

The Cleansing Light

By Colin Cubbon

The *Iambic Khorulam* made its final manoeuvres towards the station. In comparison to the majestic cog-tooth spirals that made up the lonely space station's superstructure, the forge-barque wallowed silently like an ungainly void whale. Every tooth-like projection, some as large as the *Khorulam* itself and serving as docking piers, was lined with smaller protrusions, and these in turn were lined with more, on and on in a dizzying fractal design. Viewed from an axis, the station was snowflake-like with its six protruding primary piers.

Error, mused Logicus Dunal Rovarrin as she worked, the Fylachor Terminus is like a component of the Ommissiah's celestial engine.

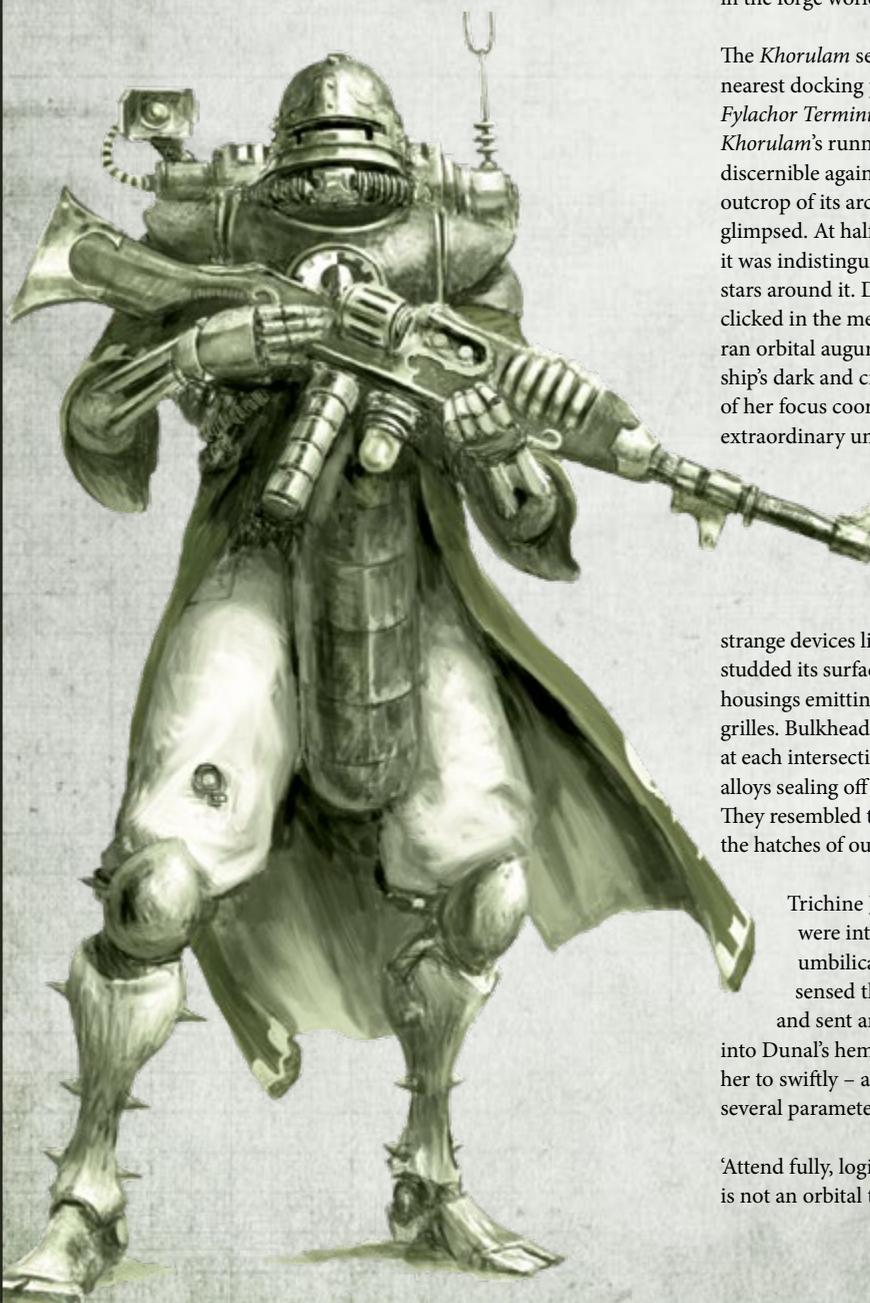
Nothing like the station existed anywhere else in Metalica's stellar system, for its heritage spoke undeniably of Mars. Upon first encountering it, Dunal had opined it was a triumphal example of 32nd millennium re-expansion. Trichine Jorrdeth, Dunal's overseer and fellow Tech-Priest, tartly responded that it was a yoke of Martian hegemony, best left out here in the forge world system's furthest reaches.

The *Khorulam* settled half a mile away from the nearest docking pier spur, on the dark side of the *Fylachor Terminus*. Its hard edges barely lit by the *Khorulam*'s running lights, the station's outline was discernible against the backdrop of stars. Above one outcrop of its architecture, Metalica's star could be glimpsed. At half a light year away, to biological eyes it was indistinguishable from the vastly more distant stars around it. Dunal's gunmetal optics span and clicked in the metal of her face as part of her mind ran orbital auguries on the star. She stood at the ship's dark and cramped bridge station, the majority of her focus coordinating the *Iambic Khorulam*'s extraordinary umbilical.

Dozens of feet in diameter, the mechanical appendage slowly stretched its way across the gap between the forge-barque and the station. Enormous heat sinks and strange devices like inverted void shield generators studded its surface, along with slab-sided power housings emitting turquoise light from a lattice of grilles. Bulkheads ran through it like cartilage, and at each intersection was a vast portal of hyper-dense alloys sealing off section after section of the umbilical. They resembled the doors to vast treasure vaults, or the hatches of oubliettes holding dangerous guests.

Trichine Jorrdeth's vine-like mechadendrites were integrated, like Dunal's, into the umbilical's controls. Through them, Jorrdeth sensed the other Tech-Priest's distraction and sent an irritable burst of calibrations into Dunal's hemisphere of operation. They forced her to swiftly – and unnecessarily – recalculate several parameters.

'Attend fully, logicus!' the trichine snapped. 'This is not an orbital transfer shaft. We must work in



absolute synchrony to ensure the entreaties to each of the umbilical's machine spirits are received with grace.'

'Apologies, trichine. Full cogitation is restored. Is the magos certain this level of protection is necessary? The weapon is fully secure, surely.'

'Do not question the magos' certainty, *logicus*.' Somehow, Trichine Jorrdeth managed to load Dunal's signifier with disdain through his subtle use of Metalica's high-echelon cant and careful positioning of his subordinate mechadendrites.

'The weapon is secure. The magos' research, however, revealed that additional caution must be taken. The exact efficacy of the weapon is – unknown.' Jorrdeth made a distasteful gesture at having to use the word. 'It is part of our sacred duty to present the magos with a full assessment of its capabilities, as well as recovering the artefact itself. Additional, this station is of the Red Planet. We cannot assume the compliance of its machine spirit. This is an inordinate honour – the successful operation of the Reclamation Fleet is dependent on my- on our holy endeavours.'

The umbilical crossed the final stretch of silent space, its surface dusted with icy fragments. Even on the bridge of the *Iambic Khorulam*, Dunal detected the heavy mechanical reverberations as its claw-like clamps locked into position on the station's airlock. A pict-thief showed her the ranks of waiting servitors at its entrance sway with the movement. It was an inestimable tribute of Metalica to grant Reclamation Fleet M4-Huy-Ω one of its precious arcana mechanicum, an ecumenical gesture of unity between those who would vie for power during the long voyage into the dark. Dunal could not fully explain to herself why the magos had despatched Jorrdeth and herself here and none other. There were adepts in far higher favour with the magos than even Jorrdeth believed himself to be.

With deft impulses Dunal ordered the dozens of servitors, logo-jacks and mechanothralls through the umbilical and past each slowly hinging or irisng portal, led by a humming servo-skull that had once been a high-ranking lexmechanic. Dunal knew Jorrdeth did not know what the magos had learned; the trichine would have artlessly boasted of such confidence. All they had been given was this location millions of miles from Metalica, and a hexaclavus signal-key that the magos claimed would be needed

to secure the weapon. The only information the two Tech-Priests had been able to glean had come from mnemo-echoes that resounded through Metalica's invisible data-fields. The weapon had been wielded in millennia past by the forge lords of Metalica, aiding them in the Quest for Knowledge by wiping out mutants, xenos and engines corrupted by the immaterium. It was said to have saved and purified the forge worlds of Thoromest, Fardell Majoris and Stele Lex, yet none knew where these planets had lain or if their forges still survived. After an unknown crisis, the weapon had been hidden, supposedly at Mars' tyrannical insistence. Until the magos' discovery, not even the Fabricator General of Metalica had known that it was here, at the very edge of the forge world's system. Only the weapon's name remained certain: *Radiant Wrath*.

After an elongated exchange between *Iambic Khorulam*'s cogitator engine and the controls of the docking pier, Dunal and Jorrdeth's servitors gained entry. The Tech-Priests watched avidly through the manifold senses of their proxies. The magos had insisted that neither of them were to board the *Fylachor Terminus* in person. Thus they were forced to experience its holy aura vicariously through the limited senses of their cyborg thralls. Ancient lumen strips flickered, olfac-scans registered ozone and unusual hydrocarbon scents. Shimmering curtains of data flapped like seaweed in currents of pulsing energy, passed through by the unheeding servitors as though they were mist, or hung like tapestries over laser-etched representations of the Opus Machina.

Despite binharic entreaties, there was no direct response from the station's controlling logic engine – merely automated blurts from outlying systems – and nor did there appear to be any physical crew. The servitors lumbered, hovered and wove their way along an interminable corridor through the station's deserted interior. Sprays of sanctified incense and blurts of binharic prayers haunted their steps as they moved in procession; their relative positions echoed Metalica's varied radium frequencies. The servitors passed sealed chambers bearing warnings in dialects of Lingua Technis that had not been broadcast in millennia, and black passages down which the thin atmosphere trickled as if pulled by some void beyond. With a final turn of the corridor, Dunal suddenly commanded the servitors to halt as her flesh-voice gasped and even Jorrdeth loosed an involuntary binharic imprecation. The passage terminated suddenly, the space beyond a vast chasm.

There were lights here, but they failed to fill the enormous space and glittered like weak stars. A smudge of grey was visible in the distance where the servitors' cranial-lumen blazed dead ahead. There was still no response to the *Iambic Khorulam's* repeated hails, yet the servitors' presence had disturbed something. Some of the distant stars in that immense space were moving.

With a suddenness that made the Tech-Priests jump, light flared like a dozen miniature suns. The void was lit. It was spherical, and at its centre on anti-gravitic impulsors hung a lead-coloured cube, some thirty feet across. The inside of the sphere was encrusted with thousands of heavy-bore weapons on gimballed turrets, and the stars the Tech-Priests had glimpsed were their targeting reticules. Twenty or so of the nearest had swung to face the servitors; hoppers churned and ammo feeds spun, while plasma cells thrummed at high power. All the others remained resolutely fixed on the leaden cube.

'Attend, I am detecting intrusion!' Jorrdeth blurted, his four mechanical manipulators and three mechadendrites flashing between ship controls. 'Ommissiah! The data-stacks, something has breached our firewalls! It is ravenous, I- I have no control!'

'What is it? Are we under attack?' Dunal asked, seeing the same invasive aggression displayed in flickering columns of data.

Jorrdeth suddenly looked back up at the oculus arrays showing the weapon systems targeting – yet not firing upon – the servitors, and his silvered irises narrowed in understanding.

'It is the station: the *Fylachor Terminus*. We have awoken its central machine spirit. By the Auric Ratio, I have never witnessed such power, such finesse!'

'It will kill us!' Dunal hastily disconnected each of her tentacular mechadendrites from the *Khorulam's* systems.

'It could easily have done that already, logicus. It is interrogating our logic core. It will find the magos' hexaclavus file. Do not make any transmission. The magos' signal key will suffice,' said Jorrdeth, though his cant was tinged with wavering variables.

After several macro-seconds, a series of runic indicators flashed. The dull grey cube in the sphere's centre moved slowly towards the tunnel's entrance where the remaining servitors were still pinned under the glare of the nearest turrets. Every other

visible weapon system followed the cube's movement with mechanical precision. As it neared, the Tech-Priests saw its almost featureless flanks contained a single viewing portal, and the passive arrays hidden within the former lexmechanic's skull detected the unmistakable chronometric waveforms of stasis technology. The cube docked with the passage with a clank of metal.

'Is it safe? Can we...' Dunal's voice trailed off.

Jorrdeth's manipulators danced over runic controls, and his grille emitted grating benedictions. The servitors responded and approached the unreflective cube, the servo-skull hovering to point its multiple optics and sensor vanes through the viewing portal. The Tech-Priests watched, rapt, as the detectors slowly swept the interior. Stasis vaults lined the cube's walls, filled not with the esoteric techno-arcana they were expecting, but with factorum-produced items of quotidian quality: disconnected bionic limbs and loops of dusty data-tethers. There was a weapons rack in one stasis vault, but the radium carbine inside was scuffed and smoke-stained. Dunal could not understand. This carbine was not a purifying weapon that would ensure the Reclamation Fleet's success. The magos had been deceived.

The servo-skull's optics peered into the final corner where a large stasis sarcophagus sat. Winking indicators showed its systems had entered revivification. Most of the armaglass was frosted and crazed with some distorting patina, but the pale robes of Metalica were visible inside, the gunmetal bionics of known forge-temples and armour plates dulled with grime. The stasis vault's countdown completed and the distinctive helmet of a Skitarius Vanguard lifted slowly to face the portal.

The *Iambic Khorulam* sat above Skorifex's equatorial belt, where the forge world's major temples still burned in psychic conflagrations. The remainder of the magos' Reclamation Fleet remained on the other side of the system, leaving the forge-barque to approach alone. The *Khorulam* was not a war ship, yet none of the fleet sought to closely guard its exposed flanks. The magos' indentured astropaths detected the final frantic cries of their kin upon Skorifex. The fleet's psychic messengers shrieked tearfully of predatory sentiences drawn from the warp, nightmares of blood and oil brought forth by witch-breeds in the forge world's slave population.

The Skitarius from *Fylachor Terminus* occupied a specially constructed drop ship in one of the

Khorulam's rear launch bays, as far from the bridge as possible. Autonomic signifiers identified the warrior as Skitarius-Luminor 000011, though few referred to it as anything other than Radiant Wrath. It seemed incapable of transmitting intelligibly and every attempt to analyse its emitters resulted in the loss of yet another servitor. The *Khorulam* had lost more than fifty during the transit from Metalica, in addition to all of those that had set foot on the station. *The magos had not been deceived after all*, thought Dunal, as she looked at the blackened puckering of her flesh around implants that flaked with crumbling oxides. The purifying weapon was simply one that walked and thought.

The excoriating emissions from the silent soldier were unprecedented. They bled into everything, a gale of zeta particles blowing in a torrent from every part of its body. Servitors in the same section of the hold swiftly lost their biological components, their waxy skin blackening and sloughing away in a matter of minutes. Metallic compounds scorched, cracking and crumbling. How the warrior's own components survived such a barrage was not something that could be determined, not on the forge-barque. Jorrdeth and Dunal had desperately marshalled their remaining servitors in work rotas through the tempestuous journey in the warp, barely keeping the ship running as the Skitarius' radiation leeched into the ship's superstructure. Twice they received emergency supplies from the rest of the fleet via disposable shuttle – no other ship deigned to get close. Though Jorrdeth and Dunal kept themselves as far away as they could, they had been forced to replace many of their flesh and bionic components repeatedly. The magos promised that ultra-deionisation protocols would be enacted once Radiant Wrath was away from the ship, assuring the two Tech-Priests that replacement augmetics were more than sufficient for now. Dunal wasn't sure.

The logicus watched the drop ship containing Radiant Wrath hit Skorifex's atmosphere through the single bionic eye Jorrdeth had allowed her from the last shipment, the trichine having sequestered the choicest replacements. Her thoughts were disorganised. Delicate neural threading had provided replacement meat for her brain where it had withered, but it was as if calculations had somehow become sluggish as well.

'It will be worth it, trichine,' she told the Tech-Priest behind her. 'Skorifex will be

tainted for hundreds of millennia. But it will be pure and purged, a testament to the glory of Metalica and the Machine God.'

Jorrdeth had not been able to respond for days. The physical manifestations of the Skitarius' furious aura were not where its effects ended. Streams of tumorous logoscripts had multiplied in Jorrdeth's noosphere, parameters expanding and twisting in the trichine's neural architecture, facts distorting. Knowledge, the gilded jewel held in awe by every Tech-Priest, bloated with a kind of replicating and mutating viral curse, one that Dunal could see swelling in her own cogitations. Logicus Dunal had hidden her fear in regular updates to the magos.

She suppressed an unpleasantly emotional burst of fear. She was part of something wondrous and divine. Every great endeavour had its martyrs.

