

The Emperors Sacrifice

Captain Ansalom squeezed the trigger of his bolter, sending a lethal stream of hot metal into the advancing ranks of Ork warriors that were now only metres away, close enough to smell their foul inhuman blood as it sprayed across the field of battle. Three of the green-skins lay dead even as five more crashed upon his position. Too close now for bolter fire he drew his power sword and faced his foe head on.

"Space marines. For the Emperor!"

As his battle-cry reverberated in his battle squads communicators Ansalom thrust forward, impaling an Ork grunt through the gut. His armoured fist smashed the Ork's face into a pulp, sending the corpse sprawling and clearing his blade. Ork blood flicked from the weapons edge as Ansalom round-housed his sword, beheading the next assailant and lodging the blade firmly into the shoulder of another.

"Death to the enemies of the Imperium!"

One kick shattered that Ork's ribcage, sending blood gushing from its mouth from between the curved, yellow tusks. Even as the body fell Ansalom swung his sword back and then hurled it forward, releasing the shaft and sending the ancient weapon spinning into the smoke filled air until it found its target, striking the fourth Ork full force and throwing the abomination back five body lengths. It died even as it hit the ground, but before Ansalom could react the fifth Ork smashed into the mighty marine, taking his power armoured body to the ground.

"Even in death we are victorious."

Ansalom roared out as he stared into the demonic red eyes of the enemy that pinned him. The monster glared downwards, its gaping maw dripping diseased saliva into the marine Captains face. At the edge of his vision Ansalom saw the Ork's fist gripping a long, serrated blade.

"Space Marines!"

The cry rang in his mind. It resounded in his ears as the united voice of his combat squad came ringing back to him. In that instant the head of the Ork exploded in a burst of blood, gristle and bone and what passed for the monstrosity's tiny brain. Blinded by gore Ansalom pushed the mass of dead green flesh away and staggered to his feet. As he blinked the blood from his eyes he made out the shape of Sergeant Carolus, wielding the power hammer that had so effectively decapitated the Ork. Behind him the eight other marines of the Steel Knuckle combat squad came into focus, forming a broad arc as they fanned out to monitor the ongoing battle.

"Well met Carolus" growled Ansalom.

"Yes Sir. Well fought." Replied the seasoned marine veteran as the two men gripped forearms.

"Better had I taken all eight. The green-skins are stupid and slow but have the strength of daemons."

The two men turned to look over the battlefield. Smoke spewed over the landscape and rose in columns from the shattered remains of marine Rhino's and Ork battlewagons. Fire licked the horizon, spreading among the husks of the once great buildings of Metatron VII, thrown into silhouette by the blue sun that was now high in the planets purple sky. As they looked on a wave of Imperial drop ships shot across the sky, vapour trails turning to rocket smoke as their retro burners kicked in, slowing them enough to make a violent but survivable landfall for the Imperial Guard units within. They crashed down towards the besieged city and the half million strong Ork warband that had captured the enclave in a bloody orgy of murder and destruction less than a solar month before.

"Their death-cries will be a hymn to the Emperor." Spoke Carolus with awe and reverence.

"As will ours Carolus," responded Ansalom, "as will ours. Signal chapter command that we have repelled the Ork breakout. The city perimeter is secured. Request further orders."

"Yes Sir."

Carolus turned to rejoin the rest of the squad as Sergeant Ansalom swept the area with his eyes. Finding the Ork corpse for which searched he strode over to it, gripped the shaft of his power sword and pulled it free of the carcass. He made no effort to cleanse it, that ritual must wait. The Ork blood would join that of the thousand other enemies of the Imperium that the blade had tasted over the centuries. It had followed Ansalom's geneseed for generations and bore among its markings a badge of the Horus Heresy, where it had been born in the final defence of the Emperors palace. Before he replaced the blade in its scabbard Ansalom knelt, allowing the sword and his arm to form the cruciform and for the second time on this day offered prayer to the Emperor. The marine Captain heard his Sergeant approach from behind and knew that new orders had arrived.

An atomic roar screamed in the night and a pure white light excoriated the darkness for an instant. Through his helmet sensors Tomas waited a few moments for the plasma blast to reach its target and then watched the frame of a towering building vaporise in seconds.

A hundred metres above the massive arm cannon of the titan glowed dull orange. The enormous war machine towered over the skyline, its huge body balanced on legs the size and strength of energy pylons. A mega plasma cannon hung to one side, a grotesquely large power fist to the other. A millennia before the techno priests had shaped the face of the titan into the snarling visage of a daemon, with burning eyes and curved fangs. It carried the anger of the Emperor to the infidels – it's was the power of justice.

"May the Emperor have his vengeance." The voice of Captain Ansalom rang in Tomas ears as the Steel Knuckle leader chanted the mantra.

The unit moved in single file between the ruined frames of burnt out buildings, away from the fiery vengeance of the Titan and into the darkness of the

night time city and the apparently deserted sector that lay between the Imperial and Ork lines. The unit's communicators crackled in Tomas ear as the Steel Knuckle squad bantered.

"The say the Ork warboss goes by the title Babymuncher," Celador spoke. He was the oldest member of the Steel Knuckles and had long born the heavy rocket launcher with honour.

"Yes. Rumour has it he roles them up into a ball, breaking their bones and then eats them up in one bite." Cantor of the heavy plasma cannon added.

"You are both mistaken," interrupted Brutus, whom all knew would soon be a Chaplin for the entire chapter. "Even a big mouthed Ork must cleave a babe in two before devouring it."

"And how would you know Brutus. You never were a babe yourself and have never seen one since." Carolus called back from the head of their line, never taking his eyes from their path. The black markings on his armoured shoulder marked his heroism and many times had the veteran Sergeant guided his comrades to victory.

"Now there is a truth," answered Brutus. "But I have seen many big mouthed Orks and killed every one of them. Whether in one or at two they have murdered too many of the blessed children of humanity. Today I will kill many more of them."

"Amen" whispered Carolus.

"Amen" chorused the Steel Knuckles, their wrathful vengeance growing as they marched. Tomas shared their rage. As the units youngest member he did not yet speak during open communications. Rarely was a freshly bred warrior placed into an elite unit such as the Steel Knuckles, but the distinguished lineage of his geneseed within the chapter had merited the place, and already his courageous acts within this campaign had proved that merit.

"Ho, Tomas." The call came from Vanator, the units banner bearer. He walked just one place before Tomas in the column and now he halted and was looking down at the ground beneath his feet.

"What do you make of this brother Tomas?"

At his feet were the broken pieces of a tiny marine Rhino and the smashed forms of miniature marine warriors.

"A child's toy?" questioned Tomas.

Vanator paused and then placed one mighty hand upon the young marines shoulder before speaking in a grim tone.

"A cause for vengeance Tomas. A cause to kill."

Before Tomas could reply a massive roar obliterated the com channel in a surge of static.

"SPACE MARINES" roared Captain Ansalom. A vast mechanical rumbling accompanied his command as the front of a nearby building exploded outwards, destroyed by the violent energy of their infernal attacker.

Ten salvos of small arm and heavy weapon fire greeted the Ork dreadnought as it smashed its way towards the line of the Steel Knuckle squad. Bolter fire reflected harmlessly from its iron hide, even the heavy rocket was useless against

the machines heavily armoured front. The plasma cannon released a supercharged whine and a burst of celestial light shot from the weapons maw as cantor squeezed the trigger. The plasma incinerated one of the dreadnoughts flailing arms. It would be a matter of seconds before the cannon had recharged and could fire again, but in that time their opponent could obliterate the entire unit.

The cyborg's carapace was made from two iron hemispheres welded into a globe, huge rivets clamping them shut. The carapace was coloured an uneven, rust red, a pigment that no member of the Steel Knuckles had any doubt had been drawn from human blood and daubed by the savage hands of their Ork enemy. Two legs and four arms of insane chaotic construction jutted from the body. Two arms ended in vicious pincers, two in heavy weaponry. One arm now hung useless at the things side. The remaining heavy weapon spun and targeted the marine line in a fraction of a second, too quickly for even the marine warrior's boosted reflexes to counter. The gout of super compressed flame struck brother Marcellus. The forward areas of his plasteel armour collapsed under the searing heat of suns, melting backwards and attacking the flesh beneath. The marines kept their fire targeted on the monstrosity but it did not slow. They awaited its next attack.

The flamethrower rotated to find its next target. Tomas continued to fire, rage giving strength to his arm. As he sighted down his weapon he saw at the periphery of his vision a blur of speed and light. Discarding his weaponry brother Brutus leapt, towards the Ork death machine, closing the gap between the marine line and the robot with superhuman speed. At the moment the flamethrower fired Brutus lodged the full might of his strength against the barrel, forcing it upwards and sending a gout of flame high into the night sky.

"By the hand of the Emperor," roared Captain Ansalom, his voice joined by those of the entire Steel Knuckle combat squad. But their victory shout was short lived. Even as they watched the multi-jointed arm swung round, the hydraulic pincer at its tip grasping hungrily at brother Brutus, closing around his neck at the joint between the power armours helmet and shoulder. With a screech of tearing metal the two blades snapped shut, severing the brave warriors head from his body. A gush of red blood mixed with blue sparks of electricity as Brutus helmet toppled to the ground followed by his lifeless corpse.

Even as his comrade died marine Cantor squeezed the trigger of the squads plasma cannon, releasing the weapons entire charge on its tightest beam. It struck the dreadnoughts carapace dead centre, punching through the thick armour like tissue, vaporising the interior circuitry and the fragment of biological material that guided the cyborg. The beam cut off and for a moment the field of battle fell silent, then the behemoth fell forward like a drunkard pitching over in the night.

"Death to the enemies of the Imperium."

Tomas kept his bolter trained upon the fallen Ork dreadnought. Smoke began to gush from the infernal machine, flame lapped at its edges and then it exploded in a dark crimson flash as its fuel cells ignited.

"Captain Ansalom." The voice of Sergeant Carolus cut into the squads communications channel, a grave certainty in his tone. "Brother Marcellus still lives."

The Steel Knuckles did not allow their concentration to flinch, holding their attention on the surrounding buildings, aware of the heightened risks that faced a stationary combat unit.

Captain Ansalom looked down at the crippled form of marine brother Marcellus and saw a broken, twisted monstrosity of plasteel and flesh. He remembered a valiant champion in the cause of the Imperium, who had guarded his comrades without fear in many conflicts. The veteran warrior pulled his bolt pistol free of its holster and levelled it at the crushed remnants of Marcellus face.

"To the arms of the Emperor I commend thy soul."

The Steel Knuckle squad held grim watch as the pistol crack echoed against the walls of the ruined buildings.

As he turned from his fallen comrade Captain Ansalom saw in the distance the lines of the Imperial Guard, and the next step of the Steels Knuckles mission.

* * *

Gobo thought through the plan in his head one more time. Make fight. Make bet. Win fight. Win bet. The Ork finished thinking. His head hurt after thinking so much. Time to do.

The Ork camp shook with noise as the revelries of the monstrous warband mixed with the sounds of combat from far parts of the city. Booze pumped around the Ork camp like blood, powering the endless carousing of the greenskin warriors. Somewhere nearby a few hundred of the boys had formed a shouting choir and were belting out one of Gobo's favourite tunes.

"GOO" shouted half the choir.

"GAA" shouted the other half.

"GOO" shouted back the first half.

"GAA" shouted back the second half, with an extra serving of furious anger.

"I loves that song." Slurred Gobo to no one in particular. "Thems lyrics are real poetic."

Gobo took a long swig of his booze brew, then released a vast belch that among a less odious species might have been classified as an obscure form of biological weaponry. Then he remembered the plan.

Staggering to his feet, Gobo looked around. Drunken Orks sat in groups, drinking and gambling, shouting and singing along with the big song.

"GOO"

"GAA"

Gobo sang along and swigged more booze. Then his eyes clapped on the Ork he was looking for. Once more he remembered the plan.

The Big Boss sat in his throne of bone, glowering out at the Ork clan that had gathered to fight his war and surrounded on all sides by his retinue. He sucked smoke from a curling pipe that reached down to a huge furnace. Snotling servants fed bundles of weed into the furnaces gaping maw producing a thick, acrid smoke. Gobo hated the Big Boss. Gobo was himself a Warboss, his was also the true Ork blood. Why should the Big Boss always rule over him?

"He think he so big n'clever." Gobo slurred. "He always do me wrong."

Gobo stumbled forward, knocking over Ork boyz and crushing snotlings underfoot as his charge gathered pace. A few strides away from the throne of the Big Boss, Gobo stopped, sucked in a huge lungful of air and with one arm pointing in accusation at the Big Boss screamed out words of pure rage.

"MA ALWAYS LOVED YOU MORE!"

Big Boss 'Baby-Muncher' Hosa looked down at his snivelling younger brother with a sense of rank distaste growing in his thoughts. If only their leather skinned old brood mother would up and die he could slaughter the little scrotling himself. He kept giving the grunter the most outrageous jobs around but the little fragger just kept coming back for more.

"SHUT YOUR MAWTH!" screamed the Big Boss, slinging a nearby snotling at Gobo.

"SHUT YOUR MAWTH!" Screamed back Gobo.

"SHUT YOUR MAWTH!" Howled Hosa.

"SHUT YOUR MAWTH!" Bellowed Gobo.

The camp fell silent, transfixed by the intricate repartee of their two great leaders. Hosa and Gobo stared unblinking at each other, their massive chests heaving, spittle flying from between their tusks. Gobo remembered the plan.

"I got a bet for you brutha."

Hosa paused before answering, the first tendrils of suspicion forming in his tiny brain. "Wot bet?"

"Wot bet?!" giggled Gobo in confusion. Then he remembered the plan. "Oh yeah right, the bet." Gobo swaggered around the circle of Orks that had gathered to watch the power struggle, puffing out his chest as he bellowed.

"Me is gonna bet you. Me is gonna bet..." Gobo paused for dramatic effect. "...That my best boy can beat..."

Gobo swung from side to side.

"...in single combat..."

The Ork boys were silent, mesmerised by the spectacle before them.

"A SPACE MARINE WARRIOR!"

For a second the camp was silent, and then Big Boss 'Babymuncher' Hosa let out a cacophonous roar of laughter that spread around the Ork boyz quicker than a dose of the clap.

"YAH! That's funny little bros. Your best couldn't tear a snotling in 'alf, let alone cain a 'oomie marine boy. Them's big bastards are stupid but they can 'alf fight. Gotta respect that. Now...one of my boys..."

Gobo interrupted his brother with a vicious grin. "All right then Hosa my dear, one of your boys it is!"

Hosa's eyes reduced to slits of suspicion.

"What's the game, Gobo love?"

"Game is...your boy wins, you win. The marine boy wins...me is BIG BOSS!"

The excitement must have got to the Ork boyz because before you could say WARGGH they were all up on their feet, cheering away and swapping bets on the winner.

" 'Old on, 'old on there now boyz." Soothed the big boss. "Ain't you all forgetting sum'ing. There ain't no hummie here to fight, now is there?"

After a second to consider the boyz let out a cascade of disappointed grumbling. A couple of fights broke out where gamblers refused to return the bets laid. Gobo giggled to himself then spoke up.

"Don't you worry boys. We got us a marine right 'ere."

Through the crowd came four of Gobo's battle boyz. They looked a little frazzled from the slaps and punches Hoza's boys were laying on them, and from the weight of the large crate they carried between them.

"Whats this?" drawled Hosa from his throne.

"This my special boy." Gobo kicked the crate open and two of his boyz dragged the naked human body of a space marine warrior into the light. He was clearly drugged, almost unconscious. His armour had been stripped, the densely packed musculature of his body left on display. Imperial tattoos covered his arms and torso. On his back were the insignia of his battlegroup, a VI followed by the curve of the Omega sigil.

"Found this boy under a pile of dead Orks. Now 'e's ours to play with. So what do you say bros?"

Hosa looked down at his brother, then at the expectant boyz, then at the comatose marine. Finally he looked back at Grunger – his warrior champion. Eight foot of pure muscle and machine glowered back at the big boss. He looked again at the human – stripped of his power armour and already wounded he could be no match for the Ork champion. How could he lose, Hosa thought to himself.

"Game On," roared Hosa. The assembled boys let out a cheer and betting resumed. With the discipline of a rioting mob the Ork boyz formed themselves into a broad circle. On one side of this circle they dropped the human warrior, into the other hemisphere clanked the half flesh, half machine, entirely murderous Grunger. Hosa jumped down from his throne and took Grungers corner, rubbing the Ork boys neck muscles and servos. This time his brother had gone to far – if need be he would strangle him with his own green hands.

Gobo squatted by his captive marine, gripped his shoulder and slapped him hard in the face. "Oi," he shouted "get up." The marine did not move, his eyes turned back in their sockets. Gobo mumbled confusedly, struggling to see how this was supposed to make him the big boss. Then he remembered the plan.

Looking around surreptitiously, Gobo pulled a big, thick needled brass syringe from his belt. He jabbed it into the marines neck. It was so long it went almost right through. He depressed the plunger and squeezed a pint of human hormone - purchased at great expense on the black market – into the marine's bloodstream.

Far away through the mists of the mortal world marine champion Antonius walked the green fields of Elysium. Long grasses brushed his calves. A breeze swept his hair back. And then as he looked on a large bumbling bee hovered towards him and landed on his neck. The bee spoke in a voice of Imperial majesty saying, "You have a chance to serve me again." Then it sunk it's stinger deep into Antonius neck.

He was naked and alone and the visage of a monster loomed before him, its stinking breath infecting his senses as it rumbled meaninglessly at him. He realised that around him were a throng of Ork warriors. He heard their shouts and jeering as if through the depths of an ocean.

The pain in Antonius' neck grew. The focus of the agony spread, engulfing his shoulder, then his arms and torso. Finally his entire body was gripped by a terrible

pain, every inch of his flesh infected. His body went rigid, spasming against the bare earth. From somewhere he heard again the Imperial boom of the bumbling bee.

"Serve me."

Through the agony Antonius understood the words of his Emperor, he heard their meaning as the roaring of the Ork boyz washed over him.

The pain receded. In its place came wave upon wave of pure energy, currents of power shot through the sinews of his body; energising the flesh and elevating the senses. At the centre of his being the burning fires of rage and vengeance filled his heart.

Gobo watched the marine spasm, twist against the ground and then quickly relax as the drug pulsed into his system. He signalled two of his boys to prop the soldier onto his feet, but even as they stepped forward the marine slowly rose of his own accord. Fully upright he turned and stared Gobo full in the face. Had the Ork vocabulary contained a word for serenity Gobo might have used it to describe the calm glance that the marine warrior brought to bear on his captor. Even as they turned to Gobo though the eyes of the marine filled with a remorseless rage. Gobo looked into the depthless anger of humanity and then turned and fled.

The enraged marine charged at Gobo, his bare hands narrowly missing a grip around the green-skinned throat. His momentum carried him on, directly towards Grunger and battleboss Hosa. Surprised by the marine's quick advance Grunger was ill prepared for the crashing impact of the marine warrior slamming into him at full pace. Lightning bolts of terror and panic filled the Ork's tiny mind as his cyborg frame went crashing toward the ground. As he struck out in retaliation the Ork felt a pair of strong hands clench against his throat and his flailing abruptly ceased.

A sharp crack echoed around the slack-jawed circle of Orks as the marine captive twisted and heaved their champion's head clean off his shoulders, tearing through flesh, bone and robotic components with apparent ease. The marine then span to his feet. In one hand he held outstretched the head of Grunger, in the other the Ork champion's bolt pistol.

A line of explosions rattled along the circle of Ork boyz, bursts of blood exploding from chest and head wounds. Ork bodies fell thudding into the dirt and rubble, the wounded shouting foul curses in their guttural excuse for a language. Big boss Hosa leapt for cover while the shocked Gobo stumbled into the space marine's line of fire. He held forth one massive green hand to protect himself, only to then scream in terror as he saw the hand blown to smithereens by a withering hail of bolter fire that narrowly missed the Ork's dense skull.

"BLOW THAT BASTARD APART."

Big boss Hosa had found cover behind a line of Ork boyz. He bellowed his order and seconds later every one of more than two hundred Ork boyz opened fire on the exposed marine. Shrapnel whined through the air, for every shot connecting to its target ten others missed or impacted on the body of another Ork, further decimating Hosa's forces. But one in ten was enough.

The once mighty body of the space marine was obliterated as hundreds of impacts pummelled it to a pulp and tore it to shreds. As the last Orks ceased fire a ragged heap of flesh lay prostrate on the ground.

Gobo watched the blood pumping from the gaping wound where once his hand had been. The viscous liquid splashed onto the earth, soaking down into dirt.

Through the pain and trauma Gobo felt the spark of victory flash in his mind. The Ork gang fell silent and big boss Hosa turned and gawped as an insane giggle ripped from his brothers lips and echoed over the rubble.

"I win brother. I WIN."

Lost in the triumph of victory Gobo began a small jig, his feet scrapping against the rubble strewn floor as they danced. The camp fell silent, Ork boyz starring at the insane warboss who now claimed leadership. All eyes turned to Hosa. The big boss at first appeared subdued, then a fearsome grin spread over his face and his booming laugh rattled around the encampment.

"We never shook – brutha."

"You wot?"

"I said," Hosa took his time over the words, enjoying the moment.
"We...never...shook."

Gobo stopped his jigging – cold rage settling upon his now still body.

"And now," Hosa paused and pointed at his brother's savagely amputated stump. "We won't ever."

The big boss burst into wicked laughter and was joined by the assembled Ork boyz. Even as Gobo opened his mouth to protest the sound of two hundred bolters being cocked to fire stopped him dead. He looked down the barrel of a barrage of weapons, at the end of every one was a smiling Ork boy backing up their big boss. In front of them all stood Hosa, pointing his bolt pistol right into Gobo's face.

"See ya, little brutha."

Tomas recognised the Space Marine among the huddle of clothed prisoners without a second glance. Even without the Imperial insignia tattooed on his temple his superior size and musculature would have marked him out as one of the warrior elite. But it was the cold stare he returned to Tomas's eyes that truly gave the man away.

The prisoners stood in ramshackle lines dictated by the chains that bound them together. Each prisoner bore a heavy, plasteel collar along with wrist and ankle cuffs. Their heads were shaved as a mark of disgrace and with the exception of the marine warrior each one carried the markings of their Imperial Guard service. Each also displayed a 'D' branded onto their cheek, the symbol of the deserter. Tomas felt pity for the ragged soldiers he looked upon, pity for their cowardice and the failure of their devotion. Once their deaths might have gained them divine blessings, now they faced only damnation. Pity for all but the marine brother, whose punishment would be all the greater for the former glories one such as he might have claimed.

"What do you see brother Tomas?" Cantor called over to his younger comrade. The veteran marine sat among the other members of the Steel Knuckle combat squad. The warriors had removed their helmets so that they might better taste the battle that continued to rage in other parts of the city. Here in the midst of the Imperial guard lines the chances of attack were remote. Away from the Ork threat the Steel Knuckles were enjoying a rare moment of respite. Brother Cantor

had his bolt pistol stripped down and was part way through the cleansing ritual as he spoke to Tomas.

"I see a heretic, brother." Tomas replied.

The Imperial Guard encampment continued in its activity, grey uniformed guardsmen manning their positions and shifting crates of ammunition. The rank and file avoided the marine unit in their midst, wary of the reputation that surrounded the superior warriors for aggression and their famously militant adoration of the Emperor of humanity. Only the marines of the steel knuckle squad noticed the full gravity of Tomas statement, and they paused in their activities to learn more.

"Here among the weak flesh of man is a child of God, a bearer of the inheritance the Emperor himself."

The sounds of battle rumbled on as Tomas spoke. On the horizon the towers of the city continued to burn, the night sky tinged red by flame. Soon the sun would return, bringing morning with it and a new day of carnage.

"What brings such a man so low, heretic?"

The marine did not react to Tomas question. He sat huddled amongst the other prisoners, eyes downcast.

"Do you hear me, heretic?"

Even Tomas raised voice did not effect the man, who remained unmoved.

"Brother Tomas," Cantor called "the man may hear you but he will not respond. Heretics have their tongues cut out to prevent the disease they carry from spreading. They are left with eyes and ears only that they may better comprehend their own doom."

As cantor spoke some of the prisoners began to move, shuffling with disquiet, their chains rattling around their necks and low moans issuing from their ruined mouths. The marine brothers remained still. The Imperial Guardsmen watching the group raised their lasgun's in warning.

"Captain Ansalom will return soon Tomas. Your bolter needs care, perform the cleansing ritual while you can."

Tomas turned from the gaggle of prisoners and went back to sit with his comrades to await their captain's return.

* * *

The odour of rotting meat pervaded the interior of the Imperial Guard command unit, as though the battle without had deposited its stink within. Captain Ansalom inhaled deeply, savouring the taste of death that hung in the air.

A handful of Imperial battle-techs manned the room, their faces occluded by the bulky implanted technology that linked their senses to the battlefield, wires and sockets directly connecting their optic nerve to the outside world. Like players caught within a remorseless game they shuffled in unconscious physical movement as their brains processed the actions of a million men.

General Quintus, commander of the 544th Imperial Guard regiment sat in the centre of the command area at a large, round table. His attention seemed entirely focused on the large bowl of grey stew that he was greedily spooning into his

mouth, occasionally swigging from a bottle of thick red liquor. He mumbled words around his meal.

"Will you explain this to me again, Captain."

Ansalom looked upon the man with distaste. He had already waited for too long a time to see the general and now the man was wasting more of his time with useless prevarication.

"My unit must pass through the Ork lines in pursuance of our mission." He deliberately forwent the courtesy of addressing this man as his superior, but the fat General seemed not to notice. "We therefore require you to deploy your troops to open a passage through which we may pass."

"Ridiculous." The fat general blustered around his mouth full of food. "My men are deployed in a defensive phalanx, as the demands of my situation require."

The portulant officer had paused partway through his statement, confirming in Ansalom's mind the lie at the centre of the Imperial guard commanders attitude.

"My orders come directly from the chapter commander himself." Ansalom persisted. "You risk much to ignore them."

"I risk more to follow the suggestions of a junior officer without the proper authority."

Sergeant Carolus moved slightly closer from his position at the edge of the room, his grip tightening on the handle of his bolt pistol at the Imperial general's tacit insult.

"I have already provided you with the authorisation code." Ansalom silently signalled Carolus to stand by – for now.

"And I have already explained that our codex was destroyed in the opening phase of this conflict. Now you must understand my position Captain."

"I understand your position far better than you perceive." The little fat man glanced up from his food, startled by the anger emerging in the marine captain's voice.

"Where is this unit's commissar?"

Ansalom's question fell heavily, the General flinching at its implication. The black coated commissars carried the Emperors political will to every corner of his empire. The absence of a commissar's presence from such a high ranking officers entourage was unheard of.

"Dead. Along with the codex."

"No commissar would ride in the frontline of battle." Ansalom probed further.

"It was a friendly fire incident. An accident with our laser artillery." The General stuttered.

Ansalom saw the full treachery of the man laid out before him. In that moment he saw the Emperors will in the trail of events that had brought the Steel Knuckle's to this place at this time.

"General Quintus. I am removing you from the command of this unit effective immediately."

"What insolence. By the Emperor you do not have the authority..."

The General's words were interrupted by a savage backhand blow from Captain Ansalom that sent blood, stew and a number of the General's teeth flying. At that moment Carolus stepped forward, levelling his bolter at the small group of Imperial Guard soldiers at the rear of the command unit. They did not move to

retaliate, the divine justice of the situation was as apparent to them as to anybody else.

"By the Emperor! You will not take our Lords name in vain again." Rage showed in Ansalom's eyes, an anger he quickly brought under control as Quintus rived in agony.

"General, you should appreciate the restraint I am required to exert to not kill you instantly. My armour has not been forged for gentleness or subtlety. Now you may live a few moments longer should you choose too – the Emperor has need of one last service from you."

* * *

The sun was cresting the far horizon as the Steel Knuckle combat squad heard their fearless Captain return. Tomas and Vanator heard the fracas before they saw it. The two men sat propped against a low wall, but neither had spoken for some time. Vanator shot the younger marine a knowing look as he turned to find the source of the disruption.

General Quintus came tumbling through the Imperial Guard camp like a spinning top. Stripped of his uniform, stumbling before the wrathful Sergeant Carolus it was difficult to imagine that this man had carried the highest Imperial rank. Captain Ansalom walked a short distance behind, his power sword in one hand, the Generals jacket and cap in the other.

Tomas looked to Vanator for some form of explanation. The look he received in return showed no surprise. Trouble was never far away from the Steel Knuckles combat squad and its heroic commander.

Blood streamed from the General's face and various other cuts and contusions across his body. His dignity was preserved only by the dirty white undergarments that held in check rolls of corpulent flesh. Tears streamed down his cheeks and wails of protest issued from his mouth.

Ansalom halted before the group of shackled prisoners who stared with incomprehension at the scene before them. The Steel Knuckles were already up, weapons in hand, forming a defensive line around their Captain. Imperial Guard troops surrounded them. The fat General made an attempt to scramble free of his captors only to be slammed down hard into the mud by Carolus. A number of the Imperial Guard soldiers raised their weapons angrily but before the situation could escalate further Capatin Ansalom bellowed a greeting to his newly formed audience.

"Warriors! The traitor who grovels before you has been found guilty of treason. By deed or misdeed he has murdered an emissary of the Emperor. He has perverted the will of our lord and master – our living God."

A murmur shot round the assembled soldiers, not one doubting the Marine Captains words.

"I carry the authority of the Emperors holy warriors. Does any man here defy me?"

The Imperial Guard soldiers remained silent, not one man offering the slightest challenge to Ansalom or his Steel Knuckles.

"By the Emperors will," Ansalom continued "a new commander must be found. Is there one among you worthy of this honour?"

Captain Ansalom strode the circle formed by the Imperial Guard soldiers. He eyed one man after another, looking for a leader among them. The eyes of the soldiers fell towards one man, a grim faced warrior bearing the insignia of an Imperial Guard captain. Slowly, reluctantly the man climbed to his feet as Ansalom approached from across the circle.

"This is yours?" Ansalom barked, holding forth the Generals jacket. The grim Captain paused before answering.

"Not mine sir."

"But these men look to you as a leader?"

"I lead these men in battle for the glory of the empire. I seek no greater honour."

Ansalom moved close to the captain, speaking so that his words reached that man and none other.

"Battle is upon us, and these men need a leader – General."

Ansalom thrust forward the Generals jacket. A hard look in his eyes, the Captain took the sign of his new rank and pulled it over his shoulders as his men cheered.

"Krakov...Krakov...Krakov." The Imperial Guard chanted their new Generals name over and again.

The Steel Knuckles lowered their weapons at a signal from their Captain. Tomas wondered at the command of a captain – even a marine captain – who could rest control of an entire regiment and select a General seemingly at will. Tomas realised with awe that his captain could have risen to the rank of General many times over. Ansalom chose to serve the Emperor from wherever their living God's will decreed, rather than pursue his frail, human ambitions.

Ansalom knelt before his new General, commander and superior. With his sword drawn he made the sign of the holy cruciform for the third time since that days dawn.

"I am at your command, sir." Intoned the marine captain.

"Your orders captain," replied Krakov "and their provenance from the Emperor. How can I aid their completion?"

"My squad must pass through the Ork lines to the city beyond. Our fate lies thence, and should it cost all our lives we must meet it."

"And should it cost the lives of every Guardsmen here present, I will ensure you do so." Krakov replied.

Captain Ansalom then rose to his feet and moved away with the Imperial Guard general, the two men debating their strategy for the coming conflict. Tomas felt his own battle rage building, and whispered a prayer to the Emperor that he may serve his lord faithfully – whatever the challenges he was still to face.

On distant Earth the lord God Emperor of man sits upon his golden throne. The chamber of the emperor's throne is humanities greatest cathedral to their lord, a vaulting magnificence so high that the ceiling above forms the arc of the sky, each wall as distant as the open horizon. Enormous skylights bring the light of Earths sun into the chamber, filtered through the vast stained glass panels, each illustrating the valiant battles of the Imperium, the high achievements of the Emperors ten millennia reign.

For ten thousand years the entrance of the throne chamber has remained unopened, giant portals the height of cliffs barred by the sheer faces of mighty doors. But around the circumference of the chamber other entrances, on the smaller scale of mortals, are never closed. Through each of eight doorways progress an unending stream of robed figures, that hide beneath their raised hoods the vacant eyes of true believers. These are the initiates, sacrificial offerings to the Emperor of humanity drawn from the furthest corners of his Imperium and the trillions of souls it contains. Each is blessed with the advanced mental capacity that has evolved among humanity over millennia of carefully controlled breeding, a control exerted by humanities first and eternally most powerful empath – the Emperor himself.

The initiates walk in awe amongst the massed rows of their forbears. A thousand, thousand human empaths pray to their Emperor – a mighty congregation in the cathedral of the Lord. They walk until they find their place, and then they to offer whispered prayer as they wait to serve their lord and master.

The appetites of a God are fearsome and magnificent. The Emperor sits upon a golden throne high above his congregation. His body is a shattered husk, broken and twisted by the final confrontation with warmaster Horus – the enemy of all humanity. But even as his victory destroyed his physical being the Emperor rose to a higher plane, and from there has exerted his will over humanity. But for his will to extend to the physical plane the body must live on, and hence the initiates of humanity wait to serve their lord, to feed the mortal remains of a long dead, ever living demi God with their eternal souls psychic energy.

The mind of the Emperor roams across an infinite universe, extending a beacon of hope to human wayfarers in every corner of the galaxy. The web of humanity is spun in His mind, each human soul a star in the constellation of his consciousness. Far away, on a distant planet racked by conflict one star finds new brightness, and then shines like a supernova. Even the mind of God is entranced by its beauty.

* * *

The traitorous Imperial Guard troops stood shaking in the cold air of the early morning as the blue sun rose in the sky above them. Their chains clanked as they shivered and a freezing wind blew over the rubble strewn wreckage of Metatron VII. After many days of continuous bombardment the outskirts of the vast city were all but flattened.

Looking out over the devastated vista Tomas saw an embattled wasteland, no building stood higher than a single storey and clear lines of sight reached from his

squads position all the way to the Ork lines. Any armed troops venturing into the wasteland would face a barrage of Ork fire. If the Steel Knuckles were to honour their orders from the Emperor they would have to brave a hazardous gauntlet to cross this dead space.

"Will they not simply be gunned down by the Orks?"

Sergeant Carolus passed a pair of binoculars to Captain Ansalom, who looked through them as he replied.

"Mayhap our Ork foe will use one or two for target practice Sergeant, but if I know the green-skins at all once they see the men are unarmed they will allow them to close the distance and use them for less gentle sport."

The two men were crouched behind a low line of rubble, observing the Ork lines. Ork sharpshooters were notoriously inaccurate but to risk failure at this stage of their mission would incur as great a dishonour as to flee the battlefield altogether, both men stayed low.

"The time is upon us, brother Carolus."

"Yes sir."

Carolus barked a short command into his communicator.

"Release the martyrs."

Fifty metres behind them, amongst the cover of two tall buildings brother Vanator received the command and nodded towards General Krakov, who stood facing the treacherous prisoners in their rags and chains.

"I address those already dead." Krakov began, his steely voice capturing the attention of the doomed men.

"By your actions you have placed yourself beyond the thoughts of the Emperor, and no longer count among the ranks of the living. In limbo, you now await the judgement of the Emperor. In his mercy our lord has decreed that those who have sinned against Him should be given the chance of redemption. Such a chance is now before you."

The prisoners watched Krakov with the vacant eyes of the dead, all save the treacherous Quintus who now stood chained among those he had once condemned. A wild terror gripped the man's features, revealing his true cowardice.

"Across the plane waits the Ork army," continued Krakov. "We will soon assault their lines with all our might. You will form the vanguard of our attack, and deliver the justice of the Emperor to these infidels. You will die as martyrs."

"LIAR!" The lips of Quintus were curled back in a terrified snarl as he screamed forth his accusation. Krakov ignored the screeching and continued.

"Death in the service of the Emperor..."

"DEATH IS ALL. FOUL LIAR!"

"...is your pathway to paradise."

"NO. THESE ARE LIES!"

"To confront the enemies of the Imperium..."

"DAMN YOU!"

"...is to gain the love of our Emperor."

"DAMN THE EMPEROR."

Even as Quintus delivered his final insult to the God Emperor of humanity, his curse was cut in half, a guttural strangling noise replacing the words. From his guard position Tomas watched the former general Quintus, his face crimson, eyes and

tongue bulging, his throat in the crushing grip of a massive fist. The space marine prisoner starred impassively into the distance as he throttled the life from Quintus, as if his arms had become their own masters and decided to snap the screaming human in two. As he dropped the corpse of Quintus into the mud he looked towards Tomas. Looking into the eyes of the marine traitor Tomas saw no guilt, remorse or even anger – only the certainty of desire that belongs to those who long to die.

Picking up his chains in either hand the marine martyr began to move forward, his mass dragging the other prisoners with him. The hundred chained men began to shuffle forwards, their momentum dragging the unwilling herd, as well as the body of Quintus, a broken reminder of the futility of treachery. As they stumbled forward Krakov issued a brusque salute, and the battle for Metatron VII burned on.

* * *

Gobo – second son of the legendary warboss Gozz and brother to the big boss Hosa – sucked sour brew from a massive tankard as a single tear trickled across the green skin of his ugly face. The stump where his hand had been throbbed with pain, the dirty cloths wrapped around the gapping wound were soaked with blood and stank of rot and decay.

The boom of Ork artillery echoed over the battlefield. From here and there the boyz let off volleys of small arms fire, mostly at nothing more than shadows. Gobo watched the Ork boyz fooling around but for the first time in his life could not laugh along with their jokes. Gobo's tiny mind didn't take in any of the activity among the Ork boyz. That limited consciousness was gripped by a cloud of pure rage and malevolence that swirled around a single word.

"Brutha."

Gobo mumbled the syllables to himself over and over again, until they blurred into a mantra of hatred.

"...bruthabruthabruthabruthabrutha..."

Gobo had followed the plan and he had won! But then his brother had refused to lose, to just lay down and die as he should have done. And those traitorous boyz, even his own ladz had taken sides with their big boss in the end.

"See ya, little brutha."

The words still echoed in Gobo's miniscule mind. He had waited for the crack of the bolt pistol and wondered how the sensation of his brains hitting the dirt would feel. But the bang never came. Instead he slowly opened his eyes and looked up to see his big brutha looking down on him with pure hatred. The two warriors had starred at each for a minute before Hosa spoke.

"You know wot?" the big boss let his weapon arm fall to his side. "You're wrong brutha. It was always you mutha luvd best."

With that Hosa kicked his brutha hard in the face, driving his lower jaw up into his skull and smashing one of Gobo's yellowing tusks. As he toppled over Gobo reached out to catch himself, only to smash his shattered wrist into the ground. As the pain shot through his body, Gobo heard his brother's final words.

"Now fuck off to the fight and die, ya scab!"

Pain pulsed from Gobo's wrist as he remembered. The Orks around him screamed madly at their absent foe and shot into the no mans land between the Ork and human lines. Gobo starred at them for a few moments before he realised that their screaming had escalated beyond it's usual intensity. Staggering to his feet he barged over to a nearby group of Ork boyz and bashed one around the head as he demanded to be told what was going on.

"We dun know boss. Them humans has gone mad!"

"Wot you mean?"

"Theys is charging us, an theys is all in the nuddy boss!"

Gobo turned his head to look where the Ork boy was pointing. Even forewarned he was surprised to see a group of nearly naked humans scrabbling over the rubble towards him. They appeared to be chained together, as among their number many were now dead, their corpses dragged forward by the groups momentum.

"God damn." Smirked Gobo, cheering considerably. As he looked on another of the humans was shot dead by an Ork salvo.

"OI!" shouted Gobo "stop shooting them bloody bullets. We can 'ave us some fun 'ere. Let 'em get close then use your knives boyz!"

The Ork boyz spread out in a line and awaited the humans who were now only a hundred metres away and would soon be theirs to play with. Gobo drew his knife and glared at the group, picking a particular big and nasty looking human to face up against. This one was seemingly dragging the rest of the group behind him, his powerful muscles hauling the unwilling into line. Exactly as he dragged them forward the big human also dragged them to a halt, stopping the whole group just a few steps in front of the Ork barricade.

The Ork boyz took no time at all to leap their own defences and fall upon the group of humans, their long serrated knives slashing into unprotected flesh. The humans could barely defend themselves as the heavy shackles weighed them down.

Gobo waited a few moments and watched the big human at the front swot a couple of Ork boyz out of his way. He took down a third and then a fourth before Gobo found his opening and with a quick thrust of his good left arm jammed his blade solidly into the warriors throat. The human went limp as his spinal cord was severed. Gobo carried the weight, holding the man aloft on his blade and coming close to breathe in the humans last moments of life. Then a flash of recognition shot through his brain as he noticed the Imperial tattoo on the marines cheek, a VI followed by the curve of the Omega sigil. He stepped back and allowed the marine body to smash to the ground. Gobo wondered at the coincidence that had brought that symbol before his eyes again, his barbarian soul unable to conceive of the divine will that had brought justice to this place.

With his final breath the marine warrior forced a laugh like broken glass passed his ruptured vocal chords and gloried in his final victory. As his heart took its last beat a small light winked into life on his steel collar as it did on the collars of the hundred men who accompanied him, alive or dead.

The Ork boyz glared at the little lights that flashed and beeped at increasing speed, scratching their bellies and shouting confused insults at one another.

"Wots this?" mumbled Gobo, even as his world evaporated in a flare of atomic white light.

Far away among the Imperial Guard troops the newly appointed General Krakov bathed in the wave of the atomic flash, the intense light blinding his eyes for a second. He watched the mushroom cloud rise above the horizon even as the tail end of the blast wave washed over his position, the much subdued heat still scorching his skin and singeing his eyebrows. The Steel Knuckle squad had moved on a few minutes before, their path following the now dead martyrs to progress through the opening their sacrifice had opened in the enemy lines.

"May their souls rest in the Emperor's heaven." Krakov intoned and then turned to survey his forces as they prepared to storm the enemy in force. On the opposing side of the battlefield the big boss Hoza laughed a mighty laugh at the news of his brothers death but then sank into a morose silence, only rising again to drive his Ork horde onto the field of battle with orders to kill every last human on the planet.

The bridge stretched a quarter mile across the vapour chasm, a vast separation between two of the cities massive infrastructural blocks that channelled light and air down to the lower levels of the metropolis. Metatron VII had been forged from metals pulled from the heart of the planets nearby star, iron and cobalt blasted into super hard alloys by imperial tech-priests and laid as the foundations of a city that covered a tenth of a continent and was home to five billion human souls. It had taken more than Ork bolters to strip all life from the city, the Ork horde brought with them bacterial plagues that swept through the populace even as their warriors gunned down the remaining innocents. The Steel Knuckle combat squad walked among the dead, the decaying remains of the once living scattered through the streets and passageways of a mighty Imperial stronghold.

The marines that walked beneath the banner of Ansalom's Steel Knuckles had followed their leader into the sweltering nuclear inferno that followed the martyrs of the Imperial Guard and their marine shepherd. They encountered no resistance as they moved into the city itself – the Ork lines had been decimated by the cascade of atomic explosions, it would be many hours before reinforcements would arrive at the sector. Much of the city's superstructure around its nearby face had also been obliterated, in many places only the super-hard base material remained that not even atomic fires could sunder. The marine unit walked through an environment of massive, smooth metal surfaces for some time before arriving at the heart of the city and the higher levels where their mission awaited them.

The Archive Imperial was a building unlike any other in Metatron VII. In a place forged from the heart of stars it was a monument to older days, to the age of stone and the bare human hands that carved it. It was a building within a building, a modern exterior of steel and glass that shrouded a stone temple of ancient design that looked back to times millennia before humanity had climbed the gravity well to

space. The Steel Knuckles entered through a forest of tall stone pillars and wove their way towards the heart of the building, past carved statues and painted wall decorations depicting ancient battles until they arrived at their goal.

Tomas had been transfixed by the object before them, as had the other marines. The glowing golden lines of the archive itself were burned now forever into Tomas consciousness. A book, a little smaller even than the great volume that stored the history of the chapter but constructed seemingly from gold and light trapped in crystal. Far more imposing than it's appearance however was the archives aura, a psychic presence that spoke to the marines on the very deepest level of this items massive importance. In the entire Imperium there were fewer than a thousand complete archives – tomes of enormous importance that stored the gathered knowledge of every sector of Imperial society in the arcane binary formats that only the tech-priests could decipher. The Steel Knuckles left the temple with the archive in their possession, only the journey back to Imperial lines between them and completion of their mission.

Now Tomas looked down at the archive once again, wrapped in it's protective bindings as Captain Ansalom held it out for the young marine to take.

The Ork patrol had caught their trail only a few miles from the city border on the third night of their mission. Twice the inhuman horde had corned the squad in maze of structures that formed Metatron VII and twice the unit had fought their way to freedom, although not without costs. Of the eight warriors who entered the temple of the Imperial Archive only four now remained – Carolus and Captain Ansalom still stood, as did Cantor and Tomas himself. The dead would rest in honour, each had slain many opponents before death took them.

Carolus and Cantor stood guard in the direction of the far end of the bridge. Brother Cantor sighted down the barrel of the heavy plasma gun, awaiting the Ork troops that might at any time emerge onto the bridge itself. The remnants of the unit under Captain Ansalom's command had headed for the bridge as a last resort. The change of direction had given them some time ahead of their Ork hunters, but the long journey across the immense bridge and the flat wasteland beyond gave them no effective chance of evading the horde for long enough to make their escape.

"Marine Tomas." Spoke Ansalom directly, "This is an Imperial Archive. Should the knowledge it contains fall into enemy hands many more planets of the Imperium will fall as well. It must be saved at all costs. Do you understand."

"Yes Captain."

"You are to carry this item to safety behind our Imperial lines. Now go, and may the Emperor be with you."

Tomas paused, his armoured hands refusing to stretch outwards and take the archive from his commander. Captain Ansalom watched the young marine for a second. In other circumstances he might have judged such a failure to act as evidence of a broken will, but he sensed that his command had forced Tomas to choose between obedience and his own sense of honour, obey and flee or stay and face death as a true warrior.

"Brother Tomas." Ansalom addressed Tomas in the familiar. "The geneseed that you carry has given birth to twelve leaders of this chapter and a line of champions and heroes untouched by dishonour for generations uncounted. You will

find death in the service of the Emperor, I promise you that. But not here, and not now. Now go."

A moment of stillness settled between the two men as the truth and power of Ansalom's words struck home, then Tomas gripped the archive in both hands and turned from his commander and his unit to complete the long journey back to safety and fulfil their mission.

Ansalom joined his comrades who waited guard upon the bridge, each man twenty or more metres from the next. The three warriors formed a barrier across the long, narrow structure – a barrier that would buy time for the last of the Steel Knuckles to reach his goal. Carolus and Cantor removed their helmets and for the first time since their mission began the marines were eye to eye. They had served together since birthing and now they would find death together. Rank fell away as the three men exchanged final glances and the heroes of Metatron VII, of whom tales would latter be told, turned to face their foe as the first Ork warriors emerged onto the bridge.

The weapons of the three marine warriors held the Ork advance at bay for a handful of minutes. Two waves of Orks were beaten back into the cover of the city structure before the third made a convincing thrust out onto the bridge, the inhuman hordes superior numbers and the added influence of their own heavy weapons forcing Ansalom, Carolus and Cantor to take cover among the struts of the bridge. As the Orks advanced the three warriors stepped back into view and unleashed a final, lethal salvo before the Ork's closed and engaged them in close combat.

Cantor was struck down even as he dropped the heavy plasma cannon, the jagged edge of massive power axe impacting on his shoulder and cleaving down to his hip. The abandoned heavy weapon let off a screaming whine as its batteries supercharged towards overload.

Ansalom and Carolus fought their Ork opponents with skills honed in three decades of war and carnage. On opposite sides of the bridge they traced two parallel dances of death, the ancient power blade and powerful warhammer swung in unison, striking down one Ork after another. But their position could not hold. Carolus was the next to fall, knocked from his feet by a charging Ork and impaled through the chest by the next warriors spear. Even as he fell the plasma cannon reached critical and exploded, sending a wave of superheated plasma across the bridge. It scorched over exposed Ork flesh and smashed into Ansalom's armoured body.

Tomas moved at speed across the shattered landscape, weaving between the wreckage of burnt out buildings and abandoned military vehicles. As he heard the explosion from the bridge behind him he knew that the final stand of the Steel Knuckles had ended. He knew also that the deaths of his comrades had not bought enough time, the Ork horde would close the distance between them long before he reached the Imperial lines. Never the less he would give his last breath to complete

his mission, even though it may now be hopeless. Tomas whispered a final prayer to his Emperor – for the sake of his mission, his comrades and for the soul of Captain Ansalom – leader of the Steel Knuckles.

* * *

The God Emperor of humanity gazed transfixed upon the shining star that burned in darkness at the distant edge of the galaxy. Around it a constellation of lesser beings burned dull and then died. As the Emperor looked on the bright star burned brighter and in its twinkling the consciousness of the Emperor divined meaning, a whispered prayer for the stars that burned no longer.

The Emperor reached out with his mind, not now to the distant galaxy but to the chamber of his throne room and the initiates that were humbled in prayer to their Lord. Each one begged for the honour of serving their master, of becoming the object of his will and to be sacrificed in his name. Today the Emperor would grant that wish for some. His thoughts walked through the dreams of his initiates and found a thousand among the thousands to serve him this day.

The Emperor of humanity reached out with the fist of his mind and tore the life from his chosen thousand, absorbing their energy into his own, leaving behind the husks of flesh and blood. Around the immense throne chamber a thousand humans screamed in ecstatic joy and collapsed upon themselves, joyous victims of the Emperors sacrifice.

Imbued with the essential energy of a thousand souls the Lord God of humanity focused his will upon a dull, lifeless star in the distant galaxy. With a thought the Emperor charged the star with his newly harvested energy, igniting within it the spark of new life. From a glowing ember the star burst into glorious radiance, illuminating it's corner of the galaxy like a super nova. The star burned onwards and intensely as the Emperor smiled at his creation.

* * *

Ansalom starred past the haft of his power-sword, the weapons ancient handle burnished by the grasp of a hundred heroes. The marine captain knelt, the weapons blade supporting his weight where wounds had sapped the strength from his body. Around him the bodies of Ork grunts were piled high, killed by the weapon that now supported him. He felt blood trickling and pooling against his mortal flesh within his armour. His sight dimmed as the blood drained from his body. Attempting to look across the bridge his eyes found only a fog of grey shadows. He could not see his brother Carolus body but he knew him to be dead. Even as Ansalom had fought he had heard the final roar of his comrade as he faced death. He turned again to look along the bridge. The first wave of Ork boyz had been repelled but now behind them came the main Ork force – fifty or more green skinned soldiers. As he looked towards them the Ork boyz faded from his sight, swallowed by the grey

shadows of mortality. His strength departed Ansalom collapsed and lay prostrate on the ground.

"For the Emperor." Ansalom whispered, the once mighty roar of his voice now departed. For a final time the marine Captain formed the holy cruciform as his forearm crossed the shaft of the sword.

The Ork boyz advanced warily across the bridge, having seen the Marine hack down ten of their number. They watched the humans last moments, heard the sound of his final, shallow breaths. The Ork boyz gathered around the dying human. One by one they raised their weapons, made ready to finish the battle, and opened fire.

The smoke of weapon fire and dust of projectile impacts cleared. The body of Captain Ansalom lay untouched and unmoved. Around the body, across the blasted armour and blooded flesh glowed a pale halo of blue light. Sparks of electrical discharge flashed and crackled over the body. The Ork boyz gawped and screeched at each other as very slowly the body of Captain Ansalom began to rise from the ground.

The Orks opened fire again, and again their bullets failed to even touch the human, repelled by the holy energy that now imbued his body. The blue light strengthened and intensified as the body rose further. As the remains of the marine ascended in to the air the body pivoted forward – rotating until it once again stood upright, its arms stretched out to either side echoing the holy cruciform. Suspended a body length from the deck of the bridge the body of Ansalom appeared for all the world as the dead remains of a martyred hero. And then the eyelids shot open, revealing pits of glowing blue where the violent energy roared.

The terrified Ork mob turned and fled, but even as they ran from the supernatural being that had risen before them they were destroyed. From the human's eyes poured the radiant energy, charging outward in jagged bolts that twisted after and caught the Ork horde. The bolts cleaved into Ork warriors like massive blades, shearing bodies in two, separating heads and limbs, punching through bodies and shattering bones. The Ork horde was obliterated in seconds, only a handful escaping the onslaught. But even their remittance lasted only seconds.

The body of Captain Ansalom hung above the carnage as a mute witness, empowered to kill without mercy. The blue energy flowed unceasing, the jagged bolts replaced by a continuous wave of radiance that expanded out from its centre in a smooth blue sphere of power. As the body of Ansalom was subsumed into the energy wave a mighty roar issued for the last time from the body's mouth.

"FOR THE EMPEROR!"

As the cry echoed outwards the dome of energy leapt forward. It swept across the bridge in both directions, vaporising the metal structure in its path. The few remaining Ork warriors screamed in terror as the light swallowed them whole. The vast wave swept onwards, rushing up to the immense city block where it crashed against the super strong base metal like a tidal wave on the shore. It burned into the material, coursing over huge structures and quickly vaporising them as it had the bridge.

As quickly as it had appeared the holy energy dissipated. Where a bridge and massive walls had stood there was now only the emptiness of space and a tumbling

fall into the vapour chasm that plunged a mile down into the bowls of the planet. A silence as deep as the chasm crawled up from the depths. Far away the sounds of the final battle for Metaron VII resounded hollowly. A blue sun climbed into the purple sky, shining stars disappeared again beneath the horizon.

* * *

Far away on Imperial Earth, in the great chamber the Emperor sat upon an ancient throne. His vacant eyes stared outwards. His minds eye watched the stars of space glow and flicker. At the galaxy's edge the shining star grew ever brighter in space, outshining the light of mighty suns. Reaching out one golden hand the Emperor plucked the star from space, gripped it between elegant fingers and with a deft movement swallowed it whole. He smiled and then let out a giant laugh that filled the cosmos with eternal music as he welcomed a new saint into his heart.

* * *

The Imperial flyer dived down from a dark night sky, falling towards the scorched earth of Metatron VII. It plunged towards the great city blocks, then down between them, past great towers and their shattered ruins. The craft glided between massive walls and then down, down into the deep chasm of light and vapours. Down it went, past the middle and lower levels, down into the foundations of a city that spanned a continent, down through the vast machine that drew power from the planets core. It fell to the very depths of the Earth and there it landed, in the pitch darkness of eternal night.

Shafts of light stabbed from the small craft, like searching hands scrabbling across the floor of a sealed cell. With a small whir a hatch slid open on the side of the craft. A lone figure stood highlighted in the hatch before stepping out onto the dust shrouded chasm floor.

The lights swept on for long moments until they found their goal. The shafts converged upon their target, pointing the way for the lone figure. With long, slow strides the man moved towards his goal. Stopping just outside, the man leant down and stretched out a hand to grasp the object that lay illuminated in the crafts lights.

The armoured hand closed upon the shaft of an ancient power-sword, burnished by the hands of heroes. Marine brother Tomas pulled the sword free of the dust, shaking it clean. The blade of the weapon remained undamaged and glittered in the crafts lights. As he gazed upon the sword brother Tomas remembered the word of his captain, and his promise of death in the Emperors service.

"For the Emperor." Intoned the marine, his lips barley moving.

The stars above Metatron VII glittered brightly as the small craft arced back towards the Imperial lines, now advanced fully into the city iafter the Ork war-bands collapse. Tomas felt the battle for this Imperial stronghold ending, and his thoughts turned towards the battles ahead of him.

Damien G Walter

damiengwalter@gmail.com

<http://damiengwalter.wordpress.com>