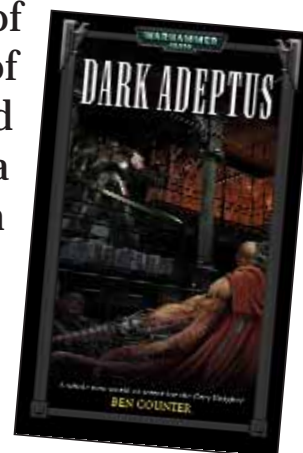


DARK ADEPTUS

The 2nd Grey Knights novel by Ben Counter

ONE HUNDRED YEARS ago, the forge world of Chaeroneia disappeared amidst rumours of corruption and civil war. Now it has returned and the once teeming factory planet is now a silent sentinel floating through space. Is it an empty tomb or a foul nest of Chaos?

That is the question facing Justicar Alaric of the Grey Knights. However, nothing can prepare even the Grey Knights for what they find on the planet's surface. One hundred years of isolation has corrupted the engineer-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus beyond all imaginings.



Ben Counter has made several contributions to the Black Library's Inferno! magazine, and has been published in 2000 AD and the UK small press. An Ancient History graduate and avid miniature painter, he is also secretary of the Comics Creators Guild.

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from DARK ADEPTUS

MAGOS ANTIGONUS WASN'T supposed to die like this.

Light was scarce beneath the complex. A single charred bulb cast a dull brownish glow over the abandoned workshop he had found. Old workbenches covered in rusted equipment were piled up against one wall and the low ceiling was hung with corroded cabling. Antigonus sat against the other wall, rivulets of rust-red water running down his back from the sweating metal behind him, trying to fix the failed servo in his motor units. His legs were withered and weak and without the servo-powered braces that encased them he could barely walk. He wasn't designed to fight. He was there because he had a facility with information systems and he could access Chaeroneia's data networks with ease. His purpose on Chaeroneia had been to debunk the apparently spurious rumours about heretical practices among the planet's tech-priests, then take that news back to Mars to satisfy the tech-priests there that their forge world was free from the taint of blasphemy.

'Primary objective failed,' he thought.

Antigonus sat bolt-upright. The voice had come from everywhere at once. He was alone in the workshop and yet there was something else in there with him. He pulled out his autogun again but he knew instinctively that it wouldn't do any good.

'Heretics!' shouted Antigonus, struggling to his feet. 'You can hide from me but the Mechanicus will find you! More will follow me! More from Mars!'

The only answer was Antigonus's own voice, echoing back through the empty workshops.

Antigonus crept through the darkness, wishing his servos were quieter. There was no one else in the workshop, but they must be near. He knew he couldn't put up much of a fight any more, but he wasn't going to go down easily. They would have to work for their kill.

More will follow. More will die. This is the way of our Machine-God.

The voice was too close, little more than a whisper directly into Antigonus's ear. It had to be someone in the room. Either that or someone controlling a machine in the room, like a servitor or machine-spirit, something complex, something that could speak. But Antigonus had secured the area before he stopped to rest. There was nothing like that in here.

Nothing, that is, apart from his own augmentations.

Clever boy.

Antigonus dropped the gun and grabbed the screwdriver he had been using to repair himself. The heretics were doing to him what they had done to Epsilon three-twelve, hijacking his more complex systems and taking control. Either they were controlling one of his augmentations directly or they had infected him with a machine-curse, an insidious self-replicating set of commands that could cause a system to self-destruct.

Which system? Like many tech-priests above the most junior rank, Magos Antigonus had several sophisticated augmentations, including datalinks that would provide a perfect point of infection. At least they hadn't got his bionic heart, otherwise he would be lying dead right now. His bionic eye was destroyed but the control circuits were still there, spiralling around his optic nerve. His mechadendrites? They were plugged directly into his nervous system through an impulse link. His bionic arm? The intelligent filtration systems in his throat and lungs?

Closer, closer. But not close enough. Know you the way of the Omnissiah, fellow traveller. The avatar speaks with us even now and it speaks to us of your death.

Antigonus jabbed the screwdriver under the housing of his bionic eye and levered the unit out of its socket, forcing himself to ignore the unnaturally dull, cold pain that throbbed from the ruined bionic. With a gristly sound the eye came out, taking a chunk of artificial flesh with it and landing on the floor with a blood-wet plop. Antigonus gasped as the shocking cold of the air hit the raw nerves in the wreckage now filling his eye socket.

Closer.

Antigonus scabbled on the floor, dizzy and sickened by the awful raw throb spreading across his face. His natural hand grabbed the autogun on the floor and he put the barrel against the side of his head.

Don't let them take you, he told himself. They'll make you one of their own.

Even if you are dead, fellow traveller.

'Get out!' yelled Antigonus crazily. 'Out! The Machine-God commands you! By the light of understanding and the rule of Mars I cast this unclean thing from this machine!'

An enginseer sent by the Adeptus Mechanicus to maintain the war machines of the Imperial Guard would know the tech-exorcism rites off by heart. But such things were not often needed on Mars, the heartland of the priesthood where Antigonus had learned his role in the Cult Mechanicus. Antigonus knew he couldn't banish the thing with words alone, but right now they were all he had.

If it had his bionic arm, it would be using it by now to force the gun away from his head. No, it was something inside him, something it couldn't use to kill him straight away.

'I cast you out!' Antigonus put the gun barrel against his left knee and fired.

A thunderbolt of pain, the worst Antigonus had ever suffered, ripped right through him and knocked him unconscious as his left leg was blown clean off at the knee. Paralysing pain reached down and dragged him back to his senses, gripping hard and not letting go. Antigonus screamed, but somewhere inside him he heard the tech-infection scream too, as part of it was ripped away and the rest fled into the mechanisms of his right leg.

It was in the servos that powered his leg bracings, infesting the systems that carried commands from his nerve-impulses to the motors. Maybe it had got in when he had scoured Chaeroneia's information nets for suspicious power spikes early in his investigation, or when he had been forced to have his nerve impulse units repaired a few days ago. Maybe it had been in him since he arrived, waiting to see how much he would uncover before striking.

Either way, now he could kill it.

His heart was working overtime, leaching so much power from the rest of his augmetics that his bionic arm fell limp. It filled him full of enough painkillers to all but kill him and he dragged himself away from the twitching mess of charred flesh and metal that had been his left leg.

Mmmaake you sufferrrr...

'Don't like that, do you?' spat Antigonus, blood running down his face where he had bitten a chunk out of his lip. 'Did you think they would send just anyone? Someone you could defeat with a machine-curse? They teach us well on Mars, heretic tech-pox.'

Nnnot machinnne-cuuuurse... much worssse...

Ice-cold fingers of information scraped up Antigonus's spine. The tech-priest writhed on the floor, the edges of his vision turning white, a high scream filling his ears. He fought the chill seeping up through him, forcing its way through his augmetics into his flesh, the whispering voice quivering with anger. It wanted revenge. It was supposed to just control him, but now it wanted to kill him instead.

Antigonus choked back the horror that had infected him and forced it, nerve by nerve, back down into the smouldering servo units in his remaining leg. He tried to pull himself upright but only got into a lopsided crawl, dragging the tattered stump of his left leg behind him as he slithered out of the workshop. He had to get out of there – it was a dead end and he was trapped. Perhaps he could find a menial down here that could help him, or a better weapon. Anywhere was better than the workshop, because the infection, or whatever it was, must have been capable of transmitting his location to the heretics.

The resources required to acquire – or, Omnissiah forbid, even create – such a sophisticated machine-curse were massive. There were relatively few even on Mars who could have done it. Antigonus didn't even want to think about what the heretics must have had to do to get hold of it.

The voice was a low stutter now, hissing darkly from the depths of Antigonus's augmetics. Antigonus made his way painfully out into a long, low gallery, like a natural void formed between the strata of collapsed factory floors. The ceiling dripped rust-coloured water and pools of it gathered on the floor. From somewhere far below came the throb of an ancient, powerful machine, probably one of the geothermal heatsinks that provided so much of Chaeroneia's power. Antigonus dragged himself to where the ceiling had fallen in and a faint reddish light bled down from above.

No ussse, tech-priest... they willll find you, they always do... I am not the only one...

Antigonus ignored the voice and dragged himself up the incline of the fallen ceiling. The floor above was more intact, with knots of machinery and hissing steam pipes everywhere. Somewhere he heard men's voices shouting. As he moved the noises got louder – shouting, machinery, humming generators, the lifesigns of a forge world.

The painkillers dispensed by Antigonus's augmented heart were killing most of the agony from his shattered leg, but they were flooding his body in such amounts that they made the world dull and distant. Every metre he moved drained him as if he had sprinted it and he kept trying to push himself forward with a left leg that wasn't there.

He was a mess. When they got him off this planet he would have to spend months being cleansed of the tech-curse and then getting all his wrecked augmentics replaced. He imagined the hospitals where servitors trundled the corridors keeping everything clean, the polished steel of the operating theatres and the spidery arms of the autosurgeon that flensed away weak flesh and grafted on strong metal. The bionics experts who would take him apart and put him back together again.

He shook the images out of his head. He was exhausted and starting to see things. If he lost his focus and started letting his mind wander the tech-infection would take a hold and rot him away from the inside.

He rounded a corner and saw he had come across a functioning factory floor – dilapidated and dangerous, but still working. Several massive stamping machines thudded on, forming metal components that were carted away by conveyor belts.

Antigonus tried to find a menial or a tech-priest who could help him. A bent-backed servitor stood hunched over a conveyor line leading from a broken stamping machine, its hands working away to perform some routine modification on parts that no longer moved past it. Antigonus ignored the servitor – even if it had been sophisticated enough to interrupt its programmed task and summon help, the machine-curse inside him could have leaped into the servitor and used it to cut Antigonus to ribbons.

Antigonus pulled himself up against the casing of the closest machine and used it to steady himself as he

inched forward on his remaining leg. The machine-curse was hissing and spitting, whispering abuse at him. He had hurt it, but he also knew that such things were self-repairing and soon it would be strong enough to take him over again.

Antigonus rounded a corner and saw more servitors, but no menials. The menials were the lowest class on any forge world, men and women who were little more than living machines ordered and directed by the tech-priests. They were there simply because there were many tasks that servitors could not do, but their servitude was self-reinforcing because it was from the ranks of menials that many junior tech-priests were recruited. At the moment Antigonus could trust a menial rather more than he could a fellow tech-priest, which counted as a sort of heresy in itself.

The servitors ignored Antigonus as he forced himself to traverse the factory floor. A battered iron stairway led upwards – Antigonus didn't fancy his chances of getting up them in his current state but it was better than waiting in the deserted factory for the heretics to hunt him down.

Getting desperate? Now you realise. This whole planet is against you. It is only with the rats and dregs that you can hide. What life is that? Not life at all. So much of you wants to join usss, traveller. It is no great hardship for the rest to agree.

'Shut up,' spat Antigonus as he struggled up the spiral stairs. 'You know nothing. You do not even have the blessing of the Omnissiah, you should not even be.'

No Omnissiah dreamed me into being. No, not that god. Another one.

'There is no other.'

Really? What of your Corpse-Emperor?

'Two faces of the same being. The Omnissiah is to the machine as the Emperor is to His servants.'

What was Antigonus saying? Why was he debating with this thing?

So innocent to think such things. So easily led. My god is something else. My god is one of many, the many who serve the One, the End, the Future that is Chaos...

‘Out!’ Antigonus was yelling now. ‘Stop these lies, heretic thing!’

The traveller starts to understand. Not a machine-curse, not a tech-pox. Something older, something stronger.

Daemon...

There was movement up ahead, footsteps and voices through the grinding of the machines. They were too urgent to just be more menials going about their business. Antigonus spotted the beams of powerful torches cutting through the shadows.

Daemon. It was a lie, just another way of rattling him. Antigonus had to concentrate on getting away. He looked around and saw a cargo elevator, rusted and old. Faded lights winked on the control panel and perhaps the machine still worked. Antigonus got across the factory floor to the elevator, trusting the noise of the machines would cover the sounds of his movement.

He let his mechadendrites haul the rusted gate open, keeping hold of his gun with one hand and steadying himself with the other. The socket in his back where Epsilon three-twelve had torn out the mechadendrite was just one of a thousand points of dull raw pain forcing their way through the painkiller haze.

With an effort Antigonus shut the gate behind him and jabbed a mechadendrite at the control stud. The cargo elevator shuddered and moved grudgingly upwards. Antigonus heard someone shouting from below – they had guessed he might be escaping on the elevator but the factory complex down this far was a warren of dead ends and it was better to keep moving than to let them close him down.

He didn’t even know what he was running from. Maybe they had hunter-servitors with scent-vanes that could track

him through the filthiest corners of Chaeroneia's undercity, servo-skulls with auspex scanners that already had his lifesigns logged. But he had to hope. The grand machine of the universe moved according to the Ommissiah's will and he had to keep the faith that the machine would move to keep him safe.

Antigonus leaned against the back wall of the elevator. Crushed strata of factories and workshops marched past, reduced to claustrophobic voids in the mass of twisted metal. Gouts of steam burst from fractured pipes. Rivers of pollutants and fuel forced their way through fissures in the metal, feeding rainbow-slicked underground rivers. Thousands of years of industrial history were crusted on the surface of Chaeroneia – charred ruins, glimpses of faded finery, strange machines that perhaps represented some technology lost to the Mechanicus, hidden places where escaped menials or wild servitors had carved out a short existence, even abandoned chapels of the Cult Mechanicus long since replaced by magnificent cathedrals and temples far above.

And somewhere, something beneath the surface that had created a heresy worse than Antigonus had ever imagined.

The elevator juddered to a halt. The doors chattered open and freezing vapour rolled in. Antigonus crawled out warily, feeling the temperature dropping rapidly around him and letting his newly unaugmented vision adjust to the half-light. Antigonus saw that he was in a stratum that must have lain undisturbed for decades or even centuries. It was relatively clean and intact and lit by hundreds of tiny blue-white lights mounted on control panels and readouts. Data-engines, huge constructions of knotted cables and pipe work like slabs of compacted metal intestines, stood like monoliths in long rows. Heavy ribbed coolant pipes hung from the high ceiling and the deep chill in the air suggested that the coolant systems were still working. This was archaic technology, the kind that Antigonus had only seen on

abandoned parts of Mars and which was obsolete on even the most traditionalist forge worlds. These engines had held information in crude digital forms, before the newer datacore technology was rediscovered and disseminated. Antigonus wasn't even sure how such things might work. There must have been thirty such engines, great rearing knots of obsolete technology, silent and untouched. The structure of this floor was intact and Antigonus couldn't even see the trails of vermin or stains of corrosion that touched everywhere else in Chaeroneia's undercity.

'Lord of Knowledge be praised,' whispered Antigonus instinctively, as it was appropriate to offer a prayer to the Omnissiah when confronted with such old and noble technology. But he couldn't stop and offer proper respects to the machine-spirits – there wasn't anyone to help him here and he had to get help or find safety.

He stumbled past a few of the data-engines, mechadendrites steadying him against the frost-cold metal. There didn't seem to be a way out other than the cargo elevator behind him. Such a facility would be well sealed against contaminants and the elevator itself had probably been protected originally, before its shielding was taken by menials and used somewhere else. At most he could hope for an access vent, but he wasn't confident about his ability to crawl through a small space with one leg missing and his head fuzzy with painkillers.

The data-engine closest to him shuddered. It coughed out a spray of super cooled air and some old mechanism inside it ticked over as it wound up to operate. Antigonus shrank from the engine, reluctant even in his current state to disrespect a machine-spirit. More of the machines seemed to stir, lights flickering. The power coming into the room was fluctuating. Something was interfering with the power supply and Antigonus knew it wasn't a coincidence.

A sudden howling of metal tore from the far wall. Antigonus saw sparks showering and the readouts on the

data-engines turned an angry red, their machine-spirits objecting to the rudeness of the intrusion. A whirring, screaming sound of tortured metal filled the floor. Antigonus took shelter behind the closest data-engine, wishing his bionic eye still worked so he could banish the shadows and see what was forcing itself into the room after him.

Had he really thought he could escape?

No escape.

'Shut up. You are no daemon.'

Lie to yourself. It makes me stronger.

A huge, dark form lumbered into view between the data-engines, sparks still spitting off the massive breacher drill that formed one of its forearms. It was a servitor, a heavy labour pattern designed for mining. One arm was a drill and the other was an enormous pneumatic ram. Its torso was broad and packed with synthetic muscle, controlled by the tiny shrunken head almost buried by the massive muscles of its shoulders. It was easily twice the height of a man. It blasted through the hole it had ripped in the wall on a track unit that belched greasy black smoke.

There were more figures behind it. Dark, robed. Tech-priests. Further back Antigonus could make out beams of torchlight – the gunlights of tech-guard, the standing armed forces of the Adeptus Mechanicus. No doubt these men and women were used as ignorant foot soldiers by the heretics.

Antigonus shrunk back, hoping to make it to the cargo elevator. His right knee servo locked and he fell backwards, hitting the freezing cold floor hard enough to send a bolt of pain punching through the painkillers. Antigonus yelled. The tech-priests would certainly have heard him.

Got you.

'Get out! Give me my body back! When I die, you die!'

Run, traveller! Run! My kind never dies, just moves on, always moving, always changing...

A deep, sibilant voice spoke a streak of zeroes and ones – pure *Lingua Technis* machine code. The huge breacher servitor paused, its drill still spinning, compressed air whistling from its ramming arm.

More *Lingua Technis*. Antigonus could have translated it instantly if his auto senses had been operating, but all auxiliary power was being diverted to his bionic heart to keep him alive. He was naked, ignorant, helpless and trapped by heretics in this holy place.

‘Magos Antigonus,’ said the voice again, this time in Low Gothic. ‘You are a resourceful man. But a man is all you are. It is impressive that you found us at all and while there was never any chance of your doing us meaningful harm there was always the possibility that Mars would send someone more competent when you reported back to them of your failure. So this is the way it has to be.’

Antigonus gave up trying to get away. His body was half-paralysed. ‘They will,’ he spat, determined to spend his last few moments defiant in the face of heresy as the Omnissiah would demand. ‘When I don’t return. They’ll send a whole Diagnostic Coven. Blockade the planet. Switch the cities off one by one. Hunt you down.’

‘Will they really now?’ The lead tech-priest walked into view. His robes were deep grey, made of some superfine mesh that flowed around him like water. His hood was thrown back and Antigonus saw that the upper part of his face was pulled so tight that it was barely more than two gleaming silver eyes in a skull. The lower jaw had been removed entirely and replaced with a nest of slender mechadendrites that hung down to the floor, writhing like tentacles. In place of his hands the tech-priest had nests of long, metallic filaments that waved like the fronds of an underwater plant, fine and dextrous. He moved with a strange sinuous grace, more like some living, boneless thing than a machine, even though the tech-priest was undoubtedly more heavily augmented than almost anyone Antigonus had ever seen.

‘Scaecos,’ breathed Antigonus. The leader of the tech-heretics was the archmagos veneratus who commanded Chaeroneia’s data-reserves. He had probably tracked Antigonus all the way through security pict-stealers and sensor-equipped servitors. He had just been waiting to see how much Antigonus knew and what he would do next before moving in. He had known all along exactly where Antigonus was and what he had been doing. Antigonus had never had a chance, not from the moment he had set foot on Chaeroneia.

‘And that,’ said Scaecos, his synthesized voice thick like syrup, ‘is why you have to die. So curious. And often correct. A dangerous combination.’

Antigonus grimaced with effort and closed his natural hand around the stock of his autogun. With strength he didn’t think he had he pulled it out from underneath him and fired.

The shot thunked into Scaecos’s midriff. Scaecos barely moved – he just parted his mechadendrites and glanced down at the small smoking hole in his robe. He shook his head slightly, as if with disappointment.

‘Azaulathis,’ he said.

Master.

‘Kill him.’

The world went white and Antigonus’s body spasmed with pain, as if there was an electric current running through him. His augmetics glowed white-hot, charring his skin, burning muscle. He couldn’t see, couldn’t hear, couldn’t feel anything but the pain.

Sparks spat as Antigonus’s bionic arm was forced out of the flesh of his shoulder, servos winding so tight the metal splintered. His mechadendrites stood on end, his bionic heart thudded arrhythmically sending more bolts of pain through him. The remains of his bionic eye unscrewed from his face and shattered on the floor, leaving a fist-sized gap in his skull. The machine-curse was infecting all his

augmetics, forcing them to self-destruct and when it got to his bionic heart it would kill him.

Antigonus prayed. Pain was a design weakness of the human body. All he had to do was fix it and he could move. He put every drop of strength into forcing his internal augmetics into obedience, keeping the machine-curse in check for a few split seconds more. He ordered one mechadendrite to work. Linked directly to his central nervous system, he had more precise control over the mechadendrites than any of his other bionics. And he only needed one.

Antigonus screamed and jabbed the tip of one mechadendrite into the closest data-engine, forcing its interface probe to stab into the ancient machine. Then, he let go.

The machine-curse, like electricity, flowed through the points of least resistance. It rippled through Antigonus's body, leaving trails of internal burning as it went, spiralling up into the mechadendrite and on into the data-engine.

Before it could turn back, Antigonus withdrew the mechadendrite. The data-engine shuddered, its lights winking blood-red as the machine-curse thrashed around inside its systems. The curse was trapped in the data-engine. Antigonus had bought himself a few more seconds.

Antigonus had committed a terrible sin by infecting the noble old machinery with such a foul thing. No matter what happened now, the Omnissiah would never forgive the machinery deep inside his soul. But Antigonus hadn't just committed the sin to stay alive – to a tech-priest life itself had no intrinsic value, only service to the Machine-God. Antigonus still had his duty to fulfil. The heretics still had to suffer.

A massive force ripped through him – the servitor's breacher drill, grinding through his body into the floor. Loops of organs were thrown about the room as the drill bored through Antigonus's abdomen. He didn't feel

pain – he couldn't feel anything any more. He guessed his nervous system must be on the edge of shutting down. He was cold and numb. Helpless. He was probably physically dead already.

The servitor lifted Antigonus and threw him clean across the room. Antigonus's ruined body smacked into one of the data-engines, scattering bionic fragments and spatters of blood.

He compelled his mechadendrites to act. One last time, in the service of the Omnisiah. Once last chance to repent of all his sins – because he had failed and he was as bad as a sinner could be.

The metallic tentacles reached behind him into the body of the data-engine. He felt old, grim technology, lorded over by a melancholy machine-spirit, indignant at the destruction and angered by the machine-curse that had infected its brother. Antigonus begged the machine-spirit for forgiveness. He never got an answer.

The servitor's ram arm thudded down onto Antigonus's head and chest, crushing him instantly into the machinery of the data-engine, blood and bone driven deep into the machine's core.

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