

THE SPIRIT OF COGS

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John French makes his Inferno! debut with this issue's lead story. John has been writing for Black Library since 2011 when he wrote 'Hunted' in the fourth volume of Hammer and Bolter. Now a household name, and a Siege of Terra writer, John brings his inexhaustible knowledge of Warhammer 40,000 to the Mechanicus, posing an age-old question: are there ghosts in the machine? Be sure to expect a thrilling mystery from the master of the Inquisition.

‘What dreams sleep in iron that by the turning wheel mankind has brought to waking?’

– from the Smith’s Address as spoken
in the *Penitent Cycles of Terra*

‘There are ghosts in machines.’ Glavius-4-Rho looked up from the mirror of the blade in his hands as he spoke.

The former Sister of Battle sat on the floor of the armourium, legs crossed, armour replaced by a grey hessian smock. She had been sat there ever since she had brought him the sword. It was damaged, the edge notched and a tine sheared from the cross-guard. He had taken it from her and begun the repairs as soon as she had shown it to him. He had not grieved for the damage done to the sword – some things were created to be damaged.

‘Ghosts?’ said Severita at last. ‘Machines have spirits – that is what all of your priesthood say, isn’t it?’

He felt the servos in his frame twitch as a plasma flame lit on his workbench. Part of him wondered if starting this exchange had been wise. He was a magos after all, a high guardian of the truths and mysteries of the most sacred Machine-God...

No... he was not. That was factually incorrect. He had failed. He had lost the machines and knowledge entrusted to his care. He was a penitent, grey-robed, where once he had been clad in red. Without rank where once he had been most high. He served Inquisitor Covenant now – that was his function.

He looked again at Severita. Like him, she was an outcast from her own kind. She had been a warrior of the Adepta Sororitas but some transgression had seen her cast from her order, service to Covenant replacing the bonds to her sisters. He liked her, and she had made a habit of talking to him. She asked him questions, questions not about the function of things but about him, about what he had experienced, about what he believed. He did not understand why. A non-logical part of his mind thought that she was trying to redeem him.

He focused his attention on the sword for fifteen seconds, his servo-arms holding it steady as he dipped its blade into the plasma flame on his workbench. Blue fire washed over its edge and sent light fizzing from its mirror finish. The beam cut off and he held the blade as it cooled.

Severita was still looking at him, head cocked, waiting for a reply to her question.

Glavius-4-Rho selected a mode of expression that he thought was correct. 'All machines possess spirits. That is a fact and truth. I did not speak of spirits. I spoke of ghosts.'

The skin around Severita's eyes creased further. Glavius-4-Rho turned back to the blade and focused the plasma flame to a narrow knife of fire.

'There are no such things as ghosts,' Severita said. 'Daemons, yes, but not ghosts.'

'Are you certain you wish to understand what I mean?' he asked, staring down at the blade as it began to glow with heat.

'I would have an answer if you would give it.'

He felt the seconds pass and the cogs in his chest tick over.

'As you command,' he said, and began to speak.

It was 401 days after my ascendancy to the rank of magos when I went to waken the machine in the underworld of Zhao-Arkkad.

Not all of those who serve the machine are made in the sight of its great forges. I was one such. My biological self began its life cycle on Mithras. The techno-clans of the second conurbation were my originators. I cannot remember my direct biological forebears. The first level of mental augmentation removed those memories when I was fourteen years. I do not miss them. I cannot remember what to miss.

I survived the early years of un-augmented life. I showed aptitude in

assembly and logic application. I have memory residue from those times: a mental image of a drop of blood on fingers, geometric blocks of bronze alloy tumbling from their grasp, shouts of admonition, the flash of an electro-whip. I hear cries sometimes. I don't know whose cries they are.

The representatives of the priesthood had already marked me as a potential subject for induction into their ranks. I was inducted into the orders of artisans. I assimilated the first levels of sacred maintenance and construction processes. I manifested the ability to replicate and memorise without error. I was blessed with machine creations to replace my hands.

At the passing of 21.233 years I was taken within the embrace of the Omnissiah. My sponsors were the Demi-flux Governors, a sanctioned branch concerned with the transference of electro-power and field parameters. There were other sects and branches who had marked me for their ranks. The high induction engines, though, calculated my characteristics being of most use to the Demi-flux Governors. If I had a preference on my path into the priesthood, I no longer store it in my memory – it was and is irrelevant.

I progressed through the levels of flux-savants. Further augmentation was made to my physical and mental architecture. At the point when I was raised to the rank of magos my physical self was 43.56% of the machine. My cognition functioned between 35.45% and 37.23% purity. In form my face was the blank mask of an aspirant, the nerves beneath the skin severed and expressive muscles paralysed. My hands and forearms were plasteel and black carbon. My primary organs had just been replaced, though my torso was still blood and bone. I recall that I was still adjusting to the rhythm of my new heart when I made my journey to Zhao-Arkkad.

Zhao-Arkkad was the first true forge world I had ever seen, and it was like nothing that I had expected. That may seem inconstant to you, but the sacred worlds of Omnissiah are few; our empire exists beside that of the Imperium, entwined with it, and my training had been in the priesthood's enclaves on Mithras, Glaucon, and in the void forges of Jeddev. Zhao-Arkkad was not an enclave world – it was a world given body and soul to iron, to the furnace and turning wheel, to the song of the blessed electro. But this soul hid beneath a skin of forests. It was a wonder and a paradox.

The fumes of engines were the clouds, and the rains that fell onto the green canopy were rich with radiation and minerals. Predator fauna thrived

amongst the equally lethal flora. The Primary Forge-Fane Complexes were buried beneath the ground, connected by tunnels and sealed against life on the surface. In these underground realms, the machine fanes and anvil districts stretched to the limits of the stone walls. Spires of data temples and the chimneys of fume vents rose to the stone ceilings and the thunder of forge hammers blended with the crackle of static leaping from wall to wall and spire to spire. Seeing that, hearing that, feeling that, was one of the most sacred experiences I have ever had.

That moment was brief.

I had thought that I would be installed in one of the electro-fanes; the divine flow of plasma and reactor rituals had been my calling since I had been raised to the cog. Instead I found that I was to be diverted to an isolated facility on the southern continent. No one could give me specific data on the purpose I was to fulfil there or even the name of the facility. I was to travel there by air, departing from an obscure landing pad set in a crater on the surface above the forge complex.

When I arrived at the landing pad, a shuttle was waiting. It bore no marks. That was an anomaly; everything I had seen since my arrival was stamped and marked with code and function. It took off as soon as I arrived.

There were two others with me. The first was a male of largely biological make up, uniformed in the style of the Collegia Titanica, but without markings of Legion or rank. All of his noospheric data was also absent. He was a non-presence. A ghost. He offered me a curt sign of respect, but no further data.

‘What is your allocated personal identifier?’ I asked.

‘Zavius,’ he answered.

‘And your designated rank and organisational placement?’

He did not answer. Not even with a negative.

<He will not comply with any other query,> linked the other individual in the shuttle. She was called Ishta-1-Gamma. She had greeted me formally when I had arrived and made a full data exchange. She was a hermetrix – an initiate into the higher mysteries of data transference, neural linking and communication interface. If information is to the machine as blood is to the biologic, then she was to the machine what a blood doctor is to a living being. Her robes of office were orange, woven with graphite thread.

Her noospheric aura was multi-sphered, coloured and patterned with the canticles of data fidelity. Her data transmission was 99.999% flawless. I had to acknowledge that I was impressed.

<He bears the signs of the Collegia Titanica,> I replied. Outside the grey-blue clouds were dragging past the shuttle's portholes.

<He is a princeps,> sent Ishta-1-Gamma. The pause in my data reply must have communicated a query, because she continued. <He has mind-interface plugs and neural augmentation that are only gifted to those of that rank and position. He has refused all my greetings in all formats. Correction – his data links are shut down and he ignores audio greetings. Strange.>

<Strange?>

<Strange. Unusual or surprising. Difficult to understand or explain.>

<I apologise – I am aware of the word's meaning. I did not follow your line of reasoning.>

Ishta-1-Gamma's data aura rippled with symbol sets that denoted amusement in a number of language systems. <It was less of a deduction and more of a non-vital conversational opening,> she sent.

<Oh.>

I paused to parse that for several seconds.

The shuttle was gaining speed towards the southern continents now, weaving between columns of storm cloud. Its engines were singing at optimal output. I could feel the contentment of its spirit in the vibration of its skin. Through the portholes, I could see the waste rivers from the forge complexes' outflows, a rainbow of reds, blues and oranges draining into green land.

<It is strange...> I transmitted to Ishta-1-Gamma, and looked at her. Her face was an ellipsoid of red ceramic. A quartet of teal eye lenses sat in a band across the top half. A vertical slot sat in the location of a mouth. There were no other features. <Do you have data on where we are going, or our purpose when we arrive?> I asked.

<I do not have that data...> She paused, but the transmission did not close. <But I have some theories based on dispersed logic.>

<You mean what the unblessed would call guesses?>

<Correct.>

A moment of silence on the data link. The wheels in my newly installed

cognition implants clicked over. I glanced at Zavius, but the princeps showed no sign of having heard what we were transmitting.

<There is no possibility of the princeps intercepting this exchange,> Ishta-1-Gamma noted.

<Why are you concerned by that?>

<For the same reason you are,> she replied, <because the absence of data is disturbing.>

<Conceded. What are your... guesses as to what is occurring?>

<Facts first – I am a devotee of the divine spark of data and transmission. You are a magos of dataetherica. Neither of us are from this forge world. You arrived 2.45 days ago. I arrived 3.34 days ago. We are outsiders to the structures of this world.>

<The high magi of Zhao-Arkkad may not have available resources in those specialities,> I replied. I could see the possible branches of inference forming from her assembly of facts. Negative emotions were building up in my mental buffers.

<Or they do and the need is for individuals whose absence will not be noted and who have no connections through which to share data with the wider priesthood on this world.>

<There are other possible reasons. Those you have outlined have no greater logical weighting than any other.>

<True.>

Another silence.

The cogs turned in my cranium and the shuttle flew on. The nearest entrance to a forge complex was now far behind us. This was the Nul Zone, a reach of Zhao-Arkkad that hid no machine-filled caverns beneath its green shroud, just a vast area of hostile bio-fauna feeding grounds. Grey and black clouds passed us, and rain began to spatter the window ports and front canopy. Needle-like crags of black rock rose from the ground. Streams of water poured down their sides, bright green or blue with minerals leached from the ground.

I admit that a disturbance had entered my thoughts. Perhaps it was Ishta-1-Gamma's guesses. Perhaps it was something in the green desolation of the land before us, bare of the shapes of machines and buildings. Perhaps it was because, for the first time in my life, I felt a long way from the familiar.

<Landing approach protocols initiated,> transmitted the shuttle's servitor pilot. A second later I detected a shift in the air pressure. I looked out of the portholes, expecting to see a landing pad rising from the jungle canopy, but there was nothing except a range of mountains. The light was fading.

The shuttle continued to lose altitude. I looked at Ishta-1-Gamma, but her noospheric aura was repeating a pattern of blank data values. I looked out again. The sides of the mountains were close enough now that they filled the view; a black-grey wall stretched before us. The shuttle began to shake.

Zavius was on his feet, face showing no emotional markers. He moved to the back of the crew space, balancing effortlessly with the vibration of the craft. I felt high-power auspex reach out and burrow into the shuttle.

<Submitting clearance codes,> the pilot servitor broadcast. <Standing by...>

Seconds decremented. The shuttle flew on towards the mountainside.

<Clearance granted. Landing protocol initiated. All praise to the vigilance of the machine.>

The whine of the shuttle's engines was a scream. The mountainside was so close I could see the canopy lights reflecting off the wet rock. I felt a cold shutter fall across my thoughts as my emotional buffers activated.

Thrusters fired. The shuttle spun around and dropped vertically. The fading light vanished. My eyes captured a brief image of the external view. We were plunging down a vertical shaft...

Melta-bored walls...

Diameter: 33.43 metres...

Gun platforms mounted at 50-metre intervals.

Multi-laser and plasma cannons...

Cabin temperature dropping at 1 degree per 50 metres...

The shuttle's thrusters fired to the edge of tolerance. We settled to stillness, moisture running off the fuselage. Zavius still stood in front of the rear access ramp. Beyond the canopy I could see guide lights flashing in the dark. We rocked in place for a second, suspended in the freezing air, surrounded by the fog from our thruster jets. Then we settled onto the landing platform. The shuttle's engines cycled down as the ramp at the back opened.

'You will follow,' said Zavius, looking back at us before stalking down

the ramp himself. I glanced at Ishta-1-Gamma.

<He appears to have discarded his etiquette protocols...> I transmitted.

‘You will follow,’ came the repeated imperative from beyond the hatch.

<And he is determined to put that freedom to use,> she sent, standing and moving towards the ramp. I noticed that his noospheric halo had shrunk and become a monochrome sphere of basic identification data. The equivalent in flesh might be to see an expressive face become still and set.

<You are concerned about the current situation?> I queried, as I followed.

<You are not?> she replied.

Guns rotated on wall mounts to greet us, tracking our steps as we descended to the landing platform. Multi-spectrum targeting and scanning systems locked on to us. An iris hatch had closed off the shaft above us. As we reached the bottom of the ramp, the guide lights shut down across the landing platform. My sight shifted into the infra-red portion of the spectrum. The air was 8.72 degrees below zero. The heat from the engines was already dissipating. Above ground it was an average of 34 degrees above freezing, but here the moisture in the air, vented from the shuttle’s cabin, fell as frost.

A tall figure, wrapped in a cloak of graphite and carbon thread, waited for us. It had four upper limbs. Each one rested its digits on the top of a chrome cane. Its head sat high on its hunched shoulders. The portion of its anatomy that would be a face on an unblest human was an arrangement of turning cogs. A single violet eye lens sat on the left of its face. From these augmentations alone I assessed this to be a senior member of the machine priesthood. That being the case, I should have offered supplication, made formal greeting. I did not. Like Zavius this magos gave out no noospheric data and offered no connection hail. Still, I might have bowed anyway, but Ishta-1-Gamma had remained unmoved and so I did the same.

‘Ishta-1-Gamma...’ the waiting figure intoned. It breathed and hissed from its voice speaker. ‘Glavius-4-Rho... You will both submit to the rites of data assessment. Failure to grant access to your data reservoirs and instrumentation will result in immediate life termination and reclamation of the blessed machine components of your forms.’

‘You have not identified yourself,’ said Ishta-1-Gamma. Her physical voice echoed loud in the cold dark. The hunched magos rotated its head to

look at Zavius and then back to us.

‘My identification is not required,’ it said. ‘You shall comply or the stated consequences will occur.’

‘But after we comply,’ she said, ‘you shall tell us who you are.’

A pause. Seconds counted down in the edge of my sight. I was aware of the wall-mounted weapons trained on me. I could feel the tingle of the power held in their charge coils.

‘Your compliance,’ said the hunched magos. ‘Now.’

<I think I have pushed the parameters of this exchange as far as is wise,> transmitted Ishta-1-Gamma, and then spoke aloud. ‘Compliance.’

Her noospheric aura unfolded, and 0.67 seconds later I felt data-interrogators push into my own systems. It took only 0.33 seconds but left me with a sensation of needles and sharp edges.

‘All is as designated,’ said the grey magos and began to move away across the platform. I could see the flash of hundreds of bladed feet moving beneath the hem of its robes as it glided away from us. Lights outlined a door set into the wall, and a section of rock slid back to reveal a passage beyond. I began to follow, but Ishta-1-Gamma still had not moved.

‘Who are you?’ she asked. The hunched magos paused, and rotated its head backwards without turning around.

‘You may use the designation Atropos,’ said the magos, then continued to glide towards the waiting door.

I looked at Ishta-1-Gamma. She transmitted an unresolvable code blurt that would be interpreted organically as a shrug, and we followed Atropos through the door.

It was another 3.67 hours until we saw the reason for our being brought to the underworld of Zhao-Arkkad. I use the term underworld advisedly and in full knowledge of its non-literal meaning and symbolic resonance. The caverns beneath the mountains were a world apart. Silence filled their spaces and unseen watchfulness crowded their shadows. We met few other initiates of the priesthood. Those that we did see offered no greeting and passed without pause. The servitors that we saw moved in their own locked rhythms, their joints so maintained and blessed by oil that they made no sound. I observed signal and interface code locks on every device; there would be no communing with their machine-spirits or

workings without the keys to unlock them.

<There is no wider noospheric network to access,> noted Ishta-1-Gamma after we had been walking for an hour.

<Perhaps it is shielded from our awareness,> I ventured.

<Negatory,> she responded. <I am initiated to the fifteenth turning of the mysteries of transmission – I would be able to detect a noosphere presence even if it was obscured. There is nothing. Every mechanism in this place is closed and locked to itself.>

<Apart from us two,> I noted.

<For now,> she replied, and then lapsed into silence. This did little to reduce the disturbance building up in my emotional buffers.

The light in all the passages we passed through was increasingly dim the further we went. The lumen globes and strips faded from clear white blue to stuttering dimness. It became colder. My sensors detected that it was not only heat that was leaching from the air – so was radiation of a number of other types. Power was slowly decrementing from my capacitors. It was as though something beyond the passage walls was drawing in every scrap of energy, a mouth breathing in warmth and light.

We passed many doors, some wide enough for large vehicles or machinery, some so small that only servo skulls or scuttle servitors could have passed through. None of the doors were open, and neither Magos Atropos or Princeps Zavius paused next to any of them.

‘What is to be our purpose here?’ I asked as we passed the latest locked opening. I had asked the same question in five different ways since our arrival, and received no reply. I experienced surprise when Atropos spoke.

‘You are here to wake a machine that has lain long asleep,’ it said.

‘What variety of machine?’ I asked.

‘I cannot tell you,’ said Atropos.

‘To withhold data is to inhibit the probability of success.’ I detected a sharpness in my reply. My emotional disturbance was bleeding out of its containment.

Atropos halted in front of a circular door set into the passage wall. Slowly the magos extended one of its canes and tapped the surface of the door. Bolts withdrew around its edge. Leaves of metal folded into the rock surround.

‘I cannot tell you,’ said Atropos, as the last portion of the door slid aside.

Distant lights glimmered in the vast space beyond. 'I can only show you.'

I confess that I did not want to pass through the door. I confess that I also wanted to see what lay at the heart of this underworld. We are made to seek knowledge, to revere it, and for all of the Martian priesthood's traditions and reverence of the known, we crave the unknown far more.

The space beyond the door was not a chamber – it was a cavern. A platform extended into space, secured to a cliff wall that I could only estimate as being as high as the mountain peaks above. Darkness ran off in every other direction. I walked across the platform to its edge, dimly aware of Ishta-1-Gamma at my side, and Atropos and Zavius following a step behind. The air was cold, so cold that warnings lit the bio-monitors linked to my remaining flesh. There were lights shining on the cavern floor far beneath us. I stepped closer to the edge, my eye lenses adjusting to focus.

'Be careful,' said Zavius, his breath powdering to crystal in the air. His flesh suddenly seemed stiff and pale, like a mask pulled over something that was not as pure as a machine, or as kind as flesh. 'It can unsettle the mind at first sight.'

I did not reply, but took the last step and looked down.

<Sacred oils of the turning wheel...> For a fraction of a second I thought the words might have been mine. Then I noticed Ishta-1-Gamma standing on the edge beside me. <The machine is god...>

Beneath us, half buried in the floor of the cavern, was a Titan. It lay like a fallen monarch found in its grave. Rubble had been cleared away around its sides. Ladders extended down to it from a web of gantries and platforms suspended above it. Stab lights lit its form, pouring brilliance into its crevasses and across its armour plates. If it had stood, its head would have been on a level with our platform, and the guns on its back would have loomed far above us. Figures moved on the gantries. I saw huge power lines and machines whose functions I knew in theory though I had never seen in practice: galvanic wave compressors, gain-output macro regulators, trans-uranic adjusters.

'How did it get down here...?' breathed Ishta-1-Gamma.

'You are attempting to...' I stated, and turned to look at Zavius and Atropos. 'You mean to wake it.'

‘Correct,’ said Atropos.

I looked back at the dead god-machine. There was something about it that made me not want to look away from it. As though it might have moved while unobserved.

‘But you mean to wake it in secret...’ said Ishta-1-Gamma. She was still looking down at the great machine. Her noospheric halo had faded, its loops of data patterns fraying. ‘This is a machine of majesty, a relic from times now long lost. That it remains here is a marvel – that it might walk again a miracle. Yet you hide it from sight.’

Did I detect a flicker of movement in Zavius’ eyes and a microscopic shift in Atropos’ posture?

‘You are here to perform a function,’ said Atropos. ‘No further clarification is needed.’ It turned and began to move away. ‘Zavius will supply the data relevant to your task. Review it. You will be integrated into the endeavour in five hours.’

‘And that endeavour is to waken the spirit of this machine?’ I asked, inferences and uncertainties still spinning at the edge of my thoughts.

Atropos did not stop, but called in a voice that echoed flatly in the vast space, ‘It shall wake. It shall walk.’

They called the first Titan Artefact-ZA01. That was not its name, of course. The names of machines are impressed upon their form and spirit when they are made. They are not designators. They are specific. They are a form of truth. The Titan had a name; we just didn’t know what it was.

We went down to see it after five hours of preliminary data in-load. A platform hoist lowered us down to the gantry web. I had assimilated all of the data supplied by Zavius. It was sizeable, and had required multiple overrides of fatigue to parse fully. I knew now that Artefact-ZA01 was a Battle Titan, but that variations in its system configuration conformed to no recorded class or pattern. Preliminary investigations had been made into its interior systems, and its reactor and energy transmission systems conformed to those of other Titan engines. At least they did superficially.

There was more, reams and reams of data and analysis, but, for all that, there was much that was screamed by its absence. There was no mention of any propitiatory rites being attempted, no identification codes for the adepts who had made the assessments. It was as though there was no

history of the endeavour before this moment, as though the past did not exist.

Again a sensation of unfamiliar emotion filled me as I stepped onto the gantry and looked down at Artefact-ZA01. Burnished metal gleamed beneath the layer of dust that clung to its armour plates. I identified amaranth colouration, what is designated as regal purple by some, gold edging and patches of bone-white lacquer. There was no damage though, no marks of battle that had laid this god low. This cavern was not a grave, it was something else.

‘You will need to get moving,’ said a voice from behind me. I turned to see a figure in the robes of an enginseer limp along the walkway behind us, red robes and augmentation in line with the biological human form. The figure stopped, then cocked its head and gave a stuttering bow that spoke of poorly meshing gears and malfunctioning servos. ‘My apologies, honoured magos, I have still not adjusted to the absence of noospheric connection. I have been here for six months, two days, seventeen hours, five minutes and two seconds and I am still sending data hails that no one receives. Personal introduction – I am enginseer designate Thamus-91.’

‘I am Magos Glavius-4-Rho,’ I replied. I was aware that an enginseer designated Thamus-91 was the overseer of primary operations at the excavation; it had been in the data supplied by Princeps Zavius. ‘I have requested a close inspection of Artefact-ZA01.’

‘I know,’ said Thamus-91. ‘I was made aware of your arrival and have already conversed with Magos Ishta-1-Gamma.’

Thamus-91 straightened, juddering as she moved.

‘Are your movement systems not functioning as ordained?’ I asked.

She shook her head. Patches of black frostbite mottled the skin of her face above her breath mask.

‘I have stayed close to *it* for too long,’ she replied. ‘I should have withdrawn, purged and charged, but I was informed that you were coming. I waited. We should move. It is worse if you stay in one place for a prolonged time.’

‘What are you referring to, enginseer?’

‘The drain – you must have noticed.’

‘The power drop-off?’ I queried.

‘Not only power, but energetic potential across multiple forms and

spectra – all of it vanishes. It takes time but the closer you are to it–’

‘You are referring to Artefact-ZA01?’

Thamus-91 twitched and I formed an impression that she was suddenly exerting a great deal of control not to look down, not to look at the Titan lying beneath us.

‘Yes,’ she said, and gestured at the unlit candles of appeasement and devotion set along the sides of the gantry. A pair of servitors were moving along them, lighting each with a stuttering blast of flame from nozzle-tipped fingers. The flames began to fade as soon as they flared. ‘You see? Even the sacred flames gutter.’

‘That cannot be an effect related to the artefact,’ I said. ‘I have reviewed the data, and it is clear that none of the Titan’s systems are active, and further it is clear that all attempts to waken them and kindle its energies have failed. Added to which there is no system within the bounds of the blessed incandescence and transference of energy that I am aware of that could produce such an effect.’

Thamus-91 gave a creaking nod. ‘Just so...’ she said, and extended an iron finger to point at a candle flame. ‘And yet...’ The flame shrank as we observed it, and then guttered. I had detected no movement in the cavern’s air.

‘Why is there no record of this phenomena in the data I was supplied?’ I asked. Thamus-91 was still pointing and looking at a wisp of smoke rising from the extinguished candle. She made no move to acknowledge my query. ‘Enginseer Thamus-91?’ I queried. She twitched and turned her head back to me.

‘You are Magos Glavius-4-Rho,’ she said. ‘Please accept my greetings. I was made aware of your arrival and have already conversed with Magos Ishta-1-Gamma. She has requested a close inspection of the... of Artefact-ZA01. If you wish to accompany her, we should join her now.’

For a second I tried to process what had just occurred. The logic trees branched but offered no clear solution. I moved the unresolved calculations out of my immediate focus.

‘We will proceed with the inspection,’ I said.

Thamus-91 bobbed her head. I noticed her fingers judder open and then closed. She gave no sign of being aware of the movement.

‘As you will it,’ she said. ‘We should get moving.’

Darkness. Darkness that I have never known before or since. Our primary source of illumination failed as soon as we were inside the Titan. Lights simply blinked out, and power sources wound down to nothing. Red capacitor warnings lit my visual display as it began to fog with distortion. The thread of noospheric connection between me and Ishta-1-Gamma vanished. We were in a conduit space accessed by a panel that was normally riveted shut. Before the lights had cut out I had captured an image of a cable-lined wall, clean of dust and corrosion. A hatch into the main engineering compartment lay 2.63 metres below us.

‘I would advise linking with the reservoir power-umbilical,’ said Thamus-91. ‘You may wish to divert available power to tactile sensors – they appear to be more reliable than visual.’

An insulated cable linked all of us to an external plasma generator. I had questioned the need for this contingency. At peak function the generator would have been able to power an entire facility and maintain the equivalent output of three Baneblade tanks, a surfeit of power for our augmetics. Now, standing in the total dark and watching my power reserves fall to zero, I had to acknowledge that I had been wrong.

I opened the umbilical power connection. My systems activated, but the power was flowing in only slightly faster than it was vanishing. I flicked my sight to an augmented infra-vision and the grey snow became a multi-coloured image of heat and energy blooms. Thamus-91 and Ishta-1-Gamma became glowing outlines of orange and red. The power-umbilicals glowed white with radiation bleed. Everything else was a perfect, cold black.

‘We should proceed,’ said Thamus-91. ‘Based on previous explorations we have approximately 15 minutes 21 seconds before our power status becomes non-viable.’ She began to move towards the hatch at the end of the conduit space. She braced herself against the walls with all four limbs, moving with care, pausing at irregular intervals as a twitch ran through her frame.

I looked at Ishta-1-Gamma. Without her noospheric halo she seemed diminished, a shadow with the same shape. She returned my look and then followed the engineer.

Thamus-91 reached the hatch and pulled it open. The void beyond was a black circle. For an instant I had the impression that the static in my eyes

had begun to spin around it, like iron dust pulled by a magnetic field.

<The machine is god...>

I snapped my head around to Ishta-1-Gamma.

‘What did you say?’ I asked.

She tilted her head in puzzlement. ‘I am sorry, I do not follow.’

‘You made a noospheric transmission—’

‘I am afraid you are mistaken,’ she said, and I formed a non-logical impression of her displeasure at my assertion. ‘I have been trying to activate noospheric connection since we entered the artefact, and have not succeeded.’

‘I would not try to do that,’ said Thamus-91 from by the hatch. She glanced back at us, twitched. ‘I mean, I would not attempt to access the noosphere in here.’

‘Why?’ asked Ishta-1-Gamma. ‘There was no standing prohibition against it in the site protocols.’

Thamus-91 twitched her shoulders in a deeply biological gesture that I assessed as a shrug.

‘It is best not to,’ was her reply. ‘Follow,’ she said and dropped through the hatch. I looked at Ishta-1-Gamma, and then complied.

The void beyond the hatch was black, unlit and without any form of radiation for my eyes to pick up. There were only the beams from stab lights attached to us, cutting into the blackness for the brief moment of our fall. I landed on the rear wall of the enginarium compartment. My legs mag-locked to the metal. I froze for a second. A cold, yes, a cold sensation slid through my machine limbs from the point of contact. The air temperature had dropped further, but this... feeling was something else. A chill, a... touch.

‘I estimate that we have twelve minutes twenty-one seconds until we lose umbilical power,’ said Thamus-91. We will need to begin to withdraw in nine minutes. I tender humble advice that the exalted magi begin their assays of the relic’s systems.’

‘Let us begin, then,’ said Ishta-1-Gamma.

I had never been in the sacred inner spaces of a god-machine before. I had been privileged to review schematics and system rituals, but this was the first time I had perceived the wonder of such sacred knowledge made real. I must confess that for sixty-seven seconds I did nothing other than

take in our surroundings.

Curved girders ran down the walls of the compartment, each one a single, metallic crystal. Bundles of cables and loops of insulated piping snaked beneath grates and curved out through openings in the metal skin of the walls and ceiling. Hatches marked with runes and yellow and black chevrons led off to either side, to the servitor niches that controlled the arms. A wider set of doors yawned open at the far end, the darkness beyond leading to the head of the god-machine and the throne of its command. I could see the marks where piston claws had pried the doors open – each scrape was marked by a taper of parchment held by a wax seal, the code lines printed on each a prayer to soothe the soul of the machine for the harm done to it.

I found myself moving towards the black space between the open doors. There was something vibrating in the dark beyond...

Blurred haze...

Night beyond night...

Ishta-1-Gamma brushed past me as she made for the open doors. I stopped. Power was still draining from my reserves and the umbilical.

The reactor. I was here to examine the reactor.

I turned my awareness to the reinforced hatch in the floor that should lead to the plasma reactor. The hatch's seals had already been disengaged, and the plasma chamber was utterly inactive, but I still proceeded with caution as I climbed down into the space beneath. The rewards for recklessness are death and suffering, it is told, and I have never observed it to be otherwise.

I began with augurs of the 1st order and cycled through the Aclaan diagnostic sequence. I also began cataclysms of appeasement for any spirit of power or charge still lingering in the reactor systems. I soon halted this litany. There was nothing. No returns. No energetic signatures of any kind. It was dead and cold, as though plasma and electrostatic convergence had never sung in its heart.

I was about to begin an integrity examination of the plasma ignition array when an alert in my visual analysis systems made me halt. There were conduits bonded and integrated into the system in addition to those that I would have expected – pipes and heavily insulated cables snaked and wormed beside those that the schematics had ordained to be there. I had

not noticed them at first, in part because I was not expecting them to be there, and partly because they were not made of standard material. It had to be an error but the close augur returns read them as being made of rock or crystal.

<The machine is god... All is known in the machine...>

I hesitated and then stepped forward, extending a blade from a finger to peel the black insulation from one of the conduits.

‘Magos Glavius-4-Rho!’ The call came from the enginarium. It was Ishta-1-Gamma, her voice loud and sharpened with indications of alarm.

‘Is there something awry?’ I called, blade finger hovering above the insulation. I had a strong inclination not to leave, to look at what strange devices had lived in this walking god’s core.

‘Attend immediately!’ she replied. I let my hand drop and climbed back up into the enginarium compartment and then into the bridge in the Titan’s head.

Ishta-1-Gamma was there. As was what remained of Thamus-91. The enginseer had linked to a mind-interface unit set behind the princeps’ throne. Her remains hung from the interface cable, a slack tangle of metal and desiccated flesh. Frost covered her, the crystals growing even as we watched.

‘I went back into the enginarium for twenty seconds...’ said Ishta-1-Gamma. ‘She must have been waiting for the chance to be alone...’

I thought of the cables of crystal and stone threading though the reactor spaces, of the whisper on the noosphere channels and the power and heat draining from the world around this... tomb.

‘We must go,’ I said, and was already lifting Thamus-91’s remains and moving for the hatch out to the world above. Ishta-1-Gamma followed. As we climbed back up to the outer skin of the god, I looked back and thought for a second I saw a face looking up at me from the black circle of the hatchway. I began to climb faster and did not look down again.

<It was not my intention to disturb your rest.> Ishta-1-Gamma’s noosphere halo turned slowly as she entered my workshop.

<I was processing the latest ritual read-outs – there was no rest for you to disturb.>

She advanced from the door as it sealed behind her. I watched her as I

parsed the symbols walking across the parchment spooling from the data-font. I saw her reach out and take an inert plasma coil-disk from my tertiary workbench. She did not look at it, but rolled it between her hands. The gesture had no purpose to it. It was enough to make me halt all my activity. You must understand, nothing in the Priesthood of Mars is without purpose; everything is of the machine and no part of the machine lacks purpose.

I watched her as the data-font clattered and the buzz of cogitator and power transfers dimmed from a cackle to a hum. She seemed to realise what she had done after three seconds. Her noospheric halo flashed through static as she replaced the coil-disk on the workbench, blurting the canticle input of harmony across all primary frequencies.

<Your pardon,> she said. <I am...>

<Pardon granted,> I replied. She shifted, looking around the workspace at the test components lying under their seals, and parchments of quieting.

I waited.

She had not been the same since that first excursion into the Artefact-ZA01. We had made a full report to Atropos about the demise of Thamus-91. The senior magos had accepted the data, but had requested no clarification or further analysis. I could not help but form a list of possible ideas as to why: the senior magos was uninterested in what had happened, the data that we supplied needed no further clarification or the incident held no new data. This last possibility clung to me. Atropos did not ask for further data because the magos knew what had happened. It had happened before.

Ishta-1-Gamma had demanded more data access. The reply from Atropos had been simple. If we wanted answers, wake the machine. If we wanted knowledge, wake the machine. If we wanted to perform our duty to Omnissiah and knowledge, wake the machine.

We protested, but neither of us had demanded to leave. We had remained, and begun work to do just what Atropos had said. We had worked to wake the machine.

Why? Even now I am not certain as to the answer, or rather, I am not certain there is an answer that would satisfy logic. We like to think that choices are rational, like the turning of cogs, that we leave the weakness of the irrational behind as we shed the weakness of flesh. But the question

that does not arise in all the coda of the Ommissiah is whether the irrational fears that pulse in our blood and beat in our chests when we wake in the night are not weakness, but warnings left on the edge of the darkness.

We were priests of the machine. Knowledge is sacred, and there is nothing higher than knowledge lost to the past. The artefact... the Titan in that tomb... there was knowledge in it, great and terrible knowledge waiting just out of sight yet close enough to grasp. You cannot understand, perhaps, what that means, what that demands of us. It calls to the truth of all we are. And so we worked to wake the machine – I to kindle energy in its metal, Ishta-1-Gamma to allow a human to interface with its systems. She worked with a focus and diligence that I have never seen.

We assayed the artefact further, accessed rituals from the Collegia Titanica archives granted us by Zavivus and created test rituals that grew sacred theory into a harmony and order. Weeks, weeks and weeks with the cold and silence, weeks of perhaps the finest work I have ever been a part of. All of it bringing us to a threshold.

<May I tender a question?> Ishta-1-Gamma asked after twenty-four seconds of silence.

<That linguistic formation is itself a question, and so the answer is presented by your ability to ask it.>

Her aura expanded for a second, flashed with bright and subtle formulae. <Was that an attempt at humour, magos?>

<An attempt implies that it was a failure, and so I shall choose to say not.>

A brighter flash, a spiral of calculations in the data link. <Was that a second attempt?>

<No.>

<You are lying.>

<That implies a degree of empathy and social judgement I am not sure I possess.> I moved to the tertiary workbench she had stopped by and moved the plasma coil-disk she had handled the 1.4 mm required for it to be resting in the correct position. <There is something you wish to discuss,> I stated. <About the endeavour.>

<Are there limits to what is divine?> she asked.

<I do not understand your frame of reference.>

<The nature of the machine reveals its divinity to us.>

<That is a primary truth.>

<Is there an exception to it?>

<I still do not follow the logic chain of your questions,> I replied.

<Artefact-ZA01, the Titan, is it divine, or—>

<It is a machine of unknown power and pattern from ages long past, how can it be otherwise than divine?> I asked.

<The demise of Thamus-91 implies—>

<The spirits of great machines are not kind.>

<The lack of data from investigations that have already taken place, the anomalies – those do not indicate to you that this might not be something that is divine but unclean?>

In truth, the same possibilities and questions had been rising unbidden in my mind with regular frequency since the first expedition into Artefact-ZA01. But I could not form a full and logical chain of inference from them.

<The demands of knowledge are proof.>

She reached her hand inside her robes and removed a data-cylinder of milled brass – 0.75 cm in diameter, 6.6 cm in length. She placed it on the workbench. I looked at it.

<What does it contain?> I asked.

<As part of my preparations to re-enable the neural interface with the ZA01, I have been able to access a number of data transfer systems in this... whatever this place is. That is the raw output of what I have found.>

<All the systems I have been granted access to are limited to current data directly relevant to the endeavour,> I said, looking at, but not touching, the cylinder. <No wider data has been present.>

<Truth, but there are fragments and trace impressions in the transfer filters and noospheric buffers. The data-djinns loosed to clear the information were thorough, but you cannot remove the past. Ghosts remain.>

I looked back at the data-cylinder, then picked it up. <What does the data indicate?>

Ishta-1-Gamma transmitted a negation. <I do not know, not completely.>

<Then why—>

<I thought I wanted to know the truth,> she transmitted. <But now I am

not sure. I don't know. I have an emotion-based intuition that if I look at what has tried to be hidden from us, then I won't be able to carry on with the endeavour.>

<Surely the only way to determine the accuracy of that is to examine this data,> I replied.

<Truth. But until it is examined I can choose to ignore it. Once I have examined it...>

<If I may extend an observation – that is not in keeping with the level of protest and suspicion of this operation you have manifested since we met.>

<I know,> she transmitted, and paused. Data silence filled the link. <But you were there. This machine, this god-machine, it is not like anything else. It is a mystery of technology. It is terrifying. And I am afraid to go forwards. And I am afraid that part of me, the part that has a spirit of flesh, is looking for reasons to turn back.>

I considered what she had said for three full cycles of thought. I admit, she spoke fears that had followed me too.

I held the data-cylinder up between us and crushed it between my digits.

<All knowledge is divine,> I transmitted. <And all knowledge comes from the unknown.>

<Thank you,> she sent, then turned and left me to the silence of my work.

'Initiate the second incarnation of power transfer,' I said, and the body of the god-machine shook. Plasma cylinders slid out of their magnetic sheaths and slammed into the fuel conduits around the Titan's reactor core. I watched through a visual feed piped from sensors in the reactor wall. Some of my kind see no value in such direct observation – all can be seen in data, they claim. The eye is merely an imperfect sensor and its output is of no value. But, to me, to watch such a moment, imperfect though that perception may be, is to look on the face of god.

Glowing primary plasma flooded through flow coils and poured into the reactor core. Magnetic fields caught it, spun it, moulded it into a roiling globe of blinding light. Output data danced in my sight. Energy was draining from the Titan's reactor core, but I had anticipated this. In an instant I had flooded the core with eight times the fuel needed for ignition, more than could drain before we could complete the ritual.

I stood in the centre of Artefact-ZA01's enginarium compartment. Stuttering blue light filled the space as relay-linked lumen globes lit and died one after another.

Atropos had not joined us in person but watched from a haze of distorting holo-light. Choirs of servitors crowded the space, each sheathed in layers of thermal and energy insulation.

The 441 mm-thick trunk of cables passing power from the reactors outside the Titan buzzed and oozed heat into the freezing air. I had set six Solex grade reactors to work in sequence; like the lumen globes in the compartment they lit as the power drained from the others. From these, we were consuming enough raw power energy per second to power a manufactory for a month.

Through the open doors at the end of the space, Ishta-1-Gamma and her own cohort of servitors filled the bridge. Zavius sat on the princeps' throne, sheathed in a black body-glove and coiled with interface cables. The neural connection spike that would link his mind and body to the Titan sat poised just behind the socket in the base of his skull. Ishta-1-Gamma's hand rested on the lever that would close the connection once primary systems had power.

'Standing by for primary neural interface,' called Ishta-1-Gamma.

'Plasma in reactor core reaching saturation,' droned one of the servitors wired into the flux monitors. 'Primary ignition yield will be achieved in three... two... one...'

'By the soul of this machine and the truth of iron, ignite!' I said.

'Compliance,' droned a servitor.

A spear of lightning stabbed down into the roiling ball of plasma held at the reactor's core. I saw it strike, saw the light pour out, blinding even to machine eyes. The body of the Titan shivered. Every light in the compartment blew out. Static poured out of every speaker grille in the chamber. The holo-image of Atropos vanished.

Then silence.

I waited in darkness.

Then I felt it. A low vibration pulsing through the floor, an electro-song on the edge of hearing. Indicator lights lit on access panels. The optical feed to the reactor cleared.

'Light is brought to dark,' I intoned. 'Fire kindled in the forge. The wheel

turns.'

'All praise to the machine!' echoed the servitors.

The power drain was slowing, dropping as the reactor output grew.

<It hungers no more, but still it thirsts...>

The noospheric words flashed into my mind. I flinched.

'What?' I blurted.

'Standing by for first phase neural connection,' called Ishta-1-Gamma. Princeps Zavius had closed his eyes.

'Take this fire to your soul and be illuminated,' I intoned, counting the sacred five seconds and holding down the switches on the power governor console. Plasma was pulled from the reactor core into conduits. Heat and power flowed into cold metal and cable. And, for a moment, through the touch of my hand on its heart, I felt the god-machine's spirit wake.

Hollowness.

The ache and hunger of aeons.

The sound of a scream that never ends caught in metal.

My consciousness almost failed at the vastness of it, but it was partial, incomplete, a half soul of iron. And behind that presence, like a shadow gathered at a god's back, was a waiting dark. I saw it then. By my oath to cog and data, I saw what had been. The ghosts flowed through my sensors and data connections, and perhaps through the cells of my flesh. I saw them moving in the spaces in which I stood. I heard their voices speak from long ago. They were there – figures in robes of emerald and fire-orange, and they spoke in tongues that were not the tongues of machines or men. And for a moment, a long black terrible moment, I saw what they had done.

I saw their dream, the dream of not just connecting man and machine, but of the machine as a sepulchre for the souls of those it consumed. I saw the devices they had wrought and bound into the heart of these machines. I saw the machines walk, and the dead scream in the minds of those who guided them to war. I saw the core of black iron nested at the root of the machine, sealed beyond sight, and the threads of crystal and stone branching from it through every limb and fibre of the walking god. And I saw the moments and thoughts and dreams held in that black heart, frozen for millennia, sent down to sleep and dream without end at the root of mountains.

And then the vision passed.

‘Initiating first phase neural connection,’ called Ishta-1-Gamma. ‘All is known in the machine.’

I tried to shout, to warn her. Cold static poured from me. I could not move, but only watch as Ishta-1-Gamma pulled the lever that sent the neural connection spike into the socket at the base of Zavius' skull.

I think I was moving across the compartment. I think I was reaching for the lever to break the connection. I think that is what I was doing... I am not certain, though, because at that moment Zavius opened his eyes.

Everything stopped. Nothing was moving. Not power, not the sparks running up the power cables, not the flicker of lights on consoles. Everyone else was gone. Ishta-1-Gamma, the servitors, Zavius, all of them.

<Where?> The voice arrived in my connections with power enough to make me fall... then I was not falling, just standing as I had been. A figure in a body-glove of emerald and orange stood in front of me. Gold symbols flowed over her form as she took a step closer to me. Her skin was pale. There was frost, I realised. Frost on the floor and walls. Frost spreading up my legs and robe. <Where?> repeated the woman. I began to form a clarifying question. She froze and began to judder, form and image blurring, face and body melting through shapes like the merged and corrupted output of a pict feed. <Where? Where? Where? Where? Where?>

The words were rolls of data thunder, crushing me down to the deck. I raised my hand to catch myself. An invisible force bent it around. Servos and hinges snapped. Cogs fell to gathering ice as they tumbled.

<Target return negative...>

<When...?>

<I walk, I walk...>

<Where...?>

<Fire and night and the song of inferno, oh the song, listen and hear...>

Black iron, cold iron and shadow and a hole at the centre of all...

<Input-nul. Input-nul. Input-nul. Input-nul. Input-nul. Input-nul. Input-
nul. Input-nul. Input-nul. Input-nul. Input-nul. Input-nul. Input-nul. Input-
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cable. Her hood fell away from her head, and I saw that it was a pure construction of polished brass and chrome. Socket plugs marched in a line from the base of her skull to her forehead. She paused for an instant, the cable held level with her face. I understood in that moment what she was going to do.

‘No!’ I shouted, and tried to rise, reaching for her as the frame of the Titan lurched and Zavius’ back arched on his throne. Its metal was glowing with heat under an impossible covering of frost. ‘No!’

But Ishta-1-Gamma plunged the cable into the socket on her forehead. For a second she was still, frozen.

Light exploded through her. Metal became liquid. Ceramic became dust. And her form became a shadow suspended in the flash of her disintegrations.

Then Artefact-ZA01, the Titan that had slept silent in darkness for millennia, screamed.

War horns boomed. A rolling cry broke from every speaker grille. Steam poured from coolant vents in a rush. I felt the chamber pitch as the god began to rise. Then, with a sound like an avalanche of gears, it collapsed back. The lights on the consoles dimmed. Then the impact shockwave of the Titan falling back to the ground slammed me back into a girder. My consciousness failed and blackness filled me.

‘It was a failure,’ I said. ‘It cannot wake. It should never wake.’

Atropos tilted its head beneath its graphite-weave cowl. Lenses flicked from green to cold blue. No reply was given.

I had woken in a chamber bare of machines and blessed only with the light of caged lumen spheres. The damage to my physical components had been repaired. My chronometric measures indicted that I had been unconscious for 105 hours. Atropos had been there when I regained consciousness.

‘You know what they are,’ I stated. ‘Ishta-1-Gamma found the remnants of the records you had imperfectly expunged from the cogitator-sifts.’ I held up the crushed data capsule that I had carried in my robes. ‘She wanted to believe that there was a purpose to what you... in what we were doing here. A higher illumination that was guiding our actions... She linked to the machine to prevent it waking fully. It was the only way. If we

had known, if she had known...'

'Your contributions to the endeavour are no longer required,' said Atropos. 'Your efforts and diligence up until this point mean that no censure will follow you. You will submit to a total data purge before you depart.'

Atropos turned and glided away.

'I will remember, though,' I called and even now I am struck by the emotion in my words, the humanity, you might say.

Atropos half turned. 'Ghosts caught in flesh are not truth. Data is truth. And only truth will be heard. You may keep your memories, Glavius-4-Rho.'

I left the facility four hours and forty-five seconds later. The rites that purged my data reservoirs and sensor captures were thrice performed. I left with nothing. The shuttle did not take me back to one of the forges but up to a ship in orbit and a summons to attend the forges of Kelio 4 as Magos-Maxima. I never spoke again of what I had seen.

'Did you ever find out what happened to them, to the Titans, to the facility?' asked Severita.

Glavius-4-Rho adjusted a dial on a control panel. An armature of chrome unfolded from the top of the workbench. He lowered a tiny cog of grey polished metal into it.

'What prompts you to enquire?' he said.

Severita looked at him, unblinking. 'I believe that I know when a story has not been fully told,' she said.

He did not answer, but keyed a control and watched the fingers of the armature close on the cog. A hair-fine laser beam extended to the cog from a projector. A tiny wisp of smoke rose as the beam began to cut.

'Truth is data,' he said without turning from his work. 'Do not stories need to be truth, also?'

'There is more to truth than data,' said Severita, 'and more to stories than truth.'

He released the armature, removed the cog and turned to the sword that lay on the metal slab of the workbench. Its disassembled parts lay in gleaming rows beside the repaired blade.

'I do not know what happened to the facility,' he said at last. 'But...' he

hesitated, and then pressed on. 'There is the dream... I have not dreamed since I ascended to the priesthood. I do not believe my cognitive augmentation allows for it. But before I left, and sometimes since, I have had a dream... In that dream I am standing on the platform in the cavern beneath the mountain on Zhao-Arkkad. I am alone. The cavern is dark except for the lumen spheres on the platform. Beyond its edge the dark goes on beyond sight. I step to the platform edge, and look down...

'And something moves. Something vast rises up, unfolding through the dark. I cannot move. I hear nothing. Silence swallows any cry. A vast head of metal lifts to become level with the platform. Dust falls from it. Its eyes are cold fire. I look into them, and I hear a voice. Her voice, Ishta-1-Gamma, echoing through me.

<The machine is eternity,> it says. Then the head and the body beneath it turn away, and the light of its eyes shine through the dark, and I see what lies in the cavern beyond my sight... Vast figures of metal, half buried by rubble and grey dust... eleven... fifteen... eighteen...twenty-seven... thirty-three... and more. A Legion sleeping in the dark. <The machine that dreams shall wake,> says the voice, and then the dream goes, but when it returns I always think I can see another metal god stir from its sleep.'

'And you hear her voice?' asked Severita. 'The other magos, it is always her?'

'Always,' said Glavius-4-Rho.

He turned to Severita, holding out her sword. It was fully assembled. The blade shone blue and silver in the light of the plasma torch burning on the workbench. All notches and blemishes had gone. The power field generator at the base of the blade gleamed with sacred oils.

'Here,' he said. 'It is perfect again.'

She took it and muttered a prayer before sheathing it.

'My thanks.' She began to turn, hesitated. 'For this and for your tale.'

Glavius-4-Rho was still for a moment, and then bowed his head and turned back to his machines.