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FAITH IN IRON

AN IRON HANDS SHORT STORY

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Faith in Iron

Cameron Johnston

Emergency lighting flickered and died as a corroded servo-arm smashed through the wall in a shower of sparks, the auxiliary limb growling in mechanical pain. Magos Biologis Viridan Shale lurched back in horror as the disease-ravaged servitor tried and failed to push through the opening, babbling corrupted data as it did so. Its flesh was afflicted with leaking boils and suppurating wounds, but the tech-priest's optics were focused on the rogue servitor's infected machine implants.

Green and orange moulds caked the servo-arm and oozed from the joints in the servitor's bionics. Half of its metal skull had been eaten away to reveal sparking components and bare optics dangling from wires. It screeched in agony.

Discoloured patches spotted Viridan's own metal legs where the flesh and machine joined as one – this was no scrapcode attack, this was a biological infection using her flesh as a vector to corrupt the holy machine parts of her body. The gestation period was non-existent, and the infection rapid and virulent. She cursed the Death Guard putrifiers who had created it, then sent her data recordings shrieking across the local noosphere: a warning that the machine-plague designated Morbus Metallum had been unleashed on the agri world of Dundas II.

The only reply was a corrupted datastream bearing the identifier codes of her research team. The other members were already lost to the infection, leaving the medicae facility as her only hope. It was imperative she fortify that location and summon assistance: the fate of the entire sector hinged on her survival.

Adrenaline and stimulants flooded her organic system, sharpening her senses. Sirens wailed as the magos shunted power to her bionic legs and fled down the corridor. Two more of her research team's infected servitors blocked access to the heavy vault door securing the medicae facility. Irritated at the delay, she triggered her combat protocols. Lascutters hidden in her mehadendrites sliced them to pieces. She was past their smoking corpses before they fell.

The door's security systems were extensive – Viridan Shale had put them in place herself, physical machine puzzles and noospheric trickery guarding what was now the most important site on the planet. She entered the facility and triggered a

lockdown. The door slammed shut, trapping the magos biologis in the bowels of a capital hive city fallen to the insane forces of Chaos.

It was a suboptimal situation.

The medicae facility was originally of Mechanicus manufacture. A black site for biological testing, it was situated deep in the bowels of the city for ready access to test subjects – undesirable denizens of the underhive such as gangers, criminals and mutants. Operations had been suspended centuries ago, or so the tech-priests on the forge world Patraig VII had thought. Instead, Nurgle-worshipping plague surgeons had repurposed it for their own twisted experiments, reactivating the bio-laboratories and servitor-fabrication wings and decorating them with crudities such as dangling chains and hooks, and human skulls nailed to blood-smearred plasteel. Arcane runes daubed by warp-twisted individuals were still faintly visible on the walls despite two attempts to scour them clean with caustics. The runes were unsettling even to a supremely ordered mind such as Shale's.

After the Chaos worshippers' communications had been intercepted, and the following purge by Imperial forces, this facility's databanks had been mined dry by Viridan Shale's research team, and all remaining equipment left by the heretek magos in charge had been cleansed and put to work investigating the machine-plague infecting the Albarnan Sector. She had discovered that this very facility was the origin of the Morbus Metallum: a natural strain of subsurface life that fed on corroded metal had mutated inside pools of chem-polluted sewage and then been gene-engineered into a weapon aimed directly at the Adeptus Mechanicus. It spread through weak flesh to corrupt the sacred machine. Her forge world was imperilled and even the most stringent containment and purging protocols had only served to slow the plague's spread.

And now that mouldering taint was inside her. Her bionics reported searing pain and garbled data, mandating the shutdown of haptic receptors. Her cogitators passed all situational data through tactical subroutines. There was no escape, and soon her cogitators and reasoning would be compromised.

Panic was for lesser beings. Her immediate survival was the primary goal. She took a solitary vial of cloudy yellow liquid from a refrigerated vault and injected it into her flesh. Tests

had not been completed. Survival was estimated at forty-five per cent.

Biology rebelled, beyond the ability of her implants to compensate...

She awoke groggy and immediately purged her blood of contaminants to achieve eighty-eight per cent of full operating potential, then reviewed the recorded data and re-enabled haptics. She felt the damage to her prosthetics and implants, but not the burn of infection. The machine-plague had been devoured by a more aggressive, yet benign, strain created from the original. Within her body more of the cure was already being manufactured.

She accessed the vox-array, found main physical lines cut and tertiary data links in the process of being severed. She had time for a single message. The Imperial Guard and Adeptus Mechanicus forces in the area would draw every cultist in the capital. It would be a brutal and protracted battle and since the enemy were already aware of this medicae facility, she calculated a ninety-two point three per cent chance that it would be breached in three days despite her security protocols. Unacceptable. She required a rescue with the precision of a las-scalpel and force of a lascannon.

She sent out the distress call.

Minutes ticked by. More communication links went dark.

Then, a reply bearing Adeptus Astartes authentication codes:

+++ Crimson Hammer acknowledges Adeptus Mechanicus Priority Alpha-Iron-Two-One request.+++

+++All available forces rerouted. Complement: one Space Marine with combat servitor.+++

Viridan Shale's cogitators supplied a low probability of survival. One Space Marine was insufficient to effect her rescue. She was disappointed, a rare emotional response. She wished she had accepted the most extensive of the Mechanicus' mental pathway architectural enhancements and additional cogitators to eliminate such variances of emotion. Most vexing that her renowned logical inference leaps relied on technological enhancements to her core biology rather than outright replacement.

+++Strike cruiser Crimson Hammer en route.+++

+++Iron Father Rathkugan planetfall in thirty-four standard hours.+++

Her anger terminated as the screen went black. Rathkugan of

the Iron Hands was known to the Adeptus Mechanicus. One Space Marine might be enough, assuming he survived the machine-plague.

Ruby beams pierced the grenade smoke, burning through men shambling down the highway towards the Imperial Guard's makeshift fortification of burnt-out groundcars and haulage vehicles. They were all that stopped crazed cultists from escaping the capital and spreading their filth through the vital farm steadings to the south.

'Make every shot count, lads!' Captain Lennox Winters yelled as he drilled a hole through the forehead of another pestilent cultist, burning away the profane symbol carved into her skin. 'We have to keep them bottled up until reinforcements arrive.' With their vox jammed his words were more an exercise in maintaining morale than they were spoken with any real expectation of help arriving.

He flexed his crude bionic arm to loosen too-tight joints, shouldered his lasgun and squeezed the trigger. Shoot. Kill. Shoot. Kill. The whine of las-fire set his teeth on edge as the latest wave fell twitching to the highway.

'Captain!' Corporal Rikki drew his attention to a burning manufactory at the edge of the city, just out of firing range. An industrial mining servitor crashed through piled-up groundcars, its body all thick metal plate and whirring drill bits. It was half a ruin already, machine implants covered in glistening green and orange growths. Armed men sheltered behind its metal bulk as it advanced onto the highway, if men those corrupted things could still be called.

Autoguns barked and bullets tinged off the barricade. Winters paid them no heed, trusting his helmet and flak armour against solid rounds. At this range the cultists' crude weaponry and poor aim was no match for the lasguns of the Guard. His casualties had been solely due to their ever-increasing numbers. 'Guardsmen Crane,' Winters growled. 'Light that thing up.'

Crane was a specialist tall enough to give an ogryn pause, for a moment at least. He grinned and hefted his grenade launcher.

The traitors might have been Chaos-worshipping madmen, but they were not stupid. They scattered, but too late to escape the explosion and lethal wave of shrapnel.

A ragged line of cultists using sheets of plasteel as shields advanced through the smoke, followed by a dozen more in

gang colours, autoguns chattering as they clambered over the corpses of their brethren. Then came two squads of traitor planetary militia, their Imperial eagles ripped off and replaced with blasphemous symbols. Yells heralded more twisted denizens being drawn to the sound of battle. Winters' men had carpeted this killing ground in corpses, but the enemy just kept on coming.

After a day and a half of retreat and relentless combat, the ragged and exhausted remnants of his command looked to their captain. He spat towards the enemy and stood tall.

'The Emperor is watching us, men. He will honour our valiant sacrifice even if our superiors in their command bunker won't.' He was lucky there was no Imperial commissar around to hear his words. 'Best you build me a wall of corpses, lads. That'll hold the scum back for a while until reinforcements arrive.'

Their laughter was harsh, forced.

'Aim well,' he demanded.

Winters squinted through his gunsight and squeezed the trigger. A man died screaming and he quickly shifted his aim to the left and fired again. His men picked off targets as they crawled from broken buildings and sewers, too many to count. Winters knew his command were too few to bottle up the scum here for long, but he had to try – beyond the capital was a planet of sparsely populated farmland that fed the Emperor's armies, and it would be all too easy to destroy.

A roar from above – a burning star plummeting from the heavens.

The city's air defences were in the hands of the traitors. They opened up, stitching the sky with fire. The falling star weathered it to shriek over the heads of the embattled Guard towards the outskirts of the city. It smashed into the midst of the Chaos worshippers' ranks like the fist of the Emperor Himself.

His men gaped. 'The Emperor protects,' Guardsman Crane repeated.

Amidst the thick cloud of smoke and dust, the shadows of surviving cultists reeled, coughing and choking. Something far larger and darker loomed above them, reached out for them. Even from afar the crack of bone was sickening as it tossed those smaller shadows aside like broken dolls. A cultist staggered back, the muzzle of his autogun bright and chattering. The looming shadow ignored it, and lashed out with

a fist. The headless and broken body of a ganger in colourful rags bounced across the highway and skidded to a stop halfway to the Guard's crude fortification. The cultists broke and ran. The deep bark and boom of a heavy weapon chased them, cutting them down. Men and women screamed for mercy. None was given.

More cultists and looters had been swarming towards the fight, but now they thought better of it, their scarred faces twisted with terror as they fled down refuse-choked alleyways leading back into the heart of the city.

Silence, save for the shifting of nervous Guardsmen. Then the thud of heavy footsteps approaching.

A huge and imposing figure advanced on them, clad in ornate black power armour chased with silver that bore the emblem of a white hand on its shoulder plate, all scarred and pitted from recent conflict. In his fists a power axe larger than Guardsman Crane thrummed with deadly energy, and on his back were three metal appendages: one with a heavy bolter that swivelled to each of the Guardsmen in turn, a second with a heavy-duty servo-arm, and the third equipped with some sort of claw that crackled with lightning. This was no mere man – this was an angel of the Emperor.

Captain Winters shivered. As a raw recruit he had seen the likes of this newcomer before, during the Kentigern III uprising. This was an Iron Father, a senior Techmarine of the Iron Hands Chapter.

The majority of his men had never seen a Space Marine before: their eyes grew wide and their lips trembled as they took in the looming warrior coming their way.

'Weapons down and fall in,' Winters yelled. The Space Marine was terrifying and glorious, the Emperor's will made manifest. He could kill every one of them in seconds.

The Space Marine approached their makeshift fortification. His servo-arm snaked out, picked up a wreck and tossed it aside. His face was more metal than flesh, ocular implants scanning the Guardsmen assembled before him. The Space Marine's master-crafted bionics made Winters' own arm look like it had been made from scrap.

'Name and designation,' the Space Marine demanded, voice deep and rumbling like a tank.

Winters stood at attention. 'Lennox Winters. Captain in the Dundas Seventh, the Grave Gunners.'

'You have terminated a significant number of hostiles prior to my arrival,' the Space Marine stated. 'You are to be commended on your efficiency. You and your remaining combat-capable force will now accompany me into the capital.' Sweat trickled down the captain's back. 'Ah, pardon, my lord?' He was not corrected as to the correct term of address, and proceeded to get to the point. 'This highway is the main transport link to the capital hive. If we don't hold it the outskirts will be overrun.'

'Irrelevant,' the Space Marine said. 'This mission takes priority over all others.'

Winters swallowed. The godly figure looming over him could crush him like an insect, and with as little regret. 'Under what authority?' His voice wavered only slightly.

'I am Iron Father Rathkugan of the Haarmek, Fifth Clan Company of the Iron Hands,' the Space Marine said. 'This world's survival is a secondary goal when the entire Albarnan Sector is on the edge of annihilation.'

Technically, a Space Marine couldn't command Winters, and if he disobeyed his standing orders he would be facing a commissar's wrath.

'I need a good reason to put my men in mortal danger.'

'We must infiltrate this city and extract a vital agent of the Imperium. The wise would court an Iron Father's favour rather than his fury.'

Captain Winters' resistance crumbled. He stiffened and saluted, sweating. 'Aye, my lord. We are at your disposal. Are we to expect more of you?'

'No,' the Iron Father stated. 'With me.' He turned and walked towards the city at a speed that had all ten Guardsmen jogging to keep up. A hunchbacked combat servitor with a featureless face of smooth metal detached from the drop pod and flanked him. It was as large as Crane and wearing power armour. One of its arms ended in a blackened meltagun and the other flickered with flame, the distinctive tang of promethium in the air.

Corporal Rikki tilted his scuffed helmet for a better look at their new allies. 'What are we doing here, cap?'

Winters grimaced. 'The Emperor's will.' He stepped over the charred remnants of a dozen dead traitor militia and scooped up spare power packs as he went. 'Corporal, secure your helmet strap before I have you up on charges.'

Rikki snorted, but did as he was told.

The industrial sprawl of the southern districts leading up to the soaring towers of the hive itself was populated only by corpses. It was too quiet, the kind of quiet that takes a flamer to a Guardsman's imagination. They passed a huge manufactory, on fire and belching smoke, to join the other black columns snaking into the sky from sites all across the city. The distant bark of guns and boom of explosions told a story of loyalist resistance – either that or cultists fighting one another. A Guardsman could pray for both.

Several people screamed inside a distant administration hub. Rathkugan ignored it and kept on towards the hive and its lofty spires, one of which was now burning, a pyre for the rich and powerful of this world. The captain's men looked to him, but he shook his head, scanning the windows and doorways for threats.

The Space Marine seemed to know exactly where he was going, taking turns without hesitation, leaping rubble or trampling burnt-out civilian vehicles as if they were flimsy toys. The faceless servitor was his constant shadow. He stopped before a supply depot, its fence twisted ruins and the cargo containers plundered. Rathkugan scanned the drab warehouse at the centre of the depot with a handheld device, waiting for the puffing and panting Guardsmen to catch up.

'Twenty-two heretics occupy the warehouse, armed with a mix of autoguns and lasguns. One wields a meltagun. Engage them.' Captain Winters looked to the heavy bolter jutting from the metal arm on the Iron Father's back. That thing could chew through plascrete and the bodies behind it with ease.

The look was not lost on the Space Marine. 'Ammunition must be conserved. Distract the enemy with a frontal assault.' He didn't wait for acknowledgement and slipped down a nearby alleyway with agility belying his armoured bulk. The servitor remained behind, its optics whirring as it stared back at the captain.

'Beta squad,' Winters said. 'Sniping duty.'

Sergeant Napier and his squad moved off to the side and took up position while Winters and his command squad advanced from the front, using steel cargo crates as cover.

Winters spotted two pox-ridden faces at a window. 'Open fire!' he shouted, squeezing his trigger. Both fell back, riddled with smoking holes.

Bullets and las-fire tore up the street as the enemy rushed to the windows and responded in kind.

‘Advance!’ Winters shouted, his voice hoarse. Beta squad immediately picked three cultists off, covering the command squad as they rushed forward, zigzagging from cover to cover. He ducked and kept his head down as bullets stitched a line into the crates ahead of him. He signalled his squad to stay out of sight: they had succeeded in drawing the enemy’s attention.

In that moment of maximum distraction, Rathkugan crashed through the rear wall of the building. The cultists firing on the command squad turned and Winters heard terrified screams. A servo-arm smashed through the front wall, oozing a mush of blood, bone and broken meltagun parts. A series of thumps and cracks followed, torn bodies and blood spraying through open windows. It was all over in seconds. Rathkugan kicked the front wall out, flicked gore from his axe and exited, leaving mounds of shattered and severed bodies behind him.

The meltagun had been the only threat to the Space Marine, and it had been immediately eliminated once its wielder was safely distracted. The rest had no chance of penetrating his armour. The Guardsmen stared in awe; they were all hardened veterans, but this was far beyond them. If Rathkugan encountered something he actually needed their help with, it would be something truly terrifying.

‘We can afford no delay,’ the Iron Father said. ‘According to my schematics there is an old supply tunnel below this depot leading down into the underhive. It should save us time by bypassing the marauders above ground.’ He passed through the devastated warehouse and ripped a reinforced hatch from a shaft in the basement, then dropped down, swiftly followed by his faceless servitor.

The Guardsmen thumbed their stab-lights on and climbed down the rusty ladder that led into the dark warren of tunnels and stairwells beyond, ankle deep in a reeking river of sewage and chemical run-off from nearby manufactoria. Captain Winters reckoned there would also be enough joy-juice and head-banger flushed down from the rich hive spires to have them seeing things, though given the state of the city he wasn’t sure if he could tell the difference between hallucination and reality.

Rathkugan was a vast black shadow in their stab-beams. He

used no lights nor evidenced any need for them as he led the Guardsmen under the centre of the city, down through tunnels and chambers into a vast metal cavern thrumming and thudding with the movement of the ancient machinery that sustained the hive city above it. The ceiling was a mass of piping and bundles of wire, sagging with stalactites formed of rust and corrosion.

Chanting voices droned from around blazing bonfires in the distance. Bound men and women writhed in the flames, screaming as they roasted. A circle of naked cultists giggled and cavorted and chanted around them, their saggy bodies moist with yellow pus and marred by plague and pox. Winters' throat burned with bile as clumps of the cultists' hair sloughed off to reveal bulbous and weeping nodules.

Bulkier figures surrounded them, a melding of flesh and corrupted machine, wires sparking and covered with machine-plague growth. Most were mindless drones bearing bloodstained servo-claws meant for loading crates, but two hunchbacked figures were draped in stained red robes and in metal hands they held pistols glowing with deadly plasma.

The heavy bolter on the Iron Father's back woke and took aim, his targeting matrix marking the enemy.

'Tech-priests?' Captain Winters whispered. 'What are they doing here?'

The Iron Father readied his axe. 'Part of a research team stationed here. They have succumbed to the madness of the machine-plague and no longer serve the Omnissiah. Terminate them.'

The screeching din of the cultists' celebrations masked the loyalists' approach. Winters signalled his command squad to go left, taking cover behind massive water pipes descending from the ceiling, and Beta squad right to take aim from behind stacks of rusty cargo crates. Rathkugan did not bother – his blessed armour was harder than anything in the cavern.

Crane eyed the ceiling dubiously and switched to his laspistol instead of the grenade launcher. The moment they were ready, Rathkugan broke into a run, his heavy bolter opening up, deafening in the enclosed space. The heavy weapon's shells exploded through corrupted tech-priests and their servitor thralls. Every shot packed the punch of a small rocket, exploding torsos and liquefying heads.

The Guardsmen fired, ruby beams mowing down naked cultists.

The remaining servitors turned as one and lurched towards the Imperial forces, their data-screech causing Winters to shudder.

Rathkugan growled in response. 'I will end your blasphemous datastreams.' His heavy bolter chewed up two more.

A diseased tech-priest rose from the floor, half-dead and leaking bio-fluids along with machine lubricants. The Iron Father leaned to one side and a blue bolt of plasma sizzled past his head to eat a hole through the wall.

Corporal Rikki shot the tech-priest in the face. He roared in triumph, but the man didn't die and instead lurched upright on tentacular mehadendrites. Guardsman Savarnejad upped the power on his rifle and blew a hole right through its head. He smirked at his corporal, then something on the ceiling caught his eye and he screamed.

Winters yelled a warning and snapped off a shot as rogue repair servitors with mouldering spider legs dropped from the ceiling pipes, claws extended. One fell towards Savarnejad but Crane got in the way, slamming the butt of his launcher into its metal face. The servitor skidded along the floor to Rathkugan, who crushed its head beneath a ceramite boot.

Three men went down, servitor claws cutting flesh as easily as steel. The captain's gun whined as he tried to shoot them off his men, the servitors' weeping flesh and corroded metal boiling and burning under relentless las-fire. Napier managed to scramble free with only a bloodied arm.

The Iron Father was besieged by servitors, claws and drill bits biting into his battle-scarred armour. His own combat servitor engaged two, coring them both with its meltagun, and Winters managed to kill another with a headshot.

Rathkugan roared and swung his power axe wide, shearing through three even as his servo-arm caught another and compacted its torso to a thin plate of metal and bone. The claw on his third metal appendage sent ribbons of lightning into the body of another victim. Diseased flesh sizzled and implants popped and burned. The heavy bolter roared and swung around, tearing apart the servitors assaulting Beta squad. He was a one-man army, and with the Guardsmen stopping the enemy from swarming him, unstoppable.

Most of Beta had fallen, one killed by a stray bolter shell that had ended the man along with the servitor attacking him.

The heavy bolter wound down, its barrel glowing with heat. 'We cannot afford to slow down,' Rathkugan said as he took

his axe to the remaining servitors.

The remaining cultists charged with knives and clubs, but the Guardsmen despatched them with a practised volley of las-fire. Even on a quiet agri world like Dundas II, riots among disaffected civilians were commonplace and suppressed with standard Imperial rigour.

Sudden silence. Three good men lying dead among enemy filth and one slain by the Space Marine. Captain Winters' surviving men were splattered with blood and bits of the enemy; they shivered and refused to look at the hulking black giant among them, wiping gore from his face and implants.

Winters swallowed and dared to speak up. 'Lord, are you immune to the machine-plague?'

'No more immune to the Morbus Metallum than you,' Rathkugan rumbled. 'Sacrifices must be made to achieve the goal. We must endure.'

It was not the answer Winters had expected from one of the Emperor's invincible angels. His eyes fell to his own bionic arm, stained with the blood of infected servitors and already spotted with mould. 'Damn them. Is this plague a weapon of the heretics?'

'Indeed,' Rathkugan replied, impatiently waiting for the merely human Guardsmen to catch their breath. 'Their blighted souls have turned from the Emperor's light to embrace disease and decay. The Death Guard desired to turn the agricultural and jungle worlds of the Albarnan Sector into teeming plague factories, but the vermin were driven to the brink of extermination by the mechanised might of three clan companies of the Iron Hands and the Adeptus Mechanicus skitarii legions. They have now unleashed a bio-weapon designed to infect our cybernetics and it has turned the tide of conflict in their favour. That shall not stand while I live. The Imperial agent inside this facility communicated discovery of a cure. It is imperative we recover that agent and verify the report.' He scanned the tunnels leading into the blood-soaked cavern. 'We must move. The noise will have alerted other hostiles.' He strode ahead and the Guardsmen ran to keep up.

Corporal Rikki's face was pale and drawn, and his leg dark and wet. 'Just a flesh wound,' he said. 'Still faster than Crane. Uh, cap... the Space Marine killed Milton.'

Winters grimaced. 'Did you not see them burning sacrifices? I'd have blown his brains out myself rather than leave him behind.'

Rikki nodded and accepted the logic of it. Winters wasn't sure he'd have found it nearly as easy as he had made it sound.

Water gushed through cracks in ancient walls as they moved deeper into this facility, a black torrent swirling through slimy grates into Stygian depths far beyond the range of their stab-lights. The old tunnels twisted noise and carried weird echoes, plaguing them with the data-screech of mad servitors and human wails of agony. The skull-and-cog emblem of the Adeptus Mechanicus appeared on the walls with more frequency, often defiled with hideous runes.

There were no location details or directions stencilled on the walls but the Iron Father could read something hidden from sight, a data-cypher of the tech-priests perhaps.

In awe of the Space Marine as he was, the captain did not trust him to keep them alive. They were now only seven men descending into the bowels of a city riven by plague and infested with traitors, and the Space Marine wouldn't save any of them if it meant slowing down. The mission was all he cared about.

Captain Winters spent the march stubbornly ignoring the spots of mould spreading across his bionic arm, burning like acid – which should not have been possible, as previously he'd only been able to sense pressure in the finger plates, nothing as advanced as pain. A low-level worry about hallucinations and poison began to bubble away in the back of his mind. Even worse, the infection was also spreading across Rathkugan's face – the captain didn't know much about the Space Marine's Chapter, but he knew they made extensive use of cybernetics. If Winters' arm hurt then the Iron Hand had to be in agony. The Iron Father raised his axe in warning. He advanced, slow and steady.

Voices in the dark, the pounding of metal on metal and the hiss of lascutters from a chamber around the next corner.

'We have reached the target facility,' Rathkugan whispered. 'Send your stealthiest scout forward.'

Winters nodded to Savarnejad, who edged to the corner, peered round, then crouched low and slid through sewer sludge.

After a long, tense moment, the Guardsman returned with an ashen face. 'Thirty plus men with faces like melted boots, and a big ugly ogryn with them. They have construction servitors working on the vault door and they're almost through. Uh, a

Space Marine in armour the colour of mould leads them.' He glanced at the Iron Father, whose implants were now badly infected by the machine-plague.

'Death Guard,' the Iron Father growled. 'Vile traitors, dealers of plague and pestilence.'

Winters cursed; ogryns could take a hell of a lot of punishment before going down but they were nothing compared to a Space Marine. The advantage provided by Rathkugan had now been negated.

Corporal Rikki palmed his frag grenades. 'How's about I send him a little gift?'

Rathkugan scanned the walls and ceiling. 'Unwise. The support structure has degraded over the centuries and explosions may bring it down. The Imperial agent within must be extracted from Dundas Two at all cost. The traitor's death is a secondary objective.'

Winters sighed. 'The old ways, then – fix bayonet and charge. What our lasguns don't kill gets a blade in the chest.'

Rikki and Crane exchanged glances. 'Cap, there's over thirty scum in there...'

'I am with you,' Rathkugan said, right cheek twitching as tendrils of infection climbed up metal towards his ocular implant. 'They cannot withstand me. I will cleave the traitor's diseased head from his shoulders.' He readied himself, his mould-spotted servo-arm configured for close-quarters battle.

They all remembered the supply depot and those cultists the Space Marine had slaughtered with ease, and the thought bolstered the loyalists' morale. They tightened helmet and boot straps, checked their lasguns, swapped in new power packs and fixed bayonets before looking to their captain for the order.

Winters took a moment to offer up a brief prayer to the Emperor, then took a deep breath and held up his hand.

After a count of three they surged around the corner, lasguns discharging into the surprised mass of cultists. Four of the enemy fell with holes burned through them.

Fire roared from the Iron Father's faceless servitor, sweeping across an entire squad of traitor militia. They rolled in the sludge, trying in vain to extinguish the flames consuming their desecrated uniforms.

Captain Winters had little experience fighting beside Space Marines, but as the Iron Father charged forward like a living

tank, trampling men beneath his boots, he quickly adjusted. He and his men used the armoured bulk of the Space Marine as moving cover. They advanced, shooting from the hip, as the terrified enemy fought one another to get out of Rathkugan's way. Some of the scum managed to avoid being trampled, but it left them wide open to the Guard's firepower.

The Emperor's angel stormed into the midst of a panicking enemy, sporadic las-fire and flailing limbs ineffective against his ornate black power armour. The crackling axe reaped skulls left and right as he charged towards the Death Guard commanding from the rear. His servo-arm launched a man screaming through the air to crunch into the far wall beside the Traitor Marine. The heavy bolter on his back roared and spat death, bolter shells exploding across the Death Guard's armour and killing four more of the enemy, spraying blood and body parts over the rest. A mouldering servitor with a smoking cavity in its metal chest turned its lascutter away from the vault door and came at him, but the Iron Father's arcing claw snaked out to meet it and a bolt of incandescent lightning fried what was left of the servitor's mind.

When las-fire proved ineffective, the big ogryn tried a chainsword, swinging the howling weapon into the Iron Father's forearm, cutting teeth screeching as they chewed through black ceramite. It only served to enrage the Space Marine. One hand let go of his axe to grab the hulking ogryn by the throat and squeeze. If Captain Winters hadn't seen it with his own eyes he'd never have believed anything could lift an ogryn into the air one-handed. Gleaming metal moved through the rent in the Iron Father's armour – a bionic arm, prompting the captain to wonder just how much of the original man remained inside that shell.

The ogryn growled and bit the hand that kept him airborne, then lifted his chainsword to cut himself free. A ceramite panel slid back on the Iron Father's knuckle to unleash a bright las-beam that burned right through the ogryn's jutting jaw to boil his tiny brain.

Winters dearly wished his own rudimentary metal arm had been blessed with such holy tech – he gritted his teeth at a fresh wave of pain. He was too busy not dying to dwell on the spreading infection. He shot a young soldier with a face like a half-rotted corpse and then rammed his bayonet into the throat to finish him off.

Las-fire criss-crossed the chamber, burning channels through rising dust and steam. The traitors still outnumbered them, and they rallied around their commander. The Death Guard Space Marine was wounded from Rathkugan's assault, rivulets of yellow pus running down his chestplate from where heavy bolter shells had cracked tainted ceramite. He retreated backwards towards a tunnel, using the bodies of his cultists as a sacrificial shield as he laid down suppressive fire.

Rathkugan took a round to the leg, the explosion causing him to stumble and become entangled with a rogue servitor flailing claws at his face. For a moment Winters knew real fear as he desperately opened fire on the servitor, blowing open a metal elbow joint to leave one claw dangling. The Iron Father rose and roared as he ripped the servitor's skull and spine free of a body of bone and metal.

Crane took a ricochet to the chest, his armour shattering but keeping him alive. He roared in fury and shot a cultist in the groin.

Corporal Rikki took a las-hit to the shoulder that spun him round and planted him face first on the ground. Napier moved to shield the corporal, screaming as he unleashed laser-fury on the heretics. The Traitor Marine blew a hole right through his chest and he fell atop his friend.

The Iron Hands combat servitor shuddered as bolter rounds and las-fire blasted its black power armour, penetrating it in three places. It stood firm, and unleashed promethium in an incandescent arc. Men screamed and clawed at their burning armour as skin crisped and fell away in sticky sheets. Black smoke boiled across the ceiling, obscuring the enemy commander, who seized the opportunity to retreat down a dark tunnel leaving his remaining men to die. Winters took aim and as a parting gift managed to score a glancing hit on the back of his green helmet. The Traitor Marine did not slow.

Two more loyalist Guardsmen were locked in vicious melee with a knot of the enemy, bayonets and the butts of their lasguns splattered with blood. They fell, taking three cultists down with them. Winters was not insane enough to chase a Traitor Marine down a dark tunnel so he had to settle for blowing out the remainder's Chaos-addled brains.

Rathkugan rampaged among the remaining enemy, and none were able to withstand his axe and servo-arm. He finished off the last diseased servitor, which was still blindly trying to cut its

way through the vault door, then leaned heavily on his power axe, mouth twisted in pain, breath harsh and hissing. The parts of his face no longer flesh were now covered with a thick layer of mould and corrosion as the machine-plague spread throughout his body.

‘What of the commander?’ Winters asked, his gun covering the dark tunnel.

‘Scans indicate he has fled the area,’ Rathkugan answered. ‘For now.’ He grimaced and staggered to the vault door. Mechadendrites snaked out to plug into a panel on the side. Those too bore the sign of systemic infection. Moments later the door shuddered and hissed open.

Winters and his command squad formed up, lasguns ready.

A woman with flame-red hair matching her red tech-priest’s robes – more ornate by far than the others they had seen – walked through jets of steam on metal legs. Her face was fully flesh, without the technological additions commonly seen on her sort. She was attractive in an unsettling sort of way and it took Winters a moment to realise that her features were gene-engineered – too symmetrical, too perfect to be natural. The mechadendrites attached to her back peered over her shoulders, bringing an array of weaponry to bear, which also helped to banish any thought of her being a normal woman.

‘Good day, captain,’ she said. ‘I am Magos Biologis Viridan Shale.’ Then she unleashed a screech of incomprehensible data at Rathkugan, who replied in a similar manner.

‘We have a maximum of three point two-five standard hours to find a secure location away from this facility,’ the Iron Father said, ‘before the plague renders me an unacceptable risk to this mission.’ His human voice cracked over the words ‘unacceptable risk’, revealing a disturbing hint of something inhuman, the sonic shudder of tortured metal putting Winters’ teeth on edge. Something more machine than man was being slowly eaten away, and its fury was terrifying.

‘My lord,’ Winters queried, ‘if there is indeed a cure, would it not be better to have you fighting fit before attempting an extraction?’

Rathkugan shook his head, wincing as he did so. ‘We must first get her to safety before purging my systems of the Morbus Metallum.’

‘It is true then, there is a cure?’ Winters said, looking over at the woman they had recovered. A cure to the machine-plague

would change the course of the war for the Albarnan Sector in the Imperium's favour, if they could disseminate it. No wonder the Space Marine prioritised that over his own survival.

'I am living proof,' the magos stated, indicating her metal legs. Winters examined the pitted metal, proof she had indeed been infected at one point. 'Aye, my lady, we will guard you with our lives.' His men had not died in vain. They had given their lives to save the sector, and there was much pride to be had in that.

The facility behind them began to smoke, a warning light strobing.

'It would be a good idea to depart before all organics within the area are sterilised,' the tech-priest said, her face devoid of all emotion as she stared unblinking at Captain Winters.

He suppressed his shiver. Her eerily perfect eyes didn't look at him like he was a person; her gaze was that of a Guardsman contemplating taking his gun apart to enact the rituals of maintenance.

They hastened on through tunnels ringing from the pounding of vast machines and the screeching of infected servitors. A short while later static electricity filled the air, lifting hair. An acrid stink of burned meat filtered through air vents. The wailing of servitors ceased.

'Run faster. Run. Fasterrr...' Rathkugan implored, his voice tinny and ticking as he staggered onwards, the infection spreading.

'Crane,' Winters barked. 'Support Corporal Rikki.' The man's leg was close to giving out, but with Crane's help they managed to clear the danger zone and Winters was finally able to locate a secure storage room.

Once inside, Rathkugan fell to his knees, teeth gritted in agony. His servo-arm whined and writhed in mechanical pain. 'The cure...'

'Assist me, captain,' Viridan Shale said. 'We must remove his armour.'

It felt like heresy to remove the armour of one of the Emperor's angels, but Winters did as he was told, holding tools and pulling where and when the tech-priest commanded. He wouldn't have even known where to begin removing those slabs of blessed ceramite.

There was little human left inside the armoured shell; instead Rathkugan's body was a mass of exquisite shining metal and

pulsing energy, scribed all over with golden prayers of purity and inlaid with slivers of bone etched with the names of fallen heroes. The machine-plague had spread through his arm, head and torso, moist fungal growths clustered wherever machine met flesh.

'It infiltrates the flesh and seeks to attack the cogitators first,' Viridan Shale explained, a dozen metal fingers flitting to and fro, cutting and unscrewing with bewildering speed. 'They seek to drive the machine-spirit mad.'

Winters swallowed and acted as her aide as she stripped out components corroded beyond salvaging. 'This is beyond me,' he whispered. 'All I know are lowly lasguns.'

'The lasgun is a miracle of technology,' Rathkugan hissed, voice filled with static. 'There are no moving parts. Never... never jam. Never fail. Logistics... recharged by sunlight or left in a fire. Perfection... never fail... never fail... never fail the Emperor!'

An inoculator needle on a metal arm emerged from inside Viridan Shale's robes and injected her blood into a pulsing tube in the Space Marine's chest. Rathkugan convulsed, eyes screwed shut. His servo-arm snapped at the tech-priest's mehadendrites and the heavy bolter clicked angrily. She crooned a strange data-song to calm their machine-spirits – a hiss holding an almost melodic prayer.

Rathkugan's eyes reopened. They were clear and filled with cold fury. His faceless servitor approached at some unseen command and its armour cracked open to reveal a nightmare of pincers, mehadendrites and tool-arms. It got to work stripping out its own body parts to replace the Iron Father's corroded components.

Viridan Shale took over as the servitor began to falter and fail, using the rest of it as spare parts. 'How is the pain?' she asked.

'To be endured,' Rathkugan replied. 'The machine must always be subservient to human will, lest we become soulless abominations like the necron.'

Winters had no clue what they were talking about but his own arm was glitching, its joints jerking. The connections sparked and smelled like burning. He held it out to the tech-priest.

'I don't suppose you have some more of that cure ready?'

She shook her head. 'Not yet. Internal production facilities are severely limited.'

Typical, Winters thought. He checked his gun, trying to keep

his mind away from shooting his own metal arm off until they were out of this mess. It had taken him months to get even this crude replacement.

The Iron Father's repair process ceased prematurely at the onset of distant yelling and the din of boots pounding down metal corridors. The Death Guard commander had sent reinforcements to hunt them down.

Rathkugan rose and donned his blessed black armour. 'The machine-plague is in retreat. I am at eighty per cent of full operational capacity. This servitor has now been rendered operationally useless and its self-destruction routines have been damaged.' He fished out a small cable and a box with a golden dial on it from the remains of the servitor's chest cavity, then looked to the prone and groaning form of Corporal Rikki. 'It can, however, be detonated manually.'

Before Winters could voice his objection, Corporal Rikki spoke up.

'I'm done running, cap.' His face was grey and his wounded leg black with blood.

'Throne!' Winters cursed. 'I don't want to lose another man.'

Rikki shook his head, and fished out his own frag grenades. 'No time to argue. Let me do this.'

Winters clapped him on the shoulder. 'May the Emperor guide your soul.'

Savarnejad offered a respectful nod and left, scouting ahead.

'Rikki,' Crane said. 'I—'

'Get going, big guy,' the corporal said. 'I'm going to light this place up so bright the Emperor will see it from Holy fragging Terra.'

Rathkugan nodded. 'An excellent use of resources.' He handed the cable and dial to the corporal and began to run, with the tech-priest at his side.

'I guess that's a great compliment from his sort,' Crane said.

Rikki laughed, then gasped and clutched his leg. 'Move it, soldier.'

They left him behind and returned to the tunnels, following whatever ancient schematics existed in the Space Marine's databanks.

Eighty per cent of the Iron Father's full operational capacity was still a dozen times that of a normal man. Viridan Shale, despite her gene-engineering and bionic legs, struggled to keep to his pace, and the remaining Guardsmen began to flag and

fall behind, much to the Space Marine's obvious irritation. A distant crump announced that Rikki had detonated the crippled servitor. The corridors shuddered as a gust of acrid hot air billowed through them. Winters spared the time to turn and offer a final salute to a brave man. He hoped the Traitor Marine and his heretics had been standing right next to Rikki as his corporal turned that dial. With any luck he'd brought the tunnel down right on top of them.

They emerged from the access shaft back into the light of day. Rathkugan hauled the magos out and cradled her in his arms like a child; the weight of all those Mechanicus implants were nothing to a Space Marine. He shielded her with his armoured body as a volley of las-bolts burst across his broad back, scoring ceramite and exquisite silver runes. The enemy had been waiting, and the Traitor Marine was with them. A bolt shell staggered the Iron Father, but did not stop him.

The loyalists took to their heels. Winters shouted a warning as a missile corkscrewed through the air towards them. Rathkugan turned, sparking optics zoomed in, and a bolt pistol appeared in his hand. It barked twice and the missile exploded in the air above them.

As they ran, the heavy bolter on the Iron Father's back roared. Rounds exploded across the highway behind them, scything through the enemy lying in wait and forcing their commander to take cover. The traitor with the launcher was hit, his ammo exploding in a thunderous detonation. Rathkugan's heavy weapon clicked empty.

Crane stopped, turned and launched a grenade into the advancing enemy, the crump of the impact making him howl with joy.

'Run faster,' the Space Marine advised, boots pounding along the highway, bolt pistol bursting the heads of anything along the way that dared raise them. 'You are now on your own.'

The Guardsmen were only men, and exhausted men at that: they quickly lost sight of the Iron Father. Winters was far from surprised at being abandoned now that Rathkugan's primary goal had been accomplished, but he was still filled with anger and despair. They limped along the highway, dripping with sweat, their weapons hot and running low, but the howls of savage cultists, mutant sewer-spawn and machine-plagued servitors at their backs spurred them onwards. They took it in turns to pause, turn, and open fire on the enemy in the lead,

slowing and tripping them as corpses fell at their feet. Cowardly scum.

Winters stumbled as a shot ripped through his bionic arm, reducing it to shreds of metal and dangling wires. Oddly, it hurt far less than a limb riddled with machine-plague. He laughed and yelled, 'Cheers, you rotting wretches!'

The enemy were gaining. Crane was on his last legs. Savarnejad fared only a little better. Captain Winters located a defensible location among the burnt-out wrecks littering the highway – he would rather go down bayoneting the scum in the face than be mown down from behind. He was the hunter, not the prey, and he knew his men felt the same.

'Right, lads,' he yelled. 'Take cover and start shooting when you see the yellow of their eyes.'

The Traitor Marine lingered in the back of the horde of pestilent soldiers. For a moment, Winters fantasised about charging in and taking him down personally. Instead he prodded Crane, who took careful aim and launched the last of his grenades. It hit the target and took out a clump of the traitors, but the Death Guard came through it unscathed.

Winters' cursing turned to a malicious cackle as the vox crackled into life and Viridan Shale's voice cut through the interference. 'I have isolated and bypassed the crude jamming signal. Artillery incoming in one minute.' Then she rattled off coordinates – right on top of them.

'Throne,' Winters gasped. 'Run for your lives!' He slung the rifle across his back and bolted for safety. He risked one glance back to witness the Death Guard's shoulder plates shaking with laughter at their apparent cowardice.

It was a heart-pounding scramble south with the very last of their strength. Then the shells hit the highway and the horde behind them: earth-shattering thuds that obliterated everything there and left the Guard sprawled on the ground, deafened and dazed.

Eventually they stirred at the sound of heavy tracks and boots pounding the highway. From the south, an aged Leman Russ tank, an armoured transport and three squads of infantry raced towards them, all proudly displaying the God-Emperor's blessed eagle. Winters laughed in relief as the tank rumbled past, cannon booming. Two squads advanced with the armour while the transport and the remaining squad drew up in front of them. A bloodied and bandaged Sergeant Howe and his

squad snapped off a salute.

Winters was ragged, exhausted, and missing an arm again, but he was alive. Crane and Savarnejad sprawled beside him, covered in gore and shallow wounds, but miraculously intact. It was an Emperor-given miracle any of them had survived that madness.

Rathkugan and the magos were among the reinforcements.

Winters wiped the sweat and dust from his face and grabbed Howe, grinning. 'With the Space Marine's help we can drive these scum right back to the city walls and contain them there.'

A gunship roared down from the heavens. It landed in a cloud of dust and lowered its rear ramp. Viridan Shale immediately embarked.

Rathkugan paused and turned to Winters. 'This planet is no longer a high priority. Fight well, Captain Lennox Winters.'

Seconds later the Thunderhawk blasted debris across the pockmarked highway as it rose up into the sky with both passengers inside.

'Emperor's teeth,' Winters cursed. He should have known it would end up this way. He checked his trusty gun and swapped out his depleted power pack. It was all very awkward with one arm, crude as his bionic had been. 'That's the life of a Guardsman, eh?' He hauled himself over to Crane and booted his leg. 'Up. No rest for the wicked. The Emperor protects us body and soul, and we can do no less in return.'

His men rose and picked up their weapons. They were exhausted, but the Emperor had sent one of His angels to Dundas II to save their lives, and had entrusted His loyal Guard with the fate of entire worlds. They would be damned before they let Him down – He had faith in them, and they in Him.

Winters felt moderately optimistic as two more squads of Guard jogged up the highway towards them. He spurred his own men back towards to the front line – things couldn't get much worse than being drawn into a Space Marine's mission.

The Thunderhawk's door whispered open to admit Viridan Shale to the hangar deck of the Crimson Hammer. The belly of the strike cruiser had been turned into a medicae facility for two dozen Iron Hands Space Marines and a number of tech-priests, sealed off by plasteel bulkheads sheathed in energy fields. Their bionics were encrusted with machine-plague growth.

A stasis field had been set up to slow their degradation, and banks of surgical equipment and human auxiliaries stood ready to obey her commands.

As Rathkugan effortlessly transferred massive crates of machinery and medical supplies from the Thunderhawk to the hangar, she admired his tremendous strength. The Imperium of Man ran like a vast machine, each individual a cog with their own role to play. Some were large and strong, others incredibly precise, and the Iron Hands and Adeptus Mechanicus meshed well together in the heart of that godly machine serving the Omnissiah's will. Their faith was iron, and in iron, endlessly toiling for a greater goal without any need for thanks. This was war without end in their lifetimes, and while the flesh of man weakened and failed their blessed iron would never falter. As for the Guard, she reflected, they were the millions of minor cogs that kept everything else moving.

'Do you need anything more?' Rathkugan asked, transferring schematics and lists of available supplies via the noosphere.

'Adequate,' she replied. They lacked the specialised equipment of a Mechanicus facility, but she was nothing if not resourceful. 'I estimate your battle-brothers will be rid of the Morbus Metallum infection within twelve hours.'

'Then their degraded bionics will be replaced and they will be battle ready in eighteen,' the Iron Father stated.

'The Hand endures,' Viridan Shale said, the ritual words slipping out before she calculated the wisdom of uttering them. It revealed she knew more about the secretive Iron Hands than she should. There were cabals within cabals inside the Mechanicus, and they kept many dark secrets.

Rathkugan studied her, deep data probing. 'Until every part of an Iron Hands warrior is destroyed, we shall not fail. We may fall but we will rise again. The flesh is weak, and the Hand endures because it must. We shall now share data.'

Viridan Shale winced. The Iron Father possessed little finesse, and his idea of sharing was a brutal and inelegant process. She studied his data packets and hummed with interest.

'A requisition request for men of the Dundas Seventh? And an order for advanced bionics and implants. Intriguing.'

'Unlike many, they did not fail,' Rathkugan replied. 'Once enhanced they will serve as superior combat auxiliaries.'

She looked up at the giant of a man and pondered how little he understood of standard human psychology. He thought

extensive surgical enhancement, brutal training and a life of relentless warfare a reward.

‘The fall of Dundas Two is inevitable,’ he added. ‘Its militia is inadequate to contain the corruption spreading through their capital. We cannot spare the forces necessary to purge a mere agri world. I will see the Grave Gunners live to aid the greater conflict.’

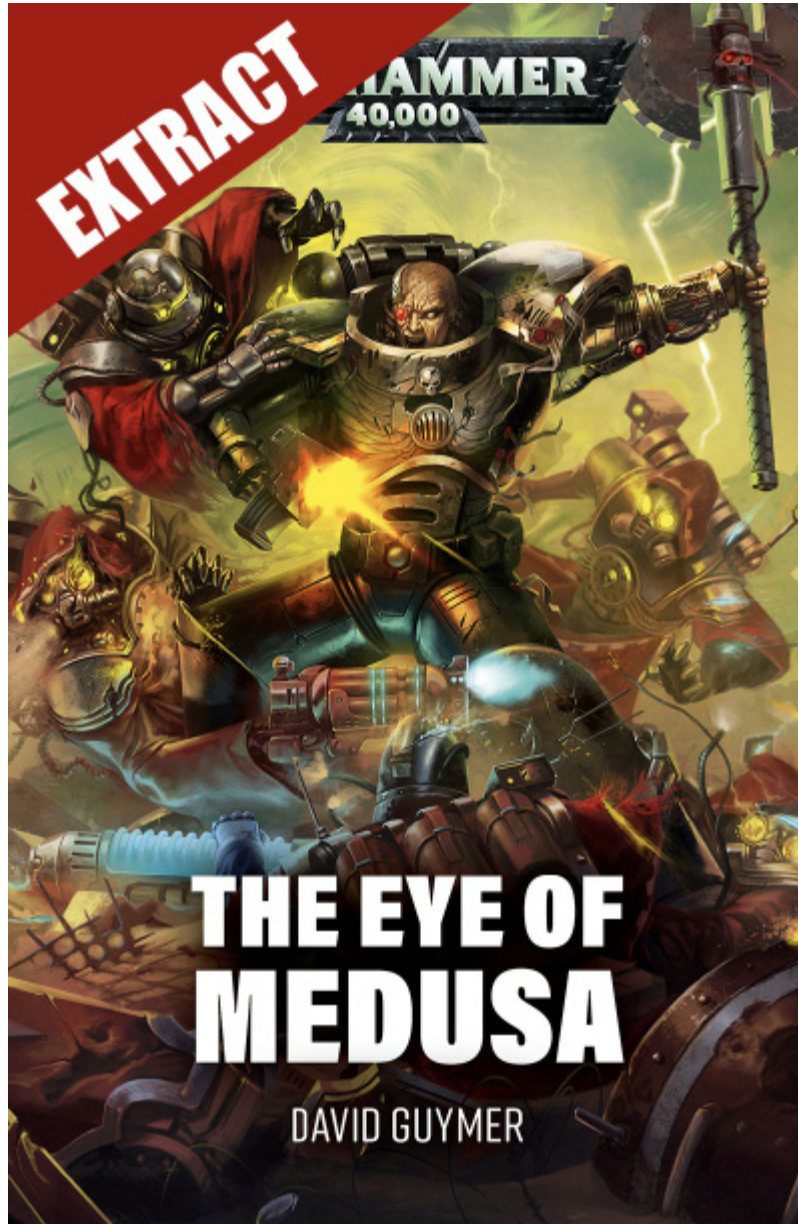
She considered his words. They were logical, and she disapproved of waste.

‘With our weak flesh purified we now set course to purge the infected forge world of Patraig Seven,’ Rathkugan said. ‘Let our blessed iron bring the Emperor’s wrath to the Death Guard. Never falter, never fail.’

About the Author

Cameron Johnston is the British Fantasy Award and Dragon Awards nominated author of grimdark fantasy novels *The Traitor God* and *God of Broken Things*. He is a swordsman, a gamer, and an enthusiast of archaeology, history and mythology. He loves exploring ancient sites and camping out under the stars by a roaring fire.

An extract from [The Eye of Medusa](#) .
Book 1 of the Iron Hands series.



‘With this link, I bind you to my clan.’

‘To my clan.’ Echoes of gears and metal.

Kardan Stronos barely heard the words of the litany. They had become inseparable from the shriek of bone planes and laser scalpels. Every tiny bone vibrated to its own share of the agony, and only his fundamental genetic hardening kept him conscious of the process at all.

‘Is there pain?’ The voice of the tech-priest, Artisan Adept Sabeq Rawl, was perfectly level. Stronos was equally fastidious in answering, the question as much a component of the ritual as the pain.

‘Pain is of the flesh. From this day onward, I am iron.’

The words they spoke were Reket, the dialect of the mortal Garrsaki clansmen and the ritual tongue of their iron overlords. It was a language of few words and constraining syntax, colourless and harsh, enforcing the terse, inexpressive speech of its wielders. The differences between it and other Medusan forms were sufficient to make its usage under the present circumstances a challenge. As was the intent.

‘The flesh cannot speak with the clarity of machine to machine,’ said Sabeq. ‘It communicates its needs through the code-language of pain.’ Stronos felt the ceramite outer casing of his upper backplate adeptly unscrewed and detached, servomuscular bundles shrinking from their first taste of the Alloyed’s meagre atmosphere. ‘What about...’ Then came the sharp jab of a spinal probe between the mechanisms and into the marrow. ‘Now?’

Stronos’ gasp perished midway up his throat, and he swallowed his cry with an effort. ‘Barely.’

‘Good.’ Impossible to be certain, but the priest sounded impressed. ‘The sensation you are feeling now is your spine passing instruction to your pain centres that the graft has been integrated successfully. Congratulations, Lord Stronos – you are of the clan.’

‘Of the clan.’

There was a chattering whir as hook limbs passed over the back of his neck, anointing the new implant with oils, machining them into the gloss with an array of rotatable scrubbers.

Stronos winced, the area still raw, and fixed his gaze firmly forward.

The cell was small, iron grey, the minimum necessary for the

physical existence of a transhuman being. Elevation to the rank of sergeant brought the privilege of single quarters, an archaic custom for his needs were few, but tradition was tradition, and the single cot was the one on which he sat. The occasional spasm of his muscles, and the artisan's insect-quick shifts in position, brought sympathetic creaks and groans from its frame. The current placement of his hands, laid one atop the other over an ironbound incunabulum in his lap, played a large part in his outward stoicism. Not the hands so much as the book itself, his iron core, all his body's weaknesses pouring into its worn binding and creased parchment.

'With this link,' said Sabeq, withdrawing his implements, then gimballing in close enough to Stronos' neck to physically blow on the polished surface, a ritual benediction to fortune. 'I bind you to my clan.'

'To my clan.'

Unconsciously, Stronos dialled through his bionic eye's spectral bands, the muscles of his cheek clenching and releasing to an ingrained rhythm, matching the acuity of his organic eye to the augmented as he flicked from wavelength to wavelength. Iron Father Verrox had laughed it off as a tick, one that often manifested under duress or in the build up to a deployment, but to Stronos it was the very definition of physical deficiency. That it arose from a desire to expunge his body's weaknesses did not repudiate it. Realising what he was doing, he stopped, the final transition from red to infrared leaving his flesh eye behind, staring into a pall of excavated bone as three heat wraiths materialised from the corners of the cell. They were hulking, black, visible only by the dim yellow corona that outlined their armoured frames, patches of fiery white around power packs and partially disengaged armour seals.

They bore witness.

One amongst their number stepped forward. His name was Jalenghaal. Stronos did not know him except by name and honour roll. He stopped half a metre before Stronos' cot, and there triggered the manual release of a sectional plate from his power armour's girdle band. For any Iron Hands battle-brother of a certain age, the removal of armour that they had long ago ceased to consider distinct from their own increasingly augmented frames was a labour of hours, if not days, one that demanded use of a forge and a team of servitors. Jalenghaal and his brothers would have devoted many days prior to

Stronos' arrival in preparation for this ritual. Sabeq's dendrites flicked expertly around Stronos' front, swifter than either eye could track, to strip him of the corresponding piece.

'With this link,' Jalenghaal intoned, flat and without cadence as he presented the slab of black armour. Corpuscular attachments and tentacled bio-circuitry probed the air for the ligand sites of a Space Marine's black carapace. 'I bind you to my clan.' The emphatic use of 'my' sounded an uneven note in the otherwise monotone purr of the Iron Hands brother's words.

It was instantly forgotten as the armour plate slotted into Stronos' prepared harness perfectly, his armour's systems snarling at the influx of foreign data. He gasped, overwhelmed, as command protocols, tactical runes, and much, much more exloaded from the other Iron Hands brother and splayed across Stronos' bionic eye. They hovered in view, like dripping steel, and in the blink of an eye Stronos knew Brother Jalenghaal.

'By your iron, am I bound,' Stronos managed to utter, and remembered to blink-click the ritual confirmation to Jalenghaal's helm display.

In silence, the Iron Hand stepped back, and the second presented himself. < Lurrgol ,> his armour told him. Then the third. < Burr .> Both came bearing parts of themselves, and further bindings from battle-brothers, ten in all, unable to attend. To each new addition, his armour's spirit responded with snarls and whines, and Stronos felt his mind whirl with the influx of information, fragments of thought and emotion that fell on his cortices only to melt away like flakes of snow. The given components were not offered at random. Each incorporated a data-tether twinned to the giver's system core.

When it was completed, Stronos heard the territorial growl that emanated from his armour's intelligence core, a surly welcome to a quorum of ten.

He had studied the customs of Clan Garrsak in preparation for his transfer and swift elevation, his fascination genuine, but the power of their bonding took his breath away. It was as though the individual identities of ten battle-brothers had been subsumed into a gestalt being, its mind noospheric, its view from a plane above its constituent sum. This being had a name.

Clave Stronos.

'It is done.' Jalenghaal stood tall against the wall, an autopsy in

monochrome of dull black ceramite and sleek plasteel bionic. For all his machine detachment, his impatience was as audible as the power hum of his systems.

‘Almost,’ said Sabeq. ‘I need only add rank insignia and ident wafers that the Omnissiah might know it.’

‘The Alloyed approaches Thennos’ orbit,’ said Jalenghaal. ‘Brothers muster.’

‘A fact to which I am cogent.’

‘Then give me a time frame, adept.’

A ripple of mechadendrites, a shrug. ‘The armour’s spirit demands its due, and yours must recognise clan-brother and commander.’

It was in the nature of the Iron Hands to challenge their superiors, for in such challenges were weaknesses exposed, but at that Jalenghaal fell silent. The bonds of clan went deeper than Chapter, deeper even than the shared gene-link to the primarch.

In times like these, it was the one bond of brotherhood that remained stronger than iron.

With the ritual essentially over, Stronos allowed his muscles to relax; his hands parted from the book in his lap.

The Cantic of Travels was the only surviving text describing Ferrus Manus’ early life on Medusa. This volume, written and annotated by the paramount Voice of Mars some time in the early centuries of M33, was the oldest version of the collected stories still in existence. The forgotten adept’s anonymous opus, bringing the Omnissiah’s enlightenment to the old legends, was the cornerstone of doctrinal thought from Medusa to Mars, and anywhere else that two Iron Hands collided. This copy had seen more action than most Imperial Guardsmen, and was better read. The pages were dog-eared, the las scorch across the lower spine earned on Furios Minor when he had still borne the book with him into battle.

It had been a gift from a friend, and Stronos had few enough of those.

He closed his flesh eye and massaged his forehead with the knuckles of his gauntlet until the dizziness receded. ‘Iron Captain Draevark has apprised me of the situation on Thennos. The ships of my former clan are uplink-capable.’

The stereotype of the thuggish warrior of Vurgaan was as old as that of the robotic butcher of Clan Garrsak; Stronos found the cultural idiosyncrasies fascinating, but the allusion to the

caricature raised a death-rattle chuckle from Lurrgol.

Stronos glanced up to address the whipping tendrils of Artisan Rawl. 'Perhaps we might dispense with the abjuration of rejection and the ancillary rites of inscription until after the initial deployment.'

'Your forgechain shows me that you have undergone the rite more than once before. I see you have learned from the experience.' Rawl bowed his mechtinous head-section. 'Very well. The machine-spirit would welcome a late arrival to your first battle even less than it would a rushed blessing. Oh, for the purity of a warrior's calling.'

'Iron is not dug pure from the ground,' growled Jalenghaal. 'It is made pure.'

Lurrgol and Burr nodded in agreement.

The artisan hooked a bloodied extensor over Stronos' shoulder and gestured for the servitor, hidden in somnolence behind the fog of counterseptic and bone. At the artisan's unspoken override, the lobotomised bio-construct started towards the cot. Its necrotised room temperature biology had hidden it from Stronos' infravision until then. A neat square of blood vessels and bone had been dug out of its brow. The flesh there had borne a binharic ident-brand containing Stronos' clan, clave, and personal authentications. All now former. It too would eventually require re-baptism that the Omnissiah might know it. The servitor presented the adept a tray of implements, which he selected from, replacing drill bits and nozzle heads as he dutifully blessed the currently nameless servitor. Then he returned his attentions to Stronos' armour, hyper-fine laser sculptors erasing rank and squad insignia and replacing them with new ones. Stronos felt the artisan's sculpting tools hover uncertainly over his battleplate's more glaring imperfections.

Scratch marks in Juuket, the barbaric dialect of Clan Vurgaan, recorded the many worlds on which he had fought. Strings of spent shells and power casings recalled particularly impressive kills, the trophies hanging from his armour like threaded beads. He nodded reluctantly. When one joined a clan, one joined absolutely.

Lurrgol appeared amused by Stronos' hesitation. 'Kardaanus and Vand look forward to fighting under you, brother-sergeant.' Stronos had never met the clave's two heavy-weapon specialists, but somehow he found he knew them well. They had a shared appreciation of firepower. 'I look forward to fighting

alongside them as well. With all of my clan.' He glanced at Jalenghaal's brooding form as, with a serried click, Artisan Rawl's lasers snapped back into folding sheaths.

It is done,' said the artisan. 'May the Omnissiah watch over this instrument of holy war. May the Motive Force move it. May the Machine God see it unmake the impure works of the heretic, the abomination and the alien.' He made a complex concatenation of gestures.

'Ave Omnissiah,' the four Iron Hands legionaries rumbled in unison.

Stronos rose. The cot creaked with the removal of his immense weight. He risked a turn of the neck. Stiff, but the pain was bearable.

'How does it feel?' said Burr.

'Weak.'

Stronos grunted as he pushed the softseals of arm and neck joints to run his fingers down the forgechain. The augmetic vertebrae symbolised acceptance into his new clan. The first that every new Scout received was the plain steel of Clan Dorrvok. Next down his chain was the opalxanthine of the Clan Vurgaan, followed now by the acid-etched gold rosarium of Clan Garrsak. He felt a frisson of connection to his prior, lesser selves, an unbroken chain that ran back, through his initiation, to his long-discarded humanity.

'With this link we bind you to our clan,' Jalenghaal intoned. There was a single century cog-stud bolted into his helm. He clasped Stronos' wrist in a grip that was stronger than superhuman and harder than plasteel. Stronos returned it with equal stiffness.

'You are fully connected?' asked Burr.

Through the constant feed of inload/exload from individual to clave to clan, Stronos found that he could see the ident-runes of every battle-brother aboard the cruiser, the Alloyed . Recognised by the interlink manifold as a sergeant, he was able to pinpoint their approximate location, determine their combat status, listen in on private vox loops, and even see through a brother's eyes by siphoning input from his visual feeds.

It felt... godlike.

'I am.'

'What is the calculus of battle?'

Stronos quickly read the runes. 'Full-scale deployment. An example must be made.'


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