

A BLIND EYE

STEVE LYONS

RED AND GREEN lights danced in the night sky. The air was a bracing minus-four degrees. Ice floes stretched to the horizon in each direction like white jigsaw pieces.

It might have been a beautiful scene - but for the Imperial drop-ship, the roar of its engines shattering the peace as it fought to remain suspended above the fragile ice.

In its shadow stood two tiny figures, one relaying instructions to his comrades above, shouting to be heard even over the vox-net. Steele wished he knew what he was doing here, on Poseidon Delta.

Oh, he understood his orders. Somewhere in the water beneath him, there was an Imperial base. An Adeptus Mechanicus facility. Transmissions from this base had ceased, some months ago, and Steele had been sent to find out why.

His only question was... why him?

They were winching down a vehicle from the belly of the ship: a Valhalla-pattern Termite. With its gun emplacements closed and sealed, it was watertight: Kellerman had spent the past few hours making sure of this.

He stood beside Steele now, ostensibly overseeing the winching operation, in fact saying little. Kellerman was a tech-priest, swathed in the red robes of the Martian Priesthood. Currently, these were but the outermost of the many layers of clothing he wore. The bulge in his back, Steele took to be a mechanical servo-arm, although he hadn't yet seen this in action. Kellerman wore a scarf around the lower half of his face, and a hood pulled down over his eyes.

He was still shivering with the cold.

'ALL I AM saying is, it makes no sense to me.'

The troopship. That morning. Mikhaelev had lowered his voice, so that only his four comrades at the mess hall table could hear him. So he had thought.

Anakora had scowled at him. 'It is not for us to question the wisdom of the Departmento Munitorum,' she had said gruffly.

'But why us?' Mikhaelev had persisted. 'Why extract us from Dask and fly us halfway across the galaxy for something so trivial?'

'Perhaps there is more to this than we have been told,' Grayle had suggested.

Barreski had nodded eagerly. 'An Adeptus Mechanicus base on an ocean world.'

'A world that has never been settled,' Grayle added.

They could be doing anything down there - studying xenos tech, perhaps, that could change the course of a thousand wars.'

'They've probably heard of the legendary Colonel Stanislev Steele,' said the young, enthusiastic Trooper Chenkov, 'and his daring exploits on Cressida.'

Mikhaelev had shot him a withering look. 'We lost almost nine thousand men on Cressida, and failed to rescue Confessor Wollkenden from the enemy.'

'That was hardly the colonel's fault!' said Anakora.

'I'm not saying it was,' said Mikhaelev, 'but Cressida is the reason why Colonel Steele no longer commands a regiment, and if you want my opinion—'

'Do we have any choice in the matter?' Grayle had said, with a grin.

'I'd say we have likely been chosen for this fool's errand,' Mikhaelev had continued, 'because our new commander would be pleased to be rid of us.'

Steele's augmetic right ear had cut out, then, but he had heard enough. Not that anything had been said that hadn't crossed his mind already. He had resumed his circuit of the troopship's main deck, deep in thought.

THE TERMITE SWAYED on creaking chains, above the ice.

Anakora and Petruski helped haul Steele and Kellerman up into the passenger compartment, to join the other six men within. Once they were shut in, Sergeant Gavotski instructed the driver, Grayle, to vox the troopship. A moment later, Steele could feel the Termite being lowered again. His augmetics picked up the sound of ice cracking beneath its tracks, then water slapped against the front shield.

The Valhallan 403rd, Steele's new regiment, had no sub-aqua vehicles. They had had no need of them before. The Adeptus Mechanicus base, however, was over two hundred metres down, too deep for even an Ice Warrior to dive to it unprotected.

They had been forced to improvise.

It seemed an eternity before the Termite set down on the seabed. Grayle reported that the winching chains had been unhooked and retracted. It took him four attempts to start the engine, and when it caught at last it proceeded to spit and to splutter asthmatically. 'It doesn't much care for the water,' murmured Palinev.

This Termite was modified to burrow through glaciers,' said Sergeant Gavotski. 'Its engine has been drenched with melted ice a thousand times'

'It's old, that's all,' said Grayle. 'Well, no sense in sending a newer vehicle down here when there's little hope of retrieving it later. It'll cope.'

'I hope you're right,' said Mikhaelev. 'If that engine fails before we get where we're going, there'll be little hope of anyone retrieving us either.'

He was right. Kellerman had only been able to narrow the location of the undersea base down to a few square kilometres. Grayle began to search that area, in an efficient grid pattern, but the Termite's luminators were next to useless in these murky depths. He could have driven them right past their goal without their seeing it.

And the rest of it? What Mikhaelev had said in the troopship's mess hall?

Steele had served long enough to know what it was like when one regiment was absorbed into another, how petty insecurities and grievances could grow out of hand. Not with Colonel Boiski, though; he would have staked his artificial

right eye on it.

Gavan was an old friend. He had been almost embarrassed to find Steele under his command, and had bent the rules to give his fellow colonel as much autonomy as he could. He had even kept Steele's old command squad from the 319th together, though there had been a few new faces to replace those lost on Cressida.

It hadn't been Gavan who had sent Steele and his men to Poseidon Delta. That order had come from someone higher up than him.

THEY HAD BEEN searching for thirty minutes when they encountered the creature.

A giant tentacle lashed across the front shield, causing Grayle to let out an ancient Valhallan curse. A moment later, a heavy weight landed on top of the Termite, making its roof groan and bow. Barreski gave the massive borer attachment a spin, and this seemed to discourage their attacker for the present.

'You said there was no aggressive fauna in this area,' said Steele to Kellerman.

'According to our scans,' said the tech-priest, 'there wasn't.'

'Get us away from here, Grayle,' ordered Gavotski. 'If that thing comes back ___'

'No,' said Kellerman sharply. 'Colonel Steele, if you please,' he added quickly, moderating his tone in the face of the colonel's glare. 'Intelligence suggests the facility is close by. The warm currents vented from it would naturally attract some life forms.'

The drill-mounted flamers should work underwater, sir,' Barreski offered. 'I can loose off a few bursts to keep it at bay.'

'Do it,' Steele agreed.

It was soon after this that Grayle sighted something. Steele leaned forward keenly, but even he could only just make out a looming shadow ahead of them and to the left. It could have been the Adeptus Mechanicus base. It could have been a rock formation.

He was still trying to work out which it was when the creature struck again. It rammed them from behind, and almost tipped the Termite tail over nose. Barreski's hands flew over the flamer controls, but he was firing blindly, and a moment later he reported that the promethium tanks were all but empty.

'We're not making headway, sir,' Grayle cried over the rising shriek of the engine. 'It's like... It's as if we're being pulled back!'

'We've been breached!' It was Chenkov who sounded the warning, but there was scarcely need of it. The back end of the Termite was being slowly crushed. Cracks scored their way across the tortured metal, and water had begun to gush through them.

There was nothing else for it now.

'Get those hatches open,' Steele ordered. 'We're going to have to swim for it!'

STEELE WAS THE last out of the stricken Termite. By now, even the newcomers to his squad knew that such was always the way with him. He knew he could last longer than any of them in the water. Not long enough to reach the surface, though.

Kellerman had been right. The water was warmer than it should have been at this depth. Still cold enough to paralyse a less hardy man than a Valhallan soldier. Steele had shed his backpack, but he needed the protection of his armoured greatcoat. It weighted him down to the seabed, as he turned to see what he was facing.

The creature was huge, squid-like in shape, a dark purple in colour, and it held the Termite enwrapped in its ten long tentacles. As Steele watched, the hatchway through which he had just swum was crushed.

Then the squid lost interest in its catch, as it noticed ten more enticing targets.

Its tentacles lashed out like whips. Steele's comrades had struck out for the nearby base - what they hoped was the base. They were scattered by the attack, and Mikhaelev was hit. Worse, Palinev was caught and held fast by a tentacle.

Mikhaelev was sinking, apparently insensate. Anakora and Sergeant Gavotski turned back for him. In the meantime, Palinev was being reeled in towards the

creature's great maw - but Barreski had a handheld flamer.

A stream of burning promethium seethed through the water, struck the creature between its eyes. The recoil sent Barreski spinning away. He was caught by Petruski, who braced his comrade as best he could to fire again.

The creature must have had no pain centres, because it didn't flinch at all and its grip remained strong, despite a pair of angry red burns. On dry land, it would have died anyway, but the water kept the promethium flames from spreading to engulf it.

Barreski refocussed, aiming now at the tentacle that was holding Palinev, perhaps hoping to sever it, but his look of frustration told the story. He couldn't fire at the creature for fear of burning its captive too.

Palinev was still fighting. He was the smallest of the Ice Warriors, but perhaps the most tenacious. He was hacking at the tentacle that held him with a knife, unleashing tiny geysers of black blood. But the creature was crushing him, and the last of his air was bubbling out through his nose and mouth.

Steele motioned to Barreski and Petruski to disengage, head for the base, save themselves. There was nothing more they could do here.

Palinev had gone limp, his knife drifting out of his grasp. His strategy had been sound, though. He had just needed a bigger blade.

Steele drew his power sword. He didn't use the controls in its hilt - he wasn't sure what the water would do to the machine-spirits within if he did. The metal itself, along with the enhanced strength he gained from his bionic upper right arm, would have to suffice. He launched himself at the creature, kicking off from the seabed.

He drew the sword back, over his head, and brought it down two-handed. It was slowed by the water, but still bit deep. Black suckers on the sea creature's tentacle exploded like pustules. Palinev was freed, but unconscious, and Steele's sword was embedded in the creature's flesh. He lacked the leverage to pull it loose.

The tentacle thrashed, and Steele, unwilling to let go of his weapon, was carried with it, over the creature's head. It was all he could do not to exhale

precious air. His lungs were starting to burn. He had no choice but to activate his sword, after all. It freed itself with a startling blue flash. Just in time. Another two tentacles were reaching for him. He discouraged them with a swipe of his still-glowing blade.

The water around him turned black; the creature had discharged some kind of ink. Steele had lost his bearings. As he settled on the seabed again, he interrogated his internal compass, but it failed to respond.

Cursing the vagaries of machines, he didn't see the next tentacle coming. He did, however, hear the whoosh of water displacement that preceded it, in time to throw up an arm to protect his head. Steele was struck in the side. His greatcoat kept his ribs from breaking, but he lost almost half his air.

On the third time of asking, Steele's compass responded to him. He headed for the base, half-swimming, half-walking. He emerged from the ink cloud, and could see it ahead of him: a dull, grey dome, strictly utilitarian in design.

He saw no sign of Palinev's body, and had no time to search for it. His internal chrono was counting down remorselessly to the moment when he would lose consciousness. His augmetics calculated that, at Steele's current speed, he wouldn't make it.

A shadow fell over him. The squid was hanging back, more cautious than it had been since its taste of Steele's blade, but reluctant to let the last of its morsels get away. Steele braced himself to fight again.

Then a jet of fire flared over his head, and burned the tips off two grasping tentacles. It was enough, finally, to make the squid creature turn and to skulk away, hungry.

Barreski was drifting in the water above Steele, his flamer to his shoulder. Ahead of them both, Steele could make out Petruski, plodding along the seabed with a slighter form that could only have been Palinev slung across his broad shoulders.

No doubt both troopers would claim not to have seen their colonel's hand signals earlier, or to have misread them. They didn't all have bionic eyes, after all. They would swear they hadn't disobeyed orders - and Steele would choose to believe them.

‘WELL,’ SAID GRAYLE, when he could speak again, ‘that was a new experience.’

They were slumped in a musty airlock, shivering and coughing up water.

‘I... I’ll say,’ gasped Barreski. ‘You’ve lost a lot of Imperial vehicles in your time, Grayle, but I think you just set a new speed...’ He succumbed to a choking fit.

They had been lucky. They had all survived. Kellerman, too - the tech-priest must have been tougher than he looked. It was he who had opened the door for them. Steele had been the last through, his body in convulsions, light-headed, but confounding the predictions of the machines inside his brain. His men had waited for him, of course.

There had been a tense minute, then, as the last of the draining water had sloshed around their boots, as Anakora had had to resuscitate the unconscious Palinev. She had brought him round, at last - not that Steele had doubted she would.

‘The Termite served its purpose,’ said Gavotski. ‘Grayle too. They got us here.’

‘Shouldn’t someone have come to meet us by now?’ asked Mikhaelev.

His luminator found a rune-pad on the wall. There had been a similar one outside. When Steele judged that the Ice Warriors were ready, he nodded to Kellerman, who tapped a code into the pad. An inner door slid open with a hydraulic whoosh. The passageways beyond were as dark as the airlock, and the atmosphere as stale.

Normally, Palinev would have been sent to scout the way ahead. He was still weak, however, so the job went to an eager Chenkov.

As soon as the young trooper set foot inside the base, lasguns barked out from each side of him. He was caught in a crossfire of ten or more beams and cut down.

Seven Ice Warriors went for their own lasguns, and Barreski for his explosives. He was beaten to it. An Imperial frag grenade came clinking,

skipping along the floor, and landed perfectly in front of the airlock doorway.

Steele had already pushed Kellerman aside, slapped his palm against the rune-pad. The others flattened themselves against the airlock walls as the door whooshed closed and, in that same instant, was blasted off its frame.

The door had saved the Ice Warriors' lives, taking the brunt of the explosion. There was enough smoke, too, to provide them with some cover. Grayle and Mikhaelev were the first through the doorway, firing left and right, diving into the mouth of the passageway opposite as the answering fire came. Right behind them, Barreski braved a las-beam gauntlet long enough to hurl a grenade of his own back the way the other had come. 'Easy on the explosives,' Steele cautioned through his comm-bead, as metal floor plates trembled beneath his feet. 'Remember where we are. One hole in the outer wall of this—' He broke off as a static burst threatened to deafen him.

Barreski's frag grenade had put paid to the las-fire from the left. However, with the smoke clearing now, most of Steele's squad was still pinned down. Crowding into the airlock doorway, Anakora, Mikhaelev and Petruski sent a volley of las-beams to their right, as did their three comrades opposite. The battle lasted for several minutes, but slowly the enemy fire lessened, then ceased and, with his augmented hearing, Steele detected several pairs of footsteps half-running, half-shuffling away.

CHENKOV WAS DEAD. But there was no time to mourn him. They had hardly had time to get to know him, anyway. At least he had been avenged.

They found four bodies down the passageway to their right, and the remnants of seven to the left: mutants, all. One of them clung to life: it seized Grayle's foot in its gnarled claws, tried to bite his ankle through his boot. He didn't waste his ammunition on it. He speared it through one of its three eyes with his bayonet.

Steele felt a familiar rush of disgust, just looking at those twisted corpses. Even more disturbing, however, were the tattered red robes in which they were wrapped.

'Adeptus Mechanicus robes,' said Mikhaelev, with a sidelong look at Kellerman.

‘They could have taken them from this base’s personnel,’ said Anakora.

Sergeant Gavotski shook his head. He had seen what Steele had seen. Most of the dead mutants had servo-arms, or mechadendrites of some description. From where else could they have come, anyway? Where else but here?

How long, had Kellerman said, since contact with this base had been lost? That was how long it had taken for these men, once good men presumably, to succumb to the lure of the Ruinous Powers, for their bodies to have become as ugly as their minds.

‘How many?’ asked Steele.

‘Twenty-three,’ said Kellerman quietly, seeing his implication. ‘Twenty-three tech-priests were stationed here. I have faith that some of them—’

Gavotski nodded. ‘Some of them would have resisted. At least three mutants remain alive, but there may be no more than that - or as many as twelve.’

Steele tested the vox-net. It was working, but intermittently. They had left the heavy caster behind in the Termite, and evidently it was damaged, unreliable.

Steele chose to divide his forces, anyway. There would be little chance, that way, of a mutant slipping past them as they fanned out across the base. They had all seen hololithic plans, which showed a large central control shrine. Gavotski and Petruski would take the most direct route to this, and take Kellerman with them; the rest of the Ice Warriors would circle around and join them there later.

Steele, Anakora and Palinev went left. Anakora had the only working luminator of the three of them, so she took point. Steele kept a close eye on Palinev, who professed to have recovered from his near-death ordeal but looked pale. They followed a curving passageway, searching bunkrooms and store cupboards as they passed them.

They found wires torn out of a wall, the machine-spirits in them spitting their annoyance. That explained the lack of lighting in the base, at least. They also came across the corpses of three tech-priests, seemingly unblemished. Kellerman had been right - some of them had resisted.

Barreski reported in. He had to repeat himself, and even then Steele heard

only half his words - enough to know that his team had found a second airlock, and a four-man escape vehicle. Grayle was checking to see if it was functional.

Anakora raised a hand, bringing her comrades to a halt. 'There are mutants ahead,' she whispered. 'I can smell their stink.' Palinev agreed that he could, too.

Steele could detect nothing. However, in such matters, he had come to trust the natural instincts of others above his own.

Palinev asked to be sent ahead, reminding Steele that he was the lightest on his feet. Steele gave him a long, appraising look before nodding his assent.

Palinev removed his boots, fearing that the squelch of water in them would betray him. He screwed an infrared scope onto his long-las sniper's gun, and put it to his eye. Steele switched his bionic eye to infrared, too, as Anakora extinguished her light. Then Palinev set off again, alone, hugging the passageway's inner wall, his footsteps barely audible even to Steele. He had gone less than twenty metres before he stopped, drew back a step and lowered himself onto his haunches.

He took his time, finding his unsuspecting targets through his scope. Then he fired around the curve of the wall, just twice. Then he waited again.

At last, he stood and beckoned for the others to join him. 'There were just two of them, sir,' he reported to Steele. 'Both dead.'

Steele was about to speak, when he heard more las-fire. It was distant, muffled by the base's internal walls, and it lasted only seconds.

He voxed the other two teams for status reports. Mikhaelev's voice buzzed through Steele's comm-bead, but its words were indistinguishable.

From Gavotski, Petruski and Kellerman, there was nothing.

THEY TURNED DOWN a radial corridor, making straight for the centre of the base.

Steele led the way at a run, slowing only to approach the arched doorway into the circular control shrine. He cranked his hearing up to full. He could hear a

mechanical pump, and the ragged, shallow breathing of a man close to death.

He stepped inside, and almost stumbled over a corpse. A fourth tech-priest.

The shrine was crowded with big, black metal engines, streaked with soot. Most were silent and dark. One machine, however, still functioned, grinding and wheezing.

There was something atop the machine: the body of some creature, splayed out. As Anakora walked up behind Steele, as her luminator light fell on that body, Steele almost gagged. It was a foul, black thing, bigger than a man, a near-formless mass of tentacles and legs and eyes.

Steele had never seen a daemon before. He had only heard tales of those warp-spawned abominations, enough to know they came in all shapes and sizes. He had no doubt, however, that a daemon was what this malformed creature was. He made the sign of the aquila, and Palinev tried to do the same but had to turn away and vomit into a corner.

It was bound to the machine - nailed to it, in fact, its blood dried black around its wounds. Numerous wires and tubes burrowed into the daemon's flesh. Its leathery chest - what Steele took to be its chest - had been sliced open, to expose muscle and sinew. Inside, a shrivelled, black organ emitted regular spasms. The machine, it seemed, was keeping the daemon alive, so that it could be dissected, studied.

'Colonel,' said Palinev, in a small voice, sounding quite ill.

Steele followed his down-turned gaze, saw that Palinev's toe had touched another corpse. Its head had been severed and was nowhere in sight, but Steele had served long enough with Sergeant Ivon Gavotski to recognise his body.

Anakora found Petruski. He was still alive, just. She broke out a medi-pack, did what she could for him. She stayed as far from the daemon as she could. Steele was still staring down at Gavotski, his oldest friend. He had never expected to outlive him. He had thought his imperturbable sergeant a constant in his life. He had come to rely on his counsel - perhaps too much.

He hadn't heard the quiet footfall behind him. His augmetics, however, had registered the sound and shrieked a warning in the back of his brain.

Steele whirled around. He found himself facing Kellerman. He must have been hiding in the shadows. Kellerman didn't flinch, though Steele had raised his sword to strike. He lowered it again, wondering how he had not detected the tech-priest's presence earlier. He cursed himself for having been distracted.

'What happened here?' he asked brusquely.

'A mutant ambush,' said Kellerman. He was perfectly calm.

'They were wielding blades?' asked Anakora, still tending to Petruski. Steele noted the gaping wound in the fallen Ice Warrior's side.

'Maybe they hoped not to be heard,' said Palinev, 'but our people got off a few las-shots.' He looked around as if expecting to find a couple of mutant corpses to add to the human ones. There were none.

'How many?' asked Steele.

'I didn't see,' said Kellerman. 'Your sergeant had me wait outside while he and his man searched the shrine. I heard the mutants fleeing as you approached. I tried to vox a warning to you, but the machine-spirits have abandoned my comm-bead.'

Even as he was speaking, he walked past Steele, as if their conversation held no interest for him. His gaze had alighted upon the captive daemon. Barreski, Grayle and Mikhaelev arrived, then, and Steele had the three of them and Palinev guard the control shrine's four doorways as he waited patiently.

He couldn't see Kellerman's expression - he still wore his scarf and hood. His body language, however, suggested that he was more angered by the daemon's presence than repulsed by it. The tech-priest turned his back on the ghastly thing with a shudder, and recited a prayer to himself.

'What is it?' asked Steele, though he knew the answer already.

'It seems,' said Kellerman, 'that the tech-priests assigned to this base were the architects of their own downfall.'

Steele summoned Barreski forward. He came unwillingly, his eyes on the slumbering daemon. He brightened considerably when Steele gave him his

orders. Anakora took his place on watch, as Barreski assembled his flamer. A single burst set the daemon's flesh alight, and melted the tubes that sustained it. Barreski fired a second, anyway.

The daemon dissipated before Steele's eyes, no spark of life remaining to anchor it to this physical realm. For a long time afterwards, nobody said a word. The daemon may have been gone, but this shrine had been tainted by its presence.

Steele had never been told the purpose of this base. He hadn't asked. He wondered if Kellerman had known - if any of the hierarchy of the Adeptus Mechanicus could have known - what was being researched down here.

He could understand the temptation. It had probably been born of the purest of motives: the desire to better comprehend the forces that beset Mankind and, in so doing, to find their weaknesses. But that knowledge was forbidden for a reason - one to which the ruined bodies in the passageways around this room well attested.

Was that why this base had been constructed down here, he wondered, so far from any pocket of civilisation? Was that why it had been submerged?

'I think we have seen enough,' said Kellerman. 'It is our duty now to destroy this facility, and bury the dark deeds that have been done here.'

'I agree,' said Steele. 'First, however, we should complete our search.'

Grayle reported that his team had found two more tech-priests - they had shut themselves in a bunkroom and taken their own lives. This left four unaccounted for, at least two of whom were now sword-wielding mutants. 'The chances of saving any of them are slight,' said Kellerman, impatiently. 'We ought to proceed with—'

'If we are to clear this base before it blows,' said Steele, 'we will need to set our explosives on a long timer. I'd rather not take the chance of leaving anything behind that could defuse them.' Kellerman bowed to his wisdom, and Steele divided his squad again. Barreski and Grayle were to head for the base's third and final airlock, in the hope of finding a second escape vehicle. Anakora and Palinev were to cover their backs as they hunted down the last of the mutants.

‘Mikhaelev and I will stay here,’ said Steele, ‘with Kellerman. We will set the majority of our charges in this shrine, so we can be sure of blasting these machines to dust.’ Palinev couldn’t conceal his look of surprise at this. It must have seemed to him that his colonel had assigned himself to the detail least likely to see combat. Had this been so, it would indeed have been unusual.

Steele, however, had his reasons.

MIKHAELEV HAD SIX krak grenades. More than enough, if they were placed wisely. He attached two to the half-melted machine that the daemon had befouled with its touch. Just to be sure. ‘If there’s anything else,’ he said to Kellerman, ‘anything on this base we don’t want salvaged, we should bring it here.’ The tech-priest nodded.

‘Set the timers for two hours,’ said Steele.

‘Can we not work more quickly?’ said Kellerman.

‘We’re in no hurry,’ said Steele. Kellerman’s body language said otherwise - his hands were twitching impatiently - but he didn’t push the point.

Petruski hadn’t come round. He needed better medical care than could be provided for him in the field. Steele had hoped for a chance to question him. He didn’t know Petruski well, but he had been impressed on more than one occasion by his physical strength. When this was coupled with Gavotski’s natural caution and instincts honed by long experience, it seemed incredible that they could have been defeated so easily, at least without claiming a few mutant scalps first.

It was likely Petruski could have told him nothing, anyway. The angle of his wound, and the way he had fallen, suggested he had been hit from behind. He may not have seen his attacker.

Static hissed over Steele’s comm-bead. He couldn’t make out a word of the incoming message, nor identify the voice that had sent it. He could hear las-fire again, however, and this told its own story. Mikhaelev could hear it too, and he reached for his gun and looked to Steele expectantly.

‘Stay here,’ said Steele. ‘Keep laying the explosives. I’ll deal with it.’ He drew his laspistol and power sword and marched out of the control shrine, determinedly.

As soon as he judged he was out of earshot, he came to a halt. He turned around, and crept back the way he had come.

Steele wasn't sure about this. Sometimes, the augmented part of his brain could piece things together and come up with a conclusion a more intuitive man would dismiss out of hand. A man like Sergeant Gavotski, perhaps. A voice in his head was screaming at him to go to his men's aid, while another insisted they could take care of themselves, and that the real threat was right here behind him.

He didn't know which voice to trust. He didn't know which of them was which.

He flattened himself to the wall outside the shrine. He peered around the doorway.

Mikhaelev was crouching by the opposite entrance, setting another grenade. At first, Steele feared he must have been mistaken. In which case, it was the other members of his squad who needed him, and he had let them down.

Then, the red-cloaked figure of Kellerman swept into view. He crept up behind Mikhaelev - and, from the folds of his robes, he drew a power sword, and ignited it.

Steele had seen enough. He stepped into the doorway, levelling his pistol. He didn't shout a warning. He shot Kellerman, twice, aiming at his head.

The first beam struck true. It ought to have been fatal.

Kellerman spun around and threw up an arm, deflecting the second beam. His reflexes were incredible - and he had to be armoured beneath his layers of clothing.

He threw out his arm, and bright energy crackled from his fingers. The air was split by jagged bolts of lightning, and Steele dived for the protection of one of the machines but was struck, speared through his augmented right shoulder.

The lightning was conducted through metal, through flesh, into his brain, where it burned like a thousand suns. Steele heard himself screaming, but turned the scream into a howl of defiance. There was a moment of blackness. Then, Mikhaelev was standing over him, helping him to his feet, and Kellerman was

gone.

‘I don’t understand, sir. I thought Kellerman was one of us. How could he be...?’

‘A mutant,’ growled Steele. ‘A psyker.’ He didn’t know the answer to Mikhaelev’s question, not for sure. But he had his suspicions. ‘Where...?’

‘Escaped, sir.’ Mikhaelev nodded towards the opposite doorway. ‘He was gone before I could get off a shot at him. If you hadn’t come back when you did...’

Steele felt drained, weak - not of body, but of mind. He was afraid his organic half had blacked out, for a second, his augmetics bringing him around. It had happened before. He felt as if someone had taken a scouring pad to the inside of his head.

He could no longer hear las-fire. The battle with the mutants was over. The rest of his squad were probably on their way back here: Kellerman’s psychic lightning had been almost silent, but they ought to have heard Steele’s own two shots. To be sure, he aimed his laspistol at the ceiling and fired three more times, a call to arms.

‘Colonel Steele,’ said Mikhaelev, ‘there’s a Krak grenade missing. It was attached to the console here. Kellerman was standing right by—’

‘Wait here for the others,’ said Steele. He was already running.

HE FALTERED AT a junction of passageways. He swept each direction with his infrared gaze, listened for footsteps. There was nothing.

Steele was short of breath and his legs were weak: the lingering effects of whatever it was Kellerman had done to him. Unacceptable. He refocused his mind, and immediately felt stronger. He had allowed his augmetics to take on a few more of his brain functions, surrendered another small part of himself to them.

He didn’t know where Kellerman was. But he could guess where he was going.

Steele closed his eyes for a half-second, called up the plans of the undersea base that he had seen once and memorised, plotted the most direct course to his destination.

He reached the airlock in less than a minute - the one in which his men had discovered the escape vehicle. It was still there: a grey, egg-shaped pod, slimy with seaweed and lichens, balanced on a square launching pad.

He waited in silence, in the darkness. He began to wonder if he had been wrong. Then he felt the slightest shift in the stale air, and knew he was no longer alone.

‘Kellerman, I presume?’ said Steele. ‘Or should I say, inquisitor?’

Kellerman stepped out of hiding. He had discarded his red robes, along with whatever apparatus had given the illusion of the servo-arm beneath. He wore a darker-coloured cloak over armour. The lower half of his face was still covered, but his hood was gone and for the first time Steele could see that he had only one eye. An old, deep scar ran through the empty socket of the other, to disappear beneath the scarf. Steele wondered if Kellerman had been offered a replacement as he had been, and if he had refused it.

He didn’t correct Steele’s assumption. Not that it had been difficult to work out, once Steele had seen all the evidence. No mere impostor could have infiltrated his squad as Kellerman had. He would have needed the cooperation of the *Departmento Munitorum*, and most likely of the *Adeptus Mechanicus* too.

‘*Ordo Malleus*?’ Steele guessed.

‘I have the authority of the God-Emperor of Mankind behind me, Colonel Steele.’ The daemon hunter’s voice was quiet but commanding.

‘I recognise that, Inquisitor,’ said Steele. ‘But my men have fought bravely and well for the Emperor. They deserve a better fate than you intend for them.’

‘None of us can escape the taint of this place, colonel.’

‘The daemon is dead now,’ said Steele, ‘and its taint has not spread to my heart, nor, I would warrant, to any of theirs.’

‘Would that we could be sure of this.’

‘I am sure,’ Steele countered. ‘I know those men, Inquisitor Kellerman. I have fought alongside them. On Cressida, when the stench of Chaos was in the air itself...’

He didn’t complete the sentence. He had seen the look in Kellerman’s eyes when Cressida had been mentioned, the flicker of an expression on his face, and Steele knew now. He knew the truth.

Experimentally, he edged a little to his right. Kellerman’s single shrewd eye followed him unerringly. The darkness was of no advantage to Steele, then. He activated his power sword, to dispel it. Kellerman did likewise. They circled each other slowly, both of them accepting, in that moment, how this had to end.

‘You knew what we would find here,’ said Steele, ‘or suspected it at least, before we even embarked upon this mission.’

‘There is a higher concern here,’ said Kellerman. ‘Were it to become known, this attempt by the Cult Mechanicus to truck with the Ruinous Powers, then—’

‘I understand the stakes,’ said Steele.

‘Then you understand,’ said Kellerman, ‘that faith in all too many is a fragile thing, and that the unity of Man must needs be preserved.’

‘I understood,’ said Steele, ‘that the purpose of your order was to shine the Emperor’s light upon the sinner, not to hide his deeds in deeper shadow.’

‘The Emperor sees all,’ said Kellerman, ‘and our deeds are for Him to judge.’

‘You didn’t need to bring us down here,’ said Steele. ‘You could have had this facility torpedoed from orbit, and protected its secrets that way.’ He left the accusation implied: Had you not been so keen to learn those secrets for yourself. Had you not known full well the purpose of this base, and turned a blind eye to it.

And that was why Steele had been chosen for this mission. Cressida. He had never told a soul about what had happened there, about Confessor Wollkenden’s madness. In some quarters, however, suspicion was often enough. Kellerman had

required an expendable squad - and, in the eyes of some of the members of his order, there was one whose commander had already seen too much.

Steele was not an emotional man. His augmetics saw to this, swift to counter any perceived imbalances in his brain chemistry. Right now, however, there was an ice-cold ball of fury forming in his stomach.

He held it down, long enough to make one final appeal to the daemon hunter.

He had to know he had no choice, that it was kill or be killed.

‘I will keep your secrets, inquisitor,’ he vowed. ‘What would it gain me to do otherwise? My devotion to the Emperor is beyond question. What I will not accept is the slaughter of good men, good soldiers, in His name - struck down from behind by one they took to be an ally.’

‘Stand aside, Colonel Steele,’ Kellerman growled. ‘Stand aside and let me pass’

And Steele could see it again, in his mind’s eye - Gavotski’s headless corpse, lying at his feet - and there was no going back now. He shut out the part of his brain, the logical part, that wanted to restrain him. He gave himself to the ice-cold anger.

His first sword thrust was parried easily. Steele’s blade locked with Kellerman’s, their energy fields clashing in a shower of blue sparks. The daemon hunter was stronger than he looked, perhaps another expression of his damnable psyker talents.

He was fast, too, or perhaps Steele was beginning to slow down. He was driven back, step by inexorable step, as Kellerman went on the offensive, slashing at his opponent again and again. An unexpected thrust to Steele’s stomach threw off his footing, and Kellerman’s blade struck for his neck.

It took Steele’s augmetics a tenth of a second to calculate that there was too much power behind the attack for him to stand a chance of blocking it. Too long.

He let his blade take the brunt of the blow, but dropped at the same time. His sword was wrenched from his hands, but Steele rolled beneath a second strike and came up with his laspistol flaring. Kellerman winced and aborted another

thrust, as he was hit in the shoulder.

The daemon hunter raised his right hand, and bright energy collected at his fingertips again. Still on his back, Steele was a sitting duck.

He smiled to himself. He had heard what his opponent had not: four pairs of booted footsteps, running to Steele's rescue.

Palinev was the first to make his presence felt. He sniped around the nearest corner, striking Kellerman between his shoulder blades. Kellerman swung around, unleashed his psychic, lightning bolts at this new target, but Palinev had already ducked back out of sight. Anakora and Mikhaelev appeared next, around the curve of the passageway - and, as the Witch Hunter turned to defend himself against their las-fire, Barreski came up shooting behind him.

Kellerman was staggered, at last, then driven to his knees. His power sword slipped from his weakened grip, and Steele retrieved it, stood over his vanquished foe.

'The... the Emperor,' Kellerman gasped. 'The God-Emperor sees all, and He will... He will judge you for your deeds today, Colonel... Stanislev...'

Steele swung his borrowed blade. He repaid the murderer of Sergeant Ivon Gavotski in kind. He parted Inquisitor Kellerman's head from his shoulders.

'I DON'T UNDERSTAND, colonel,' said Anakora, as they gathered around the body. 'Was that... was that Kellerman? What happened to him?'

'He must have been infected,' said Steele, 'as the other tech-priests were. This place...' There was no need to tell them the worst of it.

Palinev's eyes widened. 'Then we must get out of here, before—'

Steele nodded. 'More urgently than you might think, trooper. Where's Grayle?'

'He took a hit to the leg, from the mutants,' said Barreski.

'He stayed with Petruski in the control shrine,' said Mikhaelev.

Steele was already trying to raise Grayle on the vox. He heard his voice, through a static hiss, and spoke slowly and loudly: 'Listen, Grayle. You have to take Petruski and make your way to...' He broke off, and asked Barreski, 'Did you reach the other airlock? Did you find an escape vehicle in there?'

'No, sir. We never reached it, I mean. We had only just slain the last of the mutant scum when we heard your—'

'Take Petruski,' Steele instructed Grayle, 'and make your way to the third airlock. Quick as you can. I'll meet you there.'

He turned to the others, and jerked his thumb towards the four-man pod in the airlock behind him. 'Go,' he said.

'But, sir!' protested Anakora. There was always a protest, though they knew by now it would make no difference.

'I'll bring the vehicle back for you, sir,' said Barreski, 'in case there are no others.'

Steele nodded. Another lie he was letting his men believe.

This time, the truth was revealed to them in the thunderclap sound of an exploding krak grenade. It made the floor at their feet tremble, and almost shook the escape vehicle off its pad.

This had been Kellerman's plan, of course - except that he would have been far from here before his bomb went off, before the base's outer wall was breached.

The explosion had been close. Before its echoes had died down, Steele heard the roar of oncoming water. He was running before the others could react, before they could try to stop him. He took the nearest radial passageway, towards the control shrine.

He had almost made it there when he was struck from behind by a tidal wave. He was swept off his feet. He tried to fight it, in vain. He could only go limp and let the water carry him. It expelled him from the passageway, and Steele was dashed against something hard and metal. One of the shrine's black engines.

He scabbled at its pitted surface, found purchase, clung on for his life as more water lashed against him. It was cascading into the shrine from all directions, now.

It wasn't until the room was almost totally submerged that the water calmed down, and returned control of Steele's body to him. He climbed up onto the machine that had been his anchor, pushed his face above the rising surface, took one last lungful of air, then let himself sink again. He still had half the base to cross.

Progress was easier, thankfully, than it had been outside. He had the machines to push off against, and then the walls of the passageways that led to the third airlock. There had been no sign of Grayle in the control shrine. Hopefully, this meant he had received Steele's orders and acted on them. With luck, his squad would lose no more of its members today. With luck, and the Emperor's favour.

THE ICE FLOES again. The sun had risen: a distant, cold light in the violet sky.

Seven of them had made it back. Seven out of ten. The survivors had clambered out of their floating escape vehicles, soaked and exhausted.

Steele had marched them almost three kilometres across the half-frozen landscape before allowing them to rest.

They were still waiting for the drop-ship to collect them when the explosion came.

They saw the flash first, lighting up a wide area of the sea. Then, a column of seething water was thrust skyward, a hundred metres high, and even at this distance the Ice Warriors were spattered with stinging hot droplets.

When it was all over, there was a hole in the ice, four hundred metres in diameter. A hole centred on the spot where, an hour before, the seven of them had stood.

Steele removed his fur hat, bowed his head, and led his squad in a prayer for the souls of Sergeant Gavotski and Chenkov. For those courageous men, the shattered remnants of an underwater dome would be the only grave markers they had.

He made no mention of Kellerman.

He gave thanks to the Emperor, for protecting the rest of them. There had been a second escape vehicle, as Steele had prayed there would be. It had taken him all he had to reach it - and then he had found the airlock in which it had stood waterlogged, the door jammed open. Fortunately, Grayle had made it too, with Petruski. He had studied the vehicle's dashboard runes, worked out how to drain its cockpit.

There had been no sign of the squid creature, or any other hostile life forms, as they had bobbed up onto the surface of the water - another palpable blessing.

'Did we succeed in our mission?' asked Palinev.

Mikhaelev nodded. 'We left nothing alive.' Of all of them, he was the most likely to have guessed the truth. The truth that Steele couldn't tell them.

No one could prove that he had knowingly killed an inquisitor.

He did not doubt, however, that the Ordo Malleus would have their suspicions about his dealings with Kellerman, just as they had had about his dealings with Confessor Wollkenden. They would ask themselves how many dangerous secrets were stored in this upstart Ice Warrior's half-augmetic brain.

More so now than ever, Colonel Stanislev Steele was a marked man.

This was not the end.