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Taken from *Endeavour of Will* by Ben Counter

SOMETIMES, CAPTAIN LYSANDER'S thoughts turned to sacrifice.

The first lesson he had learned as a Space Marine was sacrifice. The man who had begun his training under the Chaplains of the Imperial Fists was long gone now, replaced by someone who was more a legacy, an embodiment of his Chapter, than a human being; but Lysander still remembered what he had learned. In battle, nothing can be won without sacrifice. Be it the expenditure of a single bullet or the death of a whole world, victory had to be paid for somehow.

Sacrifice was foremost in his mind now as he regarded the tactical map of the region surrounding the Eye of Terror. In the immediate vicinity of the Eye, grey icons marked worlds which had been sacrificed to the tide of Chaos that had flooded from the Eye. There were the graveyards of vast armies and planetary populations, billions fallen to the Chaos-worshipping heretics who called themselves the soldiers of the Black Crusade. Prominent battles and naval actions shone bright in the holo-display, all of them marking mass sacrifices to the possibility of victory by Imperial commanders. Some had been successful. Most had not, and the campaign around the Eye was one of containment. The Chaos spearhead had to be blunted. If it burst through in force from the Eye and crashed through the cordons the Imperial Navy had thrown around it, the Black Crusade would make for Terra herself.

That would not happen. The Imperium would sacrifice everything it had to keep it from happening. The Imperial Guardsman or Naval crewman might not understand that. He might equate victory with survival, in the way that the small-minded Imperial citizen had to just to stay sane. But Lysander understood.

Lysander contemplated this in the tactical orrery of the strike cruiser *Siege of Malebruk*. The ship had been sent from Fleet Helios, the Imperial Fists fleet guarding one of the approaches from the Eye. It was all the fleet could spare. Any moment now the fleets of Chaos could approach and force the Imperial Fists to a naval battle. Lysander himself was an asset that the Imperial Fists could ill afford to have anywhere but in the heart of battle – but his task was more important even than to lead his brother Space Marines of Fleet Helios.

His task was to confirm that Warsmith Shon'tu really was dead.

Lysander's vox-link chirped behind his ear.

'Speak,' he said.

'Captain,' came the voice of the ship's commander, Chrystis. 'We are exiting the warp. All indicators green.'

'Contact the *Bastion Inviolata* and the *Endeavour of Will* as soon as we are in real space,' said Lysander. 'Have us battle-ready. The fight will have been joined and may still be going on. We must be ready to lend our guns.'

'Yes, captain,' replied Chrystis. 'Breaching real space now. The Emperor protects.'

The tactical orrery, clad in brass and inscribed with the cogs and stylised enginework of the Adeptus Mechanicus, shuddered as the *Siege* tore through the veil between the warp and reality. For a split-second the architecture of the orrery shifted; impossible angles ghosted across its architecture as reality protested at the intrusion. Then the moment was over and the *Siege* was back in reality.

The holo-display winked out and was replaced, the ship's immediate vicinity being picked out in light. The *Endeavour of Will* was surrounded by flickering icons representing its small garrison of Imperial Fists. A star a handful of light hours away, with dead moonlets and a band of asteroids. Long-defunct explorer platforms.

There was no *Bastion Inviolata*.

'Comms coming in,' came Chrystis's voice over the vox. 'It's garbled. Distress beacons everywhere from the *Endeavour*.'

'What of the *Bastion*?' demanded Lysander.

'Nothing,' said Chrystis. 'We're searching for it. It's not putting out anything, not even static beacons.'

'Find it,' said Lysander.

'Yes, captain. Should we hold position?'

'No,' said Lysander. 'Bring us in to the *Endeavour of Will*.'

DAEMON VIRUS, THE last message had said. In the arcane code of the astropath, it had flickered across from one star fort to the other at the speed of thought. *Witchcraft. Moral threat. We are undone.*

The words ran through Techmarine Hestion's mind as he shouldered his way through the bulkhead door, forging a path through a maintenance passage not built for a Space Marine in armour. From somewhere deep in the engine and power sections of the *Endeavour of Will*, warning klaxons were blaring and synthesised voices were issuing dire warnings in a confused babble of sound.

Hestion pulled himself through a hatch into a vast, cold vault. The arched ceiling high above was obscured with freezing mist, and the polished metal of the walls was caked in ice. The vault housed a roughly spherical mass of archeotech, a biomechanical mass woven together from dozens of human forms, swathed in cabling and steel casings. The machine-spirit of the *Endeavour of Will* was housed here, the rhythms of a hundred human bodies regulating its functions and a hundred human brains containing the architecture of its mind. Just as the servitors that maintained the star fort's systems were built around the bodies of deceased crew, so this machine was composed of the bodies of the various tech-adepts and magi who had maintained it over the millennia. Their final honour had been to join the machine-spirit, their own minds mingled with it, their own wisdom added to the vast knowledge fillings its memory banks.

'I can see them,' said the *Endeavour of Will*, its voice issuing from its hundred mouths. 'They are between the seventh and eighth moons. They watch us.'

'The enemy ship is not the biggest threat,' said Hestion. 'The last communication from the *Bastion Inviolata* spoke of witchcraft. Of a tech-virus, born of daemon magic.'

'Then the *Bastion* is lost,' said the *Endeavour of Will*. 'I felt an emptiness in the realm of information, and I feared my friend was gone. For ten thousand years we have been brothers, forged in the same age, fighting alongside one another in the age that followed. So does time rob us even of that which cannot die.'

'They will assault us next,' said Hestion. 'Shon'tu and his Iron Warriors will not be satisfied with one prize. He will want to take us too.'

'He cannot have us,' said the *Endeavour of Will*. 'You and I, we are forewarned. We will fend off this daemon-scurge. Shon'tu will have to pursue his victory with gun and blade, not witchcraft.'

'This I swear too,' said Hestion.

A Space Marine's lifespan far eclipsed that of an unaugmented human, but even by a Space Marine's standards Hestion was old. His long, mournful face seemed out of place in

the red and gold armour of an Imperial Fists Techmarine. He lacked none of the size and presence of a Space Marine, but somehow still looked more like he should be bent over a scholar's desk instead of bringing fire and bloodshed to the Emperor's enemies. Sure enough, bundles of scrolls and books hung from his armour, containing the various tech-rites with which he honoured the spirits of the machines and wargear he maintained for the Chapter.

Hestion took one of the thickest books and his servo-arm unfolded down over his shoulder, the manipulator at its tip unlocking the clasp holding the book's cover closed. Hestion flipped rapidly through the pages and found the ritual he was looking for.

The pages were covered in blocks of zeroes and ones, separated by complicated algebra. Hestion ran his finger down the page, the bionics behind his eyes whirring as they parsed the phrases of machine-code and sent them to the logic circuits in the back of his skull.

'Ommissiah,' read Hestion. 'You whose knowledge builds a fortress of understanding in the realm of information. You whose domain is everything forged and wrought. The dark powers look upon your servant with jealousy. Protect him and snatch his sacred knowledge back from the jaws of sin.'

The mouths of the many bodies opened. The machine-spirit inside coordinated their vocal cords to create a harmony of machine-code, a white noise of clicking and buzzing that echoed Hestion's words in a language that an unaltered human mind could not comprehend. Fingers twitched as their nervous systems, long unused to movement, stuttered into life.

'Ah, they are here,' growled the *Endeavour of Will*. Warning lights flickered across the casing, sending red-edged shadows flitting across the columns and arches of the vault. 'An edifice of such profane knowledge, crashing through the sea of understanding like a ship crewed by the dead and hung with the trophies of violation. Would that you could see them, Imperial Fist! Even your vaunted hate would be inflamed to a new height!'

Warning icons ghosted over Hestion's vision, projected onto his retina. They told him that an unknown vessel had breached the sensorium range of the *Endeavour of Will* and was approaching fast, cloaked in all manner of sensor-fooling effects that rendered it a shadow on the void. The Imperial Fists garrison and the human crew, already on the highest of alerts after the death rattle of the *Bastion Inviolata*, were powering up the star fort's weapons.

'But it was not guns or torpedoes that took down my brother star fort,' continued the machine-spirit. 'That is something he could have fought on his own terms! Fire with fire! No, it was the very soul of deceit that brought him low. But I will not follow him into the depths of ignorance! I will not be lied to! By the holy truth shall I be shielded!'

Hestion's servo-arm reconfigured and seared a complicated pentagrammic symbol on the floor of the vault with a cutting laser. The steel of the floor seethed and bubbled around it, and not just with heat.

The shadows were darkening. The bodies of the machine-spirit's casing were ageing rapidly, skin turning grey and flaking away, muscle and organ sinking into skeletal hollows. Faces decayed into bare teeth and black eye sockets.

'Ommissiah, grant us your aid!' shouted Hestion. 'Delete not this ancient soul! Permit not this corruption!'

Crackles of red lightning played across the high ceiling forming blood-coloured fingers along the columns and walls. Distant voices chanted and gabbled, competing with Hestion's lone voice. One section of the wall bowed in and split, becoming the lids of a huge bloodshot eye that rolled madly. Hestion yelled and threw a handful of pure carbon into the circle, and the eye withdrew.

The vault was shuddering. Voices were flitting across the star fort's vox-net, carrying information about the enemy drawing closer. It was a grand cruiser, its shape well-known by the tactical histories accessed from the valley of datamedium in which the machine-spirit kept its immense reserves of knowledge. It was a flagship of the Iron Warriors, servants of Chaos. If

Hestion did not fend off their daemonic attack, the Imperial Fists would never have the chance to look this enemy in the face.

Thick reddish veins blistered up from the floor and up the side of the machine-spirit's casing. Withered bodies broke and flopped aside, revealing the tangle of circuitry and cabling inside.

'Back! Back to the warp with you!' came the machine-spirit's voice, distorted to an atonal bray. 'You will not have this soul! For ten thousand years I have wrought a grim end for your kind! I will not die now! Not now!'

Hestion looked around him. Corruption was flooding through the vault. Eyes were opening above him. The circle, the focus for his ritual, was distorting, new symbols appearing among the sigils of protection and warding.

'Flee!' said Hestion. 'Move your spirit to your datamedium vault! Abandon this place!'

'I cannot,' replied the *Endeavour of Will*, synthesised voice distorted. 'It will follow me. There all my knowledge is vulnerable.'

'They will not follow you,' said Hestion. 'I swear. I cannot hold it back here. I will not lose you. Flee, *Endeavour of Will*! Let this fight be mine!'

'Then Emperor's speed upon you, Techmarine,' said the *Endeavour of Will*. 'What you have done for me will never be deleted.'

The lights on the casing turned dark. The bodies remaining fell limp, the cacophony of their machine-code silent and replaced by the wrenching of metal as the vault was warped and distorted by the daemonic virus seeking out a way to the machine-spirit.

Hestion extended his servo-arm and plunged it into the machine-spirit's casing. 'In a few seconds you will reach this machine,' he said aloud, knowing that whatever was attacking the star fort could hear him. 'And nothing I can do will stop that. But you will find no way to the machine-spirit. Your virus will follow the only path it can, the only one open to it, and that is me! My body! You will never reach it, because you have to go through me first!'

All the mass of profane knowledge that made up the daemon-virus, all the vastness of its hate and the torrent of its blasphemy, poured through Techmarine Hestion's body. Hestion jerked and spasmed as if in the throes of electric shock, fire spitting from the extremities of his armour. The edges of his battle-plate glowed red and the skin around his collar scorched as he cooked in the heat. Blood ran from his eyes and ears. He slumped to his knees but did not fall, muscles held rigid by the force of the current.

The daemon virus coalesced into a pair of triangular red eyes, blistering down from the ceiling of the machine-spirit vault. Monstrous features pushed against the steel of the vault from the other side of reality, gnashing mandibles twisted with anger, pseudopods bowing up the floor and pushing in the walls. The daemon's roar echoed through the chamber, competing with the howl of twisting metal and the crackle of the power coursing through Hestion.

Hestion ripped the dataprobe from the machine-spirit casing. The link was snapped. Its information spine broken, the daemon screamed, an impossible sound that was both loud and distant, a thunder from another dimension booming through the star fort. The whole vault was suddenly twisted as if wrenched in two opposite directions by a pair of gigantic hands, and shards of torn metal fell from the broken columns.

Hestion fell to the floor, smoke rising from him, blood dribbling from his face. He dragged himself half a pace and slumped again, all his energy drained away by the task of standing against the virus. He doubled up in pain as the vault collapsed around him. The whole ceiling loomed down as the fabric of the vault failed.

Hestion waited to die. He would be crushed as the machine-spirit vault collapsed on top of him. He had saved the *Endeavour of Will*. To die fulfilling such a duty was no bad death.

He was moving now. He thought the floor had partly collapsed into the maintenance deck below and was tilting, and that he was sliding towards a crevasse opening up. But what little of his sight remained caught a glimpse of a gold-armoured hand grabbing one wrist and dragging

him away from the collapse, towards the vault entrance. Behind him the machine-spirit casing disappeared in a torrent of torn metal where he had been lying a moment before.

Hestion forced his head to turn. Skin tore away where it had been welded to his collar armour. But what he saw took enough of the pain away.

He was looking up at Captain Lysander.