

UNBLINKING SKITARII

This is the unofficial story of Skitarii IB-13, a cyborg warrior of the grim dark 41st millennium. She flees through a crashed alien battleship from a failed mission, hoping to regain contact with her tech-priests in orbit. However, IB-13 fights to survive against a new foe that seeks nothing but her destruction.

#

Detached from their fleet above, they'd slaughter the aggressors. No default state existed apart from that, this Will of their Machine God, the Omnissiah.

Boots pounded the deck plates as a pair of Skitarii super-soldiers ran through the halls. With the aid of their cybernetic limbs, they rushed through empty corridors of alien design, the charred dust of the former owners billowing in their wake. The external din increased the closer they got to a rip that stretched for over eighty meters in the ship's hull. Sliding under the tear's lip, IB-13 and IT-XH blurted a set of binary queries and replies to each other. With a thousand transactions a second, they debated the benefits and detriments of the decision before them: fight or flee.

Their delay only came because of the differences in their make. IB-13 was a Ranger meant for more long-range engagements while IT-XH came optimized for the more moderate reprisals of the Skitarii Vanguard. It didn't help that the Vanguard's natural output of

radiation and the radium weapon she hefted filled IB-13's receivers with excess static. After a debate transmitted in seconds that might fill a novel, their numbers aligned: They'd bring the offensive to their new, terrible enemy outside.

IT-XH synced a timer between them. As the milliseconds met their mark, IB-13 stepped up to the ledge in mirror to her companion, last of what had been a century. The radium carbine she'd commandeered from a battle-inoperable Skitarii rose with her augmented sight.

In a moment, she unleashed killing rounds while her targeting systems struggled for a lock. Rules of engagement dictated that she ought to have waited the extra cycle time to fire precisely. To bend her ingrained protocols in the context of a normal fight would have required the override of a Skitarii Centurion, leader of an entire cohort of cyborgs. As there was only IB-13 and IT-XH, their own kill-analyses would have to suffice. Regardless, with a ninety-eight-point-seven-nine percent accuracy calculation using only sight, their foe would suffer.

Her aim held minor concern for her. Those outside felt the same. Arcs of energy blistered and boiled the ship's torn hull around IB-13. By sheer volume, the barrage of return fire nearly blinded the Ranger's visual receptors. She ducked faster than her original organics could have ever hoped to as the shots corrected their aim

towards her. Fluorescent green rounds tore chunks out of the opposite wall, sizzling through the thin air where she'd been.

Her comrade IT-XH continued to shoot, , taking an extra sixteenth of a second more than their firing solution had provided for. Such was the aggression inherent in Vanguard models. Tragic that so useful a drive served so poorly against the overwhelming odds.

IB-13 caught all of the impact through the hyper fidelity of her unblinking eyes. IT-XH's helmet, for only a moment, split and peeled away from their face. Metal and plastics and flesh and silicon and bone flayed away. The matter disappeared into the crackling white light. At last, the horrific decimation exploded with the sound of a wet egg. The explosion flung cranial fluid and shards of steel about the hall. Something moist and gooey splattered on IB-13's cloak.

Slack, IT-XH's rifle fell to the floor with a clatter covered by the wale of eldritch energies scything overhead. The body collapsed with a heavy whoosh of cloak and armor. If IB-13 had the ability to smell in the traditional human way, a sense lost sometime during her innumerable operations to become a Skitarii, the stench of burnt rubbers and tang of carbonized metal would have been logged as a horror peerless in the cyborg's experience.

While missiles struck above and around her, the Ranger picked through the smoldering robes of the fresh corpse. That she and IT-XH had logged thousands of hours in operation together, that now the Vanguard was so much a pile of meat and wires gave her no pause.

Their mission was still not complete. It was the Will of the Omnissiah, the dual-faceted god of the Skitarii, the warriors but a humble branch of the Adeptus Mechanicus. A report needed to be made of their findings inside the crashed vessel so the magi of Mars could add to the records this new threat. The value of battle data alone dictated that she must survive at all costs.

If the scavenging cyborg had access to the network, she could account for the entire inventory of IT-XH's kit. Without it, she rummaged through the common storage locations on a Vanguard's body for whatever could be found. The rifle was for her excessive compared to the radium carbine already carried, though she had capacity for an additional grenade which she kept besides her own. IB-13 found no melee substitute for her arc maul, IT-XH having must lost their hand-to-hand weapon in the brutal room-to-room fighting earlier.

Inside a titanium-corded pocket she discovered radium ammo magazines whose radiation tingled through her gauntlets. IB-13's calculations for expected lifespan ticked-up another notch. Adding these to a digital inventory, something else gave off a slight magnetic signature. IB-13 pulled out a rust-colored talisman, a symbol of faith in the Machine: a skull haloed by a cog wheel. Functionally useless, it was objectively more important than a dozen of her other pieces of armor or garb. She took off in a crouch, securing the pendant as she weaved from cover to cover.

The next hall held more than the last one. The Ranger slipped her way around blue-skinned bodies splayed haphazardly around doors and consoles. Some clawed at locked doors. Others held their throats. It didn't take IB-13's post-human abilities of deduction to conclude that these "T'au" had suffocated. They likely died long before the vessel's crash, though she couldn't be precise. The Adeptus Mechanicus fleet had been in pursuit for an unacceptably long time, harrying the T'au's flight with cannons and bombs.

Data was the most holy property of the Adeptus Mechanicus technopriests of Mars, circuitry the most sacred of study for the cyborg Skitarii warriors. These aliens, these thieves, had taken both and paid for it with thousands of their lives. They were easy to kill. They stayed dead. The new enemy that had surprised the Skitarii were far less obliging.

Regardless, the T'au had received divine judgement. Now IB-13 had to find a vantage to exact a toll on those creatures that stalked after her.

The T'au warship seemed a maze. The behemoth, one of the T'au's largest, was run through by the guns of the Adeptus Mechanicus in their weeks-long chase. Corridors collapsed into others, doors remain locked while other holes cleared through entire decks. The wreckage acted as a tomb now for human cyborgs and T'au crew alike. That the blue-skins dared pull off a swindle of such proportions...

Now the silver monstrosities outside had the position surrounded and infiltrated. IB-13 had reconnoitered the enemy advance with surviving members of the Skitarii retrieval squads. Like ants, the automatons had spilled into the halls, through the deck plating, and translocated in glittery sheens amid the Skitarii's formations. The Skitarii, living weapons of the Martian Empire, were caught by surprise. She'd been caught by surprise. Though they'd fought with whirling blades of supersonic titanium and arcing lightning guns, over eighty-percent had dissolved into oil-slick smears within moments of the ambush.

IB-13 chanced to inspect her internal network systems. The communication queue held no new messages. All of her outgoing requests were yet pending responses. No data, no direction, no oversight. On her own for over the last hour. Not even IT-XH functioned to share processing capacity.

A hatch led up and the Ranger took it. She needed to keep moving. Anything with the means of slaughtering her kin like so many herdstock would have devices to track a lone warrior in the bowels of a dead ship. Maybe the interference preventing her signals didn't discriminate and the ambushers were blind too. IB-13 had to optimize for that possibility. It was the only one that predicted her being alive after more than a few minutes.

When no threat appeared, IB-13 allowed her post processing systems power to review the terribleness of the mission. The first

indication of trouble had been when their dropship lost all transmissions with the flotilla in orbit. The airwave interference of the vox spread, knocking out dropship-to-dropship traffic. As the strike team made their way inside the downed alien craft, communications with their lander was lost to them as well. Infrared laser messaging, subvocal vibrations, and gestures were all they had left while they sought out the T'au's holds of plunder.

Despite a lack of transmission mediums, the cyborgs' tactical progress couldn't be hampered over such a meager concern. Despite the massive damage to the vessel's infrastructure, the Skitarii scouted through the mess. By a semi-navigable route, the ancient database of Adeptus Mechanicus was uncovered. It proved too easy.

Foul booby traps secreted from the Skitarii's scanners triggered at the first contact with the database. Explosions ripped through both gaunt Infiltrators and armored Vanguard. The Ranger groups fared little better. Worse, the device holding eons of data ruptured in a torrent of shrapnel and flame. IB-13 held the rearguard, thus survived to witness the carnage that came immediately after.

At least the information was no longer in filthy xenos hands. Better forgotten than perverted outside the Omnissiah's intentions.

IB-13 nearly tripped as static hissed over the Skitarii network band. It immediately settled into an encrypted invitation for silicon communion. Transferring all secondary processing to the receiver, her

rush to respond fouled the first attempt at cracking the lock - something that imprecise would have had the commanding Centurion temporarily deactivate her. A partial lobotomy wouldn't be out of the question, though at least the surgery would bestow additional circuitry to the Ranger. No matter - her Centurion had evaporated under the snaking tendril of some unclassified alien energy weapon.

Her second attempt bridged the connection. IB-13 felt a flood of information pour through her wire-fused organics. Authority she'd taken for granted from decades of indoctrination calmed nerves in welcome, cooling sensation. Out of it all came the glorious figure of an ordained Magos tech-priest of Mars, emissary of the Omnissiah's unknowable Will. They were garbed in flowing robes of red and white, outlined in ever-churning data exloads. Mechadendrites coiled and unfurled as if to conduct the the orchestra of information. On their head was a cap, tall and high which obscured from view sensors and devices the Ranger could only speculate at. In the pitch dark of the hood whirled the spectacles that poured what they saw into the algorithms crafted by the Omnissiah itself. Though only a mental simulation of a being some unknown distance away, IB-13 had never been more ready and earnest for this connection of the factual, of the Omnissiah's word-made-digital in the galaxy.

"IB-13, report."

The Skitarii began to dump banks of memory into the thought stream. With only a fractional amount beginning to exload, it was

still too much for the tentative link. When the digital form of the tech-priest cut out for a moment, the cyborg almost felt the first emotion in half a century: Despair.

The Skitarii darted into a crushed hollow that was once a laboratory. Inside lay cracked workbenches, punctured pressure tanks, and other detritus. No threats. It didn't matter. Only the connection mattered.

Holding position, she focuses all resources to getting the signal back. Hydraulic limbs froze, the respirator switched to blood-oxygen reserves, and pumps cranked to a halt. To any on the outside she would have appeared as a statue of gears and armor, all shadowed by her tattered crimson cape.

Near-death comatose was far outweighed by the elation of the return of the network and the Magos. This time, the mental image downgraded from its previous glory to a pixelated silhouette of muted hues and indistinct shapes. It shimmered as it sent meaning to her.

"IB-13, have you secured the Standard Template Construct?"

The STC had been their target. It and other hyper-computers of its type held the secrets of Humankind's past. Their manufacture came in a time of darkness when Humanity sent its envoys into the void of the galaxy without knowledge of the Omnissiah. A dark age. The Omnissiah nevertheless bestowed sacred knowledge even to those that were ignorant of what they held. Technologies resided within STC databases that could allow crops to grow a hundred times their yield,

build vaccines to cure ageless plagues, erect cities kilometers high on worlds made ripe by STC terraforming. Or, the knowledge could unleash terrible weapons of havoc not witnessed for ten thousand years. It was the Adeptus Mechanicus's duty and privilege to own it all outright.

IB-13 didn't need to know how to operate an STC. Doing so would be a terrible heresy. Only the priesthood, and even then a small selection of the ordained, could enact the proper rights of access. IB-13 only needed to claim items like the STCs for the glory of Mars.

That was why theft by the T'au was of such a terrible nature. A fleet of warships had stalked the STC and its cowardly burglars across systems. Worlds burned where the T'au's allies had lain. Finally, the escaping vessel was brought down in this unperturbed planet's gravity well. IB-13 and a hundred other augmented shocktroopers had infiltrated the craft imprisoning the STC while another thousand scoured the wastelands outside. All the effort only to have the artifact destroyed...

She couldn't care about how her failures in the mission might be perceived - there was only truth to offer in the bliss of networking. IB-13 relayed without hesitation the data-beats of the STC's destruction. Landing on a dusty plain, breaching the ruined hull, stalking through crushed halls, location of and entrance into the STC chamber, the fatal boobytraps. Nothing more, nothing less.

Her virtual audience acknowledged receipt but gave no indication of praise or wrath at IB-13's efforts. Multiple machine processing cycles passed. Finally, a torrent of sentiment distilled itself into one word.

"Disappointing," said the priest. Thus judgement was passed. That was the sum total of the Skitarii Ranger's worth. IB-13's mind twitched. A pang of what might have been mental anguish stilled in the microsecond before her lapse of discipline revealed itself. The Omnissiah's messenger continued.

"Regardless, the ends defer intention. Better the knowledge of our forefathers be forgotten than perverted by xenos... Tinkering." Had it not been for the opiate haze of communion, IB-13 may have registered a shudder in the envoy. *"Why are there no other Skitarii linking with me now? Not all of our warriors were destroyed by the explosion that consumed the STC. By this deduction, you will finish your report."*

Before she could begin a second spurt of data, storms of static dropped the communication. IB-13 reinitiated passive sensory input of her surroundings with the impression her physical body was under attack.

About her were the dead robot eyes, the red color of alien glass. Objectively, the place was a sort of mechanics laboratory. To IB-13's small selection of sensibilities, it was macab. The very walls housed abominable intelligences, horrors forbidden for

millennia older than the records which held the warnings of AI. That they also were utilized by the heathen T'au spoke of the irredeemable nature of the blue race. If only there were time, IB-13 might have smashed every circuit and board in the place.

Her senses picked up the sound of a massive, booming roar. The violence had to be huge and close, something titanic, for the vibrations to reach her in the ship through a nearly nonexistent atmosphere. Moments later, a thunderous rumble shook her foundations, vestibular motors keeping the cyborg upright. Most of dust lifted and fell off the unblinking lenses staring back at her. Besides the battle roiling outside, nothing else was amiss.

A full second passed before the Magos reasserted control. Warmth passed over the cyborg's connection, mind, and attention. Her rude hovel disappeared into oblivion. She was elated but the enthusiasm quickly became blunted. Things weren't as they had been for the priest and their environment. Instead of screeds of data filling her view, machine slaves and augment-mantled operators dashed to and fro in roiling smoke. Warning lights blazed. And then there was the figure who'd summoned her. Its stead, no longer ordained in electronic grace, was replaced by the hunched amalgamation of worming tubes, choking wires, snapping pistons, and bulbous nodules that served as the thing's eyes. A robe of crimson as dark as IB-13's own oil and blood encrusted cloak swaddled the entire collection. This was the servant of the Omnissiah in their truer, more beautiful form.

IB-13 had lost the ability to cry for joy decades prior.

The priest seemed distracted, its attention drawn elsewhere, a thousand thousand places. A packet of data leaked into the stream from the priest's end. Distress. *"We are withdrawing, IB-13. The war on the planet for now goes ill."* Klaxon warnings of a ship under attack crept through the inload. *"Final orders: Terminate all -"* Static. *"The Omnissiah knows of your -"*

More code feedback interrupted the connection. IB-13 heard banging and sirens. She tensed, prepared in all capacities to receive the divine commands that were coming. Had to be coming.

An audio snippet slipped through: *"Lord Omnissiah, those things! How dare they!? What are -"* The connection crashed with a screech of overloaded feedback.

She pinged a thousand times to reestablish contact. Nothing.

Independent probabilities arrived at the same conclusion. IB-13 was alone. So alone.

The situation triggered latent plans in the cyborg's mind. When in the absence of temporary mission, there was the Universal Law: The Soulless sentience is the enemy of all life. What stalked outside, that had killed her kin, certainly counted as such.

IB-13 jump-started all of her combat programs for a price suffered by her non-vital organs and tangential brain functions. Physical nonviolence systems dropped power requests, the excess expense shunted to readiness and targeting operations. She was dying,

the flesh withering. In steel and silicon the Skitarii would live a while longer to carry on the Omnissiah's intention.

Her ocular lenses came into focus on a corner of the hideaway. There was something wrong among the red lenses of the T'au drones. It wasn't a drone mono-eye. Instead, a cluster of green lenses stared back. They sat bundled atop an insect-like carapace no bigger than the Skitarii's own torso. The eyes glowed eerily in the dim. Somehow, the ebony beetle-thing knew she was aware. It twitched.

Threat analysis shrieked at her. That the room's position was compromised, had been for an unknown amount of time...

The robot scuttled free on unseen levitation of the other machines. It flew towards the door. Her heightened impulses flexed her radium weapon, aimed, and fired in a fraction of a second. The hem of her disturbed mantle didn't begin to fall before the scarabaeus shell exploded. Falling detritus flew out of IB-13's way as she dashed into the hall.

Through empty, ravaged decks she ran. The details were lost to her consciousness - visual systems filtered the input for priority targets exclusively. Everything else did not need to die, thus was discarded. The ship itself continued to rumble at an ever increasing frequency. Certainly unnatural and no longer the testament to singular explosions, IB-13 kept track of the tremors that hinted at tectonic movements under her. Armies outside? Some great machine?

Though unable to sense them at distance, enemies would be on their way inside the ship. How many? That was speculation. It would be a bullet and bomb at a time. That mattered. It was the only thing that did now.

Rounding a corner, IB-13's processes spiked. At the end of the corridor, a stark skeleton of metal creaked around. Silver glints outlined long limbs and features that could be called a face on its humanoid frame. It looked at her with dead eye holes. No, there was something deep in the sockets that had an evil glow in the faint ambient light. In a cold grip it held a softly-pulsing rod of a meter-and-a-half - the same make of energy projector as had reaped the booby trap survivors of the STC team.

She charged ahead and would not stop. Her carbine blazing, irradiated bullets raked the grayish body. Despite a hail of what ought to have been death, the enemy tried to raise the cannon in its hands. Closing at speed, still firing, the Skitarii leaped. She kicked the plated sole of her boot into the thing's chest, sending them both crashing to the floor.

The effort landed the duo hard into the next intersection. The cyborg would have been satisfied with the loud crunch of the machine's collapsing chest cavity, the sightless robot scrutiny, the struggle of its limbs ceasing. A new problem prevented that.

Into the junction stepped another skeletal automaton from the obscured hall. This one swung its rifle, bayoneted with a cruel axe

blade. Lightning-quick motion brought the carbine up to block. The sharp impact seized the cylinder joints of the Skitarii's arms and legs, but held. However, the nuclear radium weapon smashed to pieces in IB-13's hands, dousing both combatants in skin-peeling waves of contamination. Internal alerts chimed at lethal doses of radiation and the termination of several organic components. IB-13 ignored them while her senses swirled. Logging an apology to the machine spirit of the weapon, she hurled the parts into the face of her attacker.

The monster swung again. She rolled out of the way, letting the blade sail into the wall. It caught there, pausing the vile machine for merely a second, but that was enough. For a warrior attuned to microsecond action, it meant victory.

In mechanical precision, she pulled, thumbed alive, and swung her maul, blue energy arching free. She hit the assailant once in the back, again on the arm. The attack did nothing to loosen the abnormal hold the thing had on its weapon. IB-13, discretion systems burned away in rad fire, squealed binary hate at the affront of the alien's very existence. She unleashed a final crack of the arc maul to the skull-like cranium staring her down.

Mercury sparks played over the terrain and the crumpling, silver body. In an unnatural angle, the robot bent to rise, a clawed hand snapping out to snatch at the Skitarii's boot. Pinpricks of evil jade stared at the cyborg despite or because of the punishment wrought.

IB-13 flipped her maul around in her hands, bringing it straight down into the undying thing's face. She leaned into the blow with a twist and an electronic pop from the maul. The xeno stopped trying to get back up.

Even as the creature sputtered, another green lightning round exploded next to the Skitarii's head. Bits of shrapnel sliced into her clothing. The hole cut through the deck cleanly, disappearing into the blackness somewhere farther into the ship. Snapping about, she saw sage-colored running lights throughout the shadows down the corridor.

Pressing the capacity of her servos, IB-13 rushed back behind cover as a series of killing bolts rained around her. There were a minimum of seventeen-point-three combatants. Too many. The dirty effects of her deconstructed radium carbine polluted her ability focus externally, so she ran calculations internally. An optimal trajectory for one her two grenades would allow her time to disengage. With a flick, a piece of her ordnance bounced around and far down the bend. The cyborg fell back the way she had come. A resounding boom reverberated through the deck. The shrieking of alien gunfire ceased.

Having bounded dozens of meters away, IB-13 slowed, her head now clear of interference from background radiation. She needed a weapon. Her heightened senses broadened further to take in the environment for any opportunities. Auditory detectors picked up the

clank of alien metal feet on alien metal floors. Sonar triangulated that a group was in front of her. Subauditory noise meant her grenade hadn't ended the firefight behind her. Something crawled below and above her. And all the hostile parties were closing.

She stepped back, scanned the corridor. Only two ends, patternless amid a chaos of broken workmanship, the handiwork of space battles and crashes. The spark of the Omnissiah seemed to have left IB-13's world. She queued a prayer of strength and steadfastness to the Omnissiah's Motive Force. Her eyes caught a shape in the dark before the prayer could be dispatched. By chance or divine intervention, she'd spotted a shadow darker than the wreck around it, a divot that broke the inconsistent lines of the wall.

The Skitarii bounded to the hole. Closer inspection revealed it as a recessed service hatch, vacuum sealed between sections of the ship. To IB-13 it represented her a way to regroup, rearm, and re-engage the enemy. Regardless, the T'au had decided not to include a mechanical apparatus such as a handle to the door. Instead, they installed a tiny display that gaped disappointingly, the mirrored face trashed to slivers. If there were no ready means to escape, IB-13 would leverage other tools. Using her arc maul, blow after blow only dented the frame. Then they were on her.

Thunder not from her club cracked violently in the confined space of the corridor. A segment of wall combusted next to her in a puff of eldritch power. She ignored the green flash to maximize the

energy output of the maul. In a final, pulverizing blow that rocked the cyborg back on her heels, the seal cracked open with a gust of wind.

IB-13 jumped through and slammed the portal door behind her. A chunk of the door disappeared with another thunderclap.

A metal beam hung above her, itself melted at both ends from spaceship-scale artillery damage. Maul hooked to her belt, she pulled at the support with both hands. The brace shivered but remained stout. Sacrificing further ambulatory functions, IB-13 overloaded her arms and heaved. Muscles burst, murky fluid spilling through her cloak, though her metal bones held. Without warning, debris gave way to blockade the doorway.

She fled, urged on by both an artificial and fledgling organic instinct to survive. Over pipes, under charred bulkheads, across walls melted to black rivers frozen over the hull, the cyborg did not stop. IB-13 vaulted up a ledge, a feat of dexterity her pursuers certainly couldn't match. From this perch, she had bought herself something desperate: Time.

In the respite, she took in the world around her. The Skitarii found herself still on but outside the vessel proper. An entire portion of the spaceship had torn away apparently upon impact. Her lenses saw glimmering stars through melted, carbonized tips of sundered hull that arched over her. What was left was an expansive view out over the planet's dismal surface.

She edged to the jagged precipice with respect to the dubious structural integrity, maul raised and ready to bat apart any enemy lying in wait. An full organic being might have hoped for rescue, ships descending to later return to titanic warships in high orbit, for a battle of an unstoppable army crushing the cursed foe under the treads of Martian automatons and the boot heels of cyborg Vanguard and Infiltrator assassins and Rangers like her. IB-13 was more insightful. She had run the calculations. It was no surprise what was just beyond the deck's lip. Through filmed, dispassionate eyes, her gaze lingered on the field of death before her.

To the horizon, row after row of silver warriors of nearly uniform shape and size marched in monotonous, geometric formations. Skeletons rode sleds that defied physics while operating huge, curved gun platforms. Hulking, constructed beasts of many-jointed limbs were carried aloft on clouds of the drone-beetles or half-crawled, half-flew over the advancing armies. Ark ships and scything chariot craft glided effortlessly, every spoke and point palpitating with the destructive power universal in their alien weapons. Pyramids absent hours before dotted the landscape as if a pox on the world. A canyon spread over the crust in too straight of a line to be natural, its depths disappearing into an abyss. From the structures, the hole, and from the very air itself opened swirling gates that teleported in more and more alien machines. A virtual sea of emerald death flooded into existence as she watched.

Not one of the multitude paid notice to the figure atop a downed T'au spacecraft. They may have had no need to. IB-13 wore the threadbare remains of her Ranger cape. It then barely hid the seepage of irradiated organic parts and ruptured mechanics. Armor, once lustrous, hung loosely with dents and wear. Reflective goggles, grimed with oil and blood, looked up to see what these armies made war toward, away from the forgotten, ruined vessel.

The warships of the Adeptus Mechanicus hung in the sky by their gravity projectors. Their forms were partly obscured by filthy clouds of ash that geysered from their flanks, from smoldering, blasted heaps far below. Orange and green missiles exchanged up and down between the servants of the Omnissiah and the battlefield underneath. Vehicles from both sides of the war buzzed and burst under blanketed hellstorms of firepower.

IB-13 couldn't know why the priest magi and their forces had come this close to the planet's surface. A strategy of global bombardment ought to have been warranted. Then the plasma fires, megalascannons, and atomic rockets could be brought to full effect. Turning the surface to glass with the protection of hundreds of kilometers would make short work of the world. Shorter work yet by using any one of the dozens of planet-destroying Cyclonic Torpedoes housed within the holds of their warships. So why the application of such irreplaceable resources?

IB-13 caught herself speculating again. Worse, she might have been questioning the divinations of her leaders. If a tech-priest was not available for correction of thought, it fell to her to carry it out.

With a command, a part of her brain plasticized. The treatment would forego that absent-minded luxury in the future.

Factually, she could see the Omnissiah's forces were making an escape as a capital ship gained altitude. Image enhancement brought the markings of the ship into recognition. It was the Arch Magos's flagship from where they must have contacted her. Their seat of power was fortress of the Titan god machines of war, barracks to legions of Skitarii, cradle of knowledge that could be found nowhere else in the galaxy, even holy Mars. Now the cyborg understood why so many precious space machines lingered low in the clouds. And she wouldn't look away from their destruction.

A lance of lime hue struck up from the wasteland. The shot pierced the retreating cruiser like a bullet through an alkaline bubble. In the yellow fireball of its obliteration, the reactors ignited. Fleeting as bright as any sun, the shipwreck disintegrated in a holocaust of carnage.

Parts of the superstructure the breadth of cities survived to hurtle themselves screaming onto the backs of the inadequate defenders. Having taken brutal amounts of punishment already, the battered shields of the craft underneath the explosion visibly popped

under the impacts. Most of the remaining ships became engulfed in the hell that had been the flagship. These unfortunates of holy Mars plummeted from the sky in slow motion, blackened and fiery.

Those captains still alive attempted to save what crew they could. They carried word of the atrocities committed there, crimes and horrors needing revenge. Up and up their vessels surged. Bright beams sprang up like plant stocks to join them.

One after another, the symbols of the Machine God's might were cut to ribbons. Consumed in detonations that would scar the planet for millennia, they died. Electrical storms spiraled around the cacophony of priceless destruction raining down.

Broken bodies smashed into the planet, wiping out innumerable xeno aberrations. Ships fell with such frequency they bucked the continental plate. The survivors seemed not to care.

The charnel climaxed in a tide of smoke and dust that spread over all. A billowing haze of ash wafted over everything, leaving only the pyres of dead ships as spouting torches in the distance. The wave of soot broke over the T'au ship, the cremations of IB-13's comrades soiling the cyborg spectator's armor.

The Skitarii knew she remained as the last of her kind on the forsaken world. No more exchanges of cannon fire. Her comms were static. Her unit's status indicators were black, silent. The network tethering all Skitarii with each other was lifeless. Had she still been able to scan the sky, there were no final vessels there.

Despite their victory and all the loss, the aliens came on ceaselessly.

More canyons cracked open without rumble or tremor. The blacker than black of their gulfs IB-13's sensors could not penetrate. Eldritch glows hinted at immensities entombed within the fissures.

Out of these chasms poured forth Cyclopean blocks bristling with armaments. They lifted into the heavens, their onyx disappearing into the backdrop of space save for pulsing teal pinpricks. In their departure, legions of vile silver xenos replaced them. From hidden places in the gloom, green light outlined the dauntless hordes caught in the atmospheric dust.

All that the Adeptus Mechanicus had done, all IB-13 had striven for, was for nothing. Witnessing this new data, probability counters drove her chances of survival in the next hour to fourteen-millionths of a percent.

In very un-Skitarii-like behavior, a complete departure from discipline, IB-13 sighed. Her usefulness was not yet exhausted. She'd take as many of the foul mechanical taint with her. The forgotten crypt of the T'au would be her stronghold. She could strike out and maim and kill from the husk. At least until the villains smote her out at a very terrible cost.

Sensors picked up power readings rising in her vicinity. Anything specific washed out in the electrical hyperactivity of the

dust storm. IB-13 was given over to the Motive Force. For her, there would be no rest. Let them come.

She spun on her heel. Her momentum suddenly disappeared, she pinned in place.

It was inconceivable. Nothing could subvert the awareness of Martian technology. The cataclysm IB-13 has just recorded was no excuse. Yet, there before her, a set of claws dug into her abdomen.

The owner of these blades cocked its long head. The look almost conveyed it was only killing the Skitarii to see what it was like, not out of maliciousness for her kind. Simple curiosity. It begged a sentience no abominable intelligence could possibly muster. The thing was a mindless murderer. It could not comprehend the cost of the mortality it was harvesting. Had harvested.

Through her goggles, IB-13 took in most every detail of her assailant. The ragged, red Skitarii robe on the thing's back stood out in particular. A darker patch of crimson and oil-brown had stained the frame of the monster.

They stared at each other.

In a flash, IB-13 lodged the maul under the chin of the monster, jammed deep into the shiny parts. Electricity sizzled up the shaft and into the skeleton while the blue lightning burned IB-13 at close range. Armored glass coverings over the cyborg's eyes shattered. Warnings flared in her mind as her remaining organs shriveled and mechanical life supports shut off.

As the charred remains fell backwards, the claws jerked and jittered on their way out of her torso. Streams of lubricants and steel coils followed the exit. Holding her ravaged guts, the Skitarii took one step.

She collapsed, IB-13's leg hydraulics failing. Careful so as to not disembowel herself, she sat on her smoking cloak. Her open eyes stung with the feel of gritty air, a naked exposure they'd not known for a lifetime. She even had the sensation again of tears rolling out, these the salves that had bathed the lenses of her goggles.

The arc maul was depleted of energy and partially molten, welded to a gauntlet. She lay the emaciated arm aside. Diagnostic reports failed to update, either their wires cut or the glucose in her brain being used up. Only the survival counter continued to blink at zero-percent. Lung and circulatory motors were on the backup power of her own body heat, the internal batteries leaking their caustic supply out of her wounds. At the very least, auditory mics remained intact.

IB-13 picked-up the racket of the hatch leading into the ship opening. She heard the tap of slow feet. Sharp talons scrapped the ruined superstructure. And beyond it all, the war machines on the fields below and above marched on.

The final grenade was primed in her other fist. She would not trigger it yet. The explosive's release was held down by the symbol of the skull and cog cupped in her mitt. She waited atop the results

of the conquests of her Machine God, lit by the burning defeats of her kind. She needed not to wait long.

Boney silhouettes cast their stark shadows over the prone warrior.

Looking up at her company through unblinking eyes, IB-13, Skitarii, crusader of holy Mars, grinned underneath the mask. The effort made her regurgitate sick oils in a frothing cough. The enemy advanced. A byte prayer to the bomb's machine spirit later, the cog fell off the trigger.

#

This unofficial work is published under the Intellectual Property

Policy of Games Workshop Limited:

<https://www.games-workshop.com/en-US/Intellectual-Property-Policy>