



((OoC Explanation))

Significance is similar to a “choose your own adventure” story, where the reader (as a capsuleer of New Eden) enters a virtuality that places them in the role of a Paladin aboard the eponymous station during the Elder War of YC 110. You then make your own choices and move through a narrative of modest size.

This project is meant to be experienced in-game, in the hope that this will moderately improve immersion, as well as give roleplayers the opportunity to play through it in groups and enrich the scripted narrative with their own personalities and dialogue. You can, of course, read through it entirely in solitary silence if you prefer, here or there.

To journey through “Significance” in-game, all you need to do is join the “(*) **Significance**” channel in-game. Note that the eight pointed star character there is not an asterisk, so you should copy/paste the channel name from here rather than trying to type it manually. Personally, I think it works better in-game, and would recommend you give it a try there first, but opinions may vary and that’s why this document exists.

If you prefer the google doc format, you’re in the right place. But there are a couple important rules!

DO NOT READ CHAPTERS SEQUENTIALLY or you will get very confused very quickly.

ONLY PROCEED THROUGH PAGES BY CLICKING THE [blue links](#).

Content Warning

This story is set within a particularly ugly chapter of an already brutal conflict, and does not shy away from what that means. It is bleak, and violent, and those who are uncomfortable with looking too closely at death might wish to find other entertainment.

If you are looking for a laugh to unwind after a long day’s work, you definitely have much better options.

But if you want to be existentially challenged by a perspective from those nameless soldiers and civilians sacrificed in the wars between the great Empires of Eve, well, hopefully this will not disappoint.

Lastly, constructive criticism is welcomed! I'm new to Eve, and despite my best efforts to research the wonderful lore here, I'm sure I've messed some details up. Likewise, I haven't written a project like this before, so my grasp on the medium is less than ideal. Please feel free to drop me an Evemail with any comments or suggestions. I hope at least some of you enjoy it!

If you still wish to continue, you may proceed to:

[\(*\) Investiture](#)

(*) Investiture

It isn't a pleasant, smooth ride into this virtuality, not the accustomed process eased by a curated interface and clean sensory transfer. The virtual world spun into existence around your consciousness is shrouded behind a murky veil of imperfect and rather ugly perception.

Your burgeoning senses are dull, confined, uncomfortably cramped. A battery of harsh lights assaults eyes as they blink open, photoreceptors sluggish to respond, refusing to dim for clearer perception. A riotous cacophony of noise jars aching ears unable to resolve the torrent into threads of meaning. The body itself feels... heavy, the limbs weighted and sluggish as you stir from an untidy sprawl of limbs upon the corrugated metal of the decking below. Attempts at datalink queries for context, clarifications, and aid are shouts into an uncaring void, absent the interfaces a capsuleer is accustomed to.

Are these limitations the hallmarks of lackluster coding in a sub-par virtuality? Or is this how the lesser peoples of New Eden live, absent the extensive implants that mold how capsuleers interface with the world around? It is hard to remember what it was like, Before.

Any such existential musings are short-lived as your surroundings continue to resolve into increasingly unpleasant clarity. This body has damage, pain receptors shrieking uncontrollably without the requisite implants to dampen their strident agonies. A miscellany of bone-deep contusions; a burn across one arm: a sharp pain in the left side when breathing that the heavy carapace of antiquated armor has failed to prevent. Persistent tinnitus in the left ear is only broken when a nearby explosion crashes over you with palpable force. The startled oaths of nearby soldiers taking cover and the shrill screams of panicked civilians compete to briefly outdo the blaring emergency klaxon saturating the corridor around you. A surge of unspeakably vile vomit rises in your throat, underwritten with the cloying metallic tang of blood. An awkward lurch of protesting limbs brings you fully back to your feet, taking ownership of the situation and assessment of your surroundings.

Nor is this distress confined solely to your person. As awareness expands outward, the frantic chaos of the situation becomes apparent. A panicked stream of Amarr swirl past the shattered dam of security barricades that once controlled their flow, their garments torn, burned, and sodden with blood. Echoing along the arcing causeway from whence they come comes the ugly staccato thunder of heavy slug-throwers and despairing screams.

Taking up position around you are a half-dozen Paladins, a miscellany of wide-eyed and pale young men and women, largely fresh recruits awaiting whatever might come with quavering determination. These untested guardians of the Empire may not be prepared for the savagery of the battle that has been brought to them, but their faith and their duty is stronger than their fear. And if that courage holds only by the narrowest of margins, then it is all the more impressive. There is a strange tightness in your chest and an ache in your throat as you consider your comrades in arms, an atavistic loyalty at some deep level of the virtuality that hurts like welling tears.

It is all too easy to slip into the half-remembered life of this Paladin whose body you inhabit, military commands, lines of scripture, and manufactured memories leaping into your thoughts and onto your lips as naturally as breathing. It is only in the stolen moments between each crisis that you feel truly yourself again, and they grow ever fewer the longer you remain.

And though you are carried ever forward by the inexorable flow of the virtuality around you, you are not absent agency. There are choices for you to make, large and small, whose consequences reverberate around you.

[\(*\) The Vanguard](#)

(*) The Vanguard

The tide of approaching civilians abruptly begins to ebb, thinning to a shambling trickle of battered humanity. The escalating clamor and tumult drawing ever nearer dashes the brief hope that the majority had made it to safety - rather, there is the inescapable dread that few more victims of the murderous invaders had survived to make it this far.

Only one among your Paladin cohort stands unbent, defiant - the aging sergeant with command of this small company. A generation or more older than the fresh recruits under his command, his balding pate gleams in the flickering light and his well-worn armor strains mightily to contain the bulk accumulated over decades of indolence. But now his eyes gleam with a fervid glee, a contagious eagerness to revitalize the tales of valor and courage you vaguely recall from nights as he held court at the station bar. Though his reddened and varicose cheeks are a familiar consequence of his unrivaled devotion to the holy grape, this time their color owes more to emotion and exertion as he bellows out orders to your squad.

"Let your faith steel those trembling limbs, Paladins! *This* is why you swore the oaths, not to while away your days in customs inspections and chasing petty criminals. Glory awaits the Faithful this day, and it begins here, in this shabby corridor. You hold this line, no matter what! You hear me? Whatever comes up that corridor, it will be no match for Amarr flame and fury!"

The grizzled sergeant squeezes off a quick gout of laser fire from his scrambler as violent punctuation to his speech, startling his contingent into sudden readiness. As he strikes a defiant pose, one knee braced against the plasteel barricade, such is his fervor In that moment that he is transformed from a derelict drunkard into a hero of the storied past. A ragged cheer rises from your comrades as he continues, voice raising in ever-more strident elocution.

"The Matari have *trespassed* upon Significance, yes, but they will come no further! We will send these degenerate heathens screaming down to..."

Any further oratory is abruptly terminated in a soft, wet, profane squelch as the aging Paladin ceases to exist above the shoulders. The lucky banked-shot ricochet which arced around the gentle curve of the corridor and robbed him of further glories is followed by a small fusillade that tears up the surrounding area. The remaining Paladins duck behind the cover of their woefully inadequate crowd control barricades.

As the enemy fire subsides once more, the silence left in their wake is a brittle and delicate thing broken by rising despair among the ranks.

"He's dead! The sergeant's dead!" One of the soldiers chirps out unhelpfully, stray droplets of the sergeant's blood livid against his pallid skin as he stares at the decapitated corpse at his feet.

"Oh God... God... God... God..." Another young man moans like a religious mantra, arms wrapped around his knees as he rocks back and forth behind his shelter.

Indecision and confusion spreads among the remainder like some plague from Scripture.

"The sergeant said to hold..."

"Fuck that!"

"Why are we going to die over some useless corridor? We've gotta get out of here..."

The quarrel continues unabated and without resolution for long torrid moments before dwindling into sullen silence, the squad turning towards you and deferring to your decision by some unspoken consensus. The choice, and the responsibility, falls squarely upon you now.

Do you choose to: Make your stand and [\(*\) Hold the Line](#)

Disobey and [\(*\) Abandon Your Post](#)

(*) Hold the Line

"We hold." Steel girds your voice as you repeat the command. "WE HOLD."

Following your lead, the six Paladins take a knee behind the shelter of the plasteel barricades, perhaps a daunting barrier to the usual petty criminals but now rather less than desired. The distant din of the enemy advance slowly resolves into distinct ponderous crashes of metal, the heavy tread of some frightful demon conjured from a child's terrors. Only the weight of the laser rifle reflexively clutched in hands gives some small measure of comfort, some hope as an instrument with which to write your destiny.

That benign illusion is shattered with brutal revelation as the Matari invader emerges into view some fifty meters down the station causeway. A MTAC of unfamiliar design lurches forward in an ungainly lope, four towering meters of reinforced alloys wrought into a combat walker of terrifying proportions. Like all things Matari, it is an unlovely and skeletal monstrosity, all else stripped away in sacrifice to economy and purpose. Aside from the articulated limbs and central chassis, it bears only a pair of massive multi-barrel rotary drive machine guns, one on each shoulder. It has been wrought for destruction on a higher order of magnitude than the infantry which stand in its path.

And yet the defiant Paladins open fire, rifles spilling gouts of brilliant energy shrilling through the air toward the foe. Black scars score the alloys where the laser blasts wash over the enemy mech, but the MTAC does not falter or slow in its advance. A new sound blossoms in the wake of the staggered barrage, a slow whirr escalating from a whisper to a whine to a scream, until the twin engines of death cut loose with deafening thunder.

Heavy slugs gouge parallel lines of slag into the decking and rise to sweep across the scattered barricades in wild lashing death, shattering what discipline the Amarr had maintained thus far, with individual Paladins ducking for cover and returning fire in irregular disarray.

As the deafening barrage is sustained, the counter-rotating drives of the barrels slowly align into a pinpoint stream of lethal slugs, focusing on a single plexisteel barricade. The material shudders, cracks, and buckles under an assault it was never designed to withstand, before shattering entirely. The hapless Paladin crouched behind it comes apart in a gout of red mist, his scattered remains unrecognizable as human.

A searing heat felt even through the gauntlets on your hands betrays the escalating strain suffered by the rifle as it is pushed past its fail-safes by sustained fire. Another barrier collapses under the weight of its relentless assault, the Paladin behind it barely managing to dive free and roll behind your own feeble shield. You think she might be screaming, but your ears are deaf to all but the cascading cannonade of the MTAC.

Confidence growing with each moment of unchallenged dominance, the MTAC advances on your Paladins' position. As with other conquerors before it, that eager arrogance proves its just undoing. Dangling from a shattered holodisplay over the causeway hangs a severed cable, still fitfully spitting sparks as the mech blunders into it. Coruscating energy leaps from the conduit with a blinding flash, and one lumbering leg seizes in place. The mech lurches, twists and falls awkwardly to the side, its guns sullenly subsiding into silence.

There is a single, crystalline moment of beautiful wonder at the deliverance you have been granted, and then your remaining comrades stagger from behind their ruined barricades to advance on the stricken MTAC. It twitches and stirs, failed systems struggling to reboot and restore functionality, but you and the Paladins give it no opportunity. Surrounding the twitching mech, the heretofore ineffectual rifles now concentrate fire on a single point in the main chassis. A circle of the resistant polyalloy glows red, then white, and finally buckles under the combined assault. The sudden smell of burned meat fills the air, a nauseatingly appealing odor, and it is done.

"All active units, rendezvous at the nearest medical ward."

[\(*\) Asclepeion](#)

(*) Abandon Your Post

Fight, and die, over this meaningless little corridor of an unimportant station? Your virtual wish for self-preservation and your broader capsuleer perspective find common ground in this decision, united in rejecting the meaningless death you have been ordered to.

Slowly, you rise and begin backing away, steps quickening as you begin to hear the ominous tread of some massive mechanical beast lumbering towards the paltry barricades. The other Paladins look back at you with varied emotions writ upon their features: confusion, betrayal, fear. One rises to follow you, scurrying shamefacedly past; a second casts down his rifle and simply runs, the curses of his fellows dogging his footsteps.

For a few brief moments, you hear the hiss of your erstwhile comrades firing defiant blasts from their rifles. Then a thunderous fusillade of gunfire erupts, the echoing reports rebounding on each other into a cacophony like the world itself crumbling. In the face of such terrible power, the few that remained behind are surely dead, and you turn away with a vague emptiness aching within your breast.

But your half-seen foe does not stop to savor the victory, and instead commits to the chase, massive strides propelling it down the causeway after you, and you spur this protesting body and cumbersome armor into a swift lope.

A giant newscast screen catches your attention as you run past, the display flickering and sparking fitfully as it displays fragmented stills of shattered Amarr warships and burning cities on the planet below. The scope of the suffering and death is so vast that the mind rebels at any attempt to compass it, instead fixated on your own, immediate peril.

Your pursuer is gaining.

You push yourself to the physical limit, lungs burning with searing air, muscles in your legs screaming in protest as they accumulate acids deep within, but it is not enough. This body is strong and swift, for flesh and blood, but it cannot prevail against machine endurance guided by Matari hate.

It can, however, surpass that of this Paladin, the first to follow your lead and desert. Your eyes meet hers for a single, poignant moment, tied together by shared shame and terror. Then you are past, leaving her to a fate swift on her heels. There is a single scream, swiftly ended by a wet *tearing* sound that your imagination interprets in a dozen horrifying ways.

Has it been minutes since you began your flight? Seconds? Hours? Time moves strangely now, jagged, cutting through your awareness and hitching like a dulled knife through meat. You pass the other Paladin now, frantically stripping off his armor as he crouches within an empty merchant stall. The thunder of massive guns only moments later testifies to the failure of this deception as well.

As you come to the perimeter of the station, a crossroads lies before you. Ahead, a transparent plasteel bulkhead looks out upon the larger battle, tiny sparks flaring as the last of the Amarr fleet in system is hunted and destroyed. A glance to either side reveals featureless corridors stretching away, and you are frozen for but a second in indecision. It is a second too long.

The single round goes right through your abdomen to impact and shatter on the wall beyond. It doesn't even hurt, at first, and you feel strangely detached as you slowly keel over, watching the fractal bloom of fractures in the plasteel panel. But the reprieve does not last long, and you are inundated by agony in ways you had not thought possible. Each ponderous tromp of the approaching MTAC sends a new wave of liquid, evil sensation coursing through your shattered body, and the spiderwebbing fissures in the bulkhead creep a bit further.

You feel it looming over you, a cruel predator surveying its kill, when the wall finally ruptures. The explosive decompression snatches you both and casts you out into the void, the shocking cold of the abyss a brutal escalation of the bitter chill you already were enveloped by.

The pilot of the MTAC may be buttressed against the sudden exposure, but absent maneuvering thrusters, that chassis

will become his tomb. He will slay no more of your kin. Was it uncaring chance that made your petty rebellion and ignominious death still protect the people of Amarr, or was it the hand of God? This question will haunt you for the scant moments you have left.

[\(*\) The Pitiless Psychopomp](#)

(*) The Pitiless Psychopomp

Capsuleers may have died countless times, their consciousness transferred to a new clone, as disposable as the last. Some would say that this gives them a deeper understanding of death than any mere mortal could possess, but that is simply wrong. Very few capsuleers are burdened with the knowledge of actually *dying*.

The instant a capsule is breached, two things happen: the wire-cap on the pilot's head injects an instantly lethal nanotoxin into their bloodstream, and the scanner sends its piercing light into their skull. Death is lightning-swift, and for most, painless. They seamlessly transition into a new body, consciousness uninterrupted by physical trauma.

But this virtuality is not so kind as you lay dying. It does not show mercy, or easily relinquish you to the sweet lethe of the real world or another virtuality.

No, you **suffer**.

You are trapped in this decaying prison of meat and bone as it slowly falls apart, forced to feel every nerve screaming in desperate agony for some, any relief; hoping for something, someone to pull you back from the terrifying precipice towards which you slide.

It does not come.

You are alone.

It is impossible to chart the span of these lingering moments between life and death, to compass the betrayal of your body shutting down, cell by cell, to escape the hopelessness and the despair at oblivion's inexorable march. Perhaps your faith may offer comfort in these last interminable moments, or some other form of discipline may quell the fear of the unknown. Or perhaps you are consumed entire by the utterly thorough and convincing finality of this death, the inescapable conviction that you will never have the chance to glory in another sunset, speak your truths to those you would have known them, to right your wrongs or write how you will be remembered. All lost, beyond your reach, swallowed by the pitiless void.

This, then, is what death means for the mortals of New Eden.

You are permitted one last, final thought.

What significance is there in yours?

You blink your eyes open, tasting the same breath you took before submerging yourself in the disturbingly immersive virtuality. The time dilation on this virtuality must be configured for a startlingly high ratio, for no more than a second has passed here despite the breadth of experiences you have endured within.

If you have the courage and the will, you may reenter the virtuality, and again attempt to chart the path of a Paladin through the trials of that terrible day, a doomed guardian of the Empire lost amidst ruin and despair. Whether you dare to risk how that experience might change you... that is for you to decide.

[\(*\) Significance](#)

(*) Asclepeion

The medical ward is almost unrecognizable.

The stately temple of healing has been transformed by the crisis more thoroughly than one would have thought possible. A haze of particulates shrouds the soaring arches and calming murals in disconcerting filth. The ordered flow of traffic and triage, guided by austere and competent staff, has utterly vanished, inundated by the volume of the tragedy unfolding here. Every available surface is claimed by civilians wounded during the brutal bombardment that reduced the station's exterior defenses, wreaking no small havoc upon the habitable sectors in the process.

Utterly at a loss as to what to do, your depleted squad of Paladins lingers on the threshold of this tawdry and bleak hospice as they confront the utter ruin of their people.

A doctor approaches, the once pristine aureate uniform of medical personnel darkened to near pitch black with cloying blood and her ident-tag of "Detzcha" nearly illegible. The steel-haired Amarr matron's tone is clipped and precise, biting off each word as if she could barely spare the effort to voice it.

"Paladins. Function check."

The battle-scarred youths respond to her implicit authority with a shuffling of feet into a firmer stance and a ragged line, submitting to the cursory examination already underway. The medic's left eye glows a faint blue as her datalink interfaces with each soldier's suit in turn, diagnosing each with merciless efficacy.

"Concussion. Detached cornea. Next."

"Lateral fractures of the left humerus... femur... tibia. Administering sealing agent and a double adrenaline course."

"Paladin. Holster your weapon."

"I can't." The next young woman in line shakes her head violently, clutching her rifle in gauntlets burned black as the void. "If I let go, I'll start screaming and I don't think I'll be able to stop. The trauma membrane already has me hopped up on enough speed that I can ignore it if I don't think about it."

"Very well. Increasing dosage."

The next is the worst of the lot, pale as driven snow and leaning on another's arm just to remain upright. That comrade speaks a rushed, plaintive entreaty.

"He can't keep going, he needs full medical..."

Her hard eyes are sharp with disapproval as they stare down over a beaked nose with austere authority.

"His pelvis is crushed, something worse in the gut. The suit is all that is holding him together. He can die in here, or he can die out there doing God's work."

The stricken soldier nods once, lifting his chin in defiant pride even as pink bubbles froth at the corner of his lips.

"Amarr victor!"

The doctor responds in kind before turning her attention to you.

"Injuries... minor. You're in command of this unit."

It isn't a question.

"The invaders are already releasing an aerosol compound into the life support systems. Some manner of insorzapine agent. I'm not going to pretend to know what all it does. Nausea, disorientation, probably long-term cellular degeneration. But it counteracts vitoxin, somehow. We're all about to be exposed. Come."

She leads the way to a nearby emergency locker, throwing open the doors to reveal an already vastly depleted stock of emergency equipment. No more than a half dozen rebreathers remain, dusty from years of disuse, barely enough for your squad, and none of the civilians outside.

"Those should ward your Paladins. Maybe you can buy these people enough time to reach safety, wherever that is anymore. Take them and go. Or..."

She pivots sharply and opens a refrigerated case marked with the Ministry of Internal Order seal.

"I can give you a vitoxin course. Standard issue. Whatever this insorum is doing to us, it spares those bearing the slave virus. It might do the same for you. But the process isn't reversible. You would never be free of it."

A sweet scent begins to saturate the stale air, and wisps of gray smoke are visible as they curl through the venting.

"That's it, the bastards have auxiliary life support. You're out of time, Paladins."

Do you choose to:

Accept the transformative vitoxin and the [\(*\) Sacrifice of Volition](#)

Use the rebreathers yourselves, to [\(*\) Protect the Protectors](#)

Give the remaining equipment to civilians in [\(*\) Charity of the Commons](#)

(*) Protect the Protectors

"We follow protocol. Paladins, suit up."

The words come as instinctively as breathing, obedience drilled into the Paladin psyche as deeply as the Empire's best conditioning could manage. That discipline bestows fresh purpose on your squad as they help each other into the unfamiliar equipment. As the rebreathers whirr to life, the filtered air has an unpleasant chemical taste to it, but is free from any outside contaminants.

"Go with God, Paladins."

The harried doctor snaps a quick salute to the young men and women under your command, an act that no doubt cost the corpsman stamina she did not have to spare. She turns and strides back into the chaos of the medical ward, marching with grim determination into her own unwinnable battlefield as you depart for your own.

In absence of further direction from command, you all need some manner of purpose. A victory to claim, even a small one, would do wonders for the morale ebbing away with each moment of indecision. A quick survey of your surroundings reveals that the situation here is even less tenable than you had realized.

"This position is completely indefensible. If the Matari come here, it will be a slaughter. We need to secure the area, seal off the sector at frames A-6, A-7, and A-8. Move out, staggered screen. Ebidan, Inhira, you take point."

Summoned from some deep well of knowledge provided by the virtuality, the tactical commands come easily to cracked lips as you guide the squad away from the medical ward and down the main causeway. Away from the wounded civilians, you are swiftly blanketed with a suffocating silence in which every footfall and ragged breath echoes unsettlingly.

The chosen path leads through what was once an exquisitely sculpted market, now laid to waste by savage high caliber rounds. Bodies are scattered through shattered storefronts; statues of saints laid waste by obvious intent; the people and culture alike defiled by casual depravity. A glance at your companions sees them affected by the fresh atrocities here, their hardening resolve writ in hard eyes and taut bearing as you secure the first blast door, and the second without incident.

But then the waxing tension of the hushed advance is shattered by the high, thin keening of a child's agony. The Paladins respond with disciplined intensity, fanning out to claim and secure the surrounding area, leaving you to approach the recess from which the wail arises. You move with haste spurred not only by the distress of the child but the gnawing fear that further ruin may be called down by such clarion suffering.

Within a dimly lit room, you find a boy of perhaps eight kneeling on the floor and screaming, a full throated anguish unmitigated by having miraculously escaped harm despite the devastation around him. However, the same cannot be said for the at least three bodies crushed beneath a collapsed bulkhead towards which he extends shaking hands and incoherent grief. Your hand reaches out, gently pulling the orphan away from the untimely grave of his family.

"Come, child. You shall be reunited again in Heaven."

Though words may not penetrate the shroud of intense grief, touch proves a more compelling intrusion. Small fists beat against your armored shoulder in impotent fury as you pick up the boy, an indiscriminate assault against the cruelty of men with you as proxy. That fury is quickly spent, however, and the boy's fragile weight slumps against you, shaking with muted sobs as he clutches your arm with desperate strength.

Long after you have returned the boy to the squalid refuge of the medical ward, you can feel his terrible anguish firming your resolve.

(*) The Torrent of War

(*) Charity of the Commons

“What?”

The medic blinks as you voice your decision to make this unbidden sacrifice.

“Six rebreathers isn’t nearly enough to do a damn bit of good. There are hundreds of people in this ward alone!”

The doctor’s voice tightens with helpless fury, but it isn’t directed at you. She is as powerless as you to restore order to her shattered world, and nothing anyone can do will ever be enough to restore it. You reach out a hand to squeeze her shoulder in mute commiseration, then turn to address the young men and women of your squad.

“We are the shield of our people, Paladins, and we will give what we can to ensure their safety. Find someone in need, and give them what succor we can offer.”

There is not a word of protest, nor a moment of selfish hesitation to do what you have asked of them. On the contrary, the young men and women seem to derive some measure of revitalized purpose from their charity. There is a liberating clarity in accepting one’s fate; and an empowering nobility in sparing another the same. Even as the first coughs begin to wrack their armored frames, the Paladins give away their only protection with brilliant smiles.

Guided by some unknown impulse, or perhaps the hand of God, you approach a young Ammar woman, her fine dress torn and singed from some unknown aspect of this ongoing catastrophe. Cradled in her arms is a girl of perhaps four, an ethereal child whose pale hair is matted with blood from a jagged tear on her scalp and who stirs fitfully as her mother rocks her and croons a wordless melody. She doesn’t respond to your initial, halting words, and it takes a hand on her shoulder to gain her attention and then communicate the offer of the filtration unit.

“What? A rebreather? Give it to my daughter. Please. Please! Keep my baby safe.”

A cough comes from behind, and you turn to see the doctor shaking her head with pained sorrow.

“It won’t fit her, miss. She’s too small, and the equipment won’t be able to form a seal.”

“No. No! I don’t care about myself. Just save my baby...”

“She... she’s going to need her mother healthy to look after her.”

There is nothing anyone can do. Tears etch winding paths down the mother’s soot-stained cheeks as the medic gently fits the apparatus over her head, muffling wordless sobs of powerless anguish. She still cradles her stricken child, who has begun to cough in the sweet-spicy air, wracking spasms that course through her slender frame.

You feel it burning through your lungs now too, a heavy heat that spreads into a deep-seated nausea. The experimental mutagen binder begins to run amok through your frame, but you doubt you’ll live long enough to deal with long-term consequences. And now, at least one mother will be able to concentrate all her efforts on saving her little girl from whatever may come.

Your own eyes smarting with more than the reaction to the contaminated air, you rise and return to rally your squad, battered and suffering in body, but revitalized in spirit with renewed dedication.

“We have laid down our Shield, brothers and sisters, and now it is time to take up the Sword.”

(*) The Torrent of War

(*) Sacrifice of Volition

The shot itself isn't so bad, not unlike the half-remembered standard military-grade inoculations which had left a small cluster of faint scars around the injection site. A pinch and a sudden soreness, lancing straight to the bone. What follows after, however, is very different.

It is a slow, smouldering *alienness* at first, spreading slowly but inexorably through veins like wildfire. A sudden sweat breaks out from every pore as the body tries and fails to deter the unwelcome intruder. It spreads, mutagenic toxins diffusing to settle heavily in muscle tissue like thousands of ants writhing beneath the skin. And only **then** does it kindle into a sudden, excruciating agony that doubles you over in uncontrollable spasms.

How long you linger in this personal hell is a matter of perspective. The combat suit's chronometer dubiously claims that less than a minute has passed since the injection, but your mind insists that the sheer intensity of your suffering must surely have consumed whole hours, if not days. You barely feel the second syringe, a feeble gnat's bite that would be lost in a million stings were it not for the blessed relief it brings. A cooling tide of well-being douses the flames of agony, and your surroundings once again swim into focus.

The first visage to resolve into clarity is the stern countenance of the doctor, waving a small satchel of syringes in front of your face.

"... the minimum dose of Vitoc only, every twelve hours. Otherwise that euphoria is going to get you killed. Remember, you're going to need to acquire more until... well. Until you die."

The pitiless grey eyes of the nurse shimmer with unshed tears in the murky light.

"Though that may not be an issue for any of us for very long."

She turns away with a wracking cough, but you breathe easily despite the strangeness in the air. Nothing more than a fleeting drowsiness, easily shaken off by the urgency of the moment as you rise to your feet. Furthermore, the smooth glide of the Vitoc through your neural pathways sends the tension and stress of the day sloughing away to a distant corner of your mind.

The rest of the Paladins follow your example in short order, grimly sacrificing their own uncertain futures to a chemical dependency in the hope of fighting through the next few hours without the debilitation of Insorum. As they undergo the process, you feel a deeper bond forming with your fellow soldiers. No, not some vague platitude about unit cohesion, the vitoc literally burning new pathways through your neural network that imprint you upon each other, an intimacy equally profound as sex or childbirth. It is strangely... pleasant.

It gives you all the strength to rise, to continue, whatever may come.

[\(*\) The Torrent of War](#)

(*) The Torrent of War

"All personnel, execute Imperative Athra Six."

On looping broadcast, the message repeats through the command frequencies. Your squad snaps to sudden life at even this faint spectre of authority.

"Automated. That means station command is down."

"Athra Six? That... calls for us to converge on a rally point..."

"Yeah. Deck 17, sector 1a. The major interlink for personnel transfer along the vertical axis."

"We have orders."

There is no doubt or hesitation - all here are not only ready, but eager to answer the call, setting out from the medical ward with dispatch. The path through the outer decks of the station proves harrowing, passing through alternating stretches of Matari-wrought devastation and the desolation of empty sectors left behind by fleeing civilians. But God has not turned his face from this place, for this bleak journey provides hope unlooked for.

Your small squad encounters one Paladin, then another, a slow trickle of survivors rallying to the same summons as you. Battered and wounded, ailing from Insorum poisoning and haunted by previous defeat and loss, these men and women are still far from broken, stubbornly refusing to flee or surrender to the seemingly inevitable. There are even a few grim civilians that join your ragtag detachment, armed with the rifles and scramblers of fallen soldiers. As each joins, their faltering individual sparks of hope kindle together into a surer, brighter camaraderie. You hear defiant invocations of scripture, boasts of martial valor past and future, impromptu tutelage of the civilians in weapons usage, and even awkward flirting between a pair of blushing young Paladins.

The march terminates in a broad plaza, yet untouched by the war but disquietingly empty. Aisles leading to a dozen passenger tramways extend from this grand concourse, a great loom that under normal circumstances weaves a perpetual living tapestry from the people of the station. Like all else of such importance in the Empire, the utility of the space is celebrated by sculpted beauty. Excruciatingly immaculate gardens spiral out in intricate fractal forms, hosting the variegated flora of a dozen worlds or more. Fountains rise from their midst, the gilded statues of the saints presiding over a vanished flock.

The murmuring chatter of your extempore company falters and fades, absent either friend or foe on which to focus. But not all are paralyzed, as a Ni-kunni man of middling years pushes his way towards a communication panel. His bloodstained environmental suit marks him as a station technician, easily confirmed by his facility with the interface. In no more than a scant handful of seconds he is scrolling through dozens of internal security feeds, a dizzying blur of motion that suddenly stops on an approaching corridor only two decks up.

A familiar hulking shape moves into view, the grotesque bulk of a Matari MTAC sending a shiver down your spine. But this one is not alone. A second follows... a third... and a fourth stalks past the camera to complete the daunting parade of mechanized death, the terrifying foes clearly bearing down on the plaza in which you stand.

"Four MTACs?" One of the Paladins squeaks dazedly while another messily vomits. "We can't hold off four!"

"Not with these sidearms! We'd need... we'd need..."

"There is an armory on deck 18, maybe it has..."

"That's too far away! We'll never make it back...":

The technician tugs insistently on your arm, dusky features pallid and feverish beneath a flowing silvered moustache that would be the envy of many planetary systems.

“Look, boss, we can beat them. I just need time to run a bypass on the auxiliary line and... there isn't time to explain! You give me time to work, I'll stop those godless fuckers.”

You look around at the scant cover of the yawning plaza around you and back, realizing that this request will risk the lives of everyone here on his word. Worse, each moment of delay risks the arrival of a civilian tram blundering into the enemy advance. Perhaps it would be better to trust in the men and women you've gathered here and strike quickly and decisively with the advantage of surprise... but all these choices have risks.

Do you:

Scavenge weapons from the armory and [\(*\) Trust in Might](#)

Place your faith in the technician and [\(*\) Trust in Science](#)

Plan a hasty ambush with what you already have and [\(*\) Trust in Valor](#)

(*) Trust in Might

There is no time to lose. Every second squandered gives the mechanized invaders more time to carve their way through an otherwise helpless station, and though the men and women around you move with all possible haste, injury and disarray cost precious time on the march to the armory.

The doors to the vault already stand open when you arrive, a grievous failure of security that in more normal times would carry a dire punishment for the culprit. But there is no time to concern yourself with procedure as you crowd inside to claim what heavier armaments yet remain. There are hefty plasma rifles, arc cannons, forge guns, grenades and launchers to fire them. Not enough to properly equip the platoon, but enough to give them a fighting chance against the military-grade hardware bearing down upon the rally point.

Distributing the weapons themselves proves no small logistical challenge in the ensuing haste and tumult, only proceeding at all due to individual discipline of the Paladins. Still, many of the largely inexperienced soldiers assigned to the station haven't been properly trained in the use of more specialized weapons, to say nothing of the militia, whose zeal far outstrips any practical knowledge of weapon use or safety. One grenade is accidentally armed by a hapless civilian, the shrill whining trill heralding the imminent explosion sending Paladins ducking for cover before you grab the device and disarm it with fractions of a second to spare. Rather than return the weapon to the wide eyed civilian, you tuck it into your own belt and issue the command to move out before any other fresh catastrophe can occur.

Now considerably more encumbered by heavier armaments, one might expect the return trip to take rather longer, but new-found confidence and anticipation buoys your small force as they march down the corridor. That haste is further spurred by a sudden thunder of heavy gunfire in the distance, punctuated by a haunting chorus of screams from too many voices to count.

But the headlong charge cannot close the distance fast enough, still hundreds of meters yet to go when the terrible cacophony begins to falter and fade into an unsettling quiet. With the immediacy of that distress diminished, Paladins and citizens alike subside back into a grim and stealthy approach, hard eyes and muttered prayers bracing themselves for what may come.

And as well they should. For in your absence from the central plaza of deck 17, the arrival of a passenger tram carrying refugees seems to have coincided with that of the Matari MTAC detachment. The results are predictably tragic. How exactly it might have begun is now known only to the perpetrators, but the ensuing slaughter of the civilians is as undeniable as it is total. Dozens, if not hundreds, of bodies are sprawled in careless, lurid grotesquery along despoiled gardens and shattered fountains now bubbling with fitfully scarlet. What few Paladins might have rallied here on their own stood no chance at all against the looming walkers, which even now continue to rove around this unspeakable abattoir of their creation. Heavy lower limbs raise and smash down again with murderous intent, either crushing the wounded or simply wallowing in petty desecration, you know not.

You were not here to protect these people, but you can ensure that their sacrifice has meaning sealed by vengeance.

The appearance of your small force takes the MTAC squad entirely by surprise, their confidence from effortless massacres such as this lulling them into complacency. Amid a coruscating hail of laser fire, an arc cannon hums briefly and then spits a thunderbolt that tears a hapless walker into two sparking halves. The advantage of your unexpected arrival is quickly spent, however, and the remaining three walkers bring their weapons to bear even as they reel back under the onslaught. The Paladins still have little protection against the might of their foe, but even as some fall, their fellows exact a toll. One, two, three grenades detonate at the feet of a second MTAC, which falls to one side in a shower of sparks before its ammunition stores violently detonate.

One young civilian at your side, tears pouring down across lips voicing a wordless cry of defiance, squares up the arc cannon in his hands and pulls the trigger at a distance from which it isn't physically possible to miss. But nothing happens, and he looks down at the weapon in mute confusion and betrayal before a hail of lead finds him, his mangled body unceremoniously scattered over the surrounding area. You roll to the side, quickly retrieving the fallen weapon and properly seating the charge pack this time. A 17,000 degree arc of plasma lashes out, liquifying the metal in a line across the MTAC's chassis and no doubt vaporizing the organic material concealed within.

The last walker tries to retreat, surrendering the advantage of its superior firepower in desperation as it crashes through gardens and swats aside an impeding statue as energy bolts rain down around it. But its victims exact a final revenge, their very bodies unbalancing the feckless stride of the mech and sending it crashing to the ground, where it dies twitching under the assault of all the remaining ordnance.

A decisive victory, sullied by the ashes of unimaginable loss.

[\(*\) A Trial of Conviction](#)

(*) Trust in Valor

"Paladins, a transport could pull into this situation at any moment. God is not gentle in the tests he places before the faithful, and duty is not a matter of choosing *if* and *when* to serve. Our foe is imposing; but the glory to be reaped is all the greater. We have the advantage of numbers, and of surprise. Take up positions and wait for the opportune moment, and we'll send these bastards screaming straight back to hell."

As they swiftly scatter to find cover behind statues and gardens, characterizing the mood of the Amarrs as "eager" for the coming battle would be disingenuous, but your words have put enough steel into their spines that they are not paralyzed by dread, either. Instead, a grim anticipation hangs in the air, a fatalistic courage that whets their hunger for a chance at vengeance.

There is no time for second thoughts, for fear or faithlessness to take root. The heavy tread of the MTACs is audible now, a metallic grinding thunder as they bear down on the broad plaza. Their lumbering hulks appear down the causeway, gawky metal monsters that have slaughtered all in their cursed path. They enter the plaza, a loose wedge of malevolent intent that only pauses for a moment to briefly assess the area. As they move into the midst of the impromptu ambush, someone screams a line of scripture known to every Amarr child learning of the heroism of their forebears.

"We are Brothers. And in God we shall remain brothers for all of time!"

The Amarr boil out of their scant shelter, the dual assault of wild laser fire and screaming defiance raining down upon their towering foes. Shock and confusion cost the Matari precious seconds as the Paladins close the open ground between them and ensnare them in the chaos of a wild melee.

It is only the sheer audacity of the attack which gave your motley detachment a chance. Had they kept to their own discipline, the MTACs could have easily brushed aside the paltry infantry assault, suffering little more than some laser scarring and a moderate expenditure of ammunition. However, blinded by their previous successes and believing the station largely pacified, they are slow to react and even slower to properly assess the situation, not realizing that their foes are armed only with desperate valor and not any actual weapons of consequence.

The world around you erupts with shocking violence, and you are robbed not only of your broader awareness but even the proper flow of time. All that is left are fragmented moments stitched together by the most slender threads of causality.

Massive rotary guns crossing their lines of fire in wild disarray, the torrent of metal claiming not only scattered Amarr but also one of their own. Heavy slugs rip through the reinforced chassis and tear the guts from the unlucky machine, as well as its operator...

Disciplined volleys of fire sending another mech reeling, retreating back, five Paladins advancing inexorably upon it until a stray lash of high caliber projectiles effortlessly picks them up and scatters them back as if they were no more than toys...

A nova knife wielded by fearless civilian perched precariously on the back of an MTAC, stabbing determinedly into the chassis before its wielder is crushed by a sweep of a massive mechanical arm. A Paladin leaping into his place, firing his weapon wildly through the breach torn by the knife...

A young man slumped back against a wall, a six inch hole cut clean through his torso as he looks up with pleading eyes. "It isn't so bad, right?" The light leaves his eyes before you can answer...

A young Paladin, her ethereal features spattered with blood and twisted with rage, sprinting at a surviving mech with a high scream of defiance, the purity of her voice twining with the shrilling tones of the grenades clutched in each hand...

You're not really sure how the battle ended, or when. But as you gaze around, squinting through the haze of smoke and worse particulates, it gradually dawns on you that all four MTACs lie smoldering and still upon the ravaged decking. Lying broken and lifeless alongside them is over half of the men and women who fought alongside you here, a butcher's bill shocking in its cruel totality.

The sudden screech of metal from the far side of the plaza behind you can only elicit a slow turn, every muscle in your body dragging in the wake of the adrenaline which has been spent. But instead of some fresh foe, you instead witness the arrival of a tram at the far station, and the steady stream of civilians flowing out from it. Witnessing the destruction before them, these pale-faced citizens of the Empire hesitate but for a moment before spreading out to offer what succor and comfort they can to the men and women whose sacrifice spared them a worse fate.

[\(*\) A Trial of Conviction](#)

(*) Trust in Science

"You're sure about this? You can... disable the MTACs, or something?"

The weathered Ni-Kunni technician is already elbow deep in the access panel, conduits spitting fitful sparks within.

"Oh, yeah, boss. I got this! You just buy me a minute or two, alright?"

The Paladins are, perhaps, less than inspired with confidence, but they do not shirk from their duty, spreading out to take what scant cover is available behind statues and benches and gardens. You linger for a moment, gesturing to his bloodied suit.

"Do you need... biofoam, or..."

"Oh, this?" He laughs, a full-throated merriment with a slight manic edge to it. "Caught some shrapnel in that first bombardment, but the suit sealed it up and shot me full of stimulants. I'm *golden*, boss. You just keep those big fuckers busy, yeah?"

Easier said than done, but you have already invested this man's word with the lives of dozens, including your own. There is no time for second thoughts, to devise some other plan. The heavy tread of the MTACs is audible now, a metallic grinding thunder as they bear down on the broad plaza. Their lumbering hulks appear down the causeway, gawky metal monsters that have slaughtered all in their ill-omened path. They enter the plaza, a loose wedge of malevolent intent that only pauses for a moment to briefly assess the area.

Irregular blasts of fire from rifles and scramblers dart out from the widely scattered formation of Imperial soldiers and citizens, the unexpected confrontation giving the armored mechs pause, but only for a moment. The ensuing battle can hardly be called such, as the MTACs shrug off the small arms with careless ease and return their own far superior armament with irresistible force, destroying the plaza and its guardians with careless sweeping arcs of large-bore projectiles.

They advance, but they are slow, unhurried, cautious. They do not need to hurry, and indeed seem to take some relish in slowly reducing the paltry cover of the Paladins, one by one, and then picking them off as the survivors attempt to reposition. Cruel hunters, toying with and torturing helpless prey.

As brave soldiers die, there is no sign of the promised salvation, only the mechanic grunting as he wrestles with an archaic mechanical interface inside the console. After your last pointless volley, you cast around for some tactic or stratagem to turn the tide, but there is nothing. Even retreat is not an option across the yawning expanse of the plaza, with the Paladins forced to bunker down behind their inadequate protection and await their doom.

And then, it happens. A sudden pang of nausea and disorientation washes over you as the artificial gravity on this deck abruptly vanishes, and only a desperate grasp of one hand anchors you to a nearby bench. Not all of your comrades are so swift or fortunate, and you see more than few float up into the open air, shouting in confusion.

However, their struggles are an order of magnitude less than that of their once-superior foes. The magnetic tread of the walkers is either engaged too late or unable to find purchase on the decorative ceramic of the plaza, and all four begin to rise up as well. Instinctively, the MTACs continued to fire as they go on the drift, and in that first second, a half-dozen confused Paladins are messily shredded.

But those monstrous rotary guns prove a fatal weakness, their enormous recoil no longer dampened by pneumatic support and channeled down into an anchored surface. The MTACs spin away, slowly at first, but ever faster and ever wilder with each increasingly inaccurate volley, heavy chassis caroming wildly off bulkheads with punishing impacts.

And this, *this* is what you were waiting for. Outclassed as the smaller Amarr energy weapons are, they pay their obeisance to thermodynamics through waste heat, not recoil. The Paladins may not be fully trained in null-g combat, but there were at least some basic instincts retained by many of the disjointed Amarr force. And their foes were now helpless

prisoners of their own uncontrollable coriolis.

As revelation sets in among the Paladins, you glance around and see hard smiles on the faces of your comrades, even laughter as the Paladins now hunt the hunters, carving them slowly apart with concentrated fire. The MTACs die slow, and they die hard, but they die all the same.

Many long minutes later, you return to the control console and the technician who made this possible, but the words of congratulation falter on your lips. The Ni-kunni man drifts there still, eyes uplifted and unmoving, a smile on his lips. Wounded worse than he knew, or would say, this lowly mechanic clung to life just long enough to work one simple, timely miracle.

You extend a hand to close his eyes and say a short prayer, thanking God and this man who have brought you deliverance.

[\(*\) A Trial of Conviction](#)

(*) A Trial of Conviction

In the aftermath of the battle for the central plaza, the remaining Paladins under your implicit command walk as straight as their wounds will permit, their voices stronger, their eyes brighter. Even this small and pyrrhic victory fuels a euphoric fervor that exhaustion and loss have yet to dim, a sensation you know all too well as the virtuality stokes it in your own borrowed breast.

And so, when the next communication arrives, it is met with eager anticipation from all. Unlike the first Imperative, broadcast by the local station command, this is a visual Imperative whose display bears the twining seal of the Kor-Azor family, and has been broadcast system-wide and in the clear.

TERMINATE ALL SLAVES WITH IMMEDIATE EFFECT

By now, word of the disparate effect of the mutagenic gas saturating the air around is well known to the remaining Paladins, and they greet this grim directive with stoic resignation.

"The... main servitor barracks isn't far."

"Best not tarry about this."

The ensuing march lacks the jittery enthusiasm of the last, but the funereal quiet is one of wary resolve and somber reflection. No further enemy incursions impede your march, but distant explosions and screams echo through empty halls and quicken your steps.

The stakes of the precarious situation are made excruciatingly clear as you pass a long plasteel viewscreen looking out into the black. In gentler times, you would see the steady flow of vessels which are the *raison d'être* of this station, but now you instead bear witness to the decompression of an entire deck of the station. Hundreds of meters of bulkheads fail in a sudden violent cascade, the reinforced girding of the station torn asunder with terrible ease to vomit its delicate contents into the void. Fleeting occlusions of distant twinkling stars behind are the work of drifting debris... or bodies, surely in the thousands. The lives of countless more may hinge on the decisions to come.

Before you realize it, you stand inside the yawning hangar in which the servitor population of the station is housed. Prosaic and stolid edifices, the communal residences here are sectioned into modest dwellings within, their occupants sealed inside after the sector went into lockdown earlier in the attack. The hush which hangs over the yawning space is a fragile thing, your advance a delicate trespass into a space subtly different from the Imperial environs to which you have already grown accustomed.

The door to the first responds to Paladin overrides with a quiet hum, whirring aside to reveal dozens of bodies slumped around the common area of the building. The slaves here have been spared the violence raging without, but insorum has done its odious work here as well. They breathe easily as the mutagen changes them from within, blithely insensate to the world crumbling apart just scant paces away. This is why you have come.

Here, on the threshold of the terrible charge which has been demanded of them, the young men and women under your command hesitate, feeling the weight of the expectations of Empire and God, the burdens of Duty and the demands of War. They will rise to the moment, but they require direction, a proximate authority to absolve them of the choices made. That is your burden.

Do you:

Obey the Imperative and [\(*\) Cleanse the Corrupted](#)

Equivocate and delay as you search for [\(*\) Another Alternative](#)

Instead attempt to enlist the Matari and [\(*\) Trust in the Reclamation](#)

(*) Cleanse the Corrupted

The words come unbidden to your lips, conjured by this singular moment as the only sentiment it is possible to express.

"Our duty is to the Empire and its people, Paladins. Cleanse this place, lest its corruption claim yet more innocents."

Two steps bring you alongside a slumped Matari elder, wispy gray hair drifting across his kindly features with each shallow breath. It is the easiest thing, to gently squeeze the yielding trigger. It is the hardest thing, to twitch even so small a muscle. But it is done, and in a brilliant flash that sears the slave's face into your memory, he passes from this world.

Echoes of this act rebound softly off the humble walls, fire lashing down to spare the slaves the horror of the war they have been consigned to. Release comes swiftly, easily, with disciplined grace, but each life taken adds to the burden the Paladins will carry to their graves.

The second dwelling proves the harder, as the slaves within have begun to rouse, dazed minds waking from troubled dreams to judgment and fire. There are pleas for mercy; and it is given in the only way left. There are protests and threats, which are met with pity and swiftness. And there are confused attempts to resist, crude tools taken up in reflexive violence, which are brushed aside by soldiers who have faced far sterner threats already on this terrible day.

A young paladin, barely old enough to swear the Oath, bears the sluggish waterfall of tears as he proceeds, his high voice shakily raised in a quiet paeon.

"...Those who embrace the Lord

And walk in light

Shall be saved by His grace

For we are the shepherds in the dark

His Angels of Mercy..."

It would be all too easy for the servant peoples to spurn the Faith in these last moments, to hate a God whose commandments led to their death. Some do, spitting foul oaths and unspeakable heresy before their end. But others hold to their faith, new voices twining together into soft, haunting hymns of shared comfort even as the threads are gently cut.

"Time of infinity to grief our misgivings.

Time of eternity to stray without God's guidance.

One can repent and pray for forgiveness.

But true meekness is one that has penetrated and laid its roots in the very heart of a man.

The stars above will not weep for us parting.

The air we breathe won't notice our disappearance.

The dirt of the earth will embrace our decadence.

Only in God can we thrive and grow.

Only God..."

But amidst such grace there is also horror. The insorum exacts a terrible toll even upon these unfortunate souls, twisting the minds of a few into heinous psychosis. You enter another building to find its occupants huddled to one side, shunning

a lonely figure at the center. The stains upon the young woman's smock are not dirt, and as she raises her head to face you, her scarlet cheeks and full lips are daubed with blood that is not her own. The sodden form swaddled in her arms does not move... you fire your weapon and look no more. Screams of terror precede the entry of the Paladins in many other homes, and though you know not what they saw, you understand that they too bear witness to horrors.

By the last of these dwellings, fatigue drags at every step with leaden boots, and you believe yourself numb to fervor and depravity alike. Therein, a hirsute Matari father rises as you approach, his hands raised in entreaty. But he does not grovel or threaten, or attempt to avert the inevitable. Instead, he offers a simple plea.

"Let me do it."

After this day, any might well have thought that the gulf between your warring peoples could never be crossed... but in this moment, you understand that to be false. There is an explicable cord binding you to this man, and understanding that is deeper than words, stronger than past hatreds and untouched by perverse mutagens. In an act of faith, you give over the rifle, still glowing with the heat of innumerable past discharges, and he takes it with gentle care. He turns, murmuring soft words, a whispered prayer just below the edge of your hearing, and punctuates each verse with a kiss to the brow of each of his family. And then a peaceful end, granted through love, with the last reserved for himself.

[\(*\) The Way is Shut](#)

(*) Another Alternative

This... can't be the only option. Can it? Surely, this has gone too far.

"Just... wait. Let's think this through."

With your indecision voiced, the floodgates open among the other Paladins, a desperate attempt to justify shirking the grim duty assigned to you.

"This just doesn't make sense!"

"The cost to the Holders..."

"The station can't function without their labor!"

"There is this Nefantar girl that I really liked once, let me at least find her..."

"Let's just lock them back in here..."

"... there are the chains down on the transfer dock..."

The torrent of half-baked solutions, each idea more impractical than the last, makes it quite impossible for you to focus. The disintegration of the unity which had bound the Paladins together is swift, chaotic, and total as they begin to bicker.

Meanwhile, the Matari around you have begun to stir, waking to dissension and menace among the soldiers looming over them. Confused and yet reeling from the effects of insorum, it is no wonder that they are driven to folly. One young lad, no more than fifteen, procures a simple carving knife and lunges up to grab an unwary Paladin in an attempt to take her hostage. But his movements are gawky and his grip is unsure, and instead of menacingly holding the knife to her throat, he slips and cuts deep. Far too deep.

Disoriented and confused, he cannot bear the weight of the dying woman and she slumps to the ground in a graceless tangle of limbs, leaving her accidental killer bloodstained and befuddled. Still, rebellion cannot be tolerated, and the hapless boy disintegrates in a hail of outraged lasfire, along with the wall behind, much of the ceiling... and three of his kin standing nearby.

There is a single, pregnant moment of silence that follows in the wake of tragic instinct, realization transforming to rage and then action shared by both Amarr and Matari. A desperate, brutal battle erupts, howling desperation and feckless rage consuming the confined space in a microcosm of the wars which have haunted past generations. It is ugly, and brutal, and though the Paladins prevail in the end, several of their number fall in the mad fracas, some to friendly fire.

But now that the madness of rebellion is kindled, it swiftly becomes a wildfire far beyond the power of any to control. Shouts echo in the hangar beyond, and as you stagger out of this abattoir of your own creation, you behold countless slaves boiling out from every direction. Wisdom long since discarded, the Paladins fire with reflexive desperation, striking down no few Matari but driving yet more of their fellows to insurrection.

Everywhere there are more foes. You lose track of your comrades, of the path to the exit. There is only the bulk of your rifle clutched in hands seared black by waste heat, and the next silhouetted form to send reeling back into the shadows. One moment, you are back to back with a soldier, firing frantic torrents at anything, everything. The next he is yanked away and hauled up by a chain slung over a low beam, weapon lost as he kicks and claws at the binding to no avail.

Twisting screams from the distance attest to less merciful violations of those Paladins unfortunate enough to be taken alive. You remember, too late, that not all those consigned to servitude were done so by birth. Among the Matari there are criminals of other heritages, gentled only by vitoc as part of their rehabilitation. But no longer are they shackled by chemical dependency or fear of consequence, and now have been let loose upon any and all before them in all their wanton depravity.

When the blow comes, you don't feel it, not really. The breath escapes your lungs in a gentle rush, and you topple slowly to the ground, rifle falling from nerveless fingers as you impact the deck. Lying there, you watch the bloodshed with dreamlike amity.

You suddenly have this feeling, that everything was connected. Like you can see the whole thing, one long chain of events that stretched all the way back before this war. You feel like you could see everything that happened, and everything that is going to happen. It was like a perfect pattern, laid out in front of you. And you realise you're all part of it, and all trapped by it.

Then from someplace dark and evil, a freak wave of pain lashes through your prone form with indescribable agony, and you lose interest in anything except screaming.

[\(*\) The Pitiless Psychopomp](#)

(*) Trust in the Reclamation

The stricken servitors sprawled helpless before you are no less victims of the Matari than your own people. They have been drafted into an ancient war not of their own choosing, and they deserve a chance to choose the righteous path..

It is the work of but moments to slave the local broadcast system within the servitor hangar to your suit's comm unit, and give voice to words not truly your own. Perhaps inspired by a half-remembered sermon, or the feverish mixture of stimulants and poisons coursing through your blood, or maybe, just maybe, some spark of divine inspiration.

"Minmatar aggressors besiege this station, even as we speak. They think to conscript you to fight in their war, to turn your hands against ours. The Empire does not suffer betrayal - but you have yet to make that terrible sin. I know that you will not betray the worlds we have built together, the faith we share, and the future that awaits us all. And now, I exhort you to join our fight, to protect all that we know on this most terrible of days."

The initial response to such oratory is... tepid, furtive slaves conversing in hushed conclaves. Centuries of unfortunate history have carved vast gulfs between Amarr and Matari that are not so easily bridged. Many long moments drag by, the air so thick with dread and anticipation that the mutagenic gas is but an afterthought. But then a massive bearded dock worker pushes his way to the front, a looming slab of brutish muscle seemingly sculpted from the most alarmist tales of Matari marauders. Some of the Paladins reflexively adjust their stance, weapons clutched in a taut grip. When he speaks, his gruff bass rumble is rough and his coarse, the words jagged with emotion.

"I don't give a shit about your Emperor, or some higher purpose, or you. When that first strike hit, I was on the distribution line in the dockyards. When a few tons of mangled metal crashed onto some Holder's gilded phallus of a ship, I laughed with the rest. But then a few minutes later, I found out that my son had been coming to visit me that day, with his two little girls. Gone, in an instant. Stolen from me."

He turns to glare back into the crowd, no few shrinking back from the rage seething in his dark gaze.

"Some of these bastards say that was just bad luck, but those Minmatar FUCKS chose to do this. They want me to fight in their war? They want to free me?"

The man palpably vibrates with fury as he stoops to claim a heavy length of rusting conduit, swinging the two-meter polyalloy from calloused paws as if it was no more than a twig.

"I'd like to show them exactly how fucking grateful I am."

Another steps forward, a wizened matron whose eyes twinkle with a merry fury. "My ancestors and I didn't spend decades earning respect and carving out freedom and a future for my children, to have it all whisked away without a by-your-leave. I'm keeping what's mine."

More voices joined theirs, a swelling chorus that spurns allegiance with the Matari.

"They shot my mistress. Just... put her up against the wall and executed her! She raised me, and treated me with nothing but kindness. If that isn't evil, I don't know what is."

"Maybe I didn't choose to be born here, but I sure as fuck didn't choose to have my life's work destroyed and be abducted by savages, either."

The crowd quiets as one of their elders finally reaches the front. The robe of a Priest hangs loosely over his frail arms, and deferential silence paves the way for his quavering voice to fill the vast space.

"God has placed a grave test before us, brothers and sisters. Our road to salvation has been generations in the making, and we have suffered with every step. It would be too easy to reject that hardship, and turn away, but that would betray our sacrifices and those of our ancestors. Place your trust in God, in each other, and in these Paladins who would protect us all."

In the end, only a small minority of the Matari join your company. While many of the remainder are noncombatants, others likely nurse resentment or hatred in their hearts. Still, shamed by the example of their fellows, they hold their peace and retreat sullenly back to their hovels. Perhaps, in time, they will find the strength for redemption.

[\(*\) The Way is Shut](#)

(*) The Way is Shut

When you next check your chronometer, it informs you that hours have passed without you marking them in any coherent sense. You passed from a state of exhaustion long ago, now afloat on a brittle delirium forged by a toxic cocktail of chemical stimulants and synthetic adrenaline. There is neither respite or escape to be had, and you and the Paladins with you have continued to resist because, quite simply, you do not know what else to do. Somewhere in that fevered span of time, the Command and Control relays on Eclipticum went down to enemy bombardment and stayed down, leaving you and every other Imperial citizen in the system absent direction, coordination, and increasingly, hope. The realization is creeping slowly upon everyone that the station is dying, and that aid is not coming.

The change, when it comes, is not the welcome beacon of hope prayed for. Much abused lighting shifts in hue and flares a sudden angry, pulsating crimson throughout the desolate halls of the station. Disused klaxons squeal to raucous life, blaring out a strident warning most here had never actually heard outside of a drill. The weary Paladins standing around you are rudely yanked back into this newest crisis.

"That's... the Abandon Station siren!"

"What? Why now?"

"Containment failure? Structural cascade? Imminent bombardment? Who knows?"

"Evacuate? All the life pods this station had were used hours ago!"

"There might still be some ships in the hangars..."

"Yeah, the civilians are going to head for the docks, for sure."

Your path is clear.

When you arrive, your collective prayers have been heard, for the Matari intruders either have misjudged the Imperial response to the evacuation order, or, more ominously, are busy elsewhere. But the Amarr have come, in their battered and bloodied throngs, seeking deliverance from this day of blood and fire. Among the multitude are half-remembered acquaintances from the distant recesses of virtual memory, as well as more familiar faces, of those you have saved in the last few frantic hours.

Even in this crisis, some manner of Imperial discipline has asserted itself as the crowds flow into a single looming Providence-class freighter and a handful of more modest Bestowers and Sigils. But... something is not right. Despite the urgency of the situation, the vessels yet sit inert and lifeless as refugees stream aboard, no sign of pre-flight systems startup. The reason swiftly becomes clear - every terminal flashes the warning that the port administration has put the station in full lockdown.

Likely one of the first victims of the enemy attack, the gilded majesty of the Port Controller's office has been thoroughly devastated. The wary Paladins fanning out through the offices crunch noisily across shattered glass and marble, climbing over the yet-smoldering detritus of barricades shattered by an inhuman force you know only too well. You know that there will be no survivors.

The main traffic control suite is a mangled mess of sparking conduit and shattered viewscreens, littered with dozens of corpses mangled by high-caliber fire. At length, one of the Paladins finds a still-functional interface terminal, its glowing display having been shielded by the slumped corpse of a young Khanid man who died still at his station. However, that functionality itself is frustratingly locked behind administrative access that you do not possess.

The Paladins with you as well as your virtual self are utterly at a loss, helpless without the skillset required to bypass the terminal's security and then lift the lockdown imprisoning the ships outside. But if you can recall enough of that ever-receding life beyond the virtuality, perhaps you have the knowledge to fool the system.

Do you:

Draw upon the lessons of the past and proceed to [\(*\) Primary Authentication](#)

Close your eyes, push buttons at random, and [\(*\) Force a Reboot](#)

Attempt to locate some survivor who can provide [\(*\) Tech Support](#)

(*) Primary Authentication

A quick survey of the system before you confirms that the terminal is competently hardened against tampering, physical or virtual. Circumventing it would require a physical bypass or viral agents, never mind time, that you simply do not have. However, you can force an authentication process to claim administrative access... there. The screen flashes, and the first of a three-layer authentication challenge begins.

You are hereby informed that this request for terminal reset has been logged by Port Oversight into your personnel file. Authorized personnel can expect disciplinary action for failing to use the normal procedures, and unauthorized personnel are advised to surrender themselves at this juncture lest you sustain additional injuries during your imminent arrest.

The following passage of Scripture has been altered, a single word perverting the sacred meaning of the text. Supply the correct word to correct the defiled text:

"The stars above will not weep for us parting.

The air we breathe won't notice our disappearance.

The dirt of the earth will spurn our decadence.

Only in God can we thrive and grow."

Do you:

Input the corrected single word from the text to proceed to [\(*\) Secondary Authentication](#)

Close your eyes, push buttons at random, and [\(*\) Force a Reboot](#)

Attempt to locate some manner of [\(*\) Tech Support](#)



(*) Secondary Authentication

The screen flashes as you input the correct response, the first prompt dissolving as a new challenge materializes.

Simply being a Brother or Sister in the Faith is not sufficient to gain access to this restricted terminal. This station requires an understanding of the application of basic orbital mechanics to guide orbital traffic, even under stressful situations. Resolve the following dilemma:

Carthum Conglomerate has guided a class seven asteroid, designation BA834024112, into stable gravitational orbit around Kor-Azor Prime preparatory to mining operations. Traffic control must be updated to account for its trajectory. The mean radius of BA834024112's new orbit is 8.13×10^9 meters. Given that the primary satellite of Kor-Azor Prime has an orbital period of 30.1 days at a mean radius of 2.76×10^8 meters, what is the approximate orbital period of the captured asteroid, to the nearest day?

In the corporeal world, a capsuleer is accustomed to all this information being instantly at the speed of thought, supplied by robust databases and responsive algorithms that you do not have here. Yet the third law of planetary motion *was* covered back in the required courses at your capsuleer preparatory institution. If only you could remember...

Do you:

Input the correct three digit response to proceed to [\(*\) Tertiary Authentication](#)

Close your eyes, push buttons at random, and [\(*\) Force a Reboot](#)

Attempt to locate some manner of [\(*\) Tech Support](#)



(*) Tertiary Authentication

With the correct orbital period entered, the final challenge prompt flickers into being.

Do not expect congratulations for displaying basic competence in the skillset required to serve at this post. The solution you have provided would, of course, be inaccurate and potentially lead to the catastrophic loss of life and property. Furthermore, the comparative alacrity of your response has already been uploaded to your personnel file and will be discussed at your next quarterly assessment.

The final required challenge must be one of personal identity, and Overseers are given latitude in establishing the bona fides of their personnel. And so I have chosen a query that those in this office will understand.

Name the shrewish, frigid, harridan working down in the C-5 medical ward who tramples the hearts of those foolish enough to offer her their heartfelt courtship.

That's... a strangely specific and personal query. The station Overseer must have been working through some romantic issues.

Do you:

Input the correct surname to proceed to [\(*\) Administrator Access](#)

Close your eyes, push buttons at random, and [\(*\) Force a Reboot](#)

Attempt to locate some manner of [\(*\) Tech Support](#)



(*) Administrator Access

With the authentication challenges passed, the panel flashes and begins displaying a dizzying amount of information scrolling past. The torrent of data seems to largely consist of endless error reports and allegedly critical system alerts accumulated over the last few hours, probably enough to take a whole team of appropriately trained technicians days to sift through.

But that is not your purpose here. You need to... there! Two seconds later, the comm systems in the hanger crackle to life, their monotype announcement met with cheers.

“Administrative Lockdown has been lifted. Resuming normal port operations.”

Below, you can see the engines of the transports flare to sudden life, beacons of incandescent hope.

[\(*\) How Can Man Die Better](#)

(*) Force a Reboot

The very worlds of the Empire are crumbling around you and every moment of delay may cost lives. There isn't time for following proper procedure! You close your eyes and hit the button. *All* the buttons. And all hell breaks loose. Every alarm you've ever heard aboard a station, as well as several that you previously did not know existed, blare in a deafening tempest. Helpless to intervene, you can only look on and hope that the automated system can recover, repair, and rebuild.

The much-abused mainframe struggles mightily to reassert the appropriate protocols despite the damage suffered both to its operating center and the station as a whole, as well as the absence of the personnel which are supposed to guide the process. It is an impossibly complex task, but this code is the product of the best digital architects in a dozen worlds.

Less than two percent of the seven hundred and thirty-eight systems governed by the port authority mainframe fault out on system reset.

Of that modest number, less than half experience a second critical failure when auxiliary protocols are asserted.

Of this remaining handful of flawed processes, only three do not properly go into automatic safety lockdown after the secondary failure.

Of these, the false negatives being thrown by the weapons scanning kiosks at station customs are quite immaterial in the current tactical situation. Likewise, the failure to establish functional water pressure in the aft lavatories is unlikely to draw too many official complaints in the short term.

But the last resets the hangar's manifold docking apparatus to their default configuration - which is open.

Seeing the prompt for manual override flash on the terminal before you, you slam on the input as fast as human reflexes would allow. It isn't enough.

A terrible screech of strained metal announces the docking clamps reasserting their hold on the ponderous Providence-class freighter, but the smaller ships have already drifted beyond the reach of the seals, setting millions of tons of metal unexpectedly and simultaneously adrift inside a confined hangar.

Helpless, you and the rest of the other Paladins can only watch the unfolding chaos from the lofty clarity of the station administration.

You do not know who is at the helms of these vessels, but it is likely some ships are missing their appropriate crew complements, and their replacements do not all respond appropriately to this peril you have inflicted on them.

Seeing a nearby Bestower drifting into their path, one panicked Sigil pilot punches the engines in a desperate bid to escape collision. The other hauler is left behind, yes, but there is not nearly enough time to turn the Sigil aside before it crashes into the far wall of the main hangar with a blinding explosion that causes the station itself to buckle and groan in protest.

One unlucky transport loses five of its six drive cones as the docking clamps claw at it moments too late, leaving it stricken and rudderless as it is put on the drift. In the desperate attempt to perform damage control and prevent further decompression, they do not immediately calculate their new ballistic course. By the time anyone realizes that the vessel is bearing down on one of the many causeways thronged with citizens waiting to board, it is far too late for anyone to do anything but watch hundreds of lives snuffed out in an instant as ship and causeway collide.

In time, a few of the smaller haulers manage to reassert control and dock once more alongside the larger freighter, and a significantly diminished amount of survivors resume a now more panicked boarding process.

Deliverance, to be sure, but that haste has come at a terrible price.

(*) How Can Man Die Better

(*) Tech Support

It seems folly to attempt to tamper with a system you are utterly unqualified for, and you refuse to risk all these lives on chance. No, there must be someone left on this station who can resolve this lockdown. As Paladins serve as general security here on the station, you have Lookup authority within the station. A portable audiovisual datapad on a table nearby has survived the devastation here, and as you key in your command codes into the compromised local network, you manage to access the list of Port Authority personnel.

Naturally, you begin with the main Overseer, but as you page him an answering chime rises from the room you are in. It takes but a moment to locate the faint glow of a handheld terminal within the bloodspattered robes of a decapitated corpse. Neither of you can aid the other anymore.

The next name on the list fails to establish a connection at all, as do the next three. Another datapad in the office chimes. The deputy admin has been in the morgue for the past two hours. One ping returns from several kilometers outside the hull - but there is no ship at those coordinates.

By the time you reach the last name on the list, N. Zuberi, creeping despair has established a solid foothold within your mind. But *this* time, a connection is established to the residential levels and... manually refused? This isn't the time to take a day off! You key in the command override with gritted teeth, forcing the recalcitrant tech's datapad to accept the call.

The display flickers to life, the only illumination the backlit screen of the datapad. Within the shifting shadows, you glimpse the pale features of a very young Khanid woman, probably still in her internship. Before you can say anything, she speaks in hushed, plaintive urgency.

"Shh! I'm trying to hide! The Matari have been going through this deck, shooting everyone. You're going to get me killed! Please, turn this off!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Miss Zuberi. I'm standing in the Port Authority offices, which have been put into administrative lockdown. Until that lockdown is lifted, thousands of Amarr are trapped in the hangar outside. I cannot reach any of your colleagues... you are the only one who can help me, who can save these people."

There is no immediate response, only a quiet sob punctuating a heavy silence.

"Miss Zuberi..."

"Nadia, please." She speaks with quavering determination, scrubbing at hollow eyes with the back of hand. "I'll help. Let's do this fast."

She guides you through the various administrative challenges with single-minded determination. Even ominous crashes in the background do not deter her as she works at the problems in feverish haste. As you key in the last response, the clamor outside her scant shelter has become very loud and very close. Before you can say anything, the technician cuts you off, her voice cracking with emotion.

"There, it's done. Now you're going to do something for me. There's someone I... work with. Matthias Jans. We had a fight. He... he needs to know that I'm sorry. Just tell him that I... that I'm sorry, okay?"

You glance over to the body of the young man that your Paladins removed from this terminal. With painful clarity, you see **Jans** writ on his sleeve.

"Nadia, I... "

"Just promise me! He needs to know..."

The jarring sound of crumpling metal is amplified by the connection to thunderous intensity as the display is violently upended, tumbling through a confusing kaleidoscope of a shadowed living space, long limbs scrambling away, a looming

MTAC. The last thing you hear is a despairing scream before the connection goes dead.

Long moments flow sluggishly past in the administrative office as the Paladins bow their heads to honor the young woman's sacrifice. Then the comm systems in the hanger crackle to life and offer a monotone announcement.

"Administrative Lockdown has been lifted. Resuming normal operations."

[\(*\) How Can Man Die Better](#)

(*) How Can Man Die Better

Years later...

Or so it certainly seems, for the stagnant suspense of warding the Amarr exodus has stretched the individual moments into a seemingly endless vigil. But as the last lines of refugees are slowly swallowed by the golden hulls and the promise of safety, your suit's chronometer reports that only eighty-seven minutes have elapsed. An impossibly small number for the sheer *weight* of that time.

Around you, the remaining Paladins with you are exhaustion and suffering embodied in human form. The lustre of their Imperial livery has long since been scraped away or writ over with blood and carbon scoring, and yet the men and women entombed in that battered armor are the worse off, by far. There are the obvious wounds, sealed by flaking biofoam, and undoubtedly far more damage lurking unseen. The horrors and tragedies witnessed on this terrible day are reflected in glassy, haunted gazes. Their movements are brittle and they have a feverish cast to skin that has paled to nigh translucent.

They passed the limits of human endurance long ago, kept operational only by a torrent of stimulants supplied by callous trauma systems meeting the necessity of the moment. Dim memories of some long-ago training suggest that perhaps half of these soldiers will suffer psychosis, catatonia, or multiple organ failure before the day is out. That's... long enough. Something tells you it won't matter by then.

But this race is not yet run, and some duties yet remain before weary soldiers can find respite. The Paladins throng around you, accepting their final charges without complaint, hesitation, or fear. You have left all that behind as well.

Some of the Paladins will escort the ships, and provide what small security they can as the vessels attempt to leave the combat zone. If *anywhere* is outside the combat zone, anymore.

A few of the most hale soldiers among you, bearing the bulk of your remaining armaments, will attempt a counterattack on the Matari vessels attempting their own evacuation at the port hangar.

And the others, the most wounded in body or spirit, will remain behind, to save any scattered survivors and deny the enemy the use of the station, if they can, for as long as they can.

A few lines of scripture come to mind as you face this irrevocable choice. They do not offer easy answers, but instead offer a measure of sanctity to the choice you face.

"In the beginning all things were as one.

God parted them and breathed life into his creation

Divided the parts and gave each its place

And unto each, bestowed purpose."

- The Scriptures, Book I 1:4

What burden will be yours to carry?

Boarding the freighter and ensuring the civilians reach safety, serving as [\(*\) The Shield](#)

Infiltrating the Matari evacuation and taking vengeance as [\(*\) The Sword](#)

Remaining behind on the station and serving as [\(*\) The Final Watch](#)

(*) The Shield

The Amarr Empire is not stations, or planets; not the soaring cathedrals or bustling cities; nor is it the Emperor's legions or some abstract concept. No, Amarr is its *people*, and their safety is your most sacred charge. You will see to it that these civilians will find some measure of safety amidst all this madness.

You are profoundly grateful for the lift running along the lateral access of the immense freighter, because marching to the bridge would surely have undone you otherwise. Instead, you can slump against the wall and drink deep of fresh recycled air, absent the poisonous exhaust of the dying station. By the time you reach the command center, the ship has cleared the dock and you feel halfway human again.

Relieved to not be under imminent attack, you and the skeleton crew cobbled together from the survivors assess the larger situation. It is beyond desperate. By this point, the few Navy forces that were stationed in system have either been destroyed or forced into flight, leaving Kor-Azor space entirely in Matari hands. Yet, controlling such a vast space has left the enemy warships stretched encouragingly thin. The bulk hold position on the five stargates, while others fight small skirmishes out in the cometary cloud or are aiming a concerted orbital bombardment at the southern continent of Eclipticum.

The pilots set the course well away from any of it, heading out into the black and cutting engines, going ballistic in hopes of losing the freighter amidst the nearby asteroid belt.

For the briefest of moments, you are suffused by a glow of hope and profound relief, sweeter than any drug you've ever felt. Then the internal comm system crackles to life, a panicked young boy's voice on the other end.

"Help. We need help! There are Matari here and they've taken hostages. They've got my da!"

The ride on the lift down to C deck was not as calming as the one before it. Instead of respite or rage, you are suffused by a profound *irritation*. What the hell are these savages doing, taking hostages on a ship bearing thousands? That won't end in anything but disaster.

The situation proves as chaotic as you fear. You push yourself through a shouting, jostling throng, alternately pleading and threatening the as-yet unseen assailants. You can only pick out stray words of the accented replies, but all are ugly and profane.

Moments later, you reach the front of the mob and see the invaders in the flesh for the first time: two hirsute, muscular men, their unarmored skin wreathed in strange tattoos. The only weapons they bear are ornate black daggers, their wicked edges held to the throats of two pale-faced men of middle years, their families huddled and crying alongside you.

As you raise your weapon and demand their surrender, they only smile all the broader and make increasingly foul and inventive claims about your parentage and sexual preferences. More Paladins begin to arrive, converging from every direction, the standoff growing increasingly lopsided. Surely, even these savages must...

There is no warning, some unspoken signal passing between the two Matari before their knives open the throats of their hostages in malicious unison. Horror and shock paralyzes the crowd as they leap towards more victims in suicidal glee.

They are met with a volley of laser fire from the assembled Paladins, one Matari nearly evaporating as he takes the worst of the barrage. The other, despite suffering at least six hits, any three of which should be fatal, somehow remains upright as he staggers forward, cruel dagger plunging into the back of an Amarr woman who had turned to flee. You do not know what reckless hate keeps him upright, but surely it must have limits. More shots sear craters into his torso, and even his fell spirit finally yields.

As other Paladins lower their weapons and turn their attention towards managing the distraught mob, you continue to struggle to wrap your head around the senseless carnage.

What drove these two men to such a pointless act of evil ... wait. *Two* men.

The Matari invaders operate in squads of four.

Sudden dread welling in your heart, you turn and run for the lift.

Some choices have consequences that rebound through time, while others shape the soul. When you reached the medical ward back on the station, did you:

Give your mask away to a civilian in an [\(*\) Act of Kindness](#)

Wear the rebreather yourself to better [\(*\) Protect Others](#)

Take the course of vitoxin and [\(*\) Accept your Doom](#)

(*) Protect Others

The soft whirring hum of the lift is a disconcertingly benign backdrop as you and three other Paladins check your weapons for the last time and say quick prayers. The bridge hasn't responded to hails since that terrible realization belowdecks, and you are as prepared as you can be.

It isn't enough.

Your squad is trained, armored, and now weathered veterans of station combat, but the two Matari commandos are honed by the same experience and have a considerable tactical advantage. A closed and cramped cube, the lift is a perfect kill zone, and your foes take ruthless advantage. A deadly crossfire of projectile fire erupts from the cover of consoles on the bridge, the heavy slugs ricocheting wildly in the confined space. Two of your squad never make it out of the lift, and a searing brand of agony lances through your side in the two seconds it takes you to reach the comparative safety of a pillar.

Teeth gritted against this fresh agony, you take the luxury of assessing the situation from this scant refuge. You don't actually see any sign of the crew, the three Paladins left stationed on the bridge having apparently bought them time to flee despite the unexpected assault. The sight of their sacrifice, however, summons a fresh ache in your breast that hurts more than the hole gouged in your gut. A hard look passes between you and your surviving comrade, communicating shared intent which is promptly translated into action.

Staggering up to one knee, you lay down a withering hail of covering fire, alternating between the two enemy positions and drawing an answering barrage in turn. When your rifle sputters to a stop as it overheats, you simply drop it and pull out your scrambler without missing a beat. An impact kicks you in the shoulder with terrific force, knocking you back down to the decking, but a moment later you're back on your feet, continuing your desperate distraction.

Almost lost amid the wild exchange of gunfire is a single, muted hiss from a discharging scrambler. The sudden absence of reports from one of the heavy pistols, however, is quickly obvious to both you and your remaining adversary. A pale, tattooed woman in a red jumpsuit darts from the sparking machinery which had sheltered her thus far, firing hasty shots as she runs to the communications console.

You and your companion chase her with laser fire, but the angle is poor and she may need only seconds to ensure the ruin of everyone aboard this ship. Your body screams protest at a sudden explosion of effort as you lurch out into the open and draw a clean bead on your foe. Your eyes meet hers for the briefest of moments, sharing a sudden and terrible intimacy with this complete stranger, and then you both fire.

A pair of rounds find their mark in the same instant. A spray of arterial blood sluices the viewscreen as she is spun around by the impact, while a sudden sting etches a fresh line of agony across your neck before the strength goes out of your legs like their strings have been cut.

The pain is suddenly gone, but your limbs are leaden and unresponsive as you watch the crew stream back onto the bridge. Among them is a young boy, perhaps eight, a medkit clutched in tiny arms. He stops and stares at you, his expression stricken.

"It's alright." You say, or try to, your breath fleeting and weak. You would offer reassurance if you could, but some things you take to your grave.

An inexorable gravity drags your eyelids closed for the last time.

"At the end of days when they descend

Watch for the coming of the Ark

For within it, salvation is carried"

The Scriptures, Book II, Apocalypse 32:6

(*) The Pitiless Psychopomp

(*) Act of Kindness

The soft whirring hum of the lift is a disconcertingly benign backdrop as you check your weapons for the last time, voice a hushed prayer, and brace yourself for whatever may come. The bridge hasn't responded to hails since that terrible realization belowdecks, and if the Matari have seized control of the ship's systems, there isn't the luxury of careful planning or gathering reinforcements.

You expect the worst, and you are not disappointed.

A closed and cramped cube, the lift is a perfect kill zone, and your foes take ruthless advantage. A deadly crossfire of projectile fire erupts from the cover of consoles on the bridge, the heavy slugs ricocheting wildly in the confined space. You are struck twice in your desperate dive forward, shoulder and calf, the heavy caliber gouging through your battered armor. The depleted trauma lining has nothing left to seal the damage with, and you can already feel your strength ebbing. The deep breath you draw in is rather more shallow than you hoped, but it will have to do.

You need just a little more time, and you can fix everything.

You lunge out from cover, squeezing off two careless shots in one direction while you head in the other. As you hoped, that entices your true target to rise up in hopes of a clean shot, but you are already waiting and in that single, crucial moment, you prove the faster. The pale Sebsestior commando's shot goes wild as she slides bonelessly to the ground, but you pay the price for the stratagem. Another one, two jarring impacts blossom fresh agony upon your back, and your injured leg gives out, sending you plummeting into a twisting fall.

To your despair, your blood-slick fingers lose purchase on the rifle, and it spins away to clatter to the ground among the bodies of the crew and the two paladins who await you in death. You try to rise, to claim some other weapon, but your battered armor might as well be a stone prison for your weakened limbs. Racing thoughts attempt to devise some escape from the death which approaches on clanking combat boots, but there is nothing. You are hollow, an echoing emptiness of regret.

Your eyes rise to meet those of the Krusual thug as he swaggers up, sick at the thought that such evil should prevail because of your failings. His brutish features twist into a leer as he raises the squat snub barreled pistol, and you prepare to answer to God for your failures.

A shot rings out.

And... nothing?

The creeping onslaught of cold through your limbs continues its slow, merciless advance, absent any fresh indignity of violence. No, it is the Matari who crumples to the ground, his absence revealing the vaguely familiar figure of a grey-haired medic with a still smoking pistol clasped in her hands.

Her stern mask falters almost imperceptibly as she sees your stricken form, betraying only the slightest hint of emotion as she casts aside the spent weapon and moves to kneel alongside you with unseemly haste. Concentration has become difficult, and you are no more than vaguely aware of medical ministrations that you know to be fruitless. When soft fingers wrap around the scorched remnants of your gauntlet, you hear quiet words echoing as if from a great distance.

"At the end of days when they descend

Watch for the coming of the Ark

For within it, salvation is carried"

The Scriptures, Book II, Apocalypse 32:6

[\(*\) The Pitiless Psychopomp](#)

(*) Accept your Doom

The soft whirring hum of the lift is a disconcertingly benign backdrop as the empty four syringes of vitoc clatter from nerveless fingers to the floor. The sweeping euphoria of the overdose banishes the aches of wounds and trauma alike to a distant, remote, vague awareness. Renal failure will soon follow, but that's fine. You didn't want to live like this, anyways. And you take no small pride in the fact that no one else will have to die.

The bridge hasn't responded to hails since that terrible realization belowdecks, and you expect the worst.

It doesn't bother you anymore.

You are firing before the lift's doors are even open, splashes of violent color etched on your retinas as you stride out into the open, unafraid and certain. The deadly crossfire of heavy slugs erupting from the cover of consoles on the bridge ricochet wildly in the confined space, but you are an emissary of God's justice that cannot be denied. The bullets that strikes you are a blessing writ in a sacred tongue, guiding you towards the next man to die.

His chest smouldering with righteous fire, that Matari falls back with his brutish features twisted by fear and horror, whether at the hell that awaits him or at the visage of the one that sent him there.

Before you can turn to grant his companion the same fate, you find yourself toppling to the ground. Well after the fact, you become aware of one, two, three impacts upon your back, no more than a vague irritant in themselves except as they interfere with your work.

Still, your limbs are curiously unresponsive as you try to rise. This will not do, and your gauntleted fingers spread out to caress decking stained scarlet by the blood of the bridge crew and the two Paladins which had unsuccessfully defended it. A distant part of your mind dispassionately notes that some of it is likely your own.

The world turns as you push yourself up, and the harsh bark of the remaining Matari's weapon grates upon your ears once more. This time, the impact spins you around to crash upon your back, the strength fleeing your arms as well, all save for a faint tingling in your fingertips. There is no pain, no despair, only a bemused disappointment in a course of events that you will soon no longer play a part in.

As you drift on a receding chemical tide, you hear a nervous, halting tread and see the heavy boots which make such tawdry music moving beneath the consoles, drawing closer. The pale, tattooed visage of the Sebestior commando looks down at you with something between awe and disgust as she kicks away your discarded lasrifle. You smile, a wordless invitation to the beatific rapture to which you will soon ascend, and watch her be transformed by fear and sudden panic as she sees the primed grenade in your hand.

Then everything goes white.

"At the end of days when they descend

Watch for the coming of the Ark

For within it, salvation is carried"

The Scriptures, Book II, Apocalypse 32:6

[**\(*\) The Pitiless Psychopomp**](#)

(*) The Sword

God will shelter the faithful. Or so you fervently pray, adding your voice to countless others as they board the arks waiting to bear them clear of the doomed station. Their fate will be determined by divine providence alone as the unarmed vessels scatter out into the void, and the presence or absence of a few more Paladins could not alter that in any conceivable way.

You will follow another path this day, and though your own end is writ before it has begun, you know that your sacrifice here can mean something. The few men and women gathered with you kneel in quiet prayer before departing the hangar, knowing that there will be no chance to do so later. You will have no grave, no mourners, no funeral rites.

None of you will be coming back.

Though no more than a jumbled murmur at first, the familiar words bind you together, aligning disparate cadences and harmonizing dissonant pitches into something pure and beautiful, the unity of will and purpose which is the Paladin's Creed:

"I will not hesitate when the test of Faith finds me, for only the strongest conviction will open the gates of paradise. My Faith in you is absolute; my sword is Yours, My God, and Your will guides me now and for all eternity."

It will be a sterner test than you had feared.

You have found no small number of the remaining Matari MTACs, at least a dozen of the monstrous walkers arrayed in a loose cordon around the perimeter of the hangar in wary readiness. Their formidable strength is augmented by dozens of light Matari infantry working now to usher a steady stream of their traitorous kinsmen aboard a Prowler-class transport.

Though they do not yet spy the lofty maintenance scaffolding through which you have gained entrance to the hangar, your foes have locked down the unfamiliar space with daunting thoroughness. Surviving the approach to the transport is implausible, to say nothing of the chances of a frontal assault. And so your only hope lies in misdirection.

Unslinging your rifle and scrambler, as well as all your other remaining armaments, you gesture for two other soldiers to do the same as you address the remainder.

"Split these among yourselves and spread out as far as you can. In... five minutes, you will attack with everything you have. I want each of you to make the enemy believe you're an entire squad of Paladins."

There are no questions, or doubt, or fear. Those have been left behind.

It is everything you asked for, and more - a perfect storm of fire and fury raining down on the shocked foes. There is panic, and confusion, and then overwhelming response - the enemy's attention is pulled in every direction but the only important one.

Armed only with a nova knife and your armor, you and two other paladins leap from the high perch and fall, a silent ballistic arc aiming for the hull of the docked transport. Without maneuvering thrusters or grapples, it is a massive gamble dependent on guesswork and faith. That is why there are three of you.

One misses entirely, plummeting down into the shadows below without so much as a cry. The other reaches the vessel, but impacts a nearly perpendicular plane of the irregularly shaped vessel and rebounds with a sickening crunch. But divine providence sends you arcing narrowly past a vertical surface, giving you two precious seconds to reach out and bleed off speed before colliding with the main hull

The combat suit absorbs most of the shock, but not all. Jagged shards of light dance in your vision, and pain screams at you from... everywhere. The suit hisses, trauma lining dispensing a flood of stimulants that dampens the agony and restores focus with nauseating clarity.

You are aboard.

Some choices have consequences that rebound through time, while others sculpt the soul that made them. This will be the second time on this terrible day that you have walked among a Matari throng.

Did you execute those Matari servitors in an [\(*\) Act of Necessity?](#)

Or did you offer them Redemption in an [\(*\) Act of Faith?](#)

(*) Act of Necessity

The next few minutes are taut with increasing desperation, crawling along the hull until you finally find a maintenance airlock. For the first time this day, you are profoundly grateful to the Matari, for their madcap disregard for general safety standards allows you to force entry not only without particular difficulty but also without setting off any apparent alarms in the process. Any Amarr engineers who failed this spectacularly in such basic functionality would face summary execution.

You have only just emerged from the airlock when a sudden lurch sends you staggering into the dimly lit corridor beyond, the inertial dampeners slow to engage as the ship breaks its docking seal and commences maneuvering. You take the opportunity to draw your knife, experimentally testing the flaring arc of the incandescent edge as you consider your situation.

Alone, injured, armed only with a single knife on a ship filled with thousands of your enemies. You can feel a rictus smile etch itself into your face. God *does* smile on you this day.

Still, indulging in petty slaughter would be... beneath you. There is a greater purpose that moves you, a grander aim than wanton bloodshed. Schematics unfurl in your mind, distant memories of war games at the Academy in gentler times, when words like sacrifice and vengeance were just abstract concepts bandied about by the innocent. You orient yourself, locating the hatch leading to the air filtration systems. These will run down the spine of the ship, and carry you very nearly to engineering.

The cramped and claustrophobic confines of the ventilation crawlspace cannot dim the fervor that suffuses and sustains you as you squirm through endless meters on this last journey aft. The discordant hum of misaligned fans and the fetid musk of sweat and waste that no recycling can scrub away are your unwelcome companions over the next interminable hour in the dark. You feel a certain grim satisfaction as you pass above more than one cavernously empty chamber, the Matari having failed to recover as many of their kin as they had hoped, and thus easing your infiltration.

Still, your luck cannot hold forever, and when it runs out it does so with sudden and irrevocable finality. No more than a meter away, a hapless mechanic pokes his head up into the vent, no doubt about to attempt maintenance on any of the countless mechanical defects you have witnessed. A lashing arc of your knife cuts his throat before the shout of alarm can escape, but is helpless against the gravity that drags the corpse downwards in a fountain of arterial blood.

You follow it down into a compartment that has erupted in screaming panic, the few trained soldiers here caught in a stampeding press of slaves attempting to flee in every direction simultaneously. They are wheat for the reaping, the incandescent arc of your blade striking serpentine to claim lives at will. Carving swiftly through the hubbub, you force your way into the next hallway and the next field of slaughter.

Two hatches later, you have quite lost count of the bodies left in your wake, but each meter is proving more difficult. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak, having suffered two gunshots, one knife wound, as well as countless contusions from fists, boots, and one unexpected steel chair. But that is just damage, it isn't enough to stop you. Discipline serves to lock it down, cheating the pain and weakness with the promise of later attention that will never come.

Engineering.

The wild blaring klaxons resound all around you, summoning enemies in their teeming legions to converge upon your position. But they are slow, careful in their entrapment, whether daunted by the carnage in your wake or ensuring that there is no avenue for your escape. It will prove their undoing, for you have no intention of anything of the kind. Instead, they have given you the gift of time to inflict the necessary damage upon the reactor housing.

With the interior cameras disabled and all systems still reading nominal, the ship's crew has no warning of the peril at hand before you carve through the primary coolant conduit with the last of your sputtering knife's energy. In the few seconds as the core temperature spikes on internal sensors, the already compromised shielding abruptly and unexpectedly shatters, venting superheated plasma directly into engineering, beginning a cataclysmic cascade that will

tear the ship apart from within.

You close your eyes as you bask in the searing lethality of the judgement you have unleashed.

"Casting his sight on his realm, the Lord witnessed

The cascade of evil, the torrents of war.

Burning with wrath, He stepped

down from the Heavens

To judge the unworthy,

To redeem the pure."

The Scriptures, Book II, Revelations 2:12

[**\(*\) The Pitiless Psychopomp**](#)

(*) Act of Faith

The next few minutes are taut with increasing desperation, crawling along the hull until you finally find a maintenance airlock. For the first time this day, you are profoundly grateful to the Matari, for their madcap disregard for general safety standards allows you to force entry not only without particular difficulty but also without setting off any apparent alarms in the process. Any Amarr engineers who failed this spectacularly in such basic functionality would face summary execution.

You have only just emerged from the airlock when a sudden lurch sends you staggering into the dimly lit corridor beyond, the inertial dampeners slow to engage as the ship breaks its docking seal and commences maneuvering. You take the opportunity to draw your knife, experimentally testing the flaring arc of the incandescent edge as you consider your situation.

No doubt surprise and close quarters would work to your advantage in any individual encounter, but best to avoid confrontation lest it spark overwhelming response. Schematics unfurl in your mind, distant memories of war games at the Academy in gentler times, when words like sacrifice and vengeance were just abstract concepts bandied about by the innocent. You orient yourself, locating the hatch leading to the air filtration systems. These will run down the spine of the ship, and carry you very nearly to the bridge.

The cramped and claustrophobic confines of the ventilation crawlspace cannot dim the fervor that suffuses and sustains you as you squirm through endless meters on this last journey aft. The discordant hum of misaligned fans and the fetid musk of sweat and waste that no recycling can scrub away are your unwelcome companions over the next hour.

To your considerable vexation, the crawlspace terminates at the end of the corridor before the bridge itself. It seems even the Matari are not feckless enough to compromise their command center with unrestricted access. What is worse, a cluster of four looming foes linger near the hatch you must breach, conversing in low grunts in some tribal cant. Their varied weapons are holstered, hardly a model of vigilance.

Four. That's doable.

It is the work of slow, interminable minutes, ever so carefully wrestling the rusted access grate from its seating in silence. But the flow of time reasserts balance in the next few fleeting seconds as you tumble through and land in a momentary crouch before springing back up into a swift lunge to close the distance.

You go for the one with the long rifle first, stepping up behind and thumbing the nova knife into an incandescent arc that effortlessly cleaves through his spine. But even as the first Matari dies, a second man has already closed the gap, ensnaring you in a grapple. This hulking Krusual is a creature wrought from a frankly astonishing amount of muscle, and you refuse to contest him in kind, twisting to plunge the knife into him once, twice, the air filling with the nauseatingly appealing smell of burned meat. But this furious behemoth simply *refuses* to die, and you have to saw the sputtering blade laboriously up through the ribs to reach the heart before the strength leaves his limbs.

Bruised and battered, you spin around to face the remaining two, a sickening dread blossoming in your breast as you know that you are far too late.

It takes a moment to fully process what you see. Instead of two Matari howling for blood, there is only a single silver-haired Matari left standing, the other slumped with his neck twisted at an impossible angle. Calloused hands raise towards you in peaceful submission, and a flash of recognition floods your awareness - the grieving father who sought vengeance for his slaughtered family. He nods once, and reaches down to claim a discarded rifle, his terse words raspy with emotion.

"Most of the others stayed behind on Significance to resist, but I came to... aid you, it seems. Go. You'll have time."

The bridge itself is barely manned, the three crewmembers so absorbed in their tasks that a few quick bursts from the guard's rifle kills them all before they can rise from their seats. The sound of the gunshots will draw attention, but that's

fine. You don't need long.

Manual controls. You hardly remember how such archaic instruments even work, but then... you don't need to perform a complicated maneuver now. Just a small course alteration. There, done.

The sound of sudden violence rises in the corridor behind you, shouts and gunfire and enraged screams. One lacerated hand reaches out to toggle the shipwide intercom as you bear solitary witness to what you have done.

Your voice is strange in your ears, strangely calm and exquisitely clear, ringing like a bell. You speak the last words anyone on this doomed ship will ever hear.

"Casting his sight on his realm, the Lord witnessed

The cascade of evil, the torrents of war.

Burning with wrath, He stepped

down from the Heavens

To judge the unworthy,

To redeem the pure."

The black void of space before you dwindles, vanishes, as the scope of the viewscreen is swallowed by the vast bulk of the approaching dreadnought, collision alarms blaring a futile warning.

[\(*\) The Pitiless Psychopomp](#)

(*) The Final Watch

The battle for this station was lost before the first shot was ever fired, a hapless victim of the larger naval realities within the system. Intellectually, you know that nothing you did here could ever have changed that. But that knowledge doesn't dispel your responsibility to this place, your affection for its people, or your hatred towards the invaders which have despoiled and ravaged and slaughtered.

Significance is your home.

And you'll be damned if you'll surrender it while you yet draw breath.

Those who have chosen to remain with you do so for their own reasons. Most have suffered wounds too grievous to be borne, whether in damaged flesh clinging to life only out of stubborn ignorance of its doom, or in spirit scarred by tragedy beyond the human capacity to endure. Others might seek some measure of peace and dignity in what time yet remains, some balm to ease their passage. But these men and women have chosen to spend their final moments selflessly, wading back into an unwinnable battle in the hope of wresting something good from all this horror.

The rationale of your foes remains opaque, as you cannot determine what fell compulsion drives the Matari to linger on the dying station. It is not conquest, for that would require them to do more than simply destroy and ravage. Perhaps they are yet searching for someone or something that yet eludes them in the desolated halls. Perhaps they haven't yet slaked their bloodlust with the hunt and slaughter of your kin. You may never have the answers, and must come to terms with that ignorance.

With the local communication arrays long since reduced to slag by Matari bombardment, you do not know the course of the larger war either. Occasionally, you wonder whether the spaceways of the system are still overrun with enemy warships; whether the Kor-Azor heir yet draws breath or whether the glittering cities of Eclipticum yet stand; how far the conflagration of the Elder incursion has spread, or the scope of the biogenic cancer of Insorum they have inflicted on Amarr and Matari alike. All you can do is place your faith in the Empire and do what you can, where you can, for as long as you can. To trust in God, that your sacrifice is for a purpose, that it will have meaning.

But you are the architect of the nature of that sacrifice, of what duty to follow to the end.

Some of your choices have consequences that rebound through time, while others sculpt the soul that made them. You have faced terrible odds before, in the grand plaza where first you turned the tide against the Matari assault. What choice did you make there?

Did you secure weapons from the armory to give the Paladins [\(*\) A Fighting Chance](#)

Were you willing to stand and die against hopeless odds to [\(*\) Protect the Helpless](#)

Or did you place your faith in science to [\(*\) Devastating Effect](#)

(*) A Fighting Chance

This is your post, your watch, your home. Here you will stand, and here you will fight. And here the Matari will *die*.

The mechanized foes which stalk these desolate halls still outclass your battered infantry, but you are far from helpless. Still bearing the miscellany of heavier armaments recovered from the armory, you have the ability to strike back and the will to do so. What is more, the Paladins have the advantages of terrain and stealth, and are no longer fettered by the concerns of personal survival or safeguarding a civilian populace whose survivors have largely now departed the station.

That is not to say that the guerilla campaign which now commences is one where victory is assured, or even certain. The Imperials are few in number and far from hale, and as long hours stretch into days, casualties slowly and inexorably mount. For every MTAC ensnared in an unexpected ambush or mangled by improvised incendiary traps, good men and women die. One by one, these Paladins at your side fall, some blessed by a swift death while others linger for tortured moments, their last choking breaths fouled by the poisoned air.

All the hardship, the suffering, the sacrifices and the loss of the last few days forging a singular opportunity.

The hunters have become the hunted, and found the reversal not to their taste. The Matari soldiers are pulling back, evacuating their positions as they retreat through a broad residential causeway towards the single transport they still have docked here. With them travel about two dozen mutinous slaves, armed only with improvised tools.

You're committing everything you have left: all six surviving Paladins, five bloody-minded civilians, your entire reserve of munitions, and a brace of particularly bad-tempered slaver hounds found in a discarded shipping container.

It begins with the detonation of a plasma charge, the heavy tread of an MTAC triggering the device and shearing one mechanical leg clean away in a blinding flash of light. Before the stricken machine even hits the ground, a crossfire of laser fire descends upon it from the militia firing from the cover of distant rubble carefully staged for this eventuality.

The remaining five MTACs respond quickly, chasing back the assailants with short, ruinous bursts from their heavy guns, but they are wary and do not commit to further retaliation, having been taught lessons in the misdirection by your relentless harrying over the past days.

And they are right to fear, but still not swift enough to stop it.

The arc cannon in your hands spits a stream of hellish fire down from the lofty balcony on which you perch, cleaving one hapless mech in two and moving on to lash at another in the three seconds before they find you. There are seven operational rotary guns between the surviving MTACs, and *all* of them open up on your position with ruinous force. Dropping back behind the swiftly disintegrating cover of the railing isn't so much a choice as compelled by the laws of physics as you are hit by one of the heavy slugs. The terrible impact rips away your weapon along with most of your left arm. You have no more than a glimpse of red meat and white bone before biofoam blossoms from the suit and shrouds it from view.

Stimulants chase away the pain before it can truly start, leaving you with only a vague sense of loss. That's fine, you still have one working arm, and that suffices to arm and throw a gas grenade blindly over your shoulder. The crowd-control munition has little effect on the walkers, but it certainly pisses them off even more. At this short range, the continued barrage is swiftly disintegrating both the wall and floor that yet shield you. Though no more of the lethal bullets themselves find you, shrapnel is gouging more holes in your armor than you can count, and the trauma lining is beeping an alert as its reserves are depleted.

You're not going to make it out of this building alive, but you knew that.

Concealed by the thick smoke of the grenade, the remainder of your force slips out of the maintenance ducts running along the shattered causeway. Grim Paladins aim their weapons at point blank range even as they slip the muzzles of the

hounds, blood-curdling howls piercing even the tumult of rotary fire. The deific thunderbolt of an arc cannon roars and floods the gloom with momentary brilliance, accompanied by the lesser handmaidens of plasma grenades and scramblers firing on full automatic.

Terror and death stalk the Matari wherever they turn, and the surviving slaves break and run, their fear an inexorable contagion that claims the pilots of the two remaining MTACs as well. Your fading strength suffices for one last effort, pulling your broken body up just enough to witness the last of the Matari in full flight, harried and pursued by the vengeance you have unleashed. Significance belongs to the Amarr again, and even as a tide of inexorable cold rises within your leaden limbs, it cannot douse that glow of vindication.

"Face the enemy as a solid wall

For faith is your armor

And through it, the enemy will find no breach

Wrap your arms around the enemy

For faith is your fire

And with it, burn away his evil"

The Scriptures, Amarr Askura 10:3

[\(*\) The Pitiless Psychopomp](#)

(*) Protect the Helpless

It is a simple matter of economics: to buy the safety of your people with your own blood. It will eventually run dry, but the real trick is the exchange rate.

The mechanized foes which stalk these desolate halls vastly outclass your battered infantry, but you aren't here for them. Having the advantage of mobility, stealth, and knowledge of the terrain, your remaining squad can melt away before the lumbering intruders arrive. No longer fettered by the concerns of personal survival or any other tactical distractions, you stitch together a delicate web of safe passage and intelligence through the decks of the station.

That is not to say that the covert evacuation which you now mastermind is one where success is assured, or even survival. The Imperials are few in number and far from hale, and as long hours stretch into days casualties slowly and inexorably mount. For every handful of civilians rescued from makeshift boltholes or environmental shelters and brought to makeshift escape pods, good men and women die. One by one, these Paladins at your side fall, some blessed by a swift death while others linger for tortured moments, their last choking breaths fouled by the poisoned air.

The ever-dwindling survivors offer swift prayers over the fallen, and the promise to remember their names. Fliti. Rindoban. Sarichen. Arjam, who always had a bawdy joke at hand. Satash. Inyam. Zaharu. Eveh. Cross-eyed Olan. Sems. Mahza. Theymsa, who insisted on being called Emmi. You bear their memory with you, and in so doing part of them will live on. But who will remember them, after you are gone?

An ugly agony blossoms in your side as you suck in a rattling breath, lashing you back to the perils of the immediate present.

You had expected a trap, yes, but not the totality of the Matari response. With their bloodlust frustrated by day after day in which you have denied them the battle they sought, one intended victim after another whisked away before their lumbering MTACs could arrive, their rage had grown further than you had thought possible.

When the security systems interlinked with your network revealed a half-dozen Amarr civilians huddled in a locked storage container in the port freight loading deck, it was clear that they had been forced there deliberately. Surely, they were bait dangled by your foes, but God does not grant his faithful the luxury of abandoning each other to their fate just because it might be dangerous. Besides, in the confined space, there was hardly enough room to conceal more than a single MTAC, maybe two. You could handle two.

The assault had seemingly come from all directions at once, dozens of Matari boiling out of distant hiding places. The mech pilots had left behind their superior armaments, instead bearing small sidearms and rifles that spat bullets of a class comparable to your own weapons. But then they had *also* brought in the crews of the transport ships still docked here.

Outnumbering you over five to one, the Matari would surely have overrun you if they had charged immediately, but instead they paused on the periphery of the hangar, arc welders flaring as they sealed every possible exit, ensuring that none of their hated foe would escape to vex them yet more. Only then did the cordon begin to tighten, for them to stalk their prey into the close confines of the stacked containers of the shipyard.

Surely, they expected the desperate situation to inflict panic on their foe, to compel any rational human to seek alternatives promising survival. A doomed breakout attempt could be identified, surrounded, and exterminated. But you and the Paladins with you no longer counted yourselves among the living, having accepted your deaths and moved past it days since.

Fighting outside an armored chassis now, the MTAC pilots are suddenly confronting their own fragility, and they do not handle it with disciplined grace, alternately overconfident and skittish. The crews of the transports fare all the worse, absent proper weapons training or tactics, mishandling their weapons and firing at every shifting shadow. What should have only taken minutes drags on into endless, grueling hours, compromised by low morale and and friendly fire.

To be certain, the Paladins are far from immortal. While their combat armor might shrug off stray bullets, concerted fire can and does bring them down, and one by one they do die. But for the sacrifice of each martyr, more of the foe are sent screaming to hell.

Bleeding from a dozen gunshots that your suit no longer has the biofoam to seal, never mind the knife still stuck in your lower back, you bear witness to the end - but not what any had expected. One of the sealed hatches is abruptly ruptured by a shaped charge... from the outside. And what streams in is not more of the foe, but the aureate and scarlet of Sarum marines, relief arrived at long last to liberate the station.

The torch has been passed, and your watch ended.

When they find your body, the smile will still be on your lips.

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Wrap your arms around the enemy

For faith is your fire

And with it, burn away his evil"

- The Scriptures, Amarr Askura 10:3

[\(*\) The Pitiless Psychopomp](#)

(*) Devastating Effect

The right action, in the right place, at the right moment, can change the world. This fallen world needs a shift in its current paradigm, and there is no-one else to effect it.

The mechanized foes which stalk these desolate halls vastly outclass your battered infantry, but you aren't looking to throw away lives in direct conflict. Having the advantage of mobility, stealth, and knowledge of the terrain, your remaining squad are ghosts moving through the empty tomb of the station. No longer fettered by the concerns of personal survival or any other tactical distractions, you carefully accumulate the information and equipment you need.

That is not to say that the covert strike which you now mastermind is one where success is assured, or even survival. The Imperials are few in number and far from hale, and as long hours stretch into one day, two, three, casualties slowly and inexorably mount. Each span of incremental progress claims lives, good men and women expiring from old wounds or just slowed enough to be caught by the enemy. One by one, these Paladins at your side fall, some blessed by a swift death while others linger for tortured moments, their last choking breaths fouled by the poisoned air.

But the moment came. Lulled into false security, the Matari ventured farther from their ships, scavenging and seeking and hunting while you watched and waited. It was not the obvious threat of the MTACs on which you focused your attentions, but rather the ships that housed and supplied them. Two troop transports and a battlecruiser docked for refueling in the main hangar that the Matari believed secure, a mistake most would not live to regret.

Paladin armor was not meant for EVA, lacking maneuvering thrusters or grapples or reserve air supplies, but it kept the void at bay, for a short time at least. Enough to mine the fuel transfer and supply conduits with every explosive and incendiary you could scrounge from the depleted station. The resulting destruction was rather greater than anticipated, due to secondary explosions that you still can't explain. But the result was clear - three destroyed vessels, the elimination of docking capability for ships larger than a frigate, and hundreds of dead Matari.

But not all of them.

You release the jammed lever and collapse in a heap of aching limbs. A wet cough wracks your battered frame, and you spit out something red. Intellectually, you can remember that this is a virtuality, but the fatigue and the sensation of slowly coming apart at the seams is painfully real. A moment of rest and reflection, you can spare that, before resuming once more.

The retaliation of your surviving enemies was swift and overwhelming. Now marooned aboard Significance, they hunted the small group of Paladins with single-minded focus and relentless hate. Most of your squad had been killed in the initial reentry from the dock operation, and the survivors whittled away by slow attrition. The last of your comrades died yesterday, having made it to the refuge of an emergency shelter but not before sustaining blood loss that sent her into a coma from which she never woke.

You left the suit of armor behind in the shelter, despite the protestations of the trauma lining as it insisted that your own wounds required stabilization and monitoring until medevac. It was slowing you down, and slightly postponing your death wasn't necessary. It doesn't bear thinking about what will happen if the Matari capture you. Still, the pang of loss you feel as you leave behind that last vestige of your life as a Paladin cuts keenly, and you were forced to blink back tears as you turned away.

The sudden sound of heavy metal crashing against the reinforced hatch which secures Significance's primary reactor jolts you from your reverie. In itself, that doesn't concern you. The blast door is meant to contain an explosion whose force is at least two orders of magnitude larger than anything the MTACs can bring to bear. They'll figure out a workaround, though. There isn't much time.

To your side, the engineering console continues to chime automated protestation at the safeguards you have disabled. Before this all started, you wouldn't have known how to manipulate the system to accomplish even that much, but

necessity has compelled you to learn no small amount of environmental systems management. It has also taught you what the purpose of this innocuous conduit whose manual release you again throw your crippled body into trying to force.

The percussive pounding grows louder, perhaps spurred by dawning horror if they have realized what you intend. But it is too late, because with a sudden groan, the lever gives way, and the reactor begins to vent waste elements directly into the primary atmosphere recycler. Within minutes, this station will be suffused with lethal radiation that will make of this mass grave a pyre, burning away all the hate and pain and rage which has consumed it. Even the MTACs will prove only a coffin, the combat walkers not hardened against high-rad environments.

Already you can feel something twisting in your gut, whether from past injuries or what you have unleashed, you do not know. A profound weariness guides you to the floor in a slow slump, inexorable fatigue dragging your eyes closed. The end will come soon, for all of you.

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