

THE SANCTUS DOMINUS RETURNS TO MARS

The Promethean Plaza was one of the last places where one could see the red rock of the primordial mountain which millennia ago had lent its name to the Martian capital of Olympus Mons. This vast expanse of scarlet earth and dust was surrounded by a solid wall of forge and factorum structures several miles high, evoking images of that ancient Caldera buried beneath the Martian's sacred capital. Ancient records in the Library of Knowledge proclaim this area was once used for emergency landings and takeoffs of the impossibly vast ships of man prior to the age of strife. Now it was used as a parade ground for the Titan Legions of Mars, their Princeps eternally guarding the sacred land they knew as "The Grand Mountain."

The ground had earned the name "Promethean Plaza" many times over, for here had stood gods and demi-gods. Here the newly built God Engines fresh from the Martian forges would make their first steps into the light for inspection, here the Emperor of Mankind once landed from on high on the only day of rain in living memory, and here today now stood in assembly the Emperor Titans representing the three Titan Legion's of Mars: Legio Ingatus, Legio Tempestus, and Legio Mortis.

They were summoned here at the behest of the Fabricator General of Mars itself: Kelbor Hal. The awe inspiring Imperators towered over a vast army which included more than hundred of knights from the ancient House Taranis, and legions upon legions of Martian Skitarii, battle servitors and the combat automata of the Martian Taghmata. Such an army would be capable of annihilating a lesser world many times over, ready to defend Mars from the very armies of ancient Hel of forbidden Catheric lore. But today this army was not stood in battle footing; instead, it stood in parade formation. Today, the Promethean Plaza would see the arrival of yet another demi-god.

Kelbor Hal watched from atop his personal abeyant, an ancient and ornate anti-grav platform which tradition says to have been the first model of its kind wielded by the first Fabricator General, decorated with red Martian Gold and the heraldry of the oldest church of the Cult Mechanicum. Though he and his personal attendants stood nearly motionless, their cybernetically enhanced minds and slave minds constantly processed staggering amounts of communication: everything from reports from the Forgemasters of the Red Planet and the Ring of Iron, updates from countless research projects and subdivisions, and now set to scarlet priority all status messages from Baskillon navarchs and aeronautical coordination magi.

To be Fabricator General is to withstand the furious flaming breath of a dragon that was the endless torrent of Mechanicum data and the deadly jaws of its politics and intrigue, which could and had slain lesser men before. But Kelbor Hal was no lesser man, for in a Mechanicum filled with the most brilliant of minds in the Galaxy whoever stood atop them all was at a level no other techpriest could ever reach. No other – save for *one*. And it was this one the Fabricator General was preparing to greet.

Around the edges of the plaza a hundreds of thousands of men and women, factorum workers and low adepts, all risked their lives in the nearly lethal thin atmosphere that was the upper reaches of Olympus Mons. The poorest and ill prepared of these had already perished while others knew their oxygen supplies and respirator scrubbers would not last them a return journey, knowing full well their fate would be as either corpses for servitorization or to the food reprocessing plants. But they were willing to risk it for the once in a life time chance to see not only a Primarch, but the Sanctus Dominus, the son of the Ommissiah, here to lead the Mechanicum to a new age of glory. Such a crowd would only ever have been rivaled by the one coming to see the Ommissiah himself.

Kelbor Hal heard the first reports of incoming ships nearly as soon as the binaric left the minds of the void coordinators, and had nearby servitors provide their vision to gaze up for him. Huge barges began to land, their massive ramps lowering, and deep horns sounded from within as the first to stride forward were the Knights of the Federation. Predominantly they were those of the Twin Houses of Dutonis, Borgius and Navarro, once said to be bitter enemies now close knitted rivals and blood brethren once more. But soon other banners and other colors were made known - the blazing red of House Hermetika of Mezoa, the blue and gold of House Orhlacc of Dark Haven; House Callivant, House Thorne, House Dharrovar and so many others of the former Gothic Sector, now reclaimed and rechristened as the Lucius Sector. Borgius and Navarro together could rival Taranis, the ancient and most oldest of houses, but flanked by representing knights from an entire sector they soon would more than match the knights of Taranis on the opposite side of the Plaza.

Strangely, it was only the Knights who deployed.

+So it is true, mused Kelbor Hal through binaric *+the rumors of the Federation's over-reliance upon Knights.*

As last barges had deposited their noble cargo, they lifted off to return to orbit. The crowds murmured in confusion, looking for any trace of the Sanctus Domini or his Astartes. The a mumuring sea of human voices was soon silenced by the thunderous crack of lightning arcing from horizon to horizon.

+Arc storm! the fabricator general raged. *+I did not approve this weather, get me Atmospheric-Command!*

+Fabricator General, this is not the result of atmospheric controls. Electrical discharge are coming from the fleet in orbit Responded Hal's direct attendant

The Arch-Domini of Mars bristled. *+Is it an attack? Are they mad*

The Baskillon Attache answered. *+Negative. Discharges are occurring in orbital clearance zone designated for landing of the 2nd Legion. What is the meaning of this. How do they intend to land through that.+*

It was Kelbor Hal who recognized at once what was going on. They didn't intend to land further transports now. This was a display. He needed no council to know this, the mechanical eyes on his body read it on the faces of adepts and skitarii around him and hear it their binaric chatter.

This was an act made to impress. This was, as the ancient catechism went, "Electroshock and Awe"

As the lightning tore violently through the sky and the thunderclaps reached a crescendo, there was a final brilliant flash of light that temporarily blinded unaugmented eyes and forced bionic ones to adjust for lensflare. A sonic boom louder than any thunder deafened unaugmented ears, as sections of empty space now had to give way to unfathomable mass resulting in a sonic boom. Where before was empty space, now stood gigantic bipedal cities and glittering cathedrals of red and gold, bristling with guns and armaments. The 2nd legion's God Machines had teleported directly onto the Plaza Square, bedecked in the blue and gold of the Legio Astorum, all bearing the banners of the Lucian Federation. Looking upon one could see the Federation Banner reminiscent of the Terran Federation's Flag, but the banner was blackened like the adamantine metal that ran like blood through the system with a golden embroidery.

All God Machine's appeared in perfect position and symmetry with both the Knights of the Federal Realm and the Martian Legions opposite them. The Imperators were flanked by Warlords - each and everyone of them were not the more recent Mars Alpha Pattern but the older Lucius Alpha Pattern, their hard warlike like appearance contrasted with the more decorative and knight like Mars Patterns, yet they seemed proud of their design in being older and hailing from the age of the Old Federation. Per protocol,

the three Titan Legions of Mars sounded their horns in acknowledgement of allied god engines, and the Legio astorum likewise returned, their collective thunderous noise permanently damaging unaugmented ears and whose sound waves were detected on the opposite end of the red planet.

Throughout the crowd those of weakest will and health simply died at the sight and sudden shock of such mountainlike war machines appearing from thin air or from the following apocalyptic blasts of their horns, while others covered their ears and fell prostrated on the ground in religious terror. yet there were many who held their nerve to cheer or to kneel and pray in rapturous joy, citing numeric prayers or simply lay chants to honor the Machine God. The God Machines unleashed huge clouds of cherubi and servo skulls, scenting the air with incense and filing it with binaric prayers to the God of All Machines.

From the legs of the Imperators came down ramps, and now at last marched forth the 2nd Legion and its auxilia. Each Imperator was capable of housing an entire Company of Marines, or many more companies of Skitarii and support vehicles, all marching forward in perfect mechanical lockstep only possible through noospheric coordination. The Skitarii proudly lifted their colors from men and machine, each banner identifying which reclaimed forge or hive world they hailed from: Lucius, Manachea, Mezoa, Gethsamaine, Zpandex, Vindalex. The Federation was rumored to have claimed perhaps five hundred habitable worlds or more.

Behind them in even more impressive form strode the marines, Astartes and Acillians, many of whom were highly augmented or sported bionics visible from afar, seemingly different to the lay adept but to a

skilled eye clearly showed a degree of specialty, Acillians gifted for ranged firepower and Astartes for close combat.

All bore their parade dress uniforms, the cloaks and robes the cult mechanicus, while the marines sported trophies and cloaks of the hated xeno foe. Their movements seemed not so much as a military maneuver but a religious procession.

All of this, Kelbor Hal watched - observing the clear attempt by the 2nd Legion in displays of grandeur. But these were a distraction for his true target. His gaze stood firmly upon the lead Emperor, whose name shone proudly in the building sized golden letters emblazoned upon its chest: "Particeps Semper".

There, visible only to those with the most enhanced vision, standing before the mighty doors to the large Cathedral superstructure of the Emperor, stood a mechanical being flanked by marines in the thickest and heaviest armors. They were not dressed in robes such as the others, but in heavy artificer plate whose quality could be seen even several dozen miles away. As he gazed on, there was a flash of light.

An instant later, his bionic eyes had constricted to near pinpoints and his audio sensors dialed down to near zero to shield him from a nearly incomprehensible flash of light and the boom of teleportation. The Lucian Solar Flare lived up to its name. As the glow died down, there, stood a being who - even as he stood perched upon his Abeyant and many yards away - was eye to eye with Kelbor Hal, flanked by his Steel Wardens in artificer armor. The Fabricator General now now gazed upon the face of a Titan in miniature. A name appeared before his internal vision display: T4L05 DAV15.

He had changed dramatically since the last time the Fabricator General had seen him, having clearly chosen to abandon more of his flesh and embrace the machine form, and now sported four additional kastellan arms that did not seem any larger than his two metallic ones.

The Sanctus Domini walked forward, Hal's secutarii bowing, before the Archdomini of Lucius too bowed to Kelbor Hal per ancient protocol. Kelbor Hal also gave a light bow in return. Around them all the sound of cheering crowds roared through the Plaza echoing again and again, as Mars welcomed the return of a Prophet. Many were also mesmerized as fresh barges descended releasing entire caravans of of precious goods and cargo from the Federation, an offering of Tithe as per the ancient laws of Vassalage to Mars, with interest for lost time separated. Most precious of all were the largest and most armored transports lined candles and purity scrolls and guarded by Knights which all knew at once must surely have contained the most sacred relics of all: STC's, recover from foul Xenos Hands and here to return forevermore to their rightful abode in the secure vaults of Mars.

This would be enough to appease the crowds and give the Servo-Skull's plenty of footage of propaganda value for both sides. But Kelbor Hal wasn't here to watch the show, he had other plans in mind. Deciding to forgo binaric, he gestured for Tal0S to follow him into the Temple of Knowledge. The Sanctus Domini nodded slowly and followed without a word.