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DEUS EX MECHANICUS

ANDY CHAMBERS

CONTENTS

Cover

Deus ex Mechanicus

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DEUS EX MECHANICUS

Andy Chambers

The scream of the engines fought against the howling winds in a terrifying crescendo of doom. Hypervelocity mica particles skittered across the hull of the ship like skeletal fingers as it wallowed in the storm, shuddering and dropping by steps as the pilot struggled for control. In the midst of the tumult, Lakius Danzager, tech-priest engineer, Votaris Laudare, illuminant of Mars, adept of the Cult Mechanicus was struggling to open up the skull of that failing pilot, and cursing in a distinctly un-priestly fashion as he struggled to find the right tools for the job.

‘Dammit! Osil, find me a hydro coupling, my boy. We’ll need one if I can free these accursed fasteners. Look in the vestibule.’ He tried to keep his voice calm so as not to frighten his acolyte, but Osil’s face was pallid in his cowl as he nodded and hurried out through the rusty bulkhead hatch.

The ship’s rattling, brassbound altimeter showed them at a height of nearly seven kilometres above the planet. They had already been dropping out of control for twelve. As Lakius turned back to the rune-etched panel enclosing the ship’s pilot, another violent lurch smashed his shaven skull against it, triggering an emgram patch he had only recently divined from his auto-shrine. It was about their too-rapidly approaching destination, and ran in confusing counterpoint through his right optic viewer as he tried to focus on repairing the nav-spirit.

NAOGEDDON IS A DEAD WORLD.

The ringing impact of Lakius’s metal-shod head had partially freed the rusting key-bolts. With a whispered prayer for forgiveness from the already distraught machine-spirit, he bent to the task. He carefully unscrewed the panel, murmuring the rite of unbinding and ensuring that he removed the keys in the correct cardinal directions. The ghostly image of a dun-coloured sphere hovered in his right eye. Red text scrolled past it.

Orbital distance: 0.78 AU.

Equatorial Diameter: 9,749 km.

Rotation: 34.6 hours.

Axial Tilt: 0.00.

As he’d feared, the coupling between the augur spike and the pilot-stone had ruptured, blinding the pilot to its landing beacon. He checked the altimeter as he began the ritual of dislocation to remove the charred remnants. Less than two kilometres of howling winds now lay beneath their rocking hull.

Weather: See storms.*

‘Osil! Where’s that coupling, boy?’

‘Here, father. The first one was faulty and I had to go back for another.’

0% Precipitation. Wind speed: Constant 24 kts, Variance 76 kts.

Lakius took the twist of hydro-plastic without comment but silently gave praise to the Omnissiah that the lad had been attentive enough to spot the difference. Under current circumstances, a normally forgivable sin of oversight could prove fatal. Lakius took a breath to steady himself before beginning the ritual of insertion.

Lifeforms: Autochthonic: None.

Introduced: None.

Less than a league of free air remained before they would hurtle into solid rock. His servo-hand shook as he tried to apply the proscribed number of half-turns to the coupling mounts. He yearned to simply call the rite finished and resurrect the pilot. But years of discipline and doctrine drove him on as he completed the benediction against failure, applied the sacred unguents and retrieved the panel so he could begin the final rites of protection and sealing.

Archaeotech Resource: Limited/Xeno artefacts/@ 600,000,000 yrs (pre.GA) Class: Omega.*

‘Father, I can see dust dunes below us. I think we’re going to crash.’

Notes:

First Catalogued: 7/243.751.M32. Rogue trader Xatal Parnevue. Orbital Augury Only. Annexus Imperialis.*

‘Mechanism, I restore thy spirit! Let the God-Machine breathe half-life unto thy veins and render thee functional.’ Lakius firmly depressed the activation rune on the pilot’s casing and prayed.

Landed: 6/832.021.M35. Explorator Magos Dural Lavank. Expedition Lost.

Landed: 7/362.238.M37. Explorator Magos Prime Holisen Zi. Expedition Lost.

The ship’s engines rose in a triumphant scream to drown out the rushing winds and skittering dust. Lakius and Osil felt the heavy weight of high-G deceleration as the ungainly craft steadied itself and slowed. Lakius could see dust dunes too now, through the curving port in the ship’s prow, but the dunes with their trailing streamers of blowing dust were dwarfed by the serried ranks of sharp-angled black monoliths which rose up around the ship as it dipped between them. Osil let out an involuntary gasp as the scale of the structures became apparent. The monoliths were mountain-sized edifices of harsh, alien rock cutting the horizon into saw-tooth edge, or a predator’s maw.

Landed: 6/839.641.M41. Explorator Magos Prime Reston Egal. Surface Survey. Xeno Structures Catalogued*.*

The ship changed course, angling towards a vast dark triangle which blotted out half the sky. The pilot-spirit was faithfully following the beacon, bringing them in towards a tiny ring of light in the shadows below it. There lay the explorators’ camp.

Gritty sand crunched underfoot and a cold, stinging wind blew more of it into their faces as they stepped down to the landing ground. Patchwork figures of steel and flesh were rolling towards them on armoured treads; Lakius and Osil waited by the ship and made no sudden moves.

‘See there, Osil: the explorators have invoked a laser mesh for the protection of the camp. How powerful would you say it is?’

‘I see three transformation engines on this side of camp. Assuming the same number on the far side I would estimate 10 to 20 gigawatts, father.’

The figures came closer. They were Praetorians, bionically reconstructed warrior-servitors of the Machine-God. Their cadaverous faces gazed stonily from a nest of targeting scopes and data-wires, gun barrels and energy tubes tracked Lakius and Osil until they halted. A chest-mounted speaker on one crackled into life.

‘Two lifeforms identified. Classified non-hostile. Please follow, Father Lakius, Acolyte Osil.’

They followed a pair of the heavy servitors between low buildings of pre-fabricated armourplas panelling towards a central command sphere. Osil pointed to one of the smaller structures which had its panels folded back to create a workshop lit from within by welding arcs and showers of sparks.

‘What works are being undertaken here, father?’

Lakius repressed a chill sensation of foreboding ‘They are reinitiating servitors, Osil. Evidently there has been some accident or mishap which has rendered the units non-functional.’ He forbore to comment on the row of ready caskets outside the workshop, containers for tech-priests whose biological components were fit only for incorporation into new servitors. Several priests must have died here already.

The Praetorians motioned them into the command-sphere and remained on guard outside. Inside was a scene of barely organised chaos. Wiring cascaded from panels and conduits, devices of a hundred types thrummed, buzzed and sparked, screenplates flickered and scrolled through endless lines of scripture. A robed priest detached himself from a group clustering around the central dais and addressed Lakius.

‘Adept Danzager, your arrival has been greatly anticipated. I am Adept Noam, Lexmechanic Magos Tertius. I have the honour of analysing and compiling data on this expedition.’ Noam was gaunt and emotionless, only his lack of bionic enhancement and priestly robes marking him apart from the servitors. Two other priests gathered behind him. Noam pointed to each in turn and pronounced their roles with toneless efficiency.

‘Adept Santos, artisan, responsible for camp construction and maintenance.’ A rotund man nodded. He was heavily rebuilt with a subsidiary lifting arm at his shoulder and a mass of diagnostic probes in place of his left hand and eye.

‘Adept Borr, rune priest, extrapolation and theory.’ Borr was slight and nervous-looking, and seemed to be on the edge of speaking when Noam cut him off. Noam and Borr evidently didn’t get along. Noam gestured to the other robed figures within the chamber.

‘Adepts Renallaird, Kostas and Adso are engineers like yourself, their areas of expertise covering the mysteries of generation,

augury and metricalation. Adept Virtinnian is absentia, attending to the servitors at present.' Renaillard, Kostas and Adso looked up briefly as their names were mentioned and gave a perfunctory nod before bending back to their work.

'Blessings of the Omnisiah be upon you all,' Lakius said. 'Am I to assume that you are the leader of this expedition, Adept Noam?'

'No, Explorator Magos Prime Reston Egal has that blessing. He will be joining us shortly.'

'Can you tell me why I have been summoned here then? I know that this is an important undertaking; after all, it has already made me late for my own funeral.'

If Noam understood the joke he made no sign, but Borr grinned behind his hand. Noam replied, 'Yes, you were scheduled for dissemination at the termination of your last assignment. A post with the Officio Assassinorum, I understand. You must be disappointed that your emgrams cannot yet be joined with the Machine-God.'

'In truth, it is my belief that I serve better as a living being than a collection of memories and servitor wetware.'

'Understandable, and very biological.' Something close to disdain passed across Noam's features when he said biological. 'I see that you have never considered undertaking the unction of clear thought.'

'The unction of clear thought? What is that, father?' blurred Osil, forgetting that he should be seen and not heard amongst such adepts.

Noam replied smoothly, apparently not troubled by the acolyte's gaucheness. 'The full utilisation of cerebral mass is a simple matter of isolating our thoughts from the rigours and distractions of emotion – hunger, fear, joy, boredom and so forth. This we know as the unction of clear thought.'

'A common surgical practice among lexmechanics,' Lakius told Osil, 'whose renowned cognitive abilities are enhanced thereby.' At the price of becoming an emotionless automaton he thought to himself, before adding more diplomatically, 'In my own role as engineer I have always found crude emotions such as "fear" and "pain" to be useful motivators under the right circumstances.'

'Indeed?' Noam said, warming to his subject matter. 'Studies of stress—'

'Splendid! This must be our new expert in cryo-stasis!'

Noam was cut off by a newcomer who had lurched into the chamber like an animated scarecrow, all gangling arms and legs. His narrow, vulpine head, scrawny neck and thin body conspired to complete the illusion. He grinned voraciously at Lakius. 'Now you're finally here, we can get on with it! Splendid!'

Lakius bowed deeply. 'Magos Egal, I presume.'

'That's right. I see you've met the others and Noam's about to treat you to a sermon!' Magos Egal winked conspiratorially at Lakius, bouncing up and down on his heels as if he couldn't contain his delight. Lakius was astonished. He was used to a certain amount of... eccentricity among senior members of the Mechanicus, explorators in particular, but Egal seemed to be verging on the edge of lunacy. 'You come highly commended, you know! Highly commended! Two centuries of experience!'

'Almost fifty years aboard a single craft, servicing a single sarcophagus, magos. Admittedly, that was of alien design and its failure would have brought about my immediate dissemination – but I cannot imagine how I may be of service here.' In truth, Lakius had a strong and unpleasant suspicion exactly why cryo-stasis was of interest to this famed explorator, but he wished to hear it said out loud.

'You can't guess? I bet you can, but you want to hear it anyway! You're a sharp one! I like that.' Egal grinned lopsidedly, 'Do you know what this place is?' Egal thrust his arms outwards to encompass the whole world.

'Naogeddon... a dead world.'

'No!' Egal thrust up a finger to make his point. 'Not dead, sleeping! Sleeping these six hundred million years!' Lakius's stomach underwent a queasy lurch.

Egal composed himself a little and went on. 'Let me begin at the beginning. Over six hundred million years ago, a race we know as the necrontyr arose and spread across the galaxy. What little we know of these giants of prehistory has been learned from a handful of so-called dead worlds, like this one, scattered at the very fringes of the galaxy. On each world stand vast, monolithic structures which have remained all but impenetrable to every device at the hand of man. The level of technology evident in their construction is almost incomprehensible to us and many explorators have been lost winning the fragmentary knowledge we do have.'

'On my first expedition to Naogeddon, we gained certain measurements and calibrations which are singular to the dead worlds of the outer rim, these ancient seats of the necrontyr. These have enabled myself and Adept Borr to fashion a device... a key, if you will, which can unlock these structures without awakening their occupants.'

Adept Borr had grown increasingly agitated as Magos Egal spoke and now he interjected, 'Magos, the last attempt caused an exponential jump in attacks—'

Noam cut him off smoothly. 'Adept Borr, those projections have not been verified. Adept Santos has confirmed the current threat is well within the capacity of our defences to contain.'

'The current threat, yes, but if things go wrong—'

Adept Santos seemed affronted by Borr's implied criticism. 'We have a fifteen gigawatt laser mesh, twenty armed servitors and storm bunkers built out of cubit thick, Titan-grade armourplas panels. What could possibly go wrong?'

Egal had passively watched the exchange with fatherly humour and a slight grin, but now he became animated again. ‘Ah yes! Speaking of which, I believe they’re due to attack any time now. Stations, everyone!’

Lakius’s queasy stomach lurched up towards his mouth. Sirens wailed a second later.

‘You mean they attack at the same time every day?’

‘Well, every dusk. Strictly speaking.’

Lakius, Osil and Borr were in an observation gallery at the top of the command sphere. As a rune priest adept, Borr was trained to piece together fragmentary information and make a speculative theorem, something akin to black magic to most tech-priests. As such, Borr had explained, he was detailed to make observations of their attackers, try to understand their tactics, strengths and weaknesses and then feed effective protocols to the Praetorians.

‘I thought it was already night,’ Osil said.

‘No, Osil, it’s always this dark because of the dust in the atmosphere, most of the suns’ light is reflected back into the void,’ Lakius replied. ‘Adept Borr, what are these attackers? Despite Adept Santos’s reassurances, I note a number of casualties have already been incurred.’

‘They appear to be mechanisms: humanoid, skeletal, most assuredly armed. We have not been able to secure one for study, despite strenuous efforts.’

‘And I did not note an astropath adept among those spoken of so far.’

Hesitantly, Borr looked up at Lakius. His tattooed face was underlit by the greenly glowing glass of the augurs before him, but to Lakius the sickly pallor was underwritten by a deeper fear. ‘Adept Arraius... disappeared prior to the very first attack. I—I fear Magos Egal has not fully thought through the implications of this site. There are machine spirits here which have functioned continuously for six hundred million years.’

Borr would have continued but an alarm began chiming, quietly but insistently.

The augur screen flashed and displayed a grid with moving icons, Borr glanced down and said, ‘The Praetorians have spotted something. We should have it at any moment. There, eight energy sources, six hundred metres out on the west side. We’ll have visual soon.’ Another glass flashed and displayed icons. Borr was all business now, his fears forgotten in his devotion to his work. ‘Eight more, at six hundred and closing from the south-east. They’re tempting us to split our fire, I expect... yes here it is, a third group at six hundred metres north waiting to see which way we go.’

Outside, the dark skies had deepened to an impenetrable, inky blackness which the powerful arc lights of the camp barely kept at bay. Borr fed attack vectors and coordinates to the Praetorians while Lakius and Osil clustered around an augur glass. The laser mesh was shown as a ragged line of X’s representing the ground based refraction spines. Red triangles approached in serried lines from two directions and held back on another angle. The Praetorians were represented by cog-shapes, in respect for their selfless devotion to the Machine-God. The Praetorians were moving southwest and an exchange of fire soon took place across the laser mesh. The tiny bolts flying back and forth on the glass were eerily echoed by the flashes visible through the observation ports. More frightening were the snaps and booms like distant lightning that came rolling across the compound.

The massed fire of the Praetorians was overwhelming the south-west group, the red triangles dimmed in quick succession, some disappearing altogether. Only two of the Praetorian-cogs showed the solid black of non-function, but even as Lakius watched one of the red triangles brightened momentarily and its shot turned another icon solid black. On the west the enemy was at the laser mesh, advancing through it in a tight wedge and destroying the spines with tightly controlled salvos. Red lines flickered across the interloper’s progress as detection beams were broken and the continuous energy flow of the mesh jumped to full output, searing through the ranks. Time and again the icons dimmed but recovered, they would soon break through. The northern group began to move.

‘The north group are coming,’ Lakius said.

‘I see them.’

Most of the Praetorians turned west, leaving a small group to finish off the tattered southern group.

The artificial lightning storm was getting closer. Osil was not paying attention to the glass any more. The scenes unfolding outside in plain sight froze him. Stray shots flashed into the camp, exploding in sparks or gouging glittering welts in Santos’s storm bunkers. Several Praetorians were in view, driving parallel with the laser mesh and firing at something out of view. More came into view from the camp, closing in around the spectral alien cohort forcing its way in from the west. The foe was terrible to see, their shining metal skulls and skeletons too symbolic to be missed. Here is Death, they had been built to communicate, in any language, across any gulf of time and to any race.

That was not the worst of them. These harbingers seemed in some horrible sense to live. Each was a mechanism, to be sure, but one with a fierce anime, like the idol of some ferocious, primitive god. Not only were they death, but they manifested a horrible sense of passion, even joy in their work. As machine spirits they were the most obscene perversions Lakius had ever seen, and inwardly part of him wept to see such things could still exist.

‘Father,’ Osil said, ‘the northern group...’

Lakius couldn’t tear his eyes away from the battle between the Praetorians and death machines below. The energy weapons of the aliens were frightening in their potency, their actinic bolts visibly flaying through whatever they struck layer by layer like some

obscene medical scan compressed into a heart beat. The warrior-servitors fought back with plasma fire and armour piercing missiles, cutting down the skeletal apparitions one by one, but four more servitors had been cut down by the enemies' deadly accurate fire.

Borr used the same tactic again, the bulk of Praetorians broke off and wheeled north. A small group was left to finish off the alien machines which kept stubbornly rising after hits that would have stopped a Dreadnought. Lakius was grateful for Borr's obvious tactical skill. If either the western or southern groups were not completely eliminated the foe would undoubtedly get a foothold inside the camp. The trouble was the Praetorians moving north to parry the third thrust numbered only six; for the first time they would not outnumber the enemy.

'Borr, set the northern face of the mesh to maximum sensitivity,' Lakius said.

'But the spines will fire continuously, dissipate into the windblown dust!'

'Mica dust,' Lakius corrected.

Borr grinned and began a rite of supplication.

The Praetorians fought well on the northern side. They used a storm bunker to narrow the angles so they only fought part of the enemy at once. Clattering forward on armoured treads, a salvo of missiles scorched across the void-black sky and cut down two enemy machines as they emerged from the las-mesh. Lightning-crack discharges of plasma burned another, but a critical overheat damaged one of the servitors as his shoulder-mounted plasma cannon suffered meltdown. Five faced five. The storm bunker was being torn to pieces, its adamantium sheath impossibly burning with metal-fires. With a groan it collapsed in on itself, revealing more of the foe at the inner edge of the mesh. The Praetorians lost two of their number for only one of the enemy. Three armoured servitors were left against four skull-faced killers. The aliens grinned their hideous, fixed grins as they stepped forward.

Without warning the laser mesh crackled into a frenzy of discharges. Gigawatts of energy were dissipated into the swirling dust particles, pointlessly scattering their power in flashes of heat and light.

The flashes were harmless, but powerful enough to temporarily blind the optics of the nearby skeleto-machines. Their fire slackened momentarily and the Praetorians used the opportunity to halt and let rip with every weapon in their arsenals; bolter shells, missiles and plasma carved through the silhouetted enemy.

Osil gaped at the scopes. A moment ago he had thought he was going to be killed, but instead they had won.

They had won.

Lakius stood looking at Magos Egal's 'key', a fifteen metre-long phase field generator, poised like some giant, complex syringe of steel and brass over the unyielding black stone of the alien structure. The smooth, blank wall sloped away to giddy heights, making an artificial horizon of solid black against the grey sky. Adept Renaillard was connecting power couplings at the nether region of the key-machine, quietly reciting catechisms as he anointed each socket and clamped the cables in place. Noam stood nearby, arguing with Borr about something. Four paces further along the key the magos himself was making fine adjustments to the its controls. Four Praetorians were arrayed nearby, their torsos swivelling back and forth as they scanned for danger.

Lakius had just completed a long shift restoring what Praetorians and servitors they could from the casualties sustained in the attack. The unseen Adept Virtinnian, whose duty it was to undertake such blessings, had been crushed to death along with Adept Adso and six servitors in one of Santos's Titan grade storm bunkers. Adept Santos himself had lost an arm when he attempted to secure an alien machine which had reactivated.

If the alien machine-spirits kept to their rigid timetable the next attack was due in six hours. The thought of it crawled at the back of Lakius's mind constantly, a nagging fear which grew minute by minute, hour by hour. He wished he could find some reason to dissuade the magos, stop him pursuing this patently dangerous study, but his authority was beyond question on an expedition like this. The doctrine of the Mechanicus was clear – entire planetary populations of tech-priests could be sacrificed in pursuit of sacred knowledge; the individual weighed nothing against the Cult Mechanicus. But was this sacred knowledge or something ancient and tainted?

'All set?' Magos Egal trilled to Renaillard, who nodded his assent. 'Places everyone! Lakius, you stand with me and we can all chant the liturgy of activation together.'

Chanting in choral tones, Egal made a series of connections and static started to jump from the generator, accompanied by a rising humming noise and the reek of ozone. The black stone shimmered, glittering like quicksilver as it started to deform away from the spiralled needle of the generator. An arch was appearing, tall and tapering, of perfect dimensions and straightness. Within its angles the stone writhed and coiled like a living thing before fading away like mist to reveal the mouth of a corridor. The perfect alien symmetry of it was marred only by the head and shoulder of a Praetorian which appeared to be sunk into the wall on the left hand side – mute testimony to the previously failed attempt to penetrate the structure.

Unperturbed by its silent brother, the first Praetorian moved into the corridor, its powerful floodlights piercing the darkness within. Osil gasped, the outer shell of the structure had made him imagine the inside to be the same, unadorned stone. But the lights picked out complex traceries of silvery metal set into every surface; walls, floor and ceiling twinkled with captured starlight. A murmur of wonder rose from the gathered tech-priests. Magos Egal grinned with delight.

'You see! A simple adjustment of three degrees was all it took! Quite, quite fascinating! I haven't seen anything quite like this since the moons of Proxima Hydratica!' he chuckled. Lakius felt relieved; the magos was evidently more accomplished than he appeared. One by one, trailing sensor cables and power threads behind, the techno-magi entered the alien structure.

The corridor with its rich silver filigrees sloped down and away. After a dozen metres it dropped down in knee-high steps for another hundred. The Praetorians struggled to negotiate the giant steps, laboriously lowering themselves over each one. The slow progress gave Lakius ample time to examine the silver-traced corridor walls. They were undoubtedly depicting script in a language of some form. Spines and whorls marched in lines apparently formed from continuous individual strands. The lines and strands of script crossed and re-crossed up and down the walls, across the floor and on high in frozen sine waves, creating the sensation that the alien language was somehow conveyed by the totality of what was before him, rather than its individual elements.

Adept Noam was taking input from a cadaverous-looking scanning servitor, a long umbilical connecting its oversized eye-lenses to a socket in the lexmechanic's chest. Borr was nearby, puzzling over a hand-held auspex.

'Can you make anything of it, Adept Borr?' Lakius whispered to the rune priest. The sepulchral quiet of the necrontyr monolith seemed to demand silence, as if noise would manifest all of its invisible, crushing weight to punish the impudent interlopers.

By unspoken agreement none of the party had broken that brooding silence with more than a harsh whisper since they had entered.

'No, I'm not sure that it's supposed to be read in the human optic range. Set your view-piece to read magnetic resonance and you'll see what I mean.'

Lakius fumbled with the focusing knob on the rim of his artificial eye, tuning it to scan electromagnetic frequencies. The corridor was bathed in it, every whorl and spine was a tiny energy source which glowed with magnetic force. The overall effect was dizzying, like walking through a glass corridor over an infinite gulf full of stars. After a time Lakius had to reset his vision to blank it out.

After an hour of descent the corridor flattened out and then twisted sharply to the right before being blocked by a portal of black metal. The two lead Praetorians halted before it, their floodlights darkly reflected in the glossy metal of the obstacle. Three geometric symbols were marked on it at knee, waist and shoulder height.

'Should we use weapons fire, magos?' asked one of the Praetorians, its plasma cannon eagerly swivelling into the ready position. Magos Egal shook his head, stepping up to the door with Noam faithfully shadowing him with his trailing servitor.

'No, no,' Egal muttered 'I'm sure it's a simple matter of-' He touched the metal of the portal. Lakius flinched slightly, fearing some ancient necrontyr death trap. Nothing happened. 'Understanding how to trigger these symbols.'

A pregnant silence fell behind Egal's words. Noam began analysing the symbols, cross-referencing with all the data he stored in his machine-enhanced brain.

Lakius softly let out a breath he'd been holding until he heard a new sound, a low buzz which rose quickly to a high pitched whine. It sounded horribly like a weapon charging up, its capacitors being filled to maximum before it unleashed an atomising blast. Hairs rose on Lakius's neck. The sigils were flickering with their own light now; their ghostly fingers of energy could be felt tangibly. The Praetorians sensed it too and went to a threat response, readying and charging their own weapons with a hiss of servos and whine of capacitors.

Lakius felt a surge of panic, as if he stood beneath a giant hammer which would smash down at any second. He wanted to run back up the corridor but his way was blocked by the two rearmost Praetorians. They were swivelling back and forth with their baleful targeting eyes lit as they searched for enemies. One of them turned far enough to spot its companion and its ruby eye irised down into a pinpoint as it locked on target. The Praetorian's plasma cannon crackled up to a full charge, a compressed lightning bolt which would annihilate anything within metres of its impact point.

Osil was gibbering with fear.

Lakius was shouting out command dogma: 'Praetorians! Audio primus command! Deus ex Terminus est.'

The cannon fired, a searing flash and thunderclap which tore through the other Praetorian and sent white-hot shrapnel scything down the corridor. Osil bravely shouldered Lakius to one side, saving the old engineer from a fiery demise. Shouts and another roar echoed from near the portal, as a wave front of scorching heat washed back up the corridor. The nearby Praetorian swivelled round and trained its plasma cannon on Lakius and Osil, its eye glowed with single-minded determination to destroy as it narrowed at them.

'Ergos Veriat excommen!' Lakius shouted hoarsely. 'Shut down!'

The Praetorian sagged down on its chassis like a puppet with its strings cut and the crisis was over as suddenly as it had begun. The eerie silence fell like a curtain which was broken by the crackle of tiny fires, the plink of cooling metal and the groans of Osil as he writhed on the blood slick slabs. Metal splinters had struck him in his side when he saved Lakius. By the blessings of the Omnisiah, the wounds were not too deep and Adept Borr shrived them with a somatic welder.

Adept Renaillard had not been so lucky and a shard of smouldering casing had struck him in the throat, almost shearing his head off. Smoke rose from the smouldering remains of the two Praetorians nearest the portal. Noam's servitor had been destroyed in the exchange of fire as the two destroyed each other, but Magos Egal and the lexmechanic were unharmed.

'A sophisticated form of faeran field,' Noam explained dispassionately. 'It was cut off when I completed decryption of the portal locks.' A faeran field interfered with brain functions, inducing, among other things, extreme fear responses and seizures. Lakius

couldn't help but think the lexmechanic sounded a little smug. Clear thought indeed.

Beyond the portal the corridor appeared to continue as before. Osil was sorely hurt in spite of Borr's ministrations, and Lakius undertook the rituals to reboot the solitary remaining Praetorian so that it could carry him back to the surface. Osil protested weakly, but Lakius spoke a few quiet words to him before sending him on his way. The young acolyte looked very much like a child clinging to the Praetorian's wide back and Lakius prayed that nothing was waiting back there in the darkness for them. With only four tech-priests left in the expedition it seemed dangerous to Lakius to push on, but the magos insisted, convinced they were at the verge of a breakthrough.

Egal's breakthrough proved to be a labyrinth. The corridor split and then split again and again to become many. The different ways sloped sharply up and down, some narrowing to slits too small for even a servomat to enter. Within three turns Lakius felt thoroughly disorientated. The marching hieroglyphs on the walls seemed to hint at other corridors lying just out of sight, showing outlines of other labyrinths, turnings, dead ends which were just out of phase with themselves. In the Mechanicus doctrine the faeran portal alone would have been the subject of months of careful study before further advance was made. The twistings of this alien maze would constitute a lifetime's work with studies of geometry and numerology.

Magos Egal was in no mood to linger, though, and he set Noam and Borr to calculating a path through. Adept Noam's vast analytic power was directed entirely onto building an accurate map of the interweaving passages they moved through using direct observation, phasic scanning, micropressure evaluation and tactile interrogation. Adept Borr used his carefully learned arts conjecture and intuition to understand the underlying structure of the maze, and to determine what kind of xenomorphic logic would guide them through it.

Lakius was reduced to doing the work of a servitor, spooling out power thread and invoking marker-points at each junction so that Noam could tick them off on his mental plan.

The spool's metriculator showed less than a thousand metres left of its five kilometre length when they found another portal, though the term seemed inappropriate for the gargantuan metal slabs confronting them.

The gleaming, baroquely etched metal stretched up into the darkness further than their hand lights could reach. The corridor angled away in either direction, following some inner wall but leaving a sizeable vestibule that the four explorators now occupied. They were dwarfed by the new barrier, rendered so insignificant that the opening of those titanic gates could only foretell their doom at the hand of something ancient and monstrous. Adept Noam did not even flinch as he stepped forward to begin deciphering the locking-glyphs.

Lakius's mouth was dry with fear as the adept began tracing the first glyph. He looked back along the corridor, sure he had heard some scuttling noise. The twinkling silver traceries hurt his eyes, mechanical and organic. It took him a moment to realise that shapes were moving across them. Silvery, glittering shapes.

'Watch the rear!' Lakius shouted and hefted his personal weapon, an ancient and beautifully crafted laser made by Ortisian of Arkeness, whose spirit he had long tended to. Its angry red lash was sharp and true: it caught a shape, which blew apart in a blinding flash that spoke of minor atomics. The others crouched on their spindly legs and then leapt forward, buzzing down the corridor like a swarm of metallic insects.

Each was the size of a man's torso, flattened at the edges like scarabs and fringed with vicious looking hooks and claws. They were fast but so aggressive that they impeded each other's progress as they rattled and bounced over one another. Borr's bolt launcher joined its roaring song to the hiss of Lakius's laser. Their combined fire clawed down three more of the steely scarabs. Nonetheless, Lakius and Borr had to back towards the doors to keep their distance as more swarmed forward.

'Keep them back!' shouted Egal. 'Noam almost has it!'

Their backs were almost against the doors already. Lakius focused all his attention on tracking and eliminating the machine-scarabs, his laser flickering from one to another in a deadly dance of destruction. But they were still getting closer. One scarab ducked between two of its fellows at the point of their destruction, and surged forward while the tech-priests were half-blinded by the explosions. The machine's scrabbling claws ripped Borr's bolter from his hands before its momentum carried it over Lakius's head. It bounced off a wall and arrowed down amongst the priests. Lakius flinched away and saw it clamp on to Adept Noam's back even as he completed the last sigil. Surgical-sharp hooks ripped into the lexmechanic as the twin portals began to slowly separate.

'Could someone remove this?' Noam asked calmly, like a man being troubled by a wasp on a summer's day. 'I—'

The scarab exploded like a miniature nova and Adept Noam was gone, consumed in an actinic fireball which knocked Lakius flat. He rolled desperately, purple after-images flashing in his vision, ears filled with the roar of detonation. He expected to feel the dread weight of one of the machines landing on him at any second.

Osil lay gripped to an operating table by steel bands, the arms of an auto chirurgeon delicately sliced at his skin, pulling forth steel splinters and suturing his torn flesh together. Pain blockers numbed his body but his mind was racing. Father Lakius had told him to prepare their sacred cargo for release. Such a dangerous undertaking was normally only made in response to a signal from the Adeptus Terra on distant Earth.

To begin the investiture of the living weapon the ship carried in cryo-stasis without the initiation code was tantamount to suicide. If the assassin's crypt was opened without receiving the preparatory mnemonics and engrams specifying its target it would kill everything it found until it was destroyed.

Father Lakius, he concluded, must privately believe things had gone very, very wrong indeed.

Lakius flinched as something gripped his shoulder and started dragging him backwards. He realised someone was trying to pull him to safety and kicked his legs to scramble across the floor.

Moments later, Lakius's vision cleared enough to see that he was beyond the doors and that they were closing. The dark slit of the corridor outside narrowed rapidly as they smoothly swept together. He pointed the laser still gripped in his shaking hand but no scarab-machines came through the gap before it sealed.

'Splendid! They are without and we are within,' Magos Egal's voice said, close to Lakius's ear.

He scrambled to his feet as quickly as he could, fearfully looking around. Egal stood nearby and beyond him the chamber they had entered could be seen in its full majesty. Huge, angular buttresses marched away down either wall, and the floor sloped gently downward. Frosty pillars of greenish light shone down from an unseen roof to reveal row upon row of tall blocks covered in angular alien script. The air held a chill and the silence of the labyrinth outside had given way to a gentle susurrus like waves against a distant shore.

'Where's Adept Borr?' Lakius demanded. Egal turned away from his accusing gaze, looking off down the cyclopean chamber.

'I'm sorry, I had to shut the portal or the scarabs would have killed all of us,' Egal seemed genuinely repentant. He could not even meet Lakius's gaze.

'You just left him outside!' Lakius's angry words rang hollow even to him. The young rune priest was dead and recriminations would not bring him back. They were trapped at the centre of the monolith now, the heart of the ancient structure. The Mechanicus-trained academic in him was already studying the chamber, too awed by the storehouse of alien archaeotech to give thought to the cost already incurred. The rows of man-high blocks seemed familiar, something about them... understanding blossomed with a now-familiar tang of fear.

'These are cryo-stasis machines,' he whispered. Metriculation memo-chips in his optic viewer calmly extrapolated that the chamber held over a million of them.

'It's what I brought you to see. They resemble the cryo-crypt of the Assassinorum vessel you arrived in, do they not? The best is at the centre, these are just... servants. Come and we may look upon a sight no living thing has seen in six hundred million years.'

Egal moved off down the slope and Lakius numbly followed. They passed block after block, each glittering with a rime of ancient frost. The floor got steeper until they had to crawl on hands and knees, gripping the blocks to lower themselves down to a flat circular section dominated by an immense stasis crypt. It was a sarcophagus in form, its top moulded into a representation of what lay within. Lakius expected to see a mask of death like the machine warriors, but instead found vivid life rendered in polished metal, beautiful but inhuman and cruel. Rows of sigils around the lid shone with an inner light, and it felt warm to the touch.

'It's already been opened,' said Lakius. 'Help me move the lid. I need to see inside.'

Between them they managed to turn the huge, heavy lid, swivelling it to reveal the interior. The sarcophagus was empty.

Egal seemed unsurprised; in fact, he was delighted. 'Splendid! Just as I had hoped.' He reached a gangling arm into the sarcophagus and brought out a silvery, metallic staff.

'Lakonius described an artefact like this in the Apocrypha of Skarros. He spoke of a symbol of mastery born by the lords of the necronyrr, called the "staff of light".' He hefted the ornate device in both hands. As he did so, an intense blue-white light flared in the symbol at the top of the staff. 'With this, we need fear no denizen of this edifice; with time they can even be tamed and made to serve.'

'But what of the occupant of the crypt?' Lakius asked, nervously noting the maniacal gleam in Egal's eye. 'The lord and master of this place that we're plundering from? I fear in our current circumstances we could scarcely fend off any kind of attack and that artefact is more likely to draw one to us. We should go while we still can.'

'Very well, but the staff of light could be our salvation. It would be madness to leave it behind.'

Osil limped towards the landing field where their ship lay. He had agonised greatly about whether to accede to his mentor's request. By Imperial and Mechanicus law, the activation of one of the lethal members of the Officio Assassinorum without proper authorisation was treason of the highest order. Death of the flesh would be a secondary consideration beside the terrible punishments that would entail.

But Osil had spent almost twenty Terran years in the company of Lakius Danzager, studying the tasks he would one day continue when the father was gathered to the Librarium Omnissiah. He had imagined he would spend the rest of his life aboard the ageing cutter, maintaining its systems and preparing its cargo of Imperial vengeance when it was required. That was not going to be the case now. Osil had learned enough of Lakius's clarity to understand that the explorator's expedition was woefully inadequate in the face of the alien terrors of Naogeddon. Father Lakius feared the worst, that they were about to unwittingly unleash something so terrible

that he believed only an adept of the Eversor temple would have a chance of stopping it. And so the assassin must be prepared.

Magos Egal strode ahead confidently through the labyrinth, thrusting out the staff like a torch, its fierce light burning back the shadows and setting the hieroglyphs aflame with blue-white flashes. Lakius scuttled along behind him, jumping at each new scraping, slithering noise, jabbing his pistol towards each new vagrant glitter of steel as it flicked out of sight behind a corner. The denizens of the labyrinth were dogging their heels, giving back before the circle of light from the staff and closing in behind.

After what seemed like an eternity they reached the first portal where they had fallen foul of the faeran field. The melted wreckage of the Praetorians and Renaillard's body were gone, the corridor clear except for the power threads trailing off into the darkness. Magos Egal wanted to stop and investigate but Lakius feared some assault would take place if they lingered, and urged him to press on. The soft scrapes and scratches of movement were behind them now, but following closely all the time. As they started to climb the steps Lakius looked back and caught sight of dozens of tiny lights floating in the gloom. They looked like blue fires, seemingly cold and distant, but drifting forward in pairs, the twin eye-lights of murder-machines on their trail.

The cool grey light of the outside seemed blinding after the blackness within. The edges of the phasic rift in the structure's outer sheath were wavering alarmingly and they ran past the entombed Praetorian to stumble out onto the gritty dust of the surface. It took Lakius a moment to gain his breath and he looked up to see Egal making adjustments to the phase generator.

'You're shutting it down, I trust,' said Lakius.

'Quite the contrary; I'm stabilising it so we can use the same entryway to go back in.'

'That's what I thought,' Lakius said, and fired his laser.

Osil's knees almost failed him when he saw their ship. A living sheath of machines covered it, their silvery bodies shifting over one another as they sought a way inside. The ship carried a great many devices to prevent tampering, as Osil knew all too well. If the machines found a way in, or worse still tried to breach the hull, the results could be devastating. He turned and forced his torn legs to start back to the command sphere.

Egal darted away from Lakius's laser with inhuman quickness. But Lakius had been aiming at the phase generator's power couplings, and the hit was more spectacular than he had imagined. The key-machine detonated and then imploded, a halo of white-hot flame flashing outwards for a moment before it was dragged back. A ragged distortion-veil skated erratically over the machine, crushing it smaller and smaller as it tried to suck everything nearby into it. Egal had been blown clear, but was left wrestling to hold onto the alien staff of light as it was drawn inexorably towards the rift.

'Help me, Lakius. I can't hold it!' Egal shouted over the piercing shriek of air being annihilated in the void. Lakius levelled his laser at the magos and shot him in the head without replying. Egal fell back clutching his face. The staff plunged into the rift and exploded with a crack like lightning. Ozone hung heavy in the air as Lakius backed away through the laser mesh spines towards the camp. He spared a glance for his treasured weapon's indicator jewel, and saw it was dim. His last shot had been at full strength, enough to punch through plasteel. Magos Egal was still moving, standing up.

'Have you any idea how hard it was to get this texture right?' he demanded indignantly, indicating the side of his face that had been caressed by a steel-burning laser. Charred welts revealed glittering metal beneath, quicksilver curves that betrayed an inhuman, yet familiar, anatomy. Lakius kept moving back, the figure of the thing that had pretended to be Egal was getting reassuringly distant, dwarfed by the solid black base of the alien structure. A pair of Praetorians came rattling forward from amidst the stormbunkers, balefully scanning Lakius with their targeters.

'One life form identified. Classified non-hostile,' one concluded.

The magos-thing was at the laser mesh. It leapt suddenly, astoundingly covering the hundred metres to Lakius and the Praetorians in a single somersaulting bound.

'One life form identified. Classified non-hostile,' the other Praetorian stated.

'Surely you didn't believe these clattering toys would be able to identify me?' the Egal-thing smiled. 'I had thought you one of the more intelligent specimens.'

Lakius's mouth was dry with fear, but he managed a curt nod of acceptance before crying out 'Praetorians! Audio primus command! Overwatch!' The Praetorians locked their weapons onto the alien with eye-blurring speed, their simple brains entirely devoted to obliterating the first rapid movement they sensed.

'You forget that I spent time repairing servitors after the last battle. I took the liberty of updating their command protocols at the same time,' Lakius said with more courage than he felt.

The thing smiled more broadly still, and slowly cocked its head to one side. The Praetorians' weapons tracked the minute movement faithfully.

'Good for you, Lakius Danzager. You really are a clever one. How did you know I wasn't human?'

Lakius hesitated for a moment. The thing before him exuded an almost primal sense of power. It was at his mercy for the present, but his instincts told him it could pounce on him at any moment. The Mechanicus in him yearned to learn what he could about it

while his humanity screamed out to destroy it. His curiosity overpowered his instincts for a moment.

‘I wasn’t sure, but either you were the thing from the crypt or an insane explorator who was bent on unleashing something unspeakable upon the world. When I understood that, my choices became clear. How did you replace Egal? Did he wake you in there?’ Icy daggers caressed Lakius’s back as he talked to the thing. Its silver and flesh smile widened even further.

‘What makes you think I replaced him at all? I have travelled a great distance since my first waking, walked in many places that have changed so very much since I saw them last.’

‘What were you seeking?’ whispered Lakius.

The thing’s ferocious smile was spread almost ear to ear. ‘Knowledge, mostly. I wanted to know how the galaxy had fared; who was left after the plague. You can’t imagine my surprise on finding your kind and the krork scattered everywhere. I’ve seen you humans trying to forge an empire in the name of a corpse; I have seen your churches to the machine. Racially, your fear and superstition are most gratifying. You make excellent subjects.’

‘You are necrontyr, then. You went into stasis to escape a disease.’

‘No, your language is inefficient. The plague was not a disease and it couldn’t harm us, but...’ The necrontyr tilted its head back as if dreaming of long lost times. ‘It was killing everything else.’ It looked back at Lakius. ‘And no, I am not a necron. You mistake the slave for the master. You’ll understand better when I take you back inside.’

It leapt. The Praetorians blazed into it with lasers and plasma, their bolts lashing at the thin form. Lakius was momentarily blinded by the orgy of destruction, and he fled towards the command centre in the hope of finding reinforcements. He looked back to see a silvery figure ripping pieces out of one the Praetorians. The other battle-servitor was smouldering nearby. The figure waved a piece of carapace jauntily at Lakius.

‘Sorry, Lakius, I couldn’t resist it,’ the thing called. ‘My race raised what you call “melodrama” to a high art form before you were even evolved.’ It chuckled and returned to eviscerating the Praetorian.

Lakius was spinning the locks shut on the command centre hatch when he sensed a presence behind him. He turned, too terrified and weary to fight but wanting to see his nemesis. He almost died of relief when he saw it was Osil.

‘Osil, it’s—’

‘I know, father, I was watching on the monitor.’

‘The assassin?’ Lakius gasped as he sagged to the ground.

‘I couldn’t reach the ship, it was covered by a swarm of insect machines. I’m afraid they’ll trigger its anti-tampering protocols sooner or later. I searched for something we could use to protect ourselves but there are only components, nothing complete.’

‘I fear the thing out there may survive the blast anyway. If so it would be better to—’

A ringing blow sounded against the hatch, making both Osil and Lakius jump. Then another blow slammed into it, then a third. At the third blow a bulge appeared in the Titan-grade adamantium plate. Silence fell.

‘I think we’d better look at those components, Osil.’ Lakius said, struggling to his feet. Osil fussed around him, his fears assuaged by having someone else to think about. He showed Lakius the ready-caskets and crates he had brought.

‘I’ve performed the rites of preparation on these pieces, and anointed the calibrators,’ Osil said hopefully. A hissing, popping noise came from the hatch, and a bright heat-spot formed at its centre.

Lakius looked at the mass of unconnected components and despaired.

The heat spot had made a complete orbit of the door, leaving a trail of molten fire behind it. As the circle was closed the metal fell inward of its own weight, clanging to the ground and sending up a cloud of reeking fumes. A tall, inhuman figure stepped through the gap.

‘Mechanism, I restore thy spirit. Let the God-Machine breathe half-life unto thy veins and render thee functional,’ muttered Lakius, scarcely looking up. Osil gaped at the apparition, sure that his life was over.

‘Ah, splendid, both of you,’ it grinned. ‘Don’t tell me you’ve been trying to make something to stop me? With all your chanting and bone-rattling it would take days, years!’

There was a flash outside, and seconds later a titanic roar. The blast wave from the Assassinorum vessel’s plasma reactor going critical was a second behind that.

‘Don’t worry, I can save you.’ The thing grinned again.

‘No need,’ grated Lakius and closed the last connection.

A dome of shimmering, bluish light sprang into being. It filled the hatchway with the necron-master frozen at its centre. It was a charcoal-black silhouette in the glare of the plasma-flash beyond the field. The rest of the armoured command centre shook and rattled alarmingly but held, its vulnerable hatch protected by Lakius’s improvised stasis bubble.

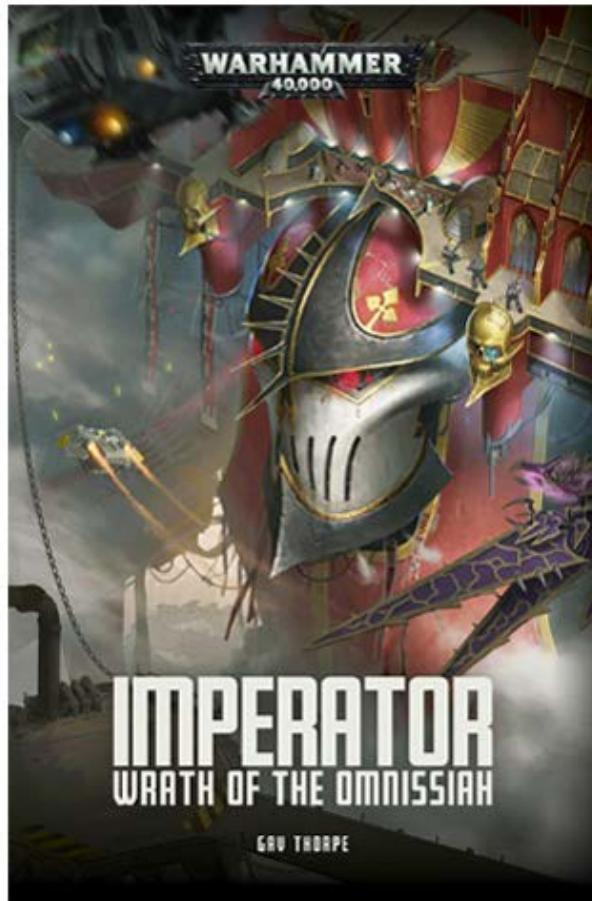
After the blast wave had passed there was a long moment of silence before Osil asked. ‘Father, won’t the Omnissiah be angry that you mistreated all those Machine Spirits making the field?’

‘Let it be our secret, Osil. Deus Ex Mechanicus. The Emperor watches over us.’

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