

# 02\_Gauntlet run

# GAUNTLET RUN

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THE RISING SUN was just cresting the mountaintops, barely visible on the eastern horizon, fat and red like an overripe fruit. The morning sunlight lanced across the alkaline flats, every stone and promontory casting long shadows that stretched over the bone-dry remains of an ancient seabed that had dried up long before man's ancestors on Terra had first descended from the trees. Nothing lived in that dead and dry place, the only movement the dust devils kicked up by the hot winds that blew from north to south and back again. These tiny brief-lived tornadoes fed on the thin layer of dust atop the salt flats dried hard as rockcrete, with no sound to be heard but the plaintive whistle of the winds.

Then the Scout bike squadron thundered in from the west, their mighty engines deafening, the treads of their fat tyres tearing up the dry ground, sending up great plumes of dust churning in their wake.

The Imperial Fists had arrived.

The squad of bike Scouts raced east across the desert in a tight vanguard formation. At the forward point of their chevron was Veteran Sergeant Hilts, on his left flank Scouts Zatori and s'Tonan, on his right flank Scouts du Queste and Kelso.

Zatori continued to glance behind. As left flank outrider, it fell to him to watch their left rear, just as Kelso covered their right rear as right flank outrider, while s'Tonan and du Queste scanned the approaches before them, and Hilts set the pace and marked their course.

They had been running through the night, zigzagging north-east and south-east, but while they had yet to unsheathe their blades and the barrels of their bikes' twin-linked bolters were idling and cool, this was no pleasure drive. The stakes for their current mission were dire, with the life of every human on Tunis in the balance. If they were not able to locate enemy forces - and enemy forces of a very particular kind - then they would fail

in their duty, and millions would pay the price. But as the morning dawned, they had still found no sign of the enemy.

Until now.

‘Sergeant,’ Zatori voxed over the shared channel, for all the squad to hear, ‘we have picked up a tail.’

Zatori concentrated, employing the enhanced vision of the Astartes to peer farther than an unaugmented human would have dreamed possible.

‘It’s the greenskins,’ he added in confirmation. ‘And they’ve spotted us.’

‘Acknowledged,’ Veteran Sergeant Hilts voxed in reply, gunning his engine and putting on speed. He motioned forward with his massive power fist. ‘Throttle up, squad. The race is on.’

IT HAD BEEN only a few weeks since an ork space hulk had appeared in orbit above the planet Tunis without warning, spat out by a random rift in the fabric of space itself.

The human inhabitants below had scarcely noticed the hulk overhead before countless landers began dropping from the skies, disgorging warriors and war-machines alike.

The first encounters between the human inhabitants and the ork invaders had been brutal and short. The easternmost settlements, ringing the western edge of the salt flats, had been obliterated by orks mounted on bikes, buggies, and battlewagons, gangs of greenskins addicted to movement and murder, ranging as outriders while the main force of the orks entrenched somewhere in the endless caverns and subterranean passages that burrowed under the mountains to the east. The Space Marines knew the orks had a hidden base somewhere beneath those peaks, and if the Fists were unable to locate it, they had little chance of preventing a full-scale invasion. It was only a matter of time before the main body of the ork invaders completed work on their siege-machines

and attacked the human inhabitants en masse, but until that time the ork outriders would find their entertainment and excitement where they could.

A SPEED FREEK never stops, never sleeps, never hesitates. For him, there is only motion.

Rotgrim Skab knew that better than anyone. Since the moment the landers had touched down on the surface of this world, he and his crew had been up and running. As Nob of a speed freek warband of the Evil Sunz clan, it was Rotgrim's responsibility to get the bikeboyz fired up and rolling, to pick a point on the horizon and head out, and then kill every living thing they encountered along the way.

He raced at the head of the pack, massive legs wrapped around the casing of his warbike's supercharged engine, its throaty roar the only sound in his ears, exhaust and dust filling his flaring nostrils. Behind him ranged supercharged trucks and battlewagons, bikes and buggies, more than a dozen in all; bikeboyz of the Evil Sunz clan, decked out in leathers, chains and harnesses, with massive steel-toed boots on their feet and metal studs screwed directly into the bones of their foreheads. And all of them had red somewhere on them, whether cloth or stain, paint or spattered blood.

As leader of the warband, the Nob himself, Rotgrim was decked out in red from head to toe, with an axe in one hand and a dakkagun holstered at his side. His ride was painted blood red from grille to ground, as was only fitting - as the old ork adage went, the colour red makes things go faster. On a stanchion mounted behind him hung the banner of the Evil Sunz, a blood-red ork face grimacing from the heart of a starburst.

Rotgrim's warband had been going on raiding forays ever since they touched down on this dry, dusty world, impatient with the preparations being carried out in the tunnels and caverns below the mountains to the east. When the word was given, the full body of the ork army would be unleashed on the humans cowering in their settlements across the desert, and when the army moved out, the Evil Sunz would be in the vanguard.

There'd be work enough for them all to do, when the word was given, but there was no point in sitting around on their thumbs, just waiting, while they could be out and moving.

When Rotgrim spotted the five humans tooling across the desert on their little bikes, he decided to have a little fun before taking them down. It had been too long since he and the rest of the boyz'd had moving targets to practice on.

IT HAD BEEN lucky for the locals that the Imperial Fists transport had been in the area at all, Scout Zatori knew. When the planetary governor of Tunis had sent out his distress call, just as the ork landers first started dropping from the sky on the far side of the planet, the Imperial Fists had been near the system, returning from a previous undertaking to the Phalanx, the Chapter's fortress-monastery, currently at anchor at a few weeks' distance.

Of course, the transport had been a Gladius-class frigate, carrying only a single squad of Veterans of the First Company, accompanied by a Scout squad of the Tenth. But the planetary governor had not been in any position to complain about the size of the force that responded to his desperate calls for aid.

Like the others in the bike squad commanded by Veteran Sergeant Hilts, Zatori was just a novice, not yet a full battle-brother of the Imperial Fists, lacking the black carapace that would allow him to wear and control the powered ceramite armour of a full-fledged Adeptus Astartes. But the years he had spent on the Phalanx being transformed from a boy into a post-human son of Dorn had already set him apart from the rank and file of humanity. When the landing party had quit their drop-pods and been received by the planetary governor, Zatori and his fellow Scouts had towered over the locals, who quavered in their shadows, nearly as frightened of the Astartes - Space Marine and Scout alike - as they were of the greenskins who threatened to overrun them from the east.

Aside from Chapter serfs, like those who crewed the Gladius frigate in orbit overhead, or those who served onboard the Phalanx, Zatori had had precious little dealing with normal humans these last few years. But looking into the faces of the planetary governor and those who sheltered with him in the strongholds to the west, Zatori could not help but be reminded of the first time he'd seen a Space Marine himself, on the battlefields of Eokaroe, on his far distant home of Triandr. They had seemed the legends of his ancestors given flesh, giant warrior-knights stepping from the realm of myths into the world of men.

Now, years later, Zatori was one of them, at least in the eyes of normal men and women. Though still only a Scout, he was a proud Son of Dorn all the same, an Imperial Fist. He would strike with the Emperor's own righteous fury. That was his duty. That was his honour.

THE FIVE IMPERIAL Fists thundered east across the desert, maintaining their vanguard formation with rigid discipline. The greenskins were closing fast, coming right up behind.

In contrast with the regimented formation of the Fists, the morning sun glinting on the golden yellow and jet-black of their armour and bikes, the greenskins were a ragtag assortment of monsters, their vehicles belching exhaust and rumbling like unending death-rattles. But they were no slower, for all of that, thundering after the Fists like a fast approaching storm front.

Glancing back, Scout Zatori steeled his nerves as he saw an ork warbike roaring up behind, tantalisingly close to his own back tyre. Bike and rider were both covered in red, the colour of new-spilt arterial blood, with a banner fluttering madly from a rear-mounted stanchion, marking the rider as the warband's leader.

The ork leader waved an axe overhead, his wide-mouthed howls lost to the wind. Then he fired a prolonged burst from the twin-linked guns forward mounted before him. Zatori might have fallen there and then if not for the fact that the warbike bucked and spun wildly out of control as soon as the

poorly balanced guns were fired, sending the shots wide of the mark. As it was, the explosive shells passed so near Zatori's left shoulder as they flew by that the Scout fancied he could feel the heat of their passage.

Zatori glanced to the right, and caught a glimpse of a pair of warbuggies approaching du Queste and Kelso's flank. On the back of each of the two-man attack vehicles stood gunners on weapons platforms, and in the brief instant that Zatori's gaze took in the scene, he saw one of the gunners fire off a pair of rockets. As the rockets dug into the ground only metres from Kelso's back tyre, sending up a gout of dust and rock, Zatori turned his attention back to the ground before his own wheels.

Like the rest of the Scouts, Zatori was waiting for Veteran Sergeant Hilts to give the signal. Their orders called for them to maintain close formation after first enemy contact, right up until the sergeant gave the word, and then the next stage of their mission plan would be put into motion.

Zatori just hoped he survived long enough to follow the order.

'Squad,' Veteran Sergeant Hilts voxed at last, 'evasive pattern alpha.'

'Confirmed,' Zatori chorused back with the others, and then as one they broke formation, the left flank jinking right and the right flank jinking left, their paths twisting like DNA helixes as they gunned forward, leaving the disorderly orks in pursuit to compensate.

Now the Scouts would have to remain mobile long enough to see how the greenskins would respond.

DUST GRITTED IN Rotgrim's eyes, the carcasses of countless insects entombed between his teeth. He whirled his axe overhead, urging the rest of the warband to greater speeds.

A dozen metres to his right, a skorcha let loose a gout of flame at the nearest of the humans, the huge vats of promethium mounted on the rear of the buggy fuelling the heavy-duty flamethrowers operated by a pair of

Evil Sunz. The flame was all but spent by the time the last flickering tongues of the stream lapped the back of one of the human riders, doing little more than scorching his armour, but it was a start, at least.

Rotgrim fired off another round from the twin-linked dakkaguns on the front of his ride, the irregular percussive sound music in his ears. The shots went wide of the human he was tailing, and Rotgrim found little satisfaction in the puffs of dust and rock kicked up where the explosive shells finally struck the ground, far ahead.

A warbiker off to Rotgrim's left kept firing off shots from his rifle, laying down cover to keep the humans off balance while Rotgrim and the others narrowed the distance. Another warbuggy fired off a few shots with a mega-blaster, and another loosed a pair of rockets from its launcher. None of the shots, large or small, did much more than kick up dust, like Rotgrim's had done, but the humans were forced to jag back and forth to avoid the orks' fire, which served to slow them down.

And then, seemingly all at once, the distance had shrunk to nothing. Instead of just pursuing the humans, Rotgrim's crew was right in with them. Close enough for melee action, for close combat weapons rather than unreliable ranged fire.

This was where the fun really started. Not in lobbing shots at distant targets, hoping against hope that something hit home. But instead in taking the fight right to the enemy, dive-bombing them head on like a bomber coming in for the kill, speed against speed, motion against motion.

An evil grin curled Rotgrim's rubbery lips, exposing vicious, yellowed teeth, dotted with insect carcasses like sunspots on a jaundiced star. This was going to be fun.

SCOUT ZATORI COULDN'T help but be reminded of the words of Rhetoricus, who long centuries before had codified the Rites of Battle by which the Imperial Fists guided their actions. In the estimation of the Chapter, Rhetoricus was surpassed only by the Primarch Rogal Dorn

himself. Rhetoricus had penned any number of tracts, codices, and lexicons, but principal among them was The Book of Five Spheres, the catechism of the sword. In it, Rhetoricus had stressed the importance of knowing the advantages and shortcomings of each weapon in a warrior's arsenal. He had spoken of the importance of ranged weapons in the open field, of flame weapons and meltas in entrenched defence, of heavy ordnance for bombardment and of blast weapons for barrage. But more than any other, he had sung the praises of the sword in close combat.

It was seldom, if ever, that a battle-brother of the Imperial Fists Chapter went into the field of battle without a sword in his fist or at his hip, and not uncommon for Fists to enter the fray with no weapon save his trusted blade. Some, like Captain Eshara of the Third Company, even went into battle with a sword in each hand, testing his skill with the blade against all enemies of the Golden Throne. Even the Master of the First Company - to say nothing of being First Captain, Overseer of the Armoury, and Watch Commander of the Phalanx - the legendary Captain Lysander had wielded nothing but a sword in the undertaking on Malodrax, scouring the Iron Warriors from the planet and reclaiming his master-crafted thunder hammer, the Fist of Dorn, which had been first given to him by the martyred Captain Kleitus more than a millennium before Zatori was born.

In The Book of Five Spheres, Rhetoricus wrote, "The sword is at its most advantageous in confined places, or in the melee, or in close quarters - any situation in which you can close with an opponent". And later, "The soul of the Imperial Fist can be found in his sword". Also, "When the odds are innumerable against you, and there is little hope for victory, still a holy warrior with a sword in his hand can prevail, if his intent is righteous and pure".

So as the greenskin warbiker with the massive axe barrelled towards him, Zatori tightened his grip on his sword, his other hand gripping his bike's handlebars, and silently repeated the Litany of the Blade. As the ork swung his axe overhand at Zatori's bare head, just as their two bikes were about to careen into one another, the Scout muttered a prayer to Dorn and the Emperor that his parry would be sufficient to the task.

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ROTGRIM BROUGHT HIS axe down in a one-handed swing, right at the human's naked head. But before the blade bit into skin and skull, the human managed to turn the axe away with his sword, sending up a shower of sparks. Just as their blades struck, their two bikes collided off one another with a bone-crunching jar. As the two riders fought to maintain their balance, offsetting the force of the impact, they veered away from one another once more, each readying for another blow.

Teeth bared, Rotgrim hurled abuse at the human, who suddenly let go of his handlebars. It would have been funny, seeing a human riding a little bike hands free, if that hand hadn't come back up another moment later with a big gun in it.

Rotgrim yanked his forks to the right just in time to miss the torrent of heat that poured out of the gun, hot enough to fuse the sand on the ground into glass.

With a grim snarl, Rotgrim couldn't help but chuckle. The human wasn't the only one with a holdout.

Steadying his bike's forks with his knees, he let go of the handle and then yanked his dakkagun out of its holster.

THE MELTA GUN was a temporary deterrent at best, Zatori knew. It was only useful anyway over the shortest of distances, the promethium it excited into a sub-molecular state impossible to aim more than a few metres; but it was difficult to use any ranged weapons at high speed, anyway, so the trade-off between range and firepower for the Bike Scouts was deemed well worth it. As it was, between the melta guns for ranged firing and their swords for close combat, Veteran Sergeant Hilts had told the Scouts not to expect much opportunity to use their twin-linked bolters. After all, the bolters were designed to be fired at a target the bike was

heading towards, and this mission would require them to head away from the enemy until the race was over. There would be enemies aplenty when - and if - they reached their goal, but even then the bike's bolters would be of little use, if all went to plan.

When he'd parried the greenskin's first blow, Zatori had known he'd need to reposition before he took another, or he'd be off his seat and sprawled in the dust. Though he'd trained to use the blade in either hand, still he was far less proficient with his left, and with the ork approaching from the left rear, he didn't have the option of switching the sword to his right. His defensive options would be limited, perhaps fatally so, if he had to cross his body to parry and block, and offensive options would be reduced to virtually nil, and so the sword in his left hand was the only option. But while his left arm was no less strong than his right, the level of skill was simply not the same in both, as he'd learned to his shame in duels on board the Phalanx.

After deflecting the ork's first blow, their bikes collided and then spun slightly apart, with the greenskin a short distance behind Zatori's bike. The next attack, Zatori knew, would be coming from that angle. Poorly braced as he was, there was simply too great a chance that the greenskin would unseat him, and then Zatori's race would be at an end, far too soon.

It was necessary, then, to change the parameters of the engagement. Or, as Rhetoricus put it in *The Book of Five Spheres*, "When facing defeat or deadlock, seize the advantage by ascertaining the opponent's state and changing your approach."

So as the greenskin readied for his next attack, Zatori risked letting go of his handlebars, pulled out his melta gun, and sent a blast of superheated gas shooting over. Then, when the ork responded as Zatori anticipated he would, by drawing his own firearm and returning fire, Zatori slammed the melta gun back into his holster, and yanked hard left on his handlebars, sending his bike careering towards the greenskin's. Damning the imprecise but no less deadly fire of the ork, Zatori's path took him barrelling right past the greenskin's, the Scout's forward tyre just missing the ork's rear wheel as they zoomed past, Zatori's sword swinging across his body as they drew near.

When Zatori felt the sword tug in his hand as he whizzed past the ork's rear, he hoped for a moment that he might have scored a hit against the greenskin, who'd been unable to raise his axe in time to parry. Glancing back Zatori now saw that the ork was unharmed, but that the stanchion that had held the banner aloft had been cut clean through, the grimacing red ork emblazoned on it now fluttering down to the churned earth.

In that instant Zatori's gaze locked with the greenskin's, and he saw murder in the ork's flashing eyes.

FUN WAS ONE thing. Rotgrim couldn't blame a human for taking a few potshots in battle, or for trying to stick Rotgrim with his pointy blade. It was only fair, after all. Rotgrim'd kill him, sooner or later, but the little guy had a right to fight back. Wouldn't be any fun, otherwise.

But knocking the Evil Sunz standard down into the dirt? Now that, that just wasn't right.

Rotgrim jammed his dakkagun back into its holster. He wasn't going to use bullets or shells for this one. He was going to take care of this one with his hands.

ZATORI WAS STEERING back around so that his front forks were aiming towards the mountains when he heard a voice buzzing over the vox.

'Zatori, on your right!'

The next instant, Scout Kelso rammed by at top speed, crossing Zatori's path from right to left, barely avoiding a collision.

'Want to trade?' Kelso voxed as he slewed around, dust flying in a wide arc. He jerked a thumb back the way he'd come, at the flame-belching warbuggy following a short distance behind him.

Zatori glanced over his own shoulder at the ork warbiker following in his wake, a murderous scowl on his green face.

Before he could answer, though, Kelso gunned his engine and went racing right at the warbiker. 'My thanks, Zatori. I was getting bored.'

In the next moment, the warbuggy that previously had been pursuing Kelso roared behind Zatori, between him and the warbiker, the flamethrowers' attention now turned to their new target. In the dance of death between the Scouts and the orks, Zatori and Kelso appeared to have traded partners.

Zatori still found Kelso's manner difficult to understand. All Imperial Fists found some measure of satisfaction in carrying out their holy duty, but Kelso seemed to find some strangely manic joy in battle, and often conducted himself in a way that the more choleric Zatori found all but impossible to understand. It was perhaps not as noxious to him as the laconic attitude of du Queste, nor the seemingly emotionless reserve of s'Tonan, but still and above all Zatori found Kelso's joyous abandon in battle difficult to reconcile with the sombre duties of an Astartes.

Blistering tongues of flame lapped at the ceramite of Zatori's armour as the warbuggy veered in pursuit, and the Scout poured on speed to keep from getting roasted alive.

ROTGRIM ROARED IN annoyance as the skorcha trundled between him and his prey, but when the other human biker came racing towards him, sword swinging overhead and a joyous smile on his face, the Nob figured this new human would serve as an adequate appetiser. If he could not take vengeance on the one that had dishonoured the Evil Sunz standard just yet, he could first colour his axe with the blood of this one.

The human was riding straight at Rotgrim, and the ork wasn't sure if it was playing dare, to see which of them would veer away first, or else wanted to joust like horseback warriors on some feral world. The strange thing was that the human almost looked like he was laughing.

Well, if it was the speed that was tickling him, Rotgrim could almost understand it.

Of course, in another second or two, it would be Rotgrim's axe that would be tickling the inside of the human's brainpan, and he wouldn't be laughing so much after that.

THE GROUND BENEATH Zatori's tyres was getting rougher the farther east they raced. Where there had been only scattered rocks and small promontories breaking the level horizon of the salt flats to the west, as they moved eastward there were increasing numbers of larger rocks rising like the tips of icebergs above the salty ground, some almost as large as Zatori's bike. With these obstacles in his path, he was no longer able simply to open up the throttle and thunder ahead, but was forced to zigzag to keep from colliding with stones large enough to arrest his forward motion in a bone-smashing crash.

The warbuggy pursuing him, unfortunately, was raised on four fat tyres, its supercharged engine powerful enough to push it up and over the smaller rocks with scarcely any loss of forward momentum. So while Zatori was forced to bleed off speed as he zigged and zagged back and forth, the warbuggy ploughed on ahead at full tilt, closing the gap between them.

The promethium-fuelled torches at the back of the warbuggy bathed Zatori in a cascade of flame, and he grit his teeth against the searing pain. He could feel the skin at the back of his neck blistering and cracking, the close-cropped hair on his scalp singing off, and while he knew his blood would already be flooding with Larraman cells from the implant in his chest, creating instant scar tissue and staunching the flow of blood to the affected area, that knowledge did little to lessen the agony itself.

Fortunately, Zatori had spent his time in the Pain Glove, as Initiate, Neophyte, and Scout, and had cleaved to the sacred words of Rhetoricus: "Pain is the wine of communion with heroes". If he could learn to endure prolonged periods with that tunic of electrofibres, suspended for what seemed an eternity within the steel gibbet deep within the Phalanx,

meditating on the image of Rogal Dorn and learning to focus past the pain, remaining fully conscious throughout - if Zatori could do that, then he could endure the mere discomfort of having his flesh cooked off the bone by burning promethium.

He knew that, if the greenskins were in close enough proximity for their flamethrowers to paint him, then they were also close enough for Zatori's own melta gun to return the compliment.

With a silent prayer for forgiveness to the spirit of his blade, Zatori slammed his sword into the sheath on his back in one smooth motion, and then whipped his melta gun out of its holster on the side of his bike. Without wasting a moment, he twisted at the waist as far as he was able, swung the melta gun around and sent a blast of superheated gas back at the pursuing warbuggy.

ROTGRIM AND HIS human prey were less than an eye blink apart now, each with their blades on high. At the last possible instant, the human jinked to the left, swinging his sword at Rotgrim's broad chest. But Rotgrim had seen the swing coming, and just as the human pulled to the left, the ork slammed on the brakes for the briefest instant, arresting his speed just long enough for the swing to whistle by harmlessly, while at the same time whirling his axe in a wide arc aimed at the soft meat of the human neck rising above the neck of his armour.

Rotgrim punched his bike to speed almost immediately after braking, and so could scarcely feel the tug of resistance as his axe sliced through the human's neck. But glancing back he saw the human's bike careening off, veering wildly left and right, as the headless rider flopped back on the seat, sword still held in his lifeless hand, the head bouncing and skipping along on the ground behind.

Rotgrim noted the incarnadined edge of his axe with satisfaction. It was a nice shade of red now. But it needed to get redder.

ZATORI'S MELTA BLAST struck the greenskin driver head on, all but vaporising him instantly from the abdomen up, leaving only a pair of dismembered hands dangling lifeless from the steering wheel and an oozing puddle of viscera pooling atop the burnt remains of his hips and legs.

The flamethrower operators on the rear platform tried to direct another stream of incendiary his way, but their attempt was stymied by the warbuggy careering wildly out of control, driverless, into one of the larger rocks. With a squeal of metal on stone, the warbuggy came to an abrupt halt, and the pair of greenskins were sent hurtling through the air, tumbling end over end. The vat of promethium, jarred by the impact, spilled over, and as the liquid sloshed into the open flames of the throwers it caught fire, the resultant blast engulfing the warbuggy in a crumping black cloud of smoke and heat.

It was only as he turned his attention back to the ground ahead that he saw the headless body of Scout Kelso crashing into the dust a hundred or so metres off. Kelso's head, bouncing along the dead seabed far behind his body, wasn't smiling anymore.

ROTGRIM SAW THE skorcha explode, a mushroom of black smoke rising into the air as the thunderclap of the explosion rumbled through the dry air, just audible above the throaty roar of his warbike's engine. The humans were down a rider, with only four left in the saddle, and even with the loss of the skorcha the Evil Sunz still had nearly a dozen vehicles on the move.

Scanning the horizon, Rotgrim could just glimpse the human who'd defiled the Evil Sunz standard, zipping off to the east. There were too many obstacles in between for Rotgrim to catch up quickly, and there were easier targets closer anyway, that deserved the attention of his axe first.

It was getting high time to bring this particular race to a close, though.

Drawing his dakkagun, he fired a few quick bursts into the air in a set pattern, two long, four short, one long. The noise of the shots would carry over the growl of even supercharged engines, and every biker boy of the warband would recognize the sequence, and what it meant.

Rotgrim's orders were clear - it was time to stop racing for the sake of racing, and to start driving their quarry into the endgame.

'HILTS TO ZATORI,' came the voice of the Veteran Sergeant over the vox. 'What's your status?'

'Kelso is down, sir,' Zatori voxed back in clipped tones. 'I'm still up and running towards the east' - he glanced back, and saw the attack bike now coursing after him - 'and am pursued by a greenskin biker. I had a clash with their leader, but I've lost sight of him.'

'Acknowledged.' Then, after a pause, 'I think I've picked up the leader. Big monster in red gear on a red bike. But I don't see the clan standard...'

Zatori could not suppress a small grin as he made a tight swerve around a waist-high rock in his path. 'That would be my fault, sergeant. I cut it down and left it in the dust.'

The Scout could hear Veteran Sergeant Hilts's short, dry chuckle buzzing through the comm-bead he wore in his ear. 'No wonder he looks so displeased.'

'I didn't intend to win his pleasure.'

A small-arms round pinged off the gold and jet ceramite of Zatori's armour, the shot thudding into his left shoulder as the pursuing attack bike attempted to pick him off with a firearm. A second shot followed, also on his left but further down, nearer his waist. Each time, he reflexively leaned to the right, pulling away from the shot.

‘Their tactics have changed,’ Veteran Sergeant Hilts voxed, after a moment’s silence. ‘They’re stopped going for kill shots, and are using nuisance tactics, instead.’

Zatori glanced to his right, and could see the sergeant angling towards him, their trajectories meeting somewhere ahead of them, and behind the sergeant the red-clad leader of the warband.

When Hilts remained silent, Zatori realized that the veteran sergeant was giving him the opportunity to divine the significance of his words. Hilts had trained Scouts of the Imperial Fists for longer than Zatori had been alive, and was always looking for a teachable moment, whether in the sparring ring or in the battlefield, an opportunity for the novices under his command to learn an essential combat lesson.

‘They are herding us,’ Zatori said at last, as confidently as he was able.

‘Yes,’ Hilts allowed. ‘Exactly as we’d hoped.’

‘Your orders, sir?’

‘Allow yourself to be herded,’ Hilts replied. ‘And try not to get killed doing it.’

ROTGRIM WATCHED AS the power fist-wearing human biker he was pursuing pulled alongside another, and a single glance was enough to tell him that this second human was the one who had cut down the banner stanchion and disgraced the Evil Sunz. Trailing the human was another biker boy, a pistol in his fist, planting careful shots on the human’s back, steering his quarry just as Rotgrim’s signal had ordered.

The plan was to allow all of the humans still upright to stay moving until they got to the wall, where they’d stop and have a final bit of fun. But seeing the bare head of the human bastard who’d knocked the standard in the dirt convinced Rotgrim that maybe one or two of them could still fall

along the way. The few who reached the wall would have to be enough fun for the others.

Rotgrim whirled his axe overhead, signalling the other biker boy. A quick jab of his finger, first at the pair of humans, then at his own massive chest, was a simple enough message to carry even over the dust-filled air: These humans were his.

ZATORI CAUGHT A glimpse of Scouts du Queste and s'Tonan veering in from the right, pursued by a trio of warbuggies. It was clear he'd been right, and that the greenskins were herding them, steering their advance towards the west. He just hoped the orks were driving them where Hilts thought they were heading.

He and Hilts were riding side by side now, jinking back and forth to dodge the ever-growing number of rocky protuberances and outcroppings, ever larger as they continued eastward, the largest of them now taller than Zatori when astride his bike.

There had been two greenskin bikes in their wake, but when Zatori chanced a glance back to see how close they had come, one of the orks was peeling off to cover their left flank. Only the warband's leader, the red of Kelso's blood still staining his axe blade the same shade as his leathers and ride, was still in pursuit, and closing fast.

'Zatori to Hilts,' he voxed. 'The leader is gaining.'

Hilts spared an instant to look back over his shoulder, then turned back to face forward. 'Tighten up, Zatori. This may get bumpy.'

THE MOUNTAINS ON the eastern edge of the salt flats now towered before them. The sun was nearing its zenith, and the shadows had shrunk almost to nothing, making it more difficult to spot some of the smaller rocks in their path.

As they headed into the maze-like network of rocks and ridges that stretched out from the base of the mountains, Rotgrim gauged it impossible to pull up between the two humans, as he'd intended, laying about him on both sides with his axe. And since the human who'd disgraced the standard was now riding slightly ahead of the other one with the power fist, it meant that Rotgrim would have to get through him first before taking out his vengeance on the human bastard.

An evil grin tugged up the corners of Rotgrim's wide mouth as an idea struck. He hung his axe on his belt, then reached behind him and snapped off the broken spar which was all that remained of the stanchion that had once held the Evil Sunz banner aloft.

As the two humans pulled into a relatively open stretch of ground, Rotgrim punched his warbike into a sudden burst of speed, pulling up alongside them on the right. As the human on the right turned to grab at Rotgrim with his power fist, the ork leaned over as far over to the left as he could go without tipping his bike over, and drove the broken spar like a lance between the spokes of the human's front wheel.

The power fist closed on empty air as the front wheel pegged, and with a squeal of metal on metal the human's bike flipped end over end.

Before Rotgrim even had a chance to savour the destruction, though, a blast of superheated air shot right across his path, and he was forced to veer off hard to the right to avoid the next shot from the twice-damned human's heat gun.

'SQUAD! COVER NEEDED!' Zatori voxed urgently, as he watched Veteran Sergeant Hilts tumbling through the air. A melta blast had been enough to drive the ork leader away, if only for a moment, but it wouldn't keep him off Zatori's back for long. And if their mission had any hope for success, Zatori couldn't let Hilts lie wherever he fell.

In response to Zatori's call, the other two scouts, du Queste and s'Tonan, came roaring over at speed, swords swinging and bolts flashing from their

twin-linked bolters. They threw themselves at the ork leader, slewing in between him and Zatori, giving the latter a few moments grace to act.

While the ork leader was occupied with du Queste and s'Tonan, Zatori ground to a halt where Hilts had come to rest. The sergeant was pinned between the massive rock that had arrested his forward motion and the heavy bike that had arrived a split second after. The bike itself was a mangled mess, bent out of its true shape, the forward forks snapped off and the tyre still trundling away in the dust. Hilts was in little better shape. At the speeds they'd been travelling, the force of the impact with the massive rock outcropping had been enough to dent his ceramite armour in several places, and he was bleeding generously from wounds that his Larraman cells had not yet been able to staunch. One leg was bent forwards at an obscene angle, and his left arm appeared to be pulled completely from its socket. The impact of the bike had only worsened the damage.

'Take... take it...' Zatori heard Hilts say, not over the vox - the sergeant's ability to transmit no doubt compromised by the crash - but the words instead rasping out through Hilts's damaged visor.

The sergeant raised his power fist, and Zatori could see the small device affixed to the gauntlet's cuff.

'Sorry, sir,' Zatori said, leaping off his bike and rushing to Hilts's side. With a grunt of effort, he heaved the mangled bike off of the sergeant. 'We're already a rider down, and I can't conscience leaving another behind.'

Slipping both hands beneath the sergeant's battered form, Zatori straightened and lifted Hilts into the air.

Hurrying to his bike, Zatori draped the sergeant over the back like saddlebags, and after securing him in place jumped back into the seat.

'Scout...' Hilts said, as Zatori gunned the engine, his voice scarcely audible. Zatori knew that, in the face of such massive injuries, Hilts would

be going into a fugue state as his body attempted to repair itself. 'Press on... No matter what... Press...'

The sergeant slipped into unconsciousness, his body's full attention on its injuries.

'Squad!' Zatori voxed, as he kicked his bike into motion, driving towards the mountains which now loomed before them. 'The sergeant's with me. Now let's end this race!'

THEY THUNDERED TO the east, the Scouts pulling just ahead of the Evil Sunz, and as they neared the foothills of the mountains, the rocky protuberances and outcroppings grew larger and more numerous, rising like ghost ships above the dead seabed. The way forward was difficult, and Scouts and orks alike were forced to jink constantly back and forth to avoid running aground.

And with each passing instant the mountains grew ever closer, ever larger, swelling to fill the horizon as far as the eye could see.

ROTGRIM RUMBLED IN grim satisfaction as he saw the three human bikers approach the end of the race.

There was nowhere for them to run. Just as Rotgrim had ordered, the warband had herded the humans across the salt flats, through the maze of stones, to a defile that ran a hundred or so metres deep into the living rock of a mountain before ending at a solid rock face. And it was to this wall of stone that the humans had run their bikes.

Rotgrim ground his bike to a halt, and the rest of the warband skidded in behind him. He snarled, hefting his axe.

The three humans were on their feet now, swords and guns in hand, ringed protectively around the fallen human draped over one of the bikes.

It was almost funny, Rotgrim thought. The humans acted like they even had a chance. And who knows, against Rotgrim and his crew of biker boyz, maybe they might have.

But what the humans didn't know was that it wasn't just Rotgrim and his crew they had to worry about.

Now the fun would start, Rotgrim thought, climbing off his warbike. He hit the transmitter on his belt, signalling that they had arrived.

The humans turned at the sound of the hidden hatch opening in the rock face behind them. Even before the hatch was clear a dozen orks were spilling through, axes, guns, and pistols armed and ready.

THERE WERE DOZENS at first, then hundreds, pouring out of the hatch that led to the passages and caverns hidden beneath the mountain.

Zatori kept close to his bike, with Veteran Sergeant Hilts still draped over the back like saddlebags, his massive power fist dangling just centimetres above the hard packed dirt.

The Scout could hear the hideous laughter of the green-skinned monsters, and knew that they must find some humour in the fact that the squad had failed to outrun them.

But what the orks did not know was that Zatori and the others never meant to outrun them, but merely outpace them. And now they had reached the end of the run.

Zatori smiled as he reached down and detached the small device attached to the power fist's cuff. He held it aloft, and as he thumbed the switch the miniature teleport homer began to hum faintly.

There was a flash of light and a sudden, deafening boom, and before Zatori stood a towering Space Marine, his ceramite armour finished golden yellow and jet black, a storm shield on one arm and a massive thunder

hammer in his other hand. A cloak fluttered behind him in the dry, hot wind, and above the Space Marine's shoulders rose a stanchion surmounted by a wreathed death's-head, bearing a scroll-shaped crossbar on which was emblazoned his name: LYSANDER.

'Primarch!' Captain Lysander shouted, swinging his thunder hammer the Fist of Dorn overhead. 'To your glory and the glory of Him on Terra!'

With a snarl on his lips, Captain Lysander charged towards the orks massed before the open hatch, without hesitation, without pause. Just as the captain cleared the patch of dirt upon which he had appeared, another Space Marine flashed into existence, and then another, and another, all with thundering war cries on their lips, all with their swords drawn and ready for blood. An entire squad of Veterans of the Imperial Fists, each of them in Terminator armour, each of them rushing to close with the ork invaders.

The Veterans of the First Company tore into the massed greenskins, swords biting. Already Captain Lysander was plunging into the hidden underground complex beyond the open hatch, laying waste to all he found.

ROTGRIM STOOD DUMBLY for a moment, watching the armoured humans smashing into his brother orks. And all he could think was that this was all the fault of the humans he'd been chasing, and of that twice-damned human in particular. He could picture the standard of the Evil Sunz laying somewhere out there in the salty dust.

He tightened his grip on his axe, rubbery lips curling in a snarl.

This race wasn't over yet, he realised. Not until he'd got his vengeance.

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ZATORI AND THE other two Scouts gathered around the supine form of Veteran Sergeant Hilts at the extraction point, waiting for the gunship that was thundering in to extract them. From where they stood, some distance from the base of the mountain, they could hear the sound of battle as the Veteran squad clashed with the orks, the greenskins ill-prepared for such an assault.

‘I would have liked to stay and watch the Terminator squad in action,’ s’Tonan said, eyeing the horizon.

The bike squad’s run across the desert had been a subterfuge all along, to get the homer deep enough into the enemy ranks for the Terminators to take them out from within, in one fell swoop.

‘And I would like to get clear of the greenskins’ stench,’ answered du Queste, picking bugs from his teeth.

Zatori didn’t have a chance to say just what he would like, as they were interrupted by a bellowing roar coming from the direction of the mountains.

It was the red-clad leader of the warband, rushing towards them at full tilt, his enormous axe held high overhead. He was driving straight at Zatori with murder in his eyes, an animalistic howl reverberating from between his cracked and massive teeth.

Zatori didn’t waste an instant by dropping into a defensive posture, or by reciting the abbreviated Litany of the Blade, or by raising his sword into the en garde position. Instead, he simply drew his melta gun, squeezed the trigger, and melted the oncoming ork into a puddle of ooze and charred bone with a single prolonged blast.

‘And what would Rhetoricus say about that manoeuvre?’ du Queste asked, eyes narrowed and a slight smile tugging the corners of his lips.

‘Simple,’ Zatori answered. ‘I ascertained the opponent’s state,’ he hefted his melta gun, ‘and seized the advantage by changing my approach.’