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BECOMING
ANDY CLARK

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BECOMING

Andy Clark

The Squires' Square rang with the clash of blades. A courtyard edged by a colonnaded walkway, the square nestled at the heart of the Draconspire. On a clear day like this one, the broad space was typically thronged with squires, aspirants practising the skills they would need to become Knights. It was empty now, as tradition dictated for the day before a Becoming, save for the two young warriors who duelled at its centre. One was tall and strongly built, and wore a confident smile. The other was shorter, slight even with the bulk of his half-armoured bodyglove. His eyes were a deep, jade green and his face was set in a frown of concentration. Both of the duellists had their hair shaved short in the style of squires. Both were in their eighteenth year, and sweating from long hours of swordplay.

The practice blades met again, a thrust parried then answered with a swift lateral cut that was deflected in turn. Though blunt, the blades would still leave a welt that neither combatant was keen to receive.

'Do you concede, Danial Tan Draconis?' asked the taller of the two, mockingly formal. 'My swordplay is clearly superior.'

'I think not, Luk Tan Chimaeros,' said Danial, equally mannered. 'Though if you're tired, I'm ready to accept your surrender now.'

Luk shook his head. He rolled his shoulders and spat on the flagstones, before launching a sudden attack. Danial parried Luk's blow, replying with a series of cuts and thrusts straight out of *Malleon's Treatise on Swordplay*. Danial's form and footwork were perfect despite his fatigue, and his opponent was driven across the square. Just as he was about to back into an obsidian column, Luk spun aside. Danial's blade struck stone with a dull clang. As his opponent reeled, Luk sprang onto the attack.

‘You fight like a textbook, Da,’ panted Luk as their blades clashed and rang. ‘I can predict you. You should learn to think more flexibly. Use your opponent’s strengths against them, as House Chimaeros teaches.’

‘House Draconis has won a great many wars without need of such trickery,’ said Danial. ‘We rely upon skill, courage and determination, as any noble Knight should. And when the moment is right,’ Danial punctuated his sentence with a sudden flurry of blows that almost knocked Luk’s blade from his hands, ‘we let the draconsfire burn!’

Luk backed away with his guard up.

‘House Draconis has won a great many wars because you have Sire Markos fighting in your ranks,’ he said. ‘That old ogre could probably kill a man with his scowl alone.’

‘He is one of the greatest Knights on Adrastapol, that’s true,’ said Danial. ‘Did you know that on Terrathos he walked clean through a firestorm? He was so keen to slay the foe that he refused to wait for the flames to die out.’

‘I heard that he killed a dozen xenos war engines during the war on Dortun’s Landing,’ said Luk. ‘He fought unsupported, and slew them all at close quarters with his thunderstrike gauntlet.’

‘Sire Daeved told me it was Markos who beheaded the Separatist Tyrant of Farhaj,’ said Danial. ‘Even after father ordered him to show mercy. Apparently, Markos said that the man was beyond even the Emperor’s forgiveness.’

‘He’s such a tough old dog,’ said Luk. ‘Markos probably just enjoys killing heretics too much to hold back.’

‘It’s *Sire* Markos, Luk,’ came a gruff shout from a nearby doorway. ‘Throne’s sakes, lad, you Become tomorrow. Don’t tell me you’ve still not learned the most basic tenets of the Code Chivalric.’

The two squires lowered their blades and eyes respectfully as Sire Markos Dar Draconis, Herald of High King Tolwyn Tan Draconis, marched towards them. Markos was a big man, weathered by years of war. His eyes glinted like chips of blue ice, and if there had ever been anything soft or gentle to him it had been sharpened to a hard point long ago. Markos stopped in front of them, arms behind his back, and looked them over coolly.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Bladework, sire,’ replied Danial, still looking at the ground. Markos intimidated Danial with his aura of permanently displeased authority.

‘You face the Becoming ritual in less than twenty hours,’ said Markos. ‘You need sleep. Food. Prayer to purify your minds and bodies before you face the

ghosts of your throne. Instead, you bludgeon each other with practice swords.’

‘We tried to rest, sire,’ said Luk. ‘When I gave up on sleep, I found Da in the Grand Library. Neither of us could stay in our chambers. So we thought to tire ourselves by the blade.’

Markos sighed and nodded.

‘I was the same before my Becoming, truth to tell. Of course, that was near on thirty years ago, right in the middle of the Ork Wars. Sleep was a little harder to come by.’

The two Squires shared a glance. The tale of Markos’ Becoming was legend amongst all five Noble Houses of Adrastapol. How he had marched straight from the Chamber of Ghosts into battle, and slain the ork leader in personal combat. How he had become a hero.

Markos saw the look and understood.

‘You want to hear the story, then?’ he asked, beckoning them out of the courtyard to sit in cushioned, iron instructors’ thrones at its edge. ‘Since you clearly aren’t about to retire, this might be my last chance to teach you two something useful before you face the test.’

‘If you wish to tell it, sire,’ said Danial. ‘We’d be honoured to hear it.’

‘That you would,’ replied Markos. ‘All right then, lads, here it is. The story of my Becoming, and of how I slew a xenos lord and saved the life of the man who would become High King. Listen well, Squires, and see what you can learn...’

Markos opened his eyes and gasped. He sat in darkness, with the terrible cold pinch of the neural jacks intruding at the base of his skull. His throat was bone-dry, and his whole body felt hollow, as though he were just now waking from the grip of some terrible fever. In his mind’s eye he still saw the whirling images that his throne’s ghosts had shown him, war and carnage stretching back over millennia.

‘Lorrence?’ he croaked, fumbling for the arm of the squire in the throne next to his. ‘Lorrence, are you...?’ He touched cold digits, stiff with rigor mortis, and snatched his hand back. Lorrence Dar Draconis had not survived his Becoming. His throne had found him wanting, and rejected him.

It had been only the two of them in the Chamber of Ghosts. Tradition dictated that all Knights of Adrastapol should Become within the seat of the High King, their House Sacristans hauling the thrones mechanicum to the appointed place aboard their ornate Crawlers. With ork invaders rampaging across the planet, this had been impossible. The two aspirants of House Draconis had faced their

Becoming alone.

Markos heard voices outside the chamber. He hoped they were outside the chamber, at least. Alone in the dark with the corpse of his friend, it was all too easy to believe them the voices of ghosts.

‘Sire Tolwyn, Gatekeeper, I know that they’re your friends but they have just Become.’

‘I know that, Gerraint, but we need every steed in the field and every Knight in panoply. This isn’t the time for half-measures. Besides, Sire Lorrence is the best blade House Draconis has seen in a century.’

Markos squinted as a rectangle of light split the darkness. He heard locking bolts disengage, and then the door swung wide. Daylight spilled in, piercing the fug of stale incense that hung in the air. Several figures stood silhouetted against the harsh brightness.

‘First, we must ascertain whether the aspirants have survived, Gatekeeper Tolwyn Tan Draconis.’ Markos recognised the grating machine-voice of High Sacristan Polluxis. The priest shuffled into the chamber and emitted a binharic blurt. Electrosconces flared, illuminating Sires Tolwyn Tan Draconis, Ronauld Dar Draconis, and the dark-haired Gerraint Tan Chimaeros.

‘Oh no...’ gasped Sire Tolwyn, rushing to Lorrence’s throne. The failed aspirant was stiff as wood, his skin grey and yawning in a hideous scream. Bloody tears lined his cheeks, and his dead eyes stared sightlessly.

‘Lorrence,’ sighed Sire Gerraint, his deep voice sombre.

‘Lorrence Dar Draconis was found wanting,’ intoned Polluxis. ‘But another yet lives. Congratulations, Sire Markos Dar Draconis. You have Become.’

Turning to their living comrade, Sires Gerraint and Ronauld helped him to uncouple his neural jacks and rise unsteadily from his throne. Gerraint pressed a nutrient pack upon him, and Markos sucked thirstily at its spout.

‘Well done, Sire Markos,’ said Sire Ronauld. ‘You’re a Knight now.’

‘This throne mechanicum is yours, Sire Markos,’ said Polluxis. ‘You are bonded to it, and it to you. My acolytes will perform the necessary rituals of consecration at once, then transfer it to the mounting chamber.’

‘Come on,’ urged Sire Gerraint, holding Markos’ arm to steady him. ‘You’ll want real food, sleep. There are ceremonies and rituals to be organised—’

‘No,’ said Sire Tolwyn, rising from beside Lorrence’s throne. ‘There is no time for that, and now our numbers are even fewer. Sire Markos, you are needed in battle immediately.’

‘Tolwyn,’ said Gerraint, his voice firm. ‘I understand your urgency, but...’

‘I can do it,’ said Markos. His words came out weak and croaking. He coughed and repeated himself. ‘I can do it. I can fight. Just give me a steed and I will march to war.’

The other Knights looked at one another. Sire Gerraint scowled with displeasure. Sire Tolwyn looked defiant, fiery and determined. Sire Ronauld shrugged as though it were all no matter to him.

‘Very well,’ said Tolwyn. ‘We’ll find you a steed.’

Barely an hour later, Markos sat on his throne mechanicum again. This time, though, he was jacked into the cockpit of a Knight. A towering giant of plasteel and adamantium, the steed was an Errant pattern named *Dracon’s Wrath*, and its machine-spirit rumbled a wary greeting to its new master. One arm ended in an enormous chainsword, the other in an intimidating thermal cannon. Markos’ sensorium expanded with a vertiginous rush, his external picters and auspex arrays engaging so that he saw both his cockpit instruments and his Knight’s physical surroundings as an overlapping image. His view was panoramic, a sweep that was far beyond the capabilities of simple human eyes. At the same time, reams of data scrolled across his retinal display and his vox emitters awoke, feeding the open channel directly into his ears. To those not augmented and psychologically prepared, such a barrage of sensory input would cause catastrophic mental trauma, even death. For Markos, it was like ascending to sudden godhood. He shook with adrenaline as the sensation of power swept through him.

Markos’ steed was one of twelve ironclad giants looming in repair armatures in the Draconspire’s cavernous armorium. The arched chamber was made to accommodate many dozens of steeds, but the majority of the House Draconis Knights were already in the field. This band of warriors had been charged by their lords with garrisoning the Draconspire, leading the fortress militia in its defence should the orks break through.

‘Knights,’ said Sire Tolwyn across an open vox channel, ‘the Draconspire faces a terrible threat, one that, as Gatekeeper of my father’s Exalted Court, I cannot ignore. The orks of Warlord Skarjaw approach in great number and we cannot wait behind these walls lest the enemy bring them tumbling down.’

‘What has happened?’ asked Sire Daeved from the throne of his Gallant, *Pyrefang*. ‘Last I heard it, the High King had pushed the greenskins all the way to the Coast of Claws. House Minotos were pinning the enemy from the east, Pegasson from the west, while Draconis and Chimaeros drove the xenos into the

sea. They had Warlord Skarjaw betwixt hammer and anvil.’

Markos recognised the name. Skarjaw – the ork leader who had brought such misery to Adrastapol these last years, a veritable bogeyman to the House Draconis squires.

‘And so they did,’ replied Tolwyn gravely. ‘But two hours ago we received a vox missive from Marchionesse Elyssa Tan Pegasson. The greenskins broke their lines. House Pegasson disengaged and retreated successfully, but were unable to prevent a sizeable xenos force from gaining the Drakebite Pass.’

‘That will bring them straight over the mountains, onto the grasslands of the Valatane,’ said Lady Bellah Dar Draconis. ‘That will bring them...’

‘Here,’ said Tolwyn. ‘My friends, if we allow the orks to gain the grass ocean they will spread out and bring their hordes to bear. The Draconspire has formidable defences, and our House militia are many and brave, but the greenskins number in the hundreds of thousands. We cannot allow them to besiege us.’

‘Agreed,’ said Sire Hugorn Dar Chimaeros. ‘But what, then, do you suggest? Twelve Knights cannot hold out against such numbers, Gatekeeper. We’ll be overrun.’

‘Not if we catch them before they reach the lower passes,’ said Tolwyn, and Markos could almost picture him thumping his fist into his open palm. ‘The terrain is difficult and unfamiliar to the invaders, and the orks are anarchic and ill-disciplined. If we move quickly, we can bottle them up then bring the cliffs down on them. Those not killed will be trapped behind a mass of rock. They will fall to infighting and destroy one another.’

There was silence as the Knights digested Tolwyn’s plan.

‘It’s risky,’ said Sire Gerraint. ‘And dangerous. But I believe this is our best chance. With luck, it will turn the greenskins’ strength in numbers against them, and prevent them from ever reaching the Draconspire. I pledge my blade to this.’

‘And I,’ said Sire Ronauld. The other Knights chorused their assent, and, swept up in the moment, Markos joined them.

‘Very well then,’ said Tolwyn, engaging his motive impellers and walking his Knight Paladin, *Fyreheart*, out of its armature. ‘We depart at once. Knights of Adrastapol, *in excelsium furore!* Let us march to glory!’

The Knights marched out of the Draconspire’s towering gates and into the grass ocean of the Valatane, a tribe of iron giants going off to war. The fortress rose behind them like a mountain hewn from granite and obsidian, every wall and

rampart lined with throngs of House militia. Those brave men would protect the keep until their noble masters returned.

Markos walked the Valatane in the middle of the Knightly lance, mastering the war machine's speed and gait, its attitudinal controls and power levels. He checked and rechecked his auspex feeds, ammo counts, damage manifold and strategic overlay.

'Markos,' voxed Tolwyn on a private channel. 'I never had a chance to congratulate you on your Becoming. Well done.'

'Thank you, sire,' said Markos. 'But there's no need. War is upon us. It leaves little time for pleasantries.'

'True,' said Tolwyn. 'But remember that this is no small thing you have done, Markos. It's not just some warrior rite of passage. The ghosts of your throne have accepted you as one of their own. You will hear them speak to you as time goes on, my friend. You will have to contend with their memories, thoughts and feelings.'

'They're not true ghosts though?' asked Markos. 'Just echoes. Impressions of those who came before.'

'On that, the Sacristans remain enigmatic,' said Tolwyn. 'All I can tell you is that the whispers sound real enough to me. Embrace the wisdom of your throne, but beware it also. Becoming is a dangerous business, and it does not end when you leave the Chamber of Ghosts. Normally you would have had months to finish bonding with your throne before you met open battle, but needs must. Just be careful you don't lose yourself, Sire Markos.'

'I won't,' replied Markos, trying to ignore the chill that ran down his spine. Sire Lorrence had lost himself. Now all that remained of him was the thin trail of smoke rising from his pyre, high in the reaches of the Draconspire. Markos looked upon that thin black line, stark against the sky, and vowed that he wouldn't be next.

The Knights marched across the Valatane for the best part of a day, passing jousting fields and serf-farms, the trails of the huge predators known as ghurgols and lonely copses of olidarne trees. All the while, the Adrapotine Mountains loomed larger on the horizon until they swelled from a hazy grey band into vast stone pinnacles.

From his forge-temple within the Draconspire, High Sacristan Polluxis voxed hourly updates upon the orks' movements. The news was not good. Augury suggested that the greenskins were moving faster than expected. By the time the

Knights reached the lower passes, Polluxis was warning of the greenskin vanguard already flowing down from the mouth of the Drakebite to meet them.

‘We’ve no time,’ voxed Tolwyn. ‘We must push up through their frontrunners and secure the mouth of the pass.’

The Knights marched through the lower valleys with their weapons unshrouded and ion shields lit. The terrain was rocky and rough. Thin rills tumbled down over jagged rocks, and spare underbrush clung to whatever cracks offered a chance at life.

Markos heard the orks before he saw them. Guttural war cries and the revving of crude engines echoed along the valley.

‘The enemy are close,’ he voxed, then almost stumbled as unfamiliar sensations and images flickered through his mind. They were coming from his throne, fragments of battles fought against the orks.

Other worlds.

Other lives.

He pushed the sensations away, fighting down a tide of whispers that threatened to lull him into a fugue state.

Now was not the time.

Suddenly there were shots stippling his ion shield. Markos blinked. His auspex swarmed with enemy contact runes, and gunfire was whistling around him.

‘Markos,’ voxed Tolwyn. ‘I say again, enemy contact fore. Advance upon them and fire at will. You’re falling behind.’

Markos swore as he saw the rest of the Knights already a quarter of a mile ahead up the valley. Between him and them was a mass of orks. Riding upon crude, tracked bikes or in buzzing single-seater flying machines, dozens of greenskins were racing straight at him with their guns blazing.

He cursed again before clenching his haptic gauntlets. His steed growled in readiness.

Punching one gauntlet forward, Markos commanded his Knight to fire its thermal cannon. The weapon blasted a glowing crater in the pass, obliterating a swathe of ork vehicles. Markos laughed in sudden elation and triggered his steed’s heavy stubber, swatting crude greenskin ornithopters from the air.

Feeding power to his motive impellers, Markos guided *Dracon’s Wrath* up the valley. He caught up to the rear of the lance a mile from the Drakebite pass, trampling ramshackle ork vehicles and blasting mobs of roaring infantry.

Enemy resistance grew as the Knights neared their destination, the trickle of xenos becoming a flood. Masses of roaring foot troops swept towards them,

firing wild hails of bullets. Most ork weapons had little hope of damaging a Knight, but here and there a crude rocket corkscrewed out of the press to explode ferociously against an ion shield or hull.

‘Don’t let them close,’ warned Sire Daeved. ‘In great enough numbers these beasts can pull down even a Knight, and their leaders have weapons that rip through armour and cables.’

The Knights slowed, concentrating fire into the onrushing horde. Amongst the sea of greenskins came lumbering scrap-metal walkers and smoke-belching tanks that added their firepower to the fusillade. It was nothing compared to the devastation the Knights unleashed, however.

Gatling cannons roared. Stubber fire crisscrossed in sawing lines. Thermal blasts reduced swathes of greenskins to ash, even as hurtling rockets engulfed hundreds more in flame. Step by step the Knights drove the orks back, shattering their morale with a concentrated barrage that echoed along the pass.

Cocooned within his cockpit, Markos felt his fears wither like parchment in the heat of the draconsfire. With every shot he fired, every mob of foes or rumbling war machine he obliterated, his confidence surged. He was destruction and death. He was a Knight, and he laughed in exhilaration as he killed.

The bellows of the enemy rang in his sensorium. Their stink penetrated even the sealed environs of his Knight, though Emperor only knew how. The violence and savagery of the orks was a primal force, revealed in terrible clarity by the acuity of his Knight’s sensorium. But they were small, crude things when compared to the war gods they faced. Markos felt the heady rush of invincibility, and embraced it.

Markos targeted and fired, targeted and fired, sending howling greenskins fleeing in terror. He had an aptitude for this. He was already the master of his steed, and with a little concentration he could begin to sift ghostly voices from amidst his throne’s background murmur.

Beware overconfidence young Knight you must watch your flanks do not allow them to surround you as I did that was my end watch your ammunition counters you must...

The roar of engines filled the sky as a squadron of greenskin aircraft hurtled over their retreating comrades, jockeying for position and trying to ram one another into the walls of the pass. A ferocious storm of rockets and shells battered the Knights’ ion shields. Markos cried out in shock as the helm of Sire Ronald’s steed exploded, burning Ronald to ash and throwing his Knight onto its back. Markos knew a moment of vertiginous panic, cringing back from the

hail of shots exploding against his shield. Panic threatened, but with a snarl he pushed the feelings down, mastering himself.

The Knights retaliated, Icarus fire sending three of the ork planes spiralling away to explode amongst the lower valleys.

‘They’ll return,’ voxed Tolwyn. ‘I’m reading another wave of xenos in the pass. We strike now.’

‘Wait, Tolwyn,’ said Gerraint. ‘What is that on the auspex? It’s huge...’

Markos felt his heartbeat quicken as a moment of ominous silence filled the vox.

‘Skarjaw...’ breathed Tolwyn.

Markos followed the designator rune that had blinked up on his retinal display. Emerging from the darkness of the pass was an immense beast of war. As tall as the shoulder as a Knight’s carapace, the huge monster lumbered along on four muscular legs that ended in clawed hooves. Its bloated bulk was covered in scales as thick as tank armour, and its foam-flecked jaws were filled with enormous tusks. On its back was an armoured howdah like a small castle, thronging with orks. A huge cannon jutted from it, and enthroned atop the howdah was an ork of remarkable size and ugliness – Warlord Skarjaw, the greenskin despot who had launched the invasion of Adrastapol and cost this world millions of lives.

Behind the monster came two more like it, also fitted with swaying howdahs. Fresh waves of orks charged into battle around their trampling feet.

‘Crusaders, Wardens,’ said Tolwyn. ‘Bring the pass down, now.’

‘By your command, Gatekeeper,’ replied Lady Bellah, her voice icy calm.

‘The orks are too close,’ said Gerraint, echoing Markos’ panicked thoughts.

‘I know,’ replied Tolwyn, accelerating his steed into a charge. ‘We’ve got to hold them until the avalanche begins. With me!’

Markos poured power into his steed’s actuators and broke into a loping run. Sires Gerraint, Hectour, Daaved and Archivauld followed suit, while Lady Bellah coordinated the fire of the Wardens and Crusaders.

So few against the horde. It was the stuff of tales and tapestries, but it was nothing like Markos had imagined. Tales didn’t tell of the disorienting din, the confusion of smoke and flame, and the pounding jolt of the Knights’ footfalls or the gut-wrenching terror of staring straight at your own death. Tales, it seemed, rarely matched reality.

A storm of firepower whipped overhead, missiles and shells tearing at the walls of the pass to blast loose huge boulders and spread cracks across the rock faces.

Down below, the orks levelled their own firestorm. Sire Daeved swore as Skarjaw's howdah fired its cannon. The shell punched through Daeved's shield and tore off his steed's chainsword in a shower of sparks. Another of the howdah guns put a round into Sire Gerraint's leg, reducing his steed to a limp. The ork planes swept overhead, ploughing furrows of gunfire through their own forces in their eagerness to destroy the Knights.

Then Markos was into the melee, and everything was madness. He trampled a mob of orks, kicking their claw-fisted leader a hundred yards as he remembered Daeved's warning. He bored a crater in the nearest monster with his fusion blaster. Shots rang from his Knight's hull, striking from every side. A sea of brutish faces surrounded him, roaring in mindless ferocity.

A rocket exploded against Markos' generator housing, and he swore vehemently as he was forced to shut down a leaking plasma feed. He stomped through a swarming mass of greenskins, fighting to dislodge the axe-wielding xenos that were trying to scale his Knight's shins, while deflecting a barrage of energy blasts with his shield.

A Knight does not fight alone look to your lance mates young Knight

Markos snatched a glance at the wider battle, just in time to see Skarjaw's monstrous steed gore Sire Archivauld's Knight Paladin. The war engine was hurled from its feet by the monster's bullish charge, before being crushed and trampled beneath its hooves. Archivauld's Knight shuddered with secondary detonations, and Skarjaw bellowed in triumph, his bestial features underlit by the fires of the burning Knight.

Markos was moving before he realised it, angling his shield to absorb the worst of the enemy fire as he accelerated towards Skarjaw. Sire Tolwyn got there first, shouting a challenge through his steed's vox amplifiers. Skarjaw roared in reply, directing a hail of shots into *Fyreheart*. The howdah cannon boomed but Tolwyn swatted the shot aside with his shield, then stepped deftly around the monster's lunging tusks to ram his reaper chainsword into its neck. Sparks flew. Adamantium cutting teeth met iron-hard scales and ripped right through. Blood sprayed Tolwyn's steed as he drove his blade deep into the monster, churning through flesh, muscle and bone.

Markos fired his thermal cannon, burning through the monster's hide. Still the creature stayed on its feet, maddened by pain. It barged forward, impaling itself further on Tolwyn's blade but crunching its tusks into his steed's chest. Tolwyn cried out in pain. His steed staggered. If the Knight fell, he would meet the same fate as Archivauld.

Markos wouldn't reach the fight in time. Yelling incoherently, he opened fire.

A column of searing energies decapitated Skarjaw's monstrous beast, burning away its flesh and bone. Tolwyn's blade came free, glowing with heat wash, and the headless monster staggered. Warlord Skarjaw was still howling in fury when his steed slumped sideways. Its massive weight crushed the howdah into the ground, cooking off its cannon ammo in a devastating fireball. Gore and flesh rained down, all that remained of Skarjaw and the monster he rode.

As Markos' ears stopped ringing, he heard another sound swelling through the clangour of battle. It was the thunderous rumble of falling stone.

'The pass is coming down,' voxed Lady Bellah. 'Sires, pull back now or be buried.'

With the orks in confusion and the rock walls collapsing, the surviving Knights fled, angling their shields behind them to catch the enemy's last desperate shots.

Dust billowed as the fury of the mountains pounded down upon the orks and trapped them, cutting them off from the Draconspire once and for all.

Sire Markos sat back, smirking at the squires' rapt expressions.

'And that,' he said, 'is the story.'

'So you saved my father from being crushed by a rampaging monster,' said Danial. 'My thanks, Sire Markos. Without your heroism that day I wouldn't even be here.'

'Well,' said Markos. 'You're welcome, I'm sure. But as I say, that's the *story*.'

Luk frowned.

'What do you mean, sire?'

The Herald leaned forward, and his voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

'If you repeat this to anyone, you'll wish you'd had it as easy as the Tyrant of Farhaj. Understood?'

They nodded.

'By the time we got back to the Draconspire, my tale was already set in stone. The tapestry was woven, as they say. A half-dozen witnesses swore they saw me kill the monster. Me, a Knight that had just Become, saving the firstborn son of House Draconis. An inspirational tale of heroism to broadcast far and wide. And so they did, and I'd like to think it helped us win the war that much faster. Throne, perhaps it even put some steel in the spines of those Pegasson dogs. Later, when the war was done and the taletellers had embellished some more, it turned out to be a great tool for inspiring young squires. So I let it lie. But it's not the truth.'

Danial frowned.

‘Then what...?’

‘In that last moment when I fired, my throne overwhelmed me. I couldn’t even aim my shot, let alone fire it.’

‘So who killed the beast?’ asked Luk. ‘My father told me that you ripped a tooth from the ork’s jaw to keep as a trophy!’

‘I’ve no idea,’ said Markos. ‘Could have been the ghosts fired my weapon for me. Could have been one of my comrades did the deed. For all I know the orks did it themselves. Half the time their guns don’t work, and the other half they can’t aim straight. It doesn’t matter. My point is that I, and by extension your father, were either very lucky that day or very blessed. There’s a lesson in it for you both. Becoming isn’t just a rite, and nor is it easy. Show weakness, prove unworthy and you’ll end up like poor Lorrence. But even then you can’t just rely on skill alone. Our steeds are vast, powerful machines and the ghosts of our thrones help us to be wise, but by itself that isn’t enough either. What I’m saying, lads, is that even once you’ve Become, even if you rise to be the greatest warrior of your age, you still need the Emperor’s favour. Every day. Without the good luck He sends, even the mightiest of us will fall. Do you understand?’

Danial and Luk nodded solemnly.

‘Good. Then you’ll understand, too, why it’s time you got off your arses and to your prayers. Consecrate your minds and souls, then get a good meal and a few hours’ sleep. You’ll need it. When next I see you, you’ll have Become.’

Danial and Luk thanked Markos, rising from their thrones and hurrying away. As he stepped through the arched doorway, Danial glanced back. His eyes widened as he saw Sire Markos reach into the neck of his tunic, fishing out something that hung on a leather thong around his neck and looking at it with a wry smile.

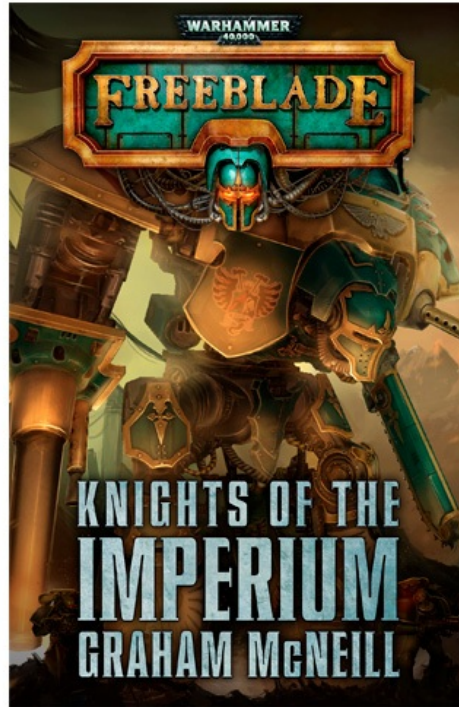
It was a long, cracked ork tooth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Clark has written the Warhammer 40,000 short story ‘Whiteout’, the Age of Sigmar short story ‘Gorechosen’, and the Warhammer Quest Silver Tower novella *Labyrinth of the Lost*. Andy works as a background writer for Games Workshop, crafting the worlds of Warhammer Age of Sigmar and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in Nottingham, UK.



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