

# Cargo Bay Ceti-78

By Dirk Wehner

Cargo Bay Ceti-78 of the Adeptus Mechanicus cruiser *Regulus Prime* seemed to shimmer ghostly green on the portable vidscreen. In a shadowy passage of the busy ship, Tech-Priest

Belafont Kreeler would have smiled if he still had the required muscles – or

a mouth, at that. Instead, he exhaled a small cloud of vapour through a metallic grille, satisfied as he looked at the somewhat distorted picture on the small screen.

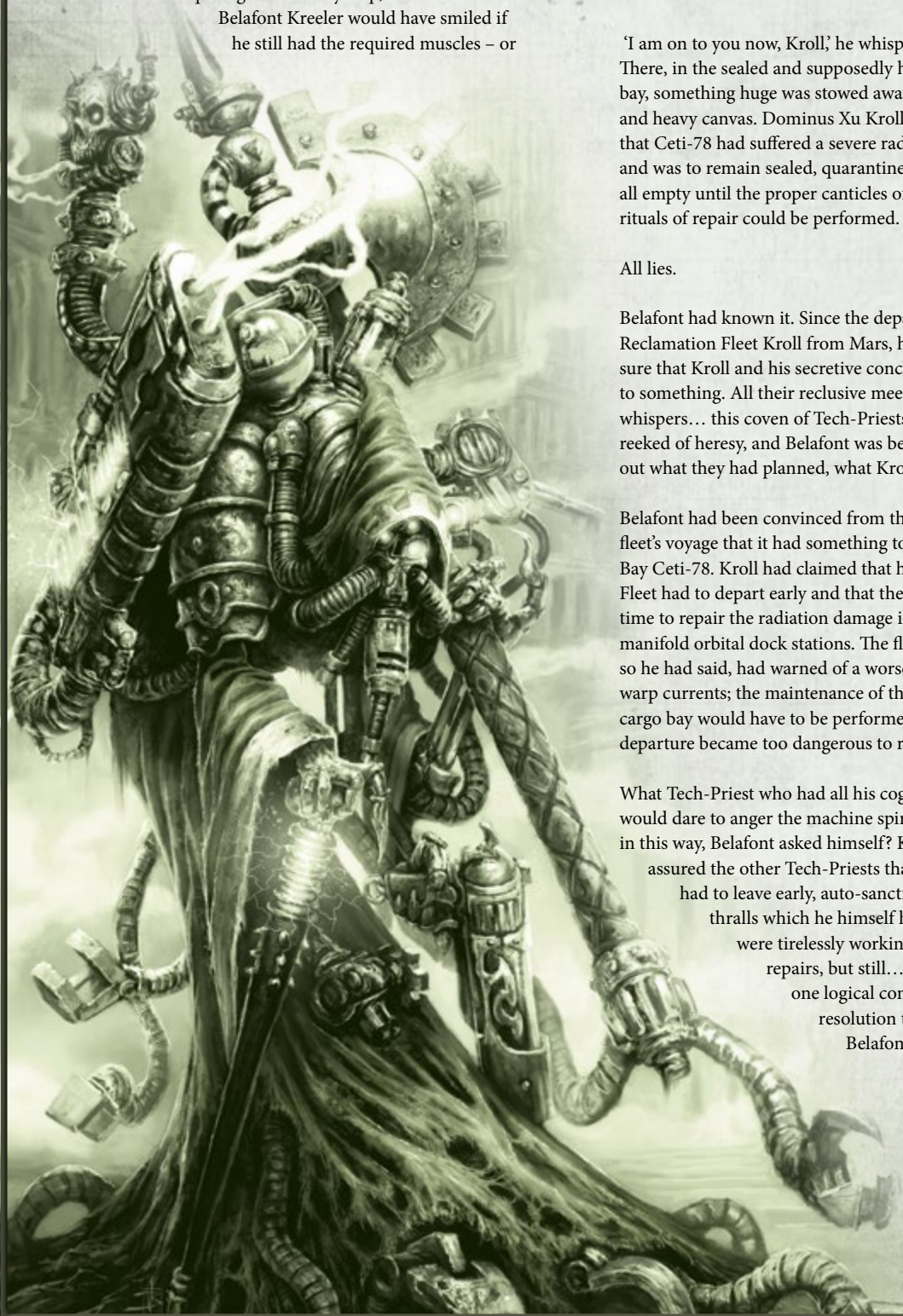
'I am on to you now, Kroll,' he whispered to himself. There, in the sealed and supposedly hazardous cargo bay, something huge was stowed away under a dark and heavy canvas. Dominus Xu Kroll had claimed that Ceti-78 had suffered a severe radiation leak and was to remain sealed, quarantined and above all empty until the proper canticles of cleansing and rituals of repair could be performed.

All lies.

Belafont had known it. Since the departure of Reclamation Fleet Kroll from Mars, he had been sure that Kroll and his secretive conclave were up to something. All their reclusive meetings, all the whispers... this coven of Tech-Priests around Kroll reeked of heresy, and Belafont was bent on finding out what they had planned, what Kroll had planned.

Belafont had been convinced from the start of the fleet's voyage that it had something to do with Cargo Bay Ceti-78. Kroll had claimed that his Reclamation Fleet had to depart early and that there had been no time to repair the radiation damage in one of Mars' manifold orbital dock stations. The fleet's Navigators, so he had said, had warned of a worsening of the warp currents; the maintenance of this certain cargo bay would have to be performed en route, lest departure became too dangerous to risk.

What Tech-Priest who had all his cogs together would dare to anger the machine spirit of his vessel in this way, Belafont asked himself? Kroll had assured the other Tech-Priests that although they had to leave early, auto-sanctified servothralls which he himself had handpicked were tirelessly working on the repairs, but still... there was only one logical conclusion, one resolution to which all of Belafont's calculations





had lead: Kroll was hiding something.

For weeks, Belafont had tried to get access to Cargo Bay Ceti-78. He had tried to tap into the vidfeed of the internal servo-scrutineer lenses, but to no avail. He had sent a team of his personal Skitarii to investigate the site. They had vanished. He had questioned low-ranking Tech-Priests and thralls whom he suspected to be involved with Xu Kroll and his cloistered attendants to some degree. Nothing.

But finally, he had managed to introduce a servo-skull into the ventilation system of the Reclamation Fleet flagship unnoticed. The small osseous drone had found its way through the entangled confusion of interlacing cables, leaking conduits, oily ducts and lazily spinning fans. At last it had arrived at the sealed cargo bay – which turned out to be not very sealed at all, or the servo-skull could never have reached it on this route. This alone proved that Kroll was lying. This, and the various traps installed in the ventilation system, which the servo-skull barely had managed to avoid. Now it was jutting through a rusty hatch in the ceiling into the wide-open hall and pointing its scanning optics on the object below.

And there it was, visible on Belafont's vidscreen: the evidence that Kroll had lied to them all. Cargo Bay Ceti-78 was not empty. But what exactly did Belafont see? His optic sensors hummed softly as they switched through various filters, while his augmented digits simultaneously scurried over the controls of the vidscreen. No matter how he tried to adjust what he saw though, he couldn't make any sense of it. All that the screen showed was a cavernous hall with nothing in it but the huge shape underneath the canvas.

Belafont hissed a static curse in binharic. How disappointing. If only he could get closer. If he could gain entrance to Cargo Bay Ceti-78 himself somehow to pry underneath that dark canvas...

His fingers tapped on the vidscreen hesitantly while he calculated the risks and rewards of his next move. But he was nearly out of options, so he had to try. With a series of short command inputs, he urged the servo-skull to hover down from the cramped frameworks and gangways of the cargo bay's ceiling. The small device descended into the open hall, approaching the veiled shape in the centre. The image on Belafont's screen flickered as the servo-skull closed in on its target. After some tedious moments, it reached ground level and began to circle

the enormous form. Belafont could make nothing of its shape though. He tried to match the picture with anything he had saved in the cogitator banks of his enhanced mind, but the data was still insufficient. He came close to something which echoed real human frustration and urged the servo-skull to hover closer.

There... beneath a tuck of the canvas. Was this–

With a sudden hiss of noisy static, the image on his screen flashed and vanished. Startled by the abrupt event, Belafont took another step back into the dark corridor where he had been hiding. Hastily he looked around if someone had seen him. He stowed the malfunctioning vidscreen device into the depths of his red robes. While his augmented metabolism slowed the rate his machine heart was pumping artificial fluids through his body, he straightened his garment with his mechadendrites and stepped into the main hallway of the deck again.

His armoured feet rang on the grid's steel plating as he paced in the direction of the nearest lift machinarium. He paid heed to appear innocuous, walking as slow as he dared and scribbling on a data slate. On his way, he evaded other Tech-Priests and the occasional mindless servitor labouring away in the cramped corridors of the ship. Usually the servitors were programmed to step out of the path of any Tech-Priest of course, but Belafont worried that Kroll might have outfitted his thralls with augur devices of some sort. Surely he monitored everything happening on his ship if he wanted to guard his secret. Belafont had to hurry now. Sending the servo-skull further into the cargo bay had been a calculated risk – Belafont had been almost sure that Kroll would have taken precautions to protect his precious cargo even from inside the huge room. But nevertheless it had been a risk Belafont had to take if he wanted to find out more about Kroll's secret.

Now the time of observation and spying was over though, and the time to act had come. When Kroll found the remnants of Belafont's servo-skull in the cargo bay, he would definitely prove more than resourceful enough to trace it back to its owner. Kroll surely knew by now that someone was on his track, but Belafont did not intend to let the Tech-Priest Dominus find out that it was him – not yet at least.

Before him, a bulkhead door with the skull-and-cog symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus emblazoned on its metal surface opened with a grating hiss,



and Belafont entered the lift machinarium, a huge rotund hub room filled with busy crew members, patrolling Skitarii and the binharic blabber of dozens of Tech-Priests. From there, a transportation system of numerous lifts ran through the whole ship and would allow Belafont to reach his destination quickly. He shoved his way through a rabble of low-ranking priests, keeping his head low. Would anyone know by now? Might Kroll be on to him already? With a last look over his shoulder, he entered one of the dozens of lift chambers and pushed the activation rune.

'Cargo Bay Ceti-78,' Belafont said, his voice a metallic droning.

'Error,' an even more artificial voice replied. 'Cargo Bay Ceti-78 is restricted as per order Dominus Kroll Gamma-Gamma-8.' Still, the doors of the lift chamber slammed shut.

'Cargo Bay Ceti-78,' Belafont repeated. 'Override code Kreeler Lambda-Rho-55.'

'Error,' the artificial voice proclaimed once more. 'Ceti-78 is to remain an off-limits area. Severe radiation leaks may cause damage to sacred machinery and organic assets.'

'Override code Kreeler Lambda-Rho-55,' Belafont said once more, regulating his voice modulator to an increased volume.

'Error.'

Belafont wanted to speak again, but then he hesitated. The answering voice had suddenly changed, a subtle variation in its pattern that suggested there was no mere machine at the other end.

'Regrettably, override code Kreeler Lambda-Rho-55 is not viable anymore,' Dominus Xu Kroll continued, his voice droning from the vox speakers of the lift chamber. 'Just like Tech-Priest Kreeler himself.'

Belafont tried to fight a sudden rush of all too mundane fear as he whirled around and slammed his hand onto the door control rune. A terrifyingly final signal rang out, signifying activation failure, as the chamber slowly set itself into motion.

'Are you afraid, Tech-Priest Belafont Kreeler?' Kroll asked. 'Such a pitifully biological failing, isn't it?'

Belafont hastily looked around him as the lift accelerated. Finally, his gaze locked onto a small lens next to the control panel. He knew Kroll was watching him, knew that Kroll was controlling the path of the lift chamber now.

'Where are you taking me?'

'Ah,' Kroll answered. 'Curiosity. A useful trait when searching for knowledge. But if it goes unchecked, it might lead to troubling results.'

'What about lies and deception?' Belafont asked, aggravated. 'Do you deem those to be useful traits, Dominus? Or the calculated double standards you are applying?'

'You are observing it from a wrong angle, Kreeler.' Dominus Kroll's voice droned on as the lift accelerated further. The small chamber was filled with an alarming red light as it approached its unknown destination. 'The secrets I keep are the secrets of the Ommissiah. The subterfuges I apply are all calculated towards logical conclusions. You, on the other hand, interfered with things beyond your understanding, simply because you could not let it go. There are no double standards, just servants of the Ommissiah who are ready for the truth and those who are not. It is a binary division between those who are willing to understand his great workings and those who cannot.'

'Arrogance is another very biological trait, Dominus,' Belafont said slowly.

A mechanical staccato, something akin to laughter, came from the emitters.

'As is your short-sightedness, Kreeler. But since you went through so much trouble, I shall at least reward your curiosity to some degree.'





Belafont stared at the faceless lens and said nothing.

'What is hidden in Cargo Bay Ceti-78,' Kroll said, 'is called the Varlian Device. If you would have waited, you could have basked in the glory of the Ommissiah once I had revealed the true power of this machine. Now you shall only know its name. Be grateful for that. It is more than most of the priests on this ship are granted.'

Belafont's expression remained blank, even for someone of his calling. The name triggered a series of disparate connections in his internal cogitator banks, but he was unable to make sense of them, no more than of the vague shape of the thing in Cargo Bay Ceti-78. Meanwhile, the lift was continuing its rattling protest. The deck signifiers flashed by at increasing speed.

A few moments passed before Xu Kroll spoke again. 'There is another secret that I will tell you, Tech-Priest Belafont Kreeler, a secret about the lift machinarium of this vessel. Not only does it connect the whole ship – it also functions as a direct exit route to the outer hull.'

The lift chamber abruptly halted. Belafont barely found the time to give a binharic scream as a hatch in its ceiling opened with the hissing noise of

decompression and he Tech-Priest was ejected into the cold and black eternity of open space.

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In his personal accommodation, Xu Kroll emitted a mechanical chuckle despite himself as he turned off the screen that showed the vidfeed from the lift chamber. He couldn't deny that he had somewhat enjoyed calculating the exact moment for his last words to Kreeler. Admittedly it was a bit beneath a high-ranking member of the Adeptus Mechanicus like himself to revel in such behaviour, but what did it matter? Xu Kroll was serving the Ommissiah, and all his wider plans and calculations were driven by pure and unemotional logic. The Varlian Device would see field tests in due time, and he could not allow sceptics like Belafont Kreeler to interfere with his great work. No one outside the Teeth of the Cog could know until the appropriate juncture. Xu Kroll turned to another vidscreen. It showed Cargo Bay Ceti-78, where a huge shape was safely tucked away underneath a heavy canvas. Yes, no one could know until the time comes...

