

The Enginarium

by Michael J. Hollows

Bryen was just a man, an ordinary man, but unlike the other ordinary men surrounding him he was a thinker. Every day, as he toiled in his sweltering metal prison, he became lost in thought. No matter how hard he was pushed his mind always drifted back to his thoughts.

He had been labelled a criminal. Though he was not much of a criminal. But that was how he had come to be here, in this hell. He was not as hard as some of the men, built of muscle and scar tissue; professional criminals that now fed the fuel to the great engines. Or as hard as the men that led these criminals to work on the end of harsh metal-barbed leashes.

He had killed, once. That was all it had taken to drag him from his home, from his wife and children. Some of the men led here had killed multiple times, some were worse.

I knew I shouldn't have done it, but what choice did I have?

The man had entered his hab and attacked his family, desperately looking for something to loot. Bryen had defended himself with the only thing he had available, a knife.

He had no idea that a man could bleed so much. The thought of it brought his reverie to a shuddering halt as he shook his head, his metal collar rattling in the motion. He didn't like to think of the expression on the intruder's face as he had stabbed the knife into his gut. Bryan hadn't meant to kill the man. He wasn't a murderer.

That day his life had become a living hell, dragged off to join the thousands of indentured workers now toiling in the heat around him. In the great depths of vessels across the wide Imperium, untold billions of workers broke their backs feeding the engines that powered these great space-faring machines. Without them the human race would be confined to their

planets and perhaps would never have left the ancient home world, *Terra*.

The slaver cracked his electro-whip and with a sharp tang of pain brought Bryan back out of his thoughts. Lifting the heavy shovel, he resumed turning fuel in to the great engine. When the fuel landed in the fire the heat cascaded, stinging his skin and adding to the pain. As the slaver moved on down the rank upon rank of indentured workers Bryan mused again on the time when he had first come here.

At first the heat from the incendiary fires had been overwhelming, the pain from the endless toil unbearable. But in time his perception of both had dimmed to become only a stark reminder that he was still alive and in hell. He just wanted it to end like many of the others he had spoken to, in broken snatches of conversation amongst the enginarium. There was no change of shift, the constant toil and pain was their punishment. They had paid their price and worked endlessly in service of the Emperor. The pain was nothing anymore. Bryan just wanted to die.

Again the electro-whip slashed across his back, breaking his thoughts and reminding him that pain could still exist, no matter how dull his senses. Bitterly he thought: *if it is the last thing I do, I will watch that bastard slaver die. I will watch his expression as I use his cruelty against him.*

The crack of the whip seemed to speed up, becoming a staccato growl. But thankfully the slaver had moved on. The electro-whip was dealing its damage to some other poor fools who had caught the slaver's withering attention.

Bryan noticed the pitch of the whip had changed with it.

No...not the whip...this is something else.

Small explosions sprayed across the decking, blowing chunks out of the machinery and throwing them about the enginarium. Thankfully, none fell on the precious engine-core, any

damage would surely kill them all.

Most of the indentured workers stood where they were, dumfounded. Their spirit so downtrodden and broken that the instinct to flee had been beaten out of them. Bryan, quicker on the uptake than most, dived behind the bulkhead near his workstation.

Death has come for me at last.

His thought had escaped as a whisper through his cracked and broken lips.

The slaver idiotically lumbered closer to the sound of gunfire, trying to locate their attackers. But before he could take more than a few unsteady, broken steps his body jerked spasmodically. Flesh and bone blew off in messy lumps that splattered against the decking, before the corpse fell to the ground with a metallic clang.

Bryan wouldn't have his vengeance after all as he noticed the grim expression on the slaver's face, but at least the cruel beast of a man was finally dead.

As the life fell from the slaver's eyes Bryan noticed his opportunity. Scrabbling on his hands and knees, he used his ebbing strength to reach out and remove the lasgun strapped to the slaver's back. It was a short thing, designed for use aboard ship and as he raised it the thin stock barely reached his shoulder. The weight and feel of the weapon was unfamiliar to Bryan, he had never held a gun before. But he had sat for hours absent-mindedly watching the local planetary defence troops drill and he was fairly confident he knew how one worked.

Throne, that was a long time ago.

As the gunfire swung around again, peppering the metalwork, he dropped behind another bulkhead nearer to the dead slaver. The blood pooled around his feet and soaked the cheap cloth of his jumpsuit, but that was the least of his problems. Death had finally come for him, but he wouldn't take it lightly. He would die fighting and cover would be his best hope.

The sound of clanking footfalls grew closer as the attackers pressed in to the enginarium.

Each footstep sounded calm and steady, gradually taking up space rather than rushing in to overwhelm the workers. Gigantic, dark shadows loomed over the workspace where Bryan crouched. The blackness only broken by the muzzle flare of weapons fire.

As he sat covering in the crevice of the machinery an armoured giant came out of the shadows. Metal boots clanged on the decking in patient footsteps as the giant warrior moved its weapon around before placing precise shots in to the fleeing workers. Their screams of misery added to the wail of sounds around Bryan, threatening to overwhelm his senses.

He gasped as he caught sight of the warrior. It was a vision of death incarnate. It was an angel of death come forth from the stories he had been told as a child. A Space Marine, the Emperor's finest warriors and sons. But what was it doing here, it wasn't what Bryan had imagined in his dreams or nightmares.

Something is wrong.

The stories had told of the Emperor's sons turning from the light of the Imperium and embracing fouler, crueller gods. But this warrior was the very epitome of the Imperium, proud and tall, decked in yellow with stylised Aquilas showing on all parts of its armour. A black hand closed in a righteous fist on a pure white disc decorated the warriors great shoulder pad.

As the barrel of the boltgun lowered and came in to angle with Bryan's face, he knew he had been duped. His years of toil in the enginarium had been a lie, this was no ship of the Imperium.

I am the enemy.

The slowly dawning thought only added to his torment. He had unwittingly served the forces of the arch-enemy and their cruel masters. It was a crueller punishment than he had ever imagined.

All my pain and suffering has been for naught.

That was the last thought that rushed through the synapses of Bryan's brain as the mass-reactive shell dismembered his body, leaving his bloody, headless corpse forgotten in the crevice of the enginarium.