun around as we heard the eerie, mechanistic voice of the tech-priest. Vettius emerged from the shadow of a dilapidated rock smasher. The spidery Wolfram followed close behind its master. 'My calculations allowed only a small margin for failure.'

'Did your calculations factor in that your ork is strutting around in its own morkanaut?' Vane growled at the engineeer. As he started to raise his lasrifle, an angry bleat of binary rasped from Wolfram's speaker. The servitor's heavy bolter whined as the automaton rotated it in the sergeant's direction.

'Wolfram! Abortion code omega!' I yelled at the machine. The whine of the heavy bolter died as the servitor submitted to the command.

'Now, let's talk about your peculiar notion of odds,' Vane said, pointing his gun at the tech-priest.

'You won't get any answers by shooting him,' I told the sergeant.

'Maybe not, but it'll make me feel a lot better,' Vane growled back. Several of the troopers muttered in agreement with the sergeant.

'Let's find Magos Olaus first,' I said. 'If we're going to have any chance in the desert, we'll need the water and food the hermitage can provide.'

Mention of water came hard to the men, as if their terrible thirst needed any

reminders.

‘What if that thing has shot it up already?’ Weir groaned, echoing the worry that had occurred to each of us since encountering the behemoth Vane had dubbed as the morkanaut after the horrible snarls from its vox-blasters.

The question provoked another fit of muttering from Vettius. Huller came forward, listening intently to the subdued speech.

‘He’s talking to someone,’ the corporal stated. ‘He must have a short-range transmitter.’

‘Let’s stop playing games with this loon and talk to the cog-head in charge of this dump,’ Vane said.

‘And how do you propose we do that unless Vettius shows us where the magos is holed up?’ I asked the sergeant.

Before I could get an answer, Weir brought up an important observation. ‘Captain, we left the engineer back in that factory where we found the morkanaut. Now, I can understand how he might have slipped away in the confusion, but how did he find us again?’

Vettius raised his head, his muttering falling away as he returned his attention to us. ‘I followed you on the oculators,’ he said, pointing his pallid hand at a raven-winged cherub adorning a nearby pillar. ‘Those sculptures are more than mere ornamentation. Their eyes house complex observation engines. Key quadrants of this facility are monitored to ensure the privacy of the hermitage. My mind is synchronised with each oculator’s machine-spirit. What they see, I can see.’

‘That’s how you found us?’ I asked. ‘That’s how you knew where the ork was?’

‘Affirmative,’ Vettius said. ‘Except for a few places where the morkanaut has destroyed the oculators, I am cognizant of the entire hermitage. Magos Olaus entrusted me with maintaining the solitude of this facility.’

‘Then you know where the ork is now?’ Huller asked.

The engineer bowed his head. ‘It is headed in this direction.’

A cold chill swept through us as the impact of Vettius’ words struck home.

‘You led the morkanaut right to us!’ Vane roared. ‘You wanted to force us into another fight with it?’

The tech-priest seemed oblivious to how near death was to him at that moment. I wasn’t. ‘We still need him alive, sergeant,’ I cautioned Vane.

‘My conclusion was in error,’ Vettius told Vane. ‘Your organics are not at optimum efficiency. That has thrown my calculations into confusion. I hastened here to warn you that the ork is on its way so that you could avoid it, not fight it.’

In time with the tech-priest's delayed warning, the dreaded tremors began to shake the floor once more, those pounding impacts that presaged the lumbering advance of the morkanaut. The ferrocrete wall shuddered as something slammed against it from the other side. Faintly, the snarl of steel talons raking against stone reached our ears.

'It's trying to cut its way through the wall!' Weir cried.

'Trying? Hell! That thing will be through in a few minutes!' Vane cursed.

'We'll try to lose it again,' I told the men. 'We can't fight it. Not here.'

Vettius swung around. 'If you can get the ork to chase you, there is a tailing pond in the processing plant two galleries to the south.'

'Tailing pond? How deep is it?' I demanded.

'Deep enough to sink it. The pit hasn't been used since the factory was abandoned, so the surface is solid enough to support a man's weight,' Vettius replied. 'But it won't hold up against something as heavy as the xenos construct.'

With the wall already beginning to crack under the metal giant's assault, I seized upon the plan Vettius offered. Quickly, we retreated down the hall and waited for the morkanaut to batter its way through the obstruction. Our wait was not a long one. With a tremendous groan, the abused wall collapsed inwards and the machine lumbered into view. At Sergeant Vane's command, the troops fired on the ork. The las-beams crackled against a nimbus of green light that flickered around the hulking giant.

'It has an energy field!' Weir shouted.

'Just as well,' I said. 'The idea wasn't to hurt it, just get its attention.'

The futile attack had certainly roused the ork. As we withdrew from the hall, the morkanaut came charging after us, its guns chattering, rockets streaking from the tubes bolted to its shoulders. Machinery exploded under the impact of the warheads, Guardsmen Zander and Kohr were ripped to shreds when they were caught in the blast from one of the monster's missiles. Guardsman Anoth, wounded by a shell from the mega-blasta in the thing's chest, was crushed beneath the giant's ponderous tread.

Down one gallery, into a second hall, we fled, the morkanaut lumbering after us. While we scrambled over the fallen beams and scattered debris littering the abandoned halls, the hulking giant smashed and clawed its way through the obstructions, its vox-blasters roaring each time it pulverised some toppled pillar or rusted scaffold. At last, we reached the hall that held Vettius' tailing pond. Despite the engineeer's assurances, it was with a feeling of horror that I led the

way across the semi-solid scum of waste that covered the pit. Vettius sent his servitor scrambling across the side of the wall, Wolfram's spiky legs digging into the rock and propelling it onwards with a scuttling swiftness.

We had scarcely reached the far side when the morkanaut came bellowing towards us, the pilot's fierce cry roaring from its vox-blasters. Two more of my men were shredded by the monster's weapons before we had fled beyond the reach of its guns. The weird rod and orb emerged once more from the depths of the giant's eye, sending out a lance of crackling energy that reduced Guardsman Polus to a sooty smear against the surface of the pond. Bellowing once more, the morkanaut charged after us, descending into the pit by the rampway once employed by slurry-haulers and waste-wagons.

The instant it stepped out into the tailing pond, the metal monster sank, its great weight fracturing the veneer of stony scum and dragging it towards the bottom. Legs and armoured skirt vanished. Soon its chest was lost to view. The lower jaw sank beneath the black filth. Then the morkanaut's descent slowed. Tarry bubbles rippled all around its hull as the monster's arms rose from beneath the muck.

'It stopped sinking!' I snarled at Vettius. 'You said the pond was deep enough to sink it!'

Vettius muttered to himself a moment. 'The morkanaut's weight must have impacted the debris under it, pressed it into a state of solidity robust enough to support it.'

'The thing is still trapped, captain,' Huller said. 'It isn't getting out of there.'

'The pilot might,' Vane warned. 'There's a hatch on top of that thing's head. Take aim in case the ork inside tries to leg it.'

But the pilot had no intention of abandoning its iron devil. A grisly sucking sound slobbered up from the pit as the morkanaut's arms cleared the sludge. The limb that sported the loading claw thrust itself forwards. The next instant, there was a shriek of grinding metal as the claw shot out, stabbing into the floor beyond the pit. A heavy chain connected the wrist of the claw to the machine's arm. Groaning, a powerful winch set into the arm began to turn, gradually reeling in the chain. As the chain went taught, the morkanaut was dragged across the tailing pond.

'If it gets to the ramp on the other side, it'll pull itself out!' Weir cried.

Vane grabbed Vettius by his robe. 'Your trap's no good, cog-head!' he growled. He glanced aside as the servitor scuttled towards him. 'Abortion code omega,' he hissed at Wolfram.

‘Take us to Magos Olaus,’ I told the tech-priest. ‘Now, while the ork is busy pulling itself out of the pit.’

‘Our research is too important...’ Vettius began.

‘Your research is going to be blasted to bits by that ork. Have you thought about that?’ Vane snarled.

The sergeant’s remark set the engineeer shaking and muttering. At last, Vettius focused his optics on me. ‘I will lead you to the magos. His research is too important to be lost.’

It was clear why Vettius had been so reluctant to lead anyone back to the Mechanicus compound. The ork had already been there. The morkanaut’s weaponry had made a mockery of the compound’s defences. It had ripped and burned its way through armoured shutters and revetments. The pulped remains of the other tech-priest were strewn about like rag dolls. As the engineeer led us through the wreckage, his agitation only increased. When we entered a bunker-like laboratory at the core of the compound, he appeared at the verge of a complete breakdown. With a despairing moan, he prostrated himself before a bundle of bloody meat and smashed augmetics that was strewn across a bank of cogitator relays.

‘I’m guessing that’s Magos Olaus,’ I sighed.

‘If that’s the magos, then who’s he been talking to?’ Huller shuddered. Vettius had started muttering again.

‘Nobody who will do us any good,’ Vane said. He turned his back on the dead magos and began to make a closer inspection of the room. ‘They must have had something important here,’ he said. ‘Everything in this room seems to be focused on this dais.’

‘Leave that alone!’ Vettius cried, rushing towards the sergeant. ‘Wolfram! Engagement protocol epsilon!’

The servitor clattered forward, a surge of enraged binary crackling from its speaker. The automaton started to train its heavy bolter on Vane.

The sergeant smiled as he told the servitor, ‘Abortion code omega.’ He swung around and thrust his hand across the empty dais. ‘Don’t get your diodes in an uproar, cog-head. I don’t have to leave anything alone. It’s already gone.’

An undulating, metallic moan rose from the engineeer as he stared at the empty field. ‘It can’t be gone. The research is too important. It is illogical to postulate that the morkanaut knows it’s here.’

‘Captain, you don’t think that ork came here deliberately?’ Weir asked. ‘It’s just

hiding out from the desert, same as us.'

'Look at the way everything is smashed up in the rest of the compound,' I said, unsettled by where the evidence was leading. 'Yet we get in here and the only thing that's been damaged is the magos. The ork would have had to climb out of its machine to be that precise. No, it's clear it wanted something in here. What I want to know is what it took. What were you studying, Vettius? What was so important that the Mechanicus sent you to a place as forgotten as this?'

'Archaeotech, fragments recovered from a skeletal armature in millennia thirty-seven on the planetoid Sigma Oannes. For eight hundred Terran cycles it has been preserved by the Reliquary of Isauricus,' Vettius said. He bowed his head again, his pale hands folding together in a gesture of benediction. 'Magos Olaus, it is a supreme honour to be allowed to contemplate such a miraculous blending of design and function.'

'Contemplate that it isn't here, cog-head, and your magos is dead,' Vane snarled.

Vettius began muttering. 'Blasphemy. Cessation of functionality before completion of study is unacceptable. Peak performance efficiency must be maintained. Isolation without distraction from the purity of our research.' The engineeer's optics burned with a brighter light as he gazed at us. 'No trespassers in the hermitage.'

The engineeer's appreciation of reality was fast degenerating into confusion with the past.

'How many years do you think he's been here, focused on nothing but this thing they've been studying?' Huller wondered.

'Too many to stay sane,' I said. Patronisingly, I waved my hand at Vettius. 'We aren't trespassers. We are here to remove the ork invader so you can resume your research without interruption. We are to be issued water and food, then you are to assist us in developing a method of exterminating the ork.'

Vettius fixed his wandering gaze on me, trying to analyse my words. His inability to relegate events to their proper sequence spoke of some injury to his faculties. It was an injury I hoped might now prove useful to us. If the engineeer took my words to mean that we'd already been permitted into the hermitage by Magos Olaus...

'Elimination of the ork requires additional resources,' Vettius decided finally. 'That is why Magos Olaus allowed you here.' Even the last was rendered as a statement, accepted by the logic engine inside the tech-priest's head as the only excuse for our admittance to the hermitage.

‘Captain, we don’t have the weapons to stop that thing,’ Weir objected.

‘Then we’ll have to find the weapons,’ I said. ‘The tech-priests have maintained a lot of the machinery in this place. Maybe we can use that against the ork.’

‘Where would we even start?’ Huller scoffed.

‘Why don’t we ask cog-head,’ Vane suggested. ‘He’s the one tapped into every oculator in this place. I’m sure he can think of something if we ask him nicely.’

‘First, he gets us water and whatever gruel passes for food around here,’ I said. ‘Then we start asking about weapons.’

The control cabin of an immense magnetic grapnel overlooked one of the sprawling halls that characterised the gargantuan facility. Vettius, familiar with the machine’s controls and the exacting maintenance that had been performed to keep the grapnel’s machine-spirit appeased, had taken position up in the shack-like cabin. His servitor took up a guarding position on the gantry that attached the cabin to a spider-web of scaffolds that crossed and re-crossed the space high above the floor of the gallery.

Down below, I led half of my men in a cautious circuit of the industrial centre, moving among huge blocks of refined tungsten and titanium. As I felt another tremor roll through the building, I wondered again at what sort of catastrophe had struck this place and forced it to be abandoned in such haste that this final shipment of elements had never left the facility.

‘Relax,’ I told my soldiers. ‘It’s just the planet acting up. Not the morkanaut. Vettius will alert us if he sees the ork heading towards us.’

I said the last with more confidence than I felt. Accessing the oculators, the enginseer had a perfect view of this section of the hermitage. The question was simply whether he could be depended on to share that information. A Guardsman named Raff was up in the control box with him, ostensibly as my liaison to the Adeptus Mechanicus. Raff’s real duty, though, was to keep a close watch on our erratic ally.

‘Captain Drakkan,’ Vettius’ voice crackled over the regimental vox. ‘The xenos has appeared three galleries to the north. I do not think it is aware of our presence here.’

‘It will be soon,’ I said to myself. I had confidence in the plan I’d developed, but I knew the risks we were encouraging. ‘Sergeant Vane, take your men and extend an invitation to the ork.’

‘We’ll bring the morkanaut back here if we have to drag it,’ Vane voxed back. I could see the sergeant and the others emerging from the loading bay they had

been resting in. They'd armed themselves with weaponry drawn from the hermitage's stores, sporting an array of firepower that would have seemed formidable against a less monstrous foe. Missile launchers, lascannons, even a heavy bolter, the weapons were of an unusually compact design with limited ammunition capacity. Vettius had explained they were intended for combat servitors like Wolfram, but a few modifications had rendered them serviceable enough for our purposes. Rate of fire and accuracy weren't important. All I needed the weapons to do was make a lot of noise.

Tense minutes passed as Vane's patrol vanished through the service door into the adjacent gallery. Their progress through the facility was voxed back in brief, whispered reports. Then, across the vox came Vane's excited shout. 'Hostile located!' It didn't need the transmission to carry back to us the distant sound of exploding missiles or the chatter of the heavy bolter. The morkanaut's bellowing siren and the vicious response of its own guns rolled back to us from the other hall like the clamour of a distant storm.

'Get ready,' I told my troops and Vettius up in the control box. 'Pray to the God-Emperor the thing follows them all the way.'

It was one thing I didn't need to worry about. The chatter of the heavy bolter drew nearer, sometimes punctuated by the roar of an exploding missile and the whoosh of a lascannon. The weaponry we'd taken from the hermitage's stores was being put to good effect by Vane and the others. Deliberately provoking the ork, they were luring the xenos into the trap that had been prepared for it.

'Morka-morka-morka!' the bestial bellow of the alien rumbled from the vox-blasters mounted in the morkanaut's hull. I could see the tiny figures of my men as they fled through the service door into the hall. Thundering after them, the heavy impact of its feet shaking the floor, the morkanaut lumbered into view. It paused for a moment as it used its immense claws to rip wide the great steel doors that separated the two galleries. Then, through the tortured, twisted portals, the metal giant stomped its way down the hall.

'Now!' I cried. At my command, Vettius dropped the grapnel towards the morkanaut. With expert precision, he arrested the grapnel's descent before it struck the behemoth's protective energy field. Depressing a command rune, the engineer evoked the grapnel's own field, an invisible talon of magnetic force that reached through the ork's forcefield to grip the iron hull of its machine.

Like a fish spitted on the end of a spear, the morkanaut flailed and thrashed as the grapnel dragged it across the factory floor. Vettius manipulated the gigantic machine towards one of the loading bays where we had set half of our remaining

krak mines.

As the morkanaut was dragged towards the waiting mines, the defensive mechanisms built into it dispatched another of the eerie blue pulsations. In a tremendous explosion, the three mines detonated before the ork could be dropped onto them. It was precisely what I'd planned to happen.

The loading bay the ork was being dragged into had suffered terribly from earth tremors. Parts of the floor had already cracked and split, exposing a volcanic fissure that snaked its way beneath the facility. The mines had been laid face down, set so that their detonation would drive most of their destructive force into the floor itself. The intention was to expand the cracks created by the quakes. We were going to try to bury the morkanaut again, this time in a pit far deeper than the tailing pond.

The explosion shook the gallery, fracturing the floor and brutalising the superstructure. The roof of the bay came crashing downwards, the falling girders and plates smashing into the giant and driving it against the wall of the bay.

'It didn't fall in!' Weir cried out in bitter frustration.

'The mines split the floor, but not enough,' Huller groaned.

Across the bay, the morkanaut was employing its chain-blades to rotate itself against the wall. The rocket tubes bolted to its left shoulder had been flattened by its impact and smoke was billowing from the crushed muzzle of the megablasta mounted in its chest, but the thing's left eye was unharmed. The iris creaked open and the copper stalk of its energy projector wobbled into view.

Vettius and Guardsman Raff were running towards the door of the control cabin just as the morkanaut fired. The blast obliterated them both, reducing the men, the control box and the wall behind them into a bubbly smear of blackened slag.

'Morka-morka-morka!' the giant's vox-blasters roared. The morkanaut was employing its claws to bend and rip the girders that imprisoned it.

'Shoot the floor! Drop that damn thing into the fissure!' Vane was shouting at his men as he rushed towards the trapped morkanaut. The sergeant's heavy bolter gouged little craters in the tough ferrocrete. The missiles fired by two of the men with him had far more effect, ripping great holes in the floor and expanding the cracks and splits caused by the mines.

The ork responded in kind. The guns mounted in its huge arm shot down four of Vane's men while another zap from its grotesque eye dissolved Guardsman Carras. The brute hefted one of the girders trapping it with its claw and sent the huge steel beam crashing down. Vane and the other survivors retreated before the morkanaut's brutal assault.

As the machine freed itself, the morkanaut lumbered after them. Its immense bulk caused the weakened floor to crack still further, sending slabs of ferrocrete crumbling away into the fissure. The molten heat of the magma below sent weird vapours steaming up into the loading bay. Any moment, it seemed like the floor must give out and pitch the machine down into the planet's volcanic fires. Yet with a perverse stubbornness, the ground remained firm beneath the morkanaut as the brute advanced.

'Steull, give me your mine!' I snapped at the trooper holding one of our last mines. Taking it from him, I turned and started rushing towards the morkanaut. 'Weir, take the other mine and follow me! Keep the ork's attention off us!' I told the soldiers as I charged at the hulking monster.

Lasguns sent their beams stabbing out at the morkanaut, provoking little flashes of the green barrier field that protected it. Another fusillade erupted from the side of the bay and I could hear Vane barking commands to the handful of survivors from his patrol.

'We're not fooling it!' Weir shouted. 'The morkanaut's turning our way! We're not going to get close enough!'

'We have to!' I snarled back. 'It's our only chance!'

For Weir, it was no chance at all. Ignoring the puny fire from the lasguns, the morkanaut focused on the men charging at it. The horrible zipper-eye ignited once more, sending a bolt of destruction sizzling down into Weir. There was no explosion, only a horrible rending sound as the trooper and the precious mine he carried disintegrated in the violence of the beam. Then the morkanaut's head was turning and its grisly eye stared down at me.

'Get it away from the captain!' Vane was roaring, adding action to words by lobbing a grenade at the monster. The explosive detonated against the thing's field, not so much as scratching the behemoth's paint.

A bleat of binary assailed my ears a moment before the chatter of a heavy bolter sounded from behind me. Thrown by the explosion that had destroyed Vettius, one of its spidery legs crumpled by its fall from the gantry, the servitor Wolfram, by some quirk of programming, had reacted to Vane's shouted command. The servitor was pouring fire into the morkanaut, the heavy shells crackling against the machine's field. The persistent fire did what the lasguns and grenade had failed to do – attract the ork's attention. With a bellow, the hulking machine turned towards the servitor, the eye-stalk wobbling as the zipper took aim.

Before the morkanaut could loose another annihilating bolt, I flung my mine at it, sending the heavy explosive skittering along the floor. For a breath, I watched

it slide towards the machine, then I turned and fled. The deafening detonation of the mine told me when it encountered the blue energy pulse the morkanaut used to protect itself. Shards of ferrocrete lashed my body as I was hurled across the bay. My head slammed against the unyielding floor, my helmet protecting me from smashing my own skull.

As soon as my violent roll along the floor was finished, I spun around to see if my desperate ploy had worked.

A crater had opened in the floor where the last mine had exploded and, as the morkanaut lumbered towards it, the hole widened, crumbling outwards. The iron devil's foot slipped into the fissure. Overbalanced, the huge machine toppled downwards.

The protective field crackled into life as the magma coursing beneath the facility boiled around the legs of the machine. Persistent and remorseless, the magma began to overwhelm the field. The barrier that had guarded against the fury of the cinder-fall began to flicker and fail. With each spark of the energy barrier, the morkanaut slipped a bit further into the crater as more of its hull melted away in the volcanic flow.

The morkanaut launched its loading claw, trying to pull itself from the pit once more. The claw shot up towards the ceiling, but the chain fitted to it was too short to reach. Thwarted, the claw slammed against the floor. Before the morkanaut could drag it back and try again, the metal monster slipped still further into the magma. The glow of the energy field sputtered one final time, then faded away completely.

Before the head could slip down into the crater, the hatch mounted into the top of the morkanaut's iron head burst open. A bulky brute with leathery green skin and yellowed tusks pushed itself through. It glared at me and as it looked up, I could see the ghastly affliction that now plagued the ork. The left side of its head was engulfed in some clinging, writhing stuff that resembled nothing so much as molten silver. The substance was eating away at the alien, dissolving its flesh down to the bone. The creature plucked and pulled at the liquid silver, trying to rip it from the side of its skull.

'Waaagh!' the ork howled, its remaining eye glaring at me in an unmistakable expression of hate. Its right hand hefted into view, an enormous pistol clenched in its stumpy green fingers.

Before the ork could shoot, a burst of binary and the snarl of a heavy bolter put an end to its malignance. The monstrous alien body shivered and jerked as the bullets slammed into it, spraying greasy green blood across the face of its

machine. Riddled by Wolfram, the dying ork slumped back into the morkanaut's cockpit. I had a last view of the creature as its machine sank into the magma, watching in disgust as the liquid silver continued to writhe and undulate beneath the ork's dead fingers.

What was it the tech-priests had brought to their hermitage? The question sent a chill through me as I saw the morkanaut slip away into the magma.

As I turned away from the crater, I found Sergeant Vane and the dozen other men who had survived the battle slowly advancing towards me. They were dirty, dishevelled and weary to the bone, yet in their eyes burned an energy that defied all of that. The thrill of victory, the sweetest vintage any soldier can sample.

'Three cheers for Captain Drakkan!' Huller shouted. 'Scrapper of the morkanaut!' The cry was taken up by the rest of the men, putting all their pride and triumph into the cheer.

Vane smiled at me and nodded at the hole that had taken the morkanaut. 'So that's how the plan was supposed to work,' he observed.

'Just don't tell that to the colonel,' I returned. 'He might not appreciate that we deliberately damaged an Adeptus Mechanicus facility destroying that thing.' I looked past Vane at the rest of the men.

'Comport yourselves like Cadians!' I growled. 'Our objective remains the same! We head back to the hermitage and take in what supplies we can carry. Huller, have a look at Wolfram. Determine if the servitor can travel. If it can, load it up with whatever you don't think we can carry ourselves. Now, move out! Double time!'

As the men snapped a stiff salute and started back to the hermitage, I caught Vane looking one last time at the hole in the floor.

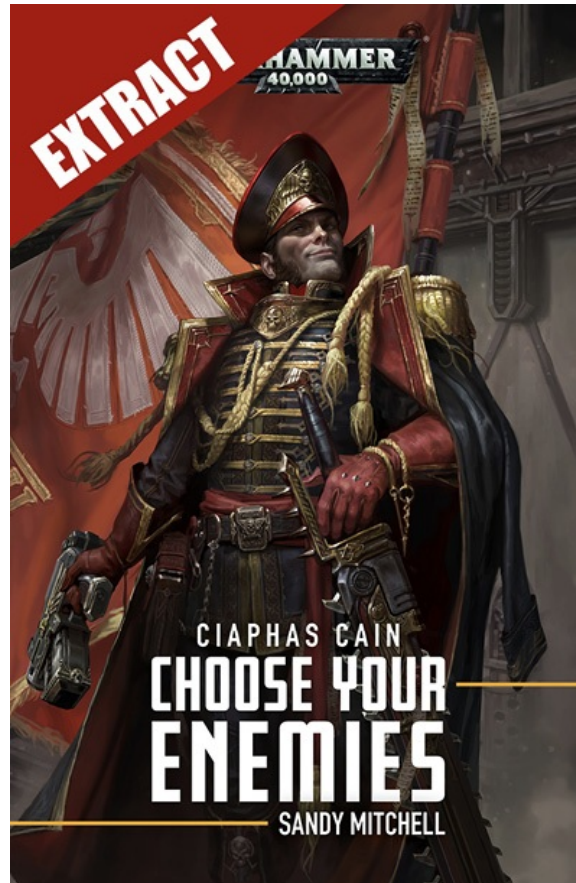
'We'd better take in a lot of ammo, captain. It's a long way back to command and I'd hate to think what would happen if we stumbled on another one like that.'

It was a prospect that made my blood go cold. 'The Emperor protects,' I said. 'Let us pray that He won't see fit to inflict such a trial upon us.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C L Werner's Black Library credits include the Age of Sigmar novels *Overlords of the Iron Dragon* and *The Tainted Heart*, the novella 'Scion of the Storm' in *Hammers of Sigmar*, the Warhammer novels *Deathblade*, *Mathias Thulmann: Witch Hunter*, *Runefang* and *Brunner the Bounty Hunter*, the Thanquol and Boneripper series and *Time of Legends: The Black Plague* series. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Marine Battles novel *The Siege of Castellax*. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the Warhammer worlds.

An extract from *Ciaphas Cain: Choose Your Enemies*.



The thing I've always found most annoying about the eldar, apart from their psychotic sadism and their almost visible aura of patronising smugness, is their habit of popping up where you least expect them. Like the ones who came charging out of the depths of the mine workings on Drechia, for instance, laying down a lethal spread of razor-edged discs from their small-arms as they came. Within seconds, half the troopers with me were down, either diced so thoroughly the burial party was going to need buckets to collect them in, or incapacitated beyond the point of any form of retaliation apart from harsh language.

Not wishing their sacrifice to have been in vain, I lost no time in diving for cover behind a comfortingly solid-seeming outcrop of rock. Once there, I snapped off a couple of shots from my laspistol in the general direction of the enemy, trying to ignore the little sparks left by ricocheting shuriken which seemed far too close to my nose for comfort while I did so.

'Where in the warp did they come from?' Lieutenant Grifen snarled, more rhetorically than because she really expected an answer.

'Who cares? They're dying right here,' Magot, her platoon sergeant and closest friend, returned, lobbing a frag grenade at the first group of Guardians to have broken cover as she spoke. It burst in the middle of them, and the two closest promptly went down, crimson trickles leaking through the newly punched rents in their green-and-purple armour.

The surviving members of Grifen's command squad were already returning fire with their lasguns, picking off the rest of the xenos who'd been incautious enough to attempt to try following up their initial advantage by closing to chainsword distance. A big mistake if you wanted my opinion, which I doubted the pointy-ears did; they'd obviously counted on the element of surprise to overwhelm us completely, before charging home against dazed and disorientated soldiers in no fit state to defend themselves. Which might well have worked against the local militia rabble who'd been trying to contain their raids up until

now, but unfortunately for them, what they got instead was battle-hardened Imperial Guard veterans who dived for cover the moment the shooting started, and immediately began giving as good as they got. But that was the 597th for you; I'd been fighting alongside them for the last couple of decades, and seen them take on pretty much anything the galaxy had to throw at us. A handful of overconfident eldar would hardly make them break sweat.

Grifen tapped her comm-bead. 'Second and fifth squads, circle back. We're under fire,' she voxed, before turning to me for approval. 'With any luck they'll catch them from behind, and we can take out the lot between us.'

'Good thinking, lieutenant,' I said, keeping my voice conversational with the ease of a lifetime's practice at concealing visible signs of panic. She hadn't been an officer for long, and I suspected she was still harbouring doubts about her ability to manage a whole platoon instead of a single squad. But the strategy seemed perfectly sound to me, if I remembered the layout of the tunnels around here correctly. 'But right now I'm wondering how they got here in the first place.'

And, more importantly, whether there were any more where these ones had come from. Needless to say I'd never have been anywhere near the place if I'd thought there was a chance of running into serious opposition, which was why I'd decided to accompany Grifen's platoon that day: if anyone asked, I was there to see how she was getting on with her new command and provide any help she might need in adjusting to her greater responsibilities. In actual fact it was because I'd got heartily tired of the eldar's fondness for sudden aerial attacks, which had seen me dodging strafing runs by the one-man speeders our troopers referred to as jetbikes, despite the obvious lack of either jets or wheels, almost from the moment of our arrival. Not to mention the aircraft, which – though mercifully few – we lacked sufficient Hydras to defend against effectively, and which accordingly were left free to maraud almost at will. Since aerial assets were strikingly ineffective down holes in the ground I'd jumped at the chance to tag along with the group sent to check the tunnels for any sign of enemy infiltration, only to find that, not for the first time, I'd become the butt of one of the Emperor's little jokes.

'There's nothing on the auspex,' Magot said, with a glance at the unit she'd pulled from one of her webbing pouches, but that hardly came as a surprise. With all the ore, and the rock it was embedded in, surrounding us, its range would be limited at best. 'We'll have to do this the hard way.' Which tended to be her preferred option in any case. She gestured towards the tunnel mouth in

front of us. ‘Get in there and flush them out.’

‘If there are any left down there to flush,’ I said, already certain that there would be. In my experience, enemies only came in two quantities: too many and far too many.

And far too many was what we’d been facing here for more than a month.

The eldar had first appeared on Drechia a couple of years ago, in relatively small numbers to begin with, grabbing a consignment of freshly dug merconium before vanishing as suddenly as they’d arrived. The planetary defence force was predictably slow and ineffectual in their response to the initial incursion, with the inevitable result that the raiders returned in ever increasing numbers. The planetary governor had believed the assurances of whichever members of her extended family were in charge of the local defence forces that they were able to cope, despite their complete lack of understanding of military matters, with the inevitable result that, by the time the Imperial Guard were called in to clean up the mess, the xenos were rampaging about the place pretty much as they pleased.

Which meant that the 597th and I had been diverted from our planned return to Coronus, and landed with the unenviable task of attempting to put a bit of backbone into the defence of the place. A proper task force would have been a far better option, but with the tyranids encroaching ever deeper into the gulf, the resources required to assemble one in a hurry simply weren’t available, and until they were we’d just have to do the best we could on our own.

I’d complained about it, of course, not expecting anyone to take a blind bit of notice, and – to my complete lack of surprise – no one had; one of the definite downsides of my absurdly inflated reputation was the average Munitorum flunkey’s apparently unshakable belief that the mere fact of my presence would guarantee victory whatever the circumstances. So, with the orders confirmed, there was nothing else for it but to get on with the job and try to keep my head down as usual.

‘It’s not going to be easy,’ I said as the door closed behind the Administratum drone, who’d departed with almost unseemly haste after delivering the briefing documents, which, as usual, I hadn’t the slightest intention of bothering to read. I glanced through the armourcrys viewport along the length of the void station’s docking arm, to where our troop ship, the encouragingly named *Indestructible IV*, was partially visible behind the bulk of an Armageddon-class battle cruiser which – judging by the rents in its hull plating – had recently been on the wrong end of a necron lightning arc. ‘We’ve got an entire planet to protect, and just one

regiment to do it with.'

'Technically, it's not really a planet,' Major Broklaw said, glancing up from one of the data-slates the scribe had left, already getting on with the job of ploughing through the verbiage so Colonel Kasteen and I could benefit from his much more succinct and useful summary – one of the habits which made him such an effective executive officer. 'It's a large moon. One of a dozen inhabited ones, orbiting an isolated gas giant.'

'So we'll be tunnel fighting,' I said, feeling a cautious surge of optimism. For an old underhiver like me, that was pretty much as good as it got, if you ignored the 'murderous xenos trying to kill you' part. An environment I felt completely at home in, knew better than the enemy, and dark enough to find somewhere to hide without anyone noticing if things went seriously plain-shaped.

Broklaw shook his head. 'It's a really big gas giant. More of a protostar, really.'

'The moons are warm, then?' Kasteen picked up another of the data-slates, and called up a pict of the surface of Drechia. My heart contracted, along with my stomach.

'Warm enough for us,' Broklaw said happily, gazing at the snowfields and glaciers as though they were a gift from the Emperor. Which, for a Valhallan, they probably were. 'Drechia's an iceworld.'

'That'll make a change,' Kasteen said happily. These days her red hair had a dusting of white in it, despite a juvenat treatment or two (which, I'm bound to say, was equally true of Broklaw and myself, except that his was still predominantly black, and mine the same nondescript hue it had always been beneath the speckling), but the cheery prospect of mucking about in bone-freezing temperatures which could kill an unprotected man in a matter of moments made her look a decade or two younger at once. 'And the troopers will be happy.'

'That they will,' I agreed, taking a closer look at the data-slate despite myself. As I'd expected, the Adeptus Mechanicus had been busy in the first few centuries of colonisation, thickening the atmosphere and warming it up from unliveable to merely lethal, not just on Drechia, but on many of the other local bodies too. 'What about the rest of the system?'

'Nothing we need to worry about,' Broklaw assured us. 'The protostar and its satellites are independent of the rest of it. They have their own governor, Administratum and infrastructure.'

I skimmed through the relevant pages, my eyes and synapses ricocheting from the dense columns of population and tithing statistics like a bullet from an

ogryn's skull, and nodded as if I'd grasped the fundamentals as quickly as he had. 'Makes sense,' I said. 'It's just like a miniature solar system on its own, stuck out near the halo. Running things from Ironfound would be a logistical nightmare.'

'That it would,' Broklaw agreed, calling up a diagram of the system as a whole. The hive world around which everything else orbited (administratively speaking) was less than a quarter of the way out from the star at the centre of things, the vast majority of inhabited worlds, moons and asteroids petering out no more than an equal distance beyond that; only a few isolated void stations or chunks of worthless rock punctuated the vast gulf between their outliers and the protostar, which, for all practical purposes, might just as well have been in another system entirely. 'Even a vox transmission would take a couple of hours to get there, let alone ships.'

I nodded. 'Month or more, probably,' I said, mindful of my own long coast into Perlia aboard a saviour pod from a similar distance out, some thirty years before. Which was why we were being sent straight there; the rest of the Ironfound System was probably blissfully unaware of the eldar raiders harassing their distant neighbours, and unwilling to help against them even if they weren't for fear of attracting the xenos' attention. We could be at least that long in the warp, of course, if the currents of that ocean of unreality happened to be flowing in the wrong direction, but at least we'd get the job done when we arrived – which is more than could be said for whatever dregs of the Ironfound planetary defence force the authorities there would be willing to get rid of. 'Do we have a departure time yet?'

'Twelve hours and counting,' Broklaw said. 'Should be long enough to get everything moved over to the freighter they've found for us, if we hustle.' But his brow was furrowing even as he spoke, for which I couldn't exactly blame him. Twelve hours might sound like a long time, but when you've got around four thousand troopers to herd, along with their vehicles, weapons, rations, ammunition, personal effects and the instruments of the regimental band, it can be eaten up hellishly fast, believe me. Especially when a double-figure percentage of them have already been granted permission to disperse among whatever diversions they can find on a pressurised ration can floating in several billion cubic kilometres of frak all.

'I'll get Sulla on it,' Kasteen said, happy to pass the buck down the chain of command to her second most senior subordinate.

'Good choice,' I agreed. Sulla had begun her career as a quartermaster, and

retained a talent for logistics which made her positively relish a challenge like this. I rose, with the best show of reluctance I could feign. ‘And I suppose I’d better start rounding our people up. There can’t be too many bars and gambling dens on a void station this size.’ I still intended to make use of as many as possible before we left, though, especially as I now had a perfect excuse to make the rounds.

‘Good luck with that,’ Kasteen said. ‘I’ll send out a general recall message, but there are bound to be plenty who’ve switched off their vox-beads.’

‘Sounds like we’ve a busy night ahead of us,’ I said, which, although it turned out to be true, was as nothing compared to the job awaiting us on Drechia – which, in turn, was to pale into insignificance once the true nature and scale of the threat we were facing eventually became clear.

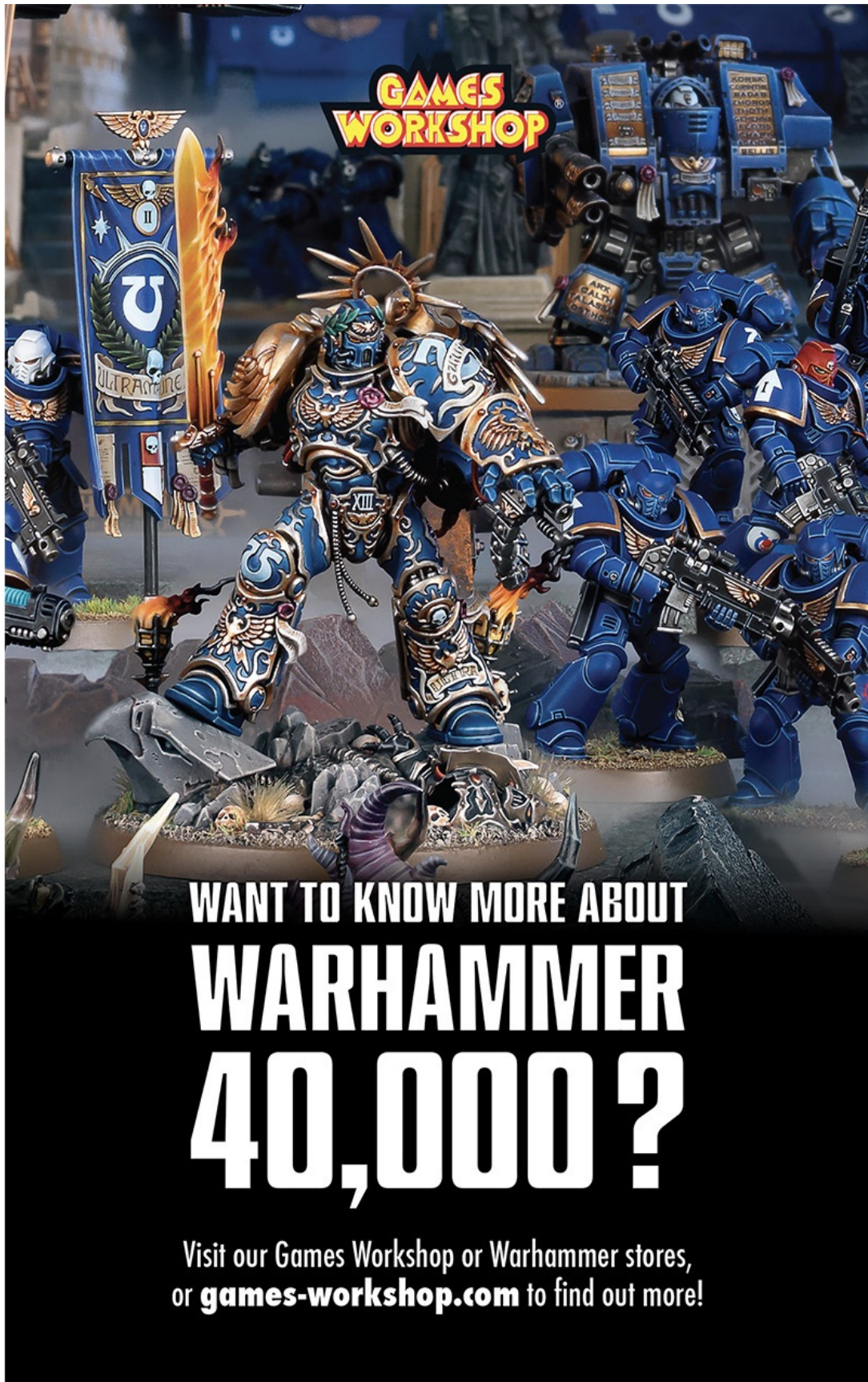
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