

THE HORUS HERESY™

SHADOWS OF TREACHERY

*Edited by Christian Dunn
and Nick Kyme*

The New York Times bestselling series
Featuring stories from Dan Abnett,
Aaron Dembski-Bowden and Graham McNeill



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THE HORUS HERESY

IT IS A TIME OF LEGEND.

THE GALAXY IS IN FLAMES. THE EMPEROR'S GLORIOUS VISION FOR HUMANITY IS IN RUINS. HIS FAVOURED SON, HORUS, HAS TURNED FROM HIS FATHER'S LIGHT AND EMBRACED CHAOS.

HIS ARMIES, THE MIGHTY AND REDOUBTABLE SPACE MARINES, ARE LOCKED IN A BRUTAL CIVIL WAR. ONCE, THESE ULTIMATE WARRIORS FOUGHT SIDE BY SIDE AS BROTHERS, PROTECTING THE GALAXY AND BRINGING MANKIND BACK INTO THE EMPEROR'S LIGHT. NOW THEY ARE DIVIDED.

SOME REMAIN LOYAL TO THE EMPEROR, WHILST OTHERS HAVE SIDED WITH THE WARMASTER. PRE-EMINENT AMONGST THEM, THE LEADERS OF THEIR THOUSANDS-STRONG LEGIONS, ARE THE PRIMARCHS. MAGNIFICENT, SUPERHUMAN BEINGS, THEY ARE THE CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT OF THE EMPEROR'S GENETIC SCIENCE. THRUST INTO BATTLE AGAINST ONE ANOTHER, VICTORY IS UNCERTAIN FOR EITHER SIDE.

WORLDS ARE BURNING. AT ISSTVAN V, HORUS DEALT A VICIOUS BLOW AND THREE LOYAL LEGIONS WERE ALL BUT DESTROYED. WAR WAS BEGUN, A CONFLICT THAT WILL ENGULF ALL MANKIND IN FIRE. TREACHERY AND BETRAYAL HAVE USURPED HONOUR AND NOBILITY. ASSASSINS LURK IN EVERY SHADOW. ARMIES ARE GATHERING. ALL MUST CHOOSE A SIDE OR DIE.

HORUS MUSTERS HIS ARMADA, TERRA ITSELF THE OBJECT OF HIS WRATH. SEATED UPON THE GOLDEN THRONE, THE EMPEROR WAITS FOR HIS WAYWARD SON TO RETURN. BUT HIS TRUE ENEMY IS CHAOS, A PRIMORDIAL FORCE THAT SEEKS TO ENSLAVE MANKIND TO ITS CAPRICIOUS WHIMS.

THE SCREAMS OF THE INNOCENT, THE PLEAS OF THE RIGHTEOUS RESOUND TO THE CRUEL LAUGHTER OF DARK GODS. SUFFERING AND DAMNATION AWAIT ALL SHOULD THE EMPEROR FAIL AND THE WAR BE LOST.

THE AGE OF KNOWLEDGE AND ENLIGHTENMENT HAS ENDED.

THE AGE OF DARKNESS HAS BEGUN.

THE CRIMSON FIST

John French

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The Primarchs

ROGAL DORN, Primarch of the Imperial Fists, Praetorian of Terra

PERTURABO, Primarch of the Iron Warriors

The VII Legion 'Imperial Fists'

SIGISMUND, First Captain

AMANDUS TYR, Captain, 6th Company, Commander of the *Halcyon*

PERTINAX, Captain, 14th Company, Commander of the *Hammer of Terra*

ALEXIS POLUX, Captain, 405th Company, Master of the Retribution Fleet

RALN, Sergeant, 1st Squad, 405th Company

The IV Legion 'Iron Warriors'

BEROSSUS, Captain, 2nd Company

GOLG, Captain, 11th Company, Commander of the *Contrador*

Imperial Personae

ARMINA FEL, Senior Astropath

CALIO LEZZEK, The Retribution Fleet's Master of Astropaths

HALM BASUS, Primus of the *Tribune*

‘True strength is born in pain.’

– Ancient Terran proverb

‘All time is unredeemable.

What might have been is an abstraction

Remaining a perpetual possibility

Only in a world of speculation.

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

Footfalls echo in the memory

Down the passage which we did not take

Towards the door we never opened’

– from burnt fragments recovered from the Alba archives, attributed to the ancient poet
Elliot

*‘We are future memories. When our flesh is dust and our dreams faded we will be ghosts living in
land of legends, made real only by the memories of others. What we take with us into that realm of the
dead, what we are remembered for, that will be the truth of our lives.’*

– Solomon Voss, from *The Edge of Illumination*

PROLOGUE

The Nightside of Inwit

Can I bear this?

My world has become a shrinking sphere of cold darkness. Within there is only pain, beyond it there is nothing but hungering night. I cannot see. Ice has pooled in my eye sockets, my tears frozen against my skin. I try to breathe but each sip of air draws razor edges through my lungs. I cannot feel my hands. Numbness is spreading through me. I think I am on the ground, curled on the ice, my limbs shaking more slowly with every fading heartbeat.

The beast must be close. It won't have given up and it has my blood to follow.

My blood.

I must still be bleeding. It is not a large wound, a clean puncture through my calf, but it will kill me all the same. I have trailed red across the ice-dunes, trying to shut out the pain, trying to ignore the numbness, trying to keep moving. I have failed. The cold is taking me and the beast will have what is left.

I cannot bear this.

I was never going to succeed. I am not strong enough.

The world is turning dark, the pain fading.

There is a voice shouting out of the black distance. I try to hear what the voice is saying but it is too far away.

Hands grip my face. Pain shoots through my head. I scream. Fingers peel back my eyelids.

'Alexis, you must move.' I see a face, surrounded by rime-caked fur. The eyes are blue, the blue of glacial ice. Helias. It is Helias, my brother. He is still with me. Behind his face a blizzard fills the starlit sky with spiralling shards of white.

'You must move now.' I feel him grip my arms and yank me to my feet. Bright pain flares through my body, jagged-edged, slicing and grinding with every movement. I scream again.

'The pain is how you know you are still alive,' shouts Helias over the wind. I blink, trying to focus. The numbness recedes; I can feel my limbs again. There is no comfort in the returning sensations. Pain of me wants to be numb again, to lie down and let my blood freeze.

We stand on a narrow flat ridge, crevasses opening to either side, its top sculpted into undulations of white powder. Around us the fractured pinnacles of ice rise above the blur of the snowstorm like shards of flawed glass, dark blue in the starlight. The false radiance of the fortress moons shines down on us from beyond curtains of emerald aurora light. These are the Splintered Lands, the night-soaked side of Inwit which has never seen the sun. The cold is as constant as the night. The warriors of the ice caste only venture here in metal-plated environmental suits, but those who wish to join the Legion must cross this desolate place in rotting pelts and rags. It is a test, a journey through a midnight realm of agony. I have chosen that journey, but I will not see its end.

There is blood on the ice, frozen hard, trailing away into the distance.

'Where is it?' I say, looking at Helias. He shakes his head. Strips of rag hide his face, and the snow

caked furs magnify his bulk so that he looks more like a tundra-ox than a man.

~~'I don't know, but it is close,' he says, his voice muffled but still strong. I know that his hands are swollen and black with frozen blood, but the pain does not even reach his eyes. As I fade, he is unbowed. He is my brother, my twin in all ways except one. He is stronger than me, he always has been. I would not have made it as far as this without him, and now I have failed him. He should leave me here; I am weak and I will kill us both.~~

He looks at me, as if he heard my thoughts.

~~'Don't even think it, Alexis. I am not leaving you.'~~

I open my mouth, but the reply dies in my throat. Over the snow-laden wind I hear it again, a low animal sound, like a breath released with a smile of anticipation. Helias has gone utterly still.

There is a growl from behind me, a crackling purr that floods my veins with warm fear. The beast has found us. It wants me, I know; I am weak and bleeding and it has already tasted my blood. There another growl, closer, longer. I can imagine it slinking across the ice behind me, its muscles moving with delicate slowness, its colourless eyes on my back. It is waiting to see what I will do, judging its attack for the moment when it is certain. And while it prepares it wants its prey to know fear.

The growl comes again, nearer, and I can hear the soft noise as the beast slides its furred body across the ice. I try to make myself calm, to ready my failing muscles for movement. Helias keeps his eyes steady on mine. He knows what I intend; it is what he would have done. I nod once, very slowly.

I hear the beast's claws scratch over the ice. In my mind I can almost see its muscles bunching under its ice-dusted pelt.

The beast roars as it leaps towards my back, the sound rising over the blizzard. I dive to the side, muscles on fire. I am too slow. The beast's jaws close on my trailing left arm. It turns as it lands, dragging me across the ice. Teeth tear through my flesh. I can smell the rank meat stink of its mouth, the animal reek of its body. It flicks its head, my arm still between its teeth. I hear joints pop and agony flashes across my eyes. I do not even feel it as I slam back to the ground. It releases my arm, and places a clawed paw on my chest. Ribs crack, and needle-sharp claws touch my skin.

There is a yell and suddenly the pressure on my chest is gone. I scramble to pull myself away, and look up. Helias is standing with his back to a crevasse, his body poised, arms spread like a wrestler. Between us the beast coils on its six legs. Pale fur covers its long body from the snout of its shovel-shaped head to the end of its twitching tail. It pauses, assessing the new prey that has drawn its attention away from the easier kill. It tenses. I cannot see my brother's face but I know that under the rag mask he is smiling.

The beast pounces. Helias is still. The beast's jaws are wide, its glassy teeth like knife blades. My brother moves at the last instant, pivoting as his arms come up to grip the beast's neck. He turns and the beast's momentum spins it through the air towards the waiting crevasse. It is almost perfect. Almost.

I start running, pain and injury falling away... The beast twists as it flies through the air, its forelimb raking flesh. The long hooked claws fasten on Helias's leg. The beast howls as both tumble together into the crevasse.

I reach the edge in time to grab my brother as he falls. His weight pulls me off my feet. The beast's claws come free and it vanishes into the crevasse, drops of blood following its panicked snarls into the darkness below.

Helias is hanging from my hand. I am on my front, my right hand gripping a ridge in the ice, my head and left arm extended over the crevasse's edge. My brother is spinning at the end of my grasp, his hand locked around mine. My arm is a lacerated ruin, the flesh punctured and chewed in the

beast's jaws, and Helias's weight is pulling the wounds into broad and bloody smiles. The pain is like nothing I have ever felt. Blood is running over our hands. My hold is slipping. Pain and fear have become one inside me. I will not let this happen. I am strong enough, I must be strong enough. I try to pull him up and my grunt of effort becomes a scream. I cannot lift him. My right hand holding the ice ridge slips. I jerk forwards, sliding further over the edge.

'Alexis.' My brother's voice is so low that it is almost lost on the wind. I look down at Helias. His eyes flick to our hands, the frostbitten flesh slick with blood that looks black in the starlight. I see what he already knows; my grip has already broken. It is his hand locked around mine that is holding him from the black void below.

He was always stronger than me. I look back into his eyes.

'No!' I shout.

He opens his hand.

One hundred and forty-one days before the Battle of Phall

The Phall System

My scream woke me from the dream.

My eyes snapped open. For a moment I thought I was blind, that I was still on Inwit and that the cold had stolen my sight. Then the chill touch of my armour cut the long-distant past from the present. I was not blind, and my brother had fallen from my hand long ago. I felt cold, as if the dream had reached into reality to wrap me in a memory of Inwit's chill. Ice covered my helmet's eye lenses, turning the view into a frosted haze of slowly shifting light. The ice was pink, the colour of snow melted to slush by blood. Warning runes pulsed at the corner of my eyes, slow, dim red.

Hard vacuum warning...

Armour integrity warning...

Gravity condition zero...

Injury assessment...

Armour power low...

I could not remember where I had been, or how I had come to be freezing while my armour died around me. I blinked, tried to focus my thoughts. Sensations began to creep across my body: a numbing echo of pain from my right leg, a black absence of all feeling from my left hand, a metallic taste on my tongue. *I am alive*, I thought, *and that is enough for now*. I tried to move my right arm, but the armour resisted no matter how hard I strained. I tried to close my left hand. Nothing. I could not even feel my fingers.

I looked back to the weakening pulse of the warning runes. The armour had cycled down to minimum power, turning it into little more than a lifeless shell of metal. It was keeping me alive, but it must have taken severe damage.

I closed my eyes, steadied my pulse. I knew where I was. I was floating free in the vacuum of space. The armour was keeping my body warm, but it was failing. Its power would fade, and I would begin to bleed more heat into the void. My enhanced flesh would last for longer than that of an ordinary human, but the cold would eventually reach my hearts and still their twin beats to silence. It was only a matter of time.

For a second my control almost broke. I wanted to scream, to thrash against the iron embrace of the armour. It was the instinct of a creature trapped beneath the water, its last breath burning in its lungs, the blackness of inevitability closing around its life. I let out a slow breath, forcing the instinct to stillness. I was alive, and while I lived I had a choice.

'Re-power all systems,' I said. A pulse of electric sensation ran through my body as the armour obeyed.

Almost as soon as the armour powered up it began to scream. Sympathetic pain stabbed into my spine. Overlapping warning chimes filled my ears. Angry runes pulsed across my helmet display. I blinked the warnings away and the chimes faded. There were at most a few minutes of power left before the armour became a tomb. I brought my right hand up and scraped the melting ice from the helmet lenses.

Light poured into my eyes, raw and white-edged. I was floating in a vast chamber lit by sunlight that came from a source somewhere behind me. A layer of pink frost covered everything, glittering in the

stark light like a sugar glaze on a sweet cake. Small crystals floated all around me, turning slowly with the last of their fading momentum. Irregular shapes coated in rose-coloured rime hung in mid-air across the chamber.

I blink-clicked a faint marker on my helmet display. The vox system activated with a moan of static. I set it to a full spectrum broadcast.

‘This is Alexis Polux of the Seventh Legion.’ My voice sounded hollow inside my helmet, and only more static answered me. I set the broadcast to a looped cycle that would last until the power faded. *Perhaps someone will hear. Perhaps there is someone that can hear.*

Something bumped against my shoulder and spun lazily into view: a frozen lump a little wider than my hand. It spun lazily end-over-end. I reached out to knock it away, and it turned over and looked at me with lifeless eyes.

Memory flashed through me: *the hull splitting with an iron roar as the ship spilled from the warp storm’s grasp, blood arcing across the deck as debris sliced through the air; a human officer shouting his eyes wide with terror.* I had been on a ship. I remembered the deck shaking under my feet and the screams of the storm outside the hull.

I jerked my hand back from the severed head, and the sudden movement sent me spinning through the frozen blood spray. The chamber rotated around me. I saw the ice-clogged servitor niches, and mangled banks of instruments. A tiered auspex dais pointed down at me from the floor, its screens and holo-projectors looking like the branches of a tree under winter snow. I tried to steady my momentum, but I just continued spinning. Warnings began to shriek in my ears.

Power failing...

Power failing...

Power failing...

Sights flicked past me, suffused in the warning rune’s ruddy light. There were bodies fused to the walls by layers of blood ice. Sections of splintered yellow armour drifted amongst limbs and shattered bone. Severed bundles of cabling hung from the walls like strings of intestine. Streamers of data-parchment floated beside the foetal shapes of frozen servitors. I spun on and saw the source of the light: a bright white sun shining through a wide tear in the hull. I could see the glittering blue sphere of a planet hung against the star-dotted darkness. Between me and that starlight was a sight that made me stare as my view turned over.

Dead warships lay spread across the void. There were hundreds of them, their golden hulls chewed and split like worried carcasses. Vast strips of armour had peeled back from cold metal guts to show the lattice of chambers and passages within. Mountain-sized hulls had been portioned into ragged chunks. It was like looking at the jumbled remains of a slaughterhouse.

All my brothers are gone, I thought, and felt colder than I had for decades. I remembered Helias, my true brother, my twin, falling into darkness from the end of my fingertips.

Power failing... the warning runes chimed.

Final memories clicked into place. I knew where we had been going: where all of us had been going. I stared at the graveyard and knew one more thing with certainty.

Power failing...

‘We have failed,’ I said to the silence.

‘...respond...’ The mechanical voice filled my helmet, broken and raw with static. It took me a heartbeat to reply.

‘This is Captain Polux of the Seventh Legion,’ I said as my helmet display dimmed. Bursts of static filled my ears. I could feel the armour stiffening around me, its power finally drained. A quiet

numbness began to spread across my body. The helmet display faded to black. I felt something bump into my chest and then fasten around me with a grind of metal. In the prison of my dying armour I could feel myself falling into darkness, falling beyond sight and pain, falling like my brothers. *I am alone in the darkness and cold, and I always will be.*

‘We have you, brother,’ said a voice that was a machine whisper. It seemed to carry out of a night filled with dreams of the ice and dead ships glittering in starlight.

I knew it would fall to me. I knew the protocol of our Legion as well as any other, but that did not stop me wishing it was otherwise. The remembrancers and iterators speak of the Legiones Astartes and say that we are without fear, that nothing fills our hearts and minds but resolve and fury. Of the Imperial Fists they say more: that we have souls of stone, that emotion is silent inside our flesh. The truth, as ever, is something that words cannot touch. If we felt nothing we would have failed in the thousands of wars we have fought on the Emperor’s behalf. Without doubt to temper boldness our enemies would have slaughtered us many times over. Without rage we would have never have reached the heights of glory. I do not feel fear, but inside me something of it remains, mutilated and withered, its strings tuned to different notes. Where a human would feel fear I feel the tug of another emotion, one layered and spliced into my psyche by the process that made me. Sometimes it is rage, caution, or cold calculation. And sometimes it is dread, a ragged echo of fear that is lost to me. And it was dread that I felt as the leadership of the fleet gathered on the *Tribune*.

They passed me as they filed into the granite and bronze chamber. A hundred war leaders arrayed for battle. Intricate silver patterns wove across the golden yellow surface of each suit of armour, and the emblem of the clenched fist worked in jet gleamed from chests and pauldrons. Some were old, their faces lined and scarred; others seemed young, though they were not. There was Pertinax, watching me with green machine eyes. Beside him walked Cazzimus, who had held the towers of Velga for six months. There Iago, who had fought in the first pacification of Luna. Beside them were marshals, siegemasters, and Legion seneschals. Between them they carried half a millennium of waging war.

Once they had all passed I followed, walking down to the centre of the chamber. The machine adepts were repairing my armour so I wore a saffron robe knotted at the waist with a blood-red cord. I stand taller than all my brothers, and even without my armour I still dwarfed every warrior in the room. The chamber was silent and my steps echoed as I limped between my peers. I could feel their eyes on me, watching, waiting. My left arm was stiff at my side, the old scars of teeth and the newer wounds hidden by my robe’s wide sleeve. The healing flesh shot traces of pain up my nerves. None of it showed on my face.

The chamber was deep in the hull of the *Tribune*, now the flagship of the Retribution Fleet, or what was left of it. Polished bronze lined the walls and its floor descended in tiers of black granite. Firelight from braziers filled the chamber with a red glow, and a ghost-green projection of a star and planets revolved above the open space at its centre.

Tyr had told me what must happen. He had come to see me as I recovered under the eyes of the Apothecaries.

‘It falls to you, Polux,’ he had said, looking down at me, his eyes dark in his axe-sharp face. The medical servitors had been bonding flesh to the left side of my body or I would have risen to reply. And it was I had to remain on the steel slab as the razor lasers and cauterising torches worked to rebuild my mashed and frozen muscle.

‘There are others more worthy,’ I had said, without breaking his stare. The edge of a sneer twitched

at the edge of Tyr's mouth. Control is one of the first qualities required of an Imperial Fist, and I had no doubt that Tyr's hint of derision was no slip. ~~Maybe he thought my words a sign of weakness, a betrayal of a flaw not yet discovered in my decades of service.~~ Perhaps he simply did not like me. We are brothers, bonded together by oaths and the blood of our primarch, but brotherhood does not require friendship. In truth I do not know what he thought. I have always been apart, unable to read the signs of my Legion brothers' thoughts. They are blank to me, and perhaps me to them.

Tyr had shaken his head, the hunched shoulders of his Terminator armour shifting with the small movement.

'No, brother. You are Yonnad's pupil, the heir to this command. The primarch and Sigismund passed it to him. Now it is yours, but it is not yours to refuse.'

I had looked into Tyr's eyes that were so like our primarch's. I had not spoken from false modesty; there *were* others more worthy to lead a force that was still a fifth of our Legion's full strength. Better men had survived the wreck of the fleet: commanders with more campaign experience, higher in the rolls of honour, and more skilled at arms. Tyr was one such leader.

I am no hero, no champion of the Legion. I know how to defend and attack, how to stand and not to yield. I have nothing else. It is all I have. But we are Imperial Fists and form and order is not something we set aside easily. Yonnad had designated me as his successor. That command might fall to me so soon was a possibility I doubt he contemplated. But they had pulled me alive from a frozen wreck, and the storm had taken my mentor. Tyr was right; I could not refuse. It was my duty, and that duty led me in limping steps to the centre of a circle of my peers.

I stopped at the chamber's centre, under the turning display, and looked up at the faces lining the raked tiers. A hundred pairs of eyes glittered at me from the shadows. I felt deeply honoured and completely alone. The truth was that I did not fear the command. Yonnad was the Legion's finest fleetmaster and I was his best pupil; I had commanded expeditionary fleets and campaigns of conquest. With Yonnad dead in the storm I was his heir. It was an honour the Legion had tutored and trained me for, but it was an honour I did not want.

Our fleet was the primarch's first answer to his brother's treachery. Five hundred and sixty-one ships and three hundred companies had left the *Phalanx*. First Captain Sigismund had been given command but the primarch had taken him back to Terra, and so we had jumped towards Isstvan under Yonnad's command. The storm had seized us as we entered the warp and it had not let go. The Navigators could not find the beacon light of the Astronomican, and every course took us deeper into the tempest. We were lost, drifting on the currents of a malign sea. After what seemed like many weeks the Navigators perceived a break in the storms, a single point of stillness. We had fled towards it, and the storm's fury had followed.

The fleet had translated into reality on the edge of a star system. The power of the storm in those last moments was like nothing I had ever felt. Geller fields failed, hulls sheared into fragments and burned in the fires of their own reactors. Some ships had reached safety, but many had died, their corpses spat out of the warp to freeze in the void. Two hundred warships lost, their remains left spinning in the light of a forgotten star. They had found me in the remains of one of those broken wrecks. I was one of the few.

Ten thousand Imperial Fists gone. I could not grasp that loss.

Three hundred and sixty-three warships remained. The fates of over twenty thousand of my brother's Imperial Fists were now in my hands. It was a weight that I had never carried before. *I must, I thought. Even if it is more than I can bear, I must.*

I nodded once to the assembled chamber.

Silence. Then a hundred fists slammed into chest plates in unison.

I gestured across the slowly rotating projection of the system we found ourselves in. Its name was Phall, a system so minor and un-noted that it existed only as an obscure footnote in navigational records. The projection spun, the orbiting planets disappearing as a section of the image grew to show the surviving Imperial Fists vessels. I let it rotate for a moment. There was a question that all those present needed to consider.

‘Five hundred vessels aimed at the heart of the greatest betrayal ever committed. Two hundred lost as they fled to the one point of calm amidst the storm. Two planets, once inhabited, now empty.’ I looked at where shifting purple clouds represented the relative warp conditions around the system. ‘Here we sit, surrounded by the storms that drove us here. Cut off from communication. Contained. Trapped.’ I looked up at the watching faces; some were nodding as if seeing where I was going. Perhaps they had already seen the same elements of our situation and made the same judgement. I knew how to construct a trap, had used them in dozens of wars, and I knew what it was to kill a weakened and surprised enemy. Looking at the projection of our fleet floating in the Phall system I saw a trap. How anything could create such a thing was beyond me, but I knew what every instinct was telling me.

‘And if we have been trapped here,’ I said, and my voice carried through the silent chamber, ‘who is coming for us?’

The Imperial Palace, Terra

His father waited for him at the summit of the oldest stronghold on Terra. The Bhab Bastion was an irregular cylinder of rock that rose to the roof of the world like a finger pointing to the heavens. In the long millennia of Old Night warlords, kings and tyrants had made it their refuge, and even they had called it old. Now it was an ugly relic surviving amongst the growing sprawl of the Imperial Palace, a blunt reminder of barbarity fused into a monument to illumination and unity. Sigismund wondered whether now the barbarity of the old fastness would triumph over the palace that had tried to tame it. *The old ways and necessities are come again, he thought, as they always do.* War had been the only constant of existence since mankind first walked under the rays of this sun, and it would last long after that same sun burnt to a cold ember. Of that he was certain.

The wind that blew across the bastion top was cold and scented by spices carried from the work camp on the distant mountain slopes. Above him clouds scudded through a brightening blue sky and a chill dawn light fell across the bare skin of his face. It was a face that might have been handsome, but war and genecraft had carved it to a different end. Noble features were spread across a blunt face, the skin pitted and the flesh under the right eye chewed by a scar that ran down the cheek to the jaw. But it was the eyes most people noted: bright sapphire-blue and lit by hard intensity. Clad in burnished gold battle plate, swathed in a white surcoat crossed in black, he bore the marks and honours of a hundred wars like a second skin. In battles across the stars he had never been defeated. From the gladiatorial pits of the World Eaters to the conquest of star clusters he had demonstrated what it was to be a warrior of the Imperium. In another time he would have been the greatest warrior of his age, but in these times he was merely the strongest son of the being who waited for him by the tower’s parapet.

Rogal Dorn glimmered in the brightening light. Standing head and shoulders taller than Sigismund the primarch of the Imperial Fists was a demigod clad in adamantine and gold. Beside Dorn stood an

astropath, a hunger-thin woman whose bent spine showed clearly under the green silk of her robe. Neither said anything but Sigismund could feel that a conversation had just ended, the severed tension still hanging in the air. He knelt, the wind stirring his tabard against his armour.

‘My thanks, mistress.’ Dorn nodded to the withered astropath, who bowed and walked away. ‘Rise, my son,’ he added.

Sigismund rose slowly and looked up at his father. Dark eyes glittered at him from a face of hard lines and unreadable stillness. Dorn smiled grimly. Sigismund knew what that meant; it meant the same as it had every day since they had returned to Terra.

‘There is no word, my lord?’ asked Sigismund.

‘None.’

‘The warp storms occluding the—’

‘Would make communication unlikely, yes.’ Dorn turned away. Out beyond the battlement an eagle turned against the cold blue sky, skimming the edge of a plume of drifting smoke. Dorn’s eyes followed it, tracing the spiral of its flight as it rose on a column of warm air.

It had been many weeks since Dorn had heard and seen the evidence of his brother’s treachery. Sigismund remembered the rage in his father’s eyes. It was still there, he knew, wrapped in will and buried beneath layers of control. He knew it because it burned in him, a bright echo of his father’s cold fury. Dorn had wanted to go and confront Horus himself, to hear the traitor’s confession and bring retribution with his own hands. But duty had held him back: duty to the Emperor and the Imperium that Horus now sought to destroy. They had returned to Terra, but Dorn had sent his sons as emissaries of his anger. He had named it a Retribution Fleet. Thirty thousand Imperial Fists and over five hundred warships had struck out towards Isstvan, a force great enough to subdue a hundred worlds, bearing a brother’s wrath. Now a second force from many Legions gathered to strike at Isstvan, but no word had come from the Retribution Fleet.

‘Word will come, my lord. The galaxy does not simply swallow a third of a Legion.’

‘Does it not?’ Dorn turned his dark eyes on Sigismund. ‘War amongst the Legions. Horus a traitor. The ground under our feet becomes the sky. Can we be sure that we know anything for certain?’

‘You have been listening too much to the worries of the council, my lord,’ said Sigismund in a level voice. *Fear surrounds us*, he thought. It ran through the halls of Terra like a cold wind. It ran through the hive sumps of Nord Merica, and through the whisper colonnades of Europa. It spread in glances, rumour and in the silence of fears left unsaid. It was everywhere and it was growing. Horus’s treachery had shaken all assumptions of loyalty and truth in the Imperium. In a single moment everything had become unsure. Who else had sided with Horus? Who could be trusted? What would happen? The questions went on without answer. As he looked into his father’s eyes Sigismund reflected that knowing some of the answers gave little comfort.

‘The fleet will arrive at Isstvan, and whatever happens to them they will endure. They are your sons.’

‘Do you now regret returning here?’ asked Dorn.

‘No. My place is here,’ he said, looking back into his father’s face. Command of the Imperial Fists sent to Isstvan had been Sigismund’s, but it was a duty that he had not taken. He had asked instead to return to Terra. Dorn had trusted his son and acceded to his plea without question.

He had kept the real reason to himself, sensing that his father would not understand. Sigismund barely understood it himself, but he had made his decision. That deception had weighed on Sigismund like penitent chains ever since.

Dorn smiled.

‘So certain, so little doubt,’ he said.

‘Doubt is the greatest weakness.’ Sigismund frowned.

Dorn raised an eyebrow. ‘Quoting my own words is unsubtle flattery, or a very subtle rebuke.’

‘The truth is a many-edged blade,’ quoted Sigismund in a flat voice. Dorn’s laughter blew across the platform like brief thunder.

‘Now you really are trying to provoke me,’ growled Dorn, but the words still held a note of laughter. He gripped Sigismund’s shoulder. ‘Thank you, my son,’ he said, his voice grave again. ‘I am glad you are here.’ For a moment Sigismund thought of telling him the truth, of telling him why he had returned to Terra. Then his father looked away and the feeling passed.

‘And there is more for you here than keeping me from melancholy.’ Dorn’s eyes had gone to the stars glittering on the horizon’s edge, his gaze fixed on where a red spark flickered like a cooling cinder. ‘It has reached us,’ he said. ‘The treachery is at our threshold.’

‘The reports are true, then? Mars is falling?’

‘Yes.’

Sigismund felt anger coil through him at the thought of an enemy so close to the heart of the Imperium. The hate built within him, running through his limbs in a hot wave, feeding on lesser emotions until it was a focused line of barely shackled fire. It was this inner fire that had made him a warrior without peer beneath the Emperor and the primarch whose flesh he shared. For a moment he felt as he had before the encounter on the *Phalanx*, before everything had changed.

He let out a long breath. ‘I will grind the Martian traitors to dust.’

Dorn shook his head. ‘There is no time. For now we must secure what we need for the defence of Terra: the armour from Mondus Occulum and Mondus Gamma.’ Sigismund nodded. If they had no allies remaining amongst the Martian adepts it would be a punishing task; punishing, but straightforward.

‘My resources?’

‘You have four companies, and Camba-Diaz will go with you.’

‘To shackle my temper,’ snarled Sigismund, seeing the wisdom in his father’s order even as it pulled at his pride.

‘All of us need others to balance us.’ Dorn inclined his head slightly. ‘Is that not so, my son?’ Sigismund thought of the flicker of uncertainty he had seen in his father’s eyes and of the real reason he had asked to return to Terra. *He stands at the centre of a storm of fear and betrayal*, he thought, *and I must stand with him no matter what is to come.*

‘It will be done, my lord,’ he said, and knelt at his father’s feet.

‘Of that I am certain,’ said Rogal Dorn.

Eighty-eight days before the Battle of Phall

The Phall System

The fire from the fleet's engines blotted out the stars. Beyond the *Tribune's* viewports hundreds of warships slid across the darkness in an interlacing web of plasma trails. Each was moving on a precise arc around its fellows, forming a shifting lattice like an ever-changing orrery. Some were so close that I could see the augur spines projecting from their backs and bellies. It was an arrangement I had created, placing each element and setting their trajectories in motion. Every ship was in a constant state of readiness, their shields raised, and their weapons ready. At another time such a creation might have pleased me, but it only served to fill my mind with half-formed worries. It had been weeks and nothing had happened.

I flicked my eyes back to the battlegroup commanders that stood in a circle around me. My first sergeant, Raln, stood a little behind me, his helmet in his hand, his face devoid of its normal crooked grin. We stood at the centre of a spit of white marble that ran down the centre of the *Tribune's* bridge. Black stone walls curved above our heads to a vaulted roof. Round viewports ran the length of the bridge, their armoured eyelids open to the void beyond. In the clefts to either side of us rows of servitors sat bound to machines by thick creepers of cable. The smell of warm wiring and the sound of clicking cogitators filled the air. Human officers paced the long rows, followed by hovering servospheres that projected transparent curtains of data in front of their faces. Beneath my feet images of mythical beasts inlaid in gold and bloodstone writhed across the marble. The *Tribune* was the product of the Inwit shipyards, and like all ships birthed above that world of night and ice its master commanded on his feet. Those that came into his presence stood with him, equal in respect if not rank. It was a principle that appealed to me, but after dozens of councils I sometimes felt that the Inwit shipwrights had been kinder to the commanded than the commander.

Pertinax completed his report. I nodded thanks and then looked around the circle. Each of those assembled commanded one of the fleet's two-dozen battlegroups. Most of those in attendance were projections, their translucent images rendered in flickering light. Only Tyr, Raln and the spindle-limbed Master of Astropaths Calio Lezzek were physically present. The council had been like all those that had preceded it; all was quiet. As it had been for weeks. I caught Tyr's eye and saw the old argument growing in the glance. I looked away to the only person yet to give their report.

'Master Lezzek.' The old man raised his head at the sound of his name, and cocked his head as if to listen. 'Is there word from Terra?'

'No, captain,' wheezed Lezzek, the loose skin of his face quivering above his silk-shrouded shoulders. 'There has been no word from Terra, or anyone else.' The answer was as expected; we were as deaf and mute as we had been when the storm first spat us out.

'Thank you,' I said, and was about to dismiss the gathering when Lezzek took a gulp of air and continued.

'We lost another two astropaths in our last attempt to send a message through the storms.' The old man paused, breathing hard. I could see the fatigue running through his body. His skin had a feverish sheen to it, and a drop of blood formed at the corner of his mouth as he spoke. 'Fleet master, we have lost half the remaining astropaths in the fleet trying to get word to Terra. We cannot continue like this. The storms beat on our minds even when we sleep. It's like they are alive. Like they—'

‘You will keep trying,’ I said, a hard edge to my voice. Lezzek opened his mouth to speak but I did not give him a chance. ‘There is nothing more important. Nothing.’ Lezzek was silent for a moment and then nodded.

It was a death order, I knew. I was ordering his astropaths to give their lives whether they wished to or not. But there was no choice, and we had all suffered losses in this endeavour. Doing one’s duty while bearing loss is the essence of loyalty. Still I felt the blind man’s empty eyes boring into my back as I turned to the other commanders.

‘Until next division,’ I said, and brought my closed right fist to my chest. All of the Imperial Fists returned the salute. Lezzek simply bowed and shuffled away, looking as if he might fall over at any moment. One by one the projected images blinked out, until only Tyr remained. A frown creased his sharp face as he stared at the back of the departing astropath. A sensation of restlessness hung around Tyr even when still, a restrained energy like a predator looking out from the inside of a cage. He was honourable and true but he bowed in respect to no one other than Sigismund and Dorn himself. He was my brother by virtue of the alterations to our flesh and the oaths we had made, but he would never be a friend.

‘If you have something on your mind you should have voiced it, brother.’

Tyr gave me an accusing look. I braced myself for renewed debate. Behind me Raln moved discreetly away from us both, his constant enigmatic grin back in place.

‘He has a point, brother,’ said Tyr, looking at where Lezzek had stood. ‘We cannot continue like this.’

‘We must establish communications with Terra,’ I said, my voice flat and steady. Tyr nodded, still looking at the spot vacated by the astropath.

‘That is true, but that is not what I meant.’ He frowned, the scars across his face becoming jagged fissures. ‘The primarch ordered us to Isstvan. Word from Terra is vital but so is the mission.’

‘Ten ships, captain,’ I said quietly. Tyr winced. Since I had assumed command he had been arguing that the whole fleet should be trying to find a way through the storms. In his eyes staying in place and preparing our defences was a waste of time. After our first conversation I had agreed that we needed to try to break through the storms. I had given Tyr the responsibility of probing into the warp to try and find a safe passage. Ten ships had been lost over the last weeks, and twice as many had taken damage. The storms had not abated; if anything they seemed to have increased in ferocity.

‘If the whole fleet sought a way out—’

‘We would lose more, and we would not be able to maintain our readiness.’

‘Is that our duty?’ growled Tyr. ‘To stay here and wait for an enemy that may never come? Command did not fall to you to delay here while our enemy waits for us beyond the storms.’ He gestured at the viewports but kept his gaze on me. I saw something dangerous in the deep centre of his eyes.

I stepped closer to Tyr, a poised stillness suddenly running through my body. My armour was void-hardened battle plate, less massively plated than Terminator armour, but I still looked down on Tyr. ‘I have listened to you.’ My voice was low and level. ‘I agreed to let you seek a way out. But mastery of the fleet is mine.’ Tyr looked about to say something, but I shook my head slowly. ‘You could have had command. You are more honoured. Sigismund holds you in high regard, as does the primarch. The decisions I make could have been yours. But they are not. You and the others placed this duty in my hands.’ Unconsciously I found I had clenched my hand, the scarred fingers hidden by the enfolding bulk of my power fist. ‘You may continue to seek a passage out, but I will not risk more of the fleet, or our deployment. That is my command, captain.’

Tyr blinked once and then bowed his head, but when he looked up again I could still see fire in his eyes. I felt something kindle at the base of my neck, a hot acid sensation that spread through my head and chest. I recognised the feeling: anger. Not the focused rage of battle, but the low human sensation

I opened my mouth, but never spoke the words that had formed there. At that moment, the *Tribune* screamed.

We are told that pride is a virtue, but only when bound to humility. I had been ready for an attack. Through the long weeks of watching, drilling and planning I had waited for the enemy to show his face. I had expected silent ships drifting on momentum from the system edge, or a blunt mass assault from behind the system's sun. Our disposition accounted for this, as it did for any number of other preludes to attack.

My plan, though thorough, had not anticipated the unimaginable. Of the many mistakes I made it is perhaps the easiest to understand but the most difficult to forgive.

It began with the servitors. There were hundreds of them, bound into the ship by interface trunks, and locked in cable cradles and machine niches. As one they howled. Some vomited data code as if trying to purge themselves. Others babbled half-formed words. Those without mouths thrashed in silence.

I tried to understand what was happening. Then the psychic wave hit me and pitched me over into a sea of fragmented sensation. I heard crying, jabbering, and pleading in a hundred desperate voices. I staggered, my vision swimming with luminous streaks of light and colour. I was falling and the sounds I heard were shards of memory and suffering that were not mine. I was drowning, stinking fluid filling my lungs. I was floating in the void knowing that I was about to die. I was screaming as an iron-faced figure walked towards me, bladed arms extending. I was shouting into the winds of a storm.

'Brother.' The word seemed to come from far away. I opened my eyes. A fever blur edged my vision and the screams echoed in my ears. There was a face looking at me, the pain on its features an echo of my own. For an instant I saw a ghost, a half-dream of the past meshed with the present. Then I felt a blow jolt my shoulder, hard enough to shake me inside my armour. My senses snapped back into sharp clarity. Tyr was looking at me, a snarl of suppressed pain twisting his thin face. Sweat beaded his skin. Behind him I could see human officers slumped over sensor daises, or twitching on the floor amongst pooled vomit and excreta. Blood dribbled from their eyes and ears, running over static-filled data screens. I could tell by their stillness that some were dead. There was a taste of dry ash and grave rot in my mouth.

'Look,' shouted Tyr, and pointed to where the holo-projection of the Phall system turned in the air above us.

I looked, and was shouting for full battle readiness even as my mind processed what I saw.

A thousand energy signatures flared and blinked out in front of my eyes. Sensor bursts and auspex sweeps bombarded us, hundreds of them coming from sources that came to life and then vanished. Clustered spikes of data and auspex readouts bloomed and died across display screens on the bridge. It was like watching a phosphor shell scatter sparks across the night sky. The cogitators snarled as they tried to process and assess the sudden squall of data. And all the while the nightmares and visions churned through our minds in a swelling tide.

Then it was over. The last energy signals vanished from the holo-projection. The machines went quiet, the servitors slumped at their stations, and the fevered sensations faded from my mind.

Twenty-eight days before the Battle of Phall

The Phall System

They took our fear but not our doubts. *Am I right? Have I misjudged? What will happen?* The questions hammered on me and I bore them in silence. That is the necessity of command: that you hold doubt within. You cannot look to others for assurance, because you are their surety. You cannot share your doubts, lest they spread like a withering disease through muscle. You are alone. Sometimes I wonder if the primarchs feel this; if decisions eat at their thoughts as they do mine.

I had been drilling with my company for hours. Normally I find calm in the repetition of such practice, but the questions repeated in my mind. *What if the storms did not abate? Should I change my plan? What would Sigismund have done?*

The training chamber ran along the flank of the *Tribune* for half a kilometre. Blast doors closed tank-wide holes in one wall, shutting out the void beyond. The floor was a tangle of barricades and fire-scorched debris. Weapon servitors hung from the ceiling, sliding along gantries to rain fire from the different angles required by the training scenario.

As I glanced up I saw that the barrels of the servitors' cannons were glowing red. The guns increased their rate of fire. Sparks danced across the rim of my boarding shield. Lines of tracer fire scored the air above my head. My shield arm was vibrating with the impact of hard rounds. A line of tracer hit the crown of my helm, and I felt muscles tear in my neck. To either side of me two of my first squad stood with their shields braced across the left of their body, their legs set.

Each shield was a thick plate of plasteel two-thirds our height. The snouts of bolters jutted from the vertical slot cut into the right-hand side of each shield. Stood shoulder to shoulder, we created a wall of metal. In battles fought in the guts of starships this is what keeps you alive and allows you to win. Fighting this way is blunt and ugly; it is killing with discipline and workmanlike routine. It is perhaps the method of war I come closest to enjoying.

'Advance, with fire,' I roared. Our targets were servo-rigged automata that moved to preset patterns to mimic the response of a determined enemy. Only when we had closed the distance would real opponents replace machines and servitors. We began to step forwards and every step was a volley of bolter fire, repeated with lethal rhythm.

Questions rang in my head in time with our tread. *Was Tyr right? Should we try and break through the storms?* After the sensory and psychic onslaught we had come to full alert, and waited for an enemy to show their face. They had not come. And the weeks had passed, and the drumbeat of questions grew in my head.

'Enemy, ten metres, front, closing fast,' shouted Raln, from my right. I could not see the enemy without looking over my shield, but I did not need to; Raln had seen and I trusted his judgement.

Was the Phall system really a trap? The populations of its planets were missing and we had seemed to come under a form of psychic attack. But we had not found the cause of the onslaught. There could be other factors at work. Our being here could simply be coincidence.

'Open ranks,' called Raln. Our shield wall opened, peeling back just before the enemy hit. Five Imperial Fists in a tight wedge, hammers and chainswords ready. Skill at war is a blade edge made sharp only by harsh practice, and so I had picked the best of the company as our close-quarter opponents. They came at us as I intended: like they wanted to kill us. The five came through the gap

our shield wall and spilled into the space behind. 'Close,' shouted Raln. Our ranks closed, enveloping the mock enemies within in a tight ring of shields.

Can I do this? A fifth of a Legion on full alert, drilling for an attack that I believed was coming... What if I am wrong?

A hammer blow hit my shield with a sound like a gong. An instant later one of the five enemy warriors had rammed his shoulder into the point where mine and Raln's shields touched. It was Settor sergeant of the sixth squad, an old warrior seasoned by the conquest of worlds. He was also lethally fast. In the instant that a gap opened between our shields he had stepped forwards, forcing it wider and bringing his hammer down on my head. My vision swam. I blinked and in that second Settor was through our shield wall. He kicked Raln's legs out from under him and suddenly there was a wide hole in the circle of our shields. Above us the gun servitors rose on their hoists and bullets began to fall on our heads like rain.

I raised my shield high, covering my head. Settor's hammer head hit me in the gut. I staggered and a second blow crashed into my face plate. The eye lenses of my helm shattered, red fragments spilling down my front like drops of blood. I was dead, or would have been in a true fight.

'End,' I called over the vox. A second later the gunfire slackened as the servitors hanging from the weapon gantries cycled their slug cannons to silence. I pulled my helmet off. Pieces of red glass ringed the eye sockets like shattered teeth. Around me my company lowered their weapons. Sulphurous weapon smoke fogged the air. Countless chips and gouges had stripped everyone's armour back to the dull metal beneath. Flattened slugs smeared the fronts of our boarding shields.

'There was an opening, fleet master,' said Settor, bowing his head as he spoke. 'A momentary gap in your guard. I used it to break the shield wall.' I nodded. It is the duty of all Imperial Fists to recognise weakness. Settor was right – my thoughts and focus had drifted. In a real fight it could have led to slaughter and failure.

'Thank you, brother,' I said with a nod. Settor moved away, his hammer hanging loose from his fists. I looked at the battered helm in my hand. Anger buzzed behind my eyes. I had allowed my doubts to make me weak. If I could not find the strength to bear my duty then I would kill us all.

There may be no enemy coming for you, whispered a craven voice at the back of my thoughts. *Tyr may be right and your duty might lie down another path.* I thought of Sigismund, our first captain. This was to have been his duty to bear, but he had returned to Terra with the primarch. I thought of the steps of mischance that meant that his duty now rested in my hands. Would it have been as heavy in his?

'Not bad.' Raln's voice cut through my thoughts. He had come to stand at my shoulder; blade cuts and gunfire had pitted and gouged his armour. He pulled his own helmet off, and took a deep breath as if savouring the thick smells of battle training.

'The wall broke,' I growled.

'For the first time in four hours.'

'It still broke.'

'Response and cohesion have increased.'

'Another four hours,' I said. Raln held up his helmet as if in surrender and I saw the hint of a smile on his scarred lump of a face. I have no idea why he smiles.

'The artificers will not thank you.'

'Another four hours.' I hefted my shield, feeling its reassuring weight.

Raln raised an eyebrow, but nodded and began to shout orders. The company began to reform. Overhead the gun gantries repositioned into a different configuration. I did not care if the artificers

had to rebuild every suit of armour in the fleet; when an enemy came we needed to be ready. The opinions of others, whether they agreed or not, were of no matter. Strength requires obedience, not thought.

I clamped my eyeless helm over my head. I would be without the information fed to me through the helmet's eye lenses, but I would continue anyway. In war you cannot rely on anything except your brothers. To do otherwise is weakness.

'Begin,' I called and the hammer chime of gunfire filled my ears.

'Fleet master?' The helm officer's voice cut through the noise as I was about to give the first order. It was Cartris; a human veteran of fifty years in service to the Imperial Fists, and the man I had trusted with coordinating the sweep of the system's planets, moons and asteroid belts. He was not the type to be easily shaken, but I could hear the tension in his voice. Was it an attack? Alarms would have rung through the ship. No, it was something else, something important enough to alert me immediately but not enough to raise a general alarm.

'I hear you, Cartris.'

'We have received a signal from our search units.' Cartris paused. I could hear the chatter of signal readouts and vox distortion in the background. 'They have found something.'

Tyr came with me. Perhaps I wanted him to see it and so answer his own questions. But perhaps there was another, less worthy motivation.

Our steps clanged dully as we approached the dead machine at the centre of the gloom-filled chamber. I glanced at Tyr, but his eyes stayed fixed on the isolated circle of bright light. The chamber had been an ordnance magazine. Its walls were three metres thick, and its triple-layered blast doors sealed by stratified layers of cipher codes. The machine sat alone under a buzzing stasis field, a specimen pinned out for display and then locked away from sight. Automated gun turrets twitched at our approach, and then cycled to stillness. It was as if we had passed into a shadow world that had formed like a cyst around a secret.

We stopped and looked at what the search teams had pulled from the ocean of Phall II. The machine glistened under the stab lights, water beading its bare metal body, the stasis field tinting the drops to sapphires. It had suffered severe damage, but its form was still clear: a blunt-edged cube of metal, studded with thruster vents and ugly protrusions. Its shell had been cracked open, first by jagged wounds that to my eyes looked like impact hits, and then by the smooth cuts of a melta torch. The tech-priests had dissected it and left it with its innards exposed. I could see a jumble of cables and clusters of glass blisters like lidless eyes. Dribbles of yellow fluid hung unmoving from severed tubes. Shattered crystals had spilled over the stained floor. At its heart was something grey and soft, like a corpse bloated in lightless water. I could see a spine under pale skin, and above that a nest of cables haloing a head, its eyes and mouth stapled shut. There were no arms or legs, just stumps. A thick smog of ionised air filled my nose, and my teeth ached in time with the field's hum.

I had seen countless servitors created by the Mechanicum, and had waded knee-deep through mutilated bodies, but there was something about the machine and the amputated torso that was utterly repellent. I had examined it before, when the search teams first brought it aboard, but without the crowding tech-priests and labour servitors it felt different. It felt like going to a grave's edge to look down at the remains of a secret atrocity.

Tyr let out a carefully controlled breath beside me. 'What is it?' he said, his voice echoing in the empty chamber.

'We don't know, at least not with certainty,' I said. Tyr was moving around the edge of the stasis

dome. 'The search units I sent to Phall II found it floating in the oceans, but it has clearly been exposed to the void. The adepts tell me that the machine components have several purposes.' Tyr gave a small nod, but was silent as I pointed to different portions of the wreckage. 'Most of it is made up of high-gain augur arrays and broad-spectrum sensors effective over a relatively short range. Then there is the human component. Apparently it would have been in a state of hibernation, kept alive with minimal power usage. Their assessment is that it was in orbit around Phall II, suffered damage and fell to the planet's surface.' Tyr was still staring at the grey remains of the human in the machine. I glanced at it then away; it made me want to shiver.

'Some form of servitor-controlled sensor vehicle? An asteroid survey unit, perhaps?'

'The adepts think it unlikely. In addition to the sensor equipment some of the systems seem to be a form of psy-amplifier.'

Tyr looked up. 'This created the psy-attack?'

'This and others like them. There were hundreds of energy signatures detected. There are most likely many more.'

'We need to find and destroy them; they could trigger again at any moment.'

'This one fell through the ocean planet's atmosphere as its orbit decayed. Our search teams would never have found it without the flare light of its re-entry.' I looked back at the broken machine and its pitiful occupant. 'It sustained damage but the adepts say that most of its system had already burnt out. Its occupant was already dead.'

Tyr shook his head, his face taut with an emotion I could not read. 'They were killed once they had been activated,' he breathed. There was a note of disbelief and rage in his voice. 'Objects this size, now dead and without power; we could sift this system for a decade and find nothing. With no population on the planets there is no way of knowing who put them here or why they attacked us.'

'You are correct, but it was no attack.'

'You say that now?' I could see the months of dispute and controlled animosity straining at his will. After the psychic attack Tyr had not dropped his calls for the fleet to try and break the storms. If anything his attitude became more unyielding. As had mine. I had hoped that he would have seen the full implication of the recovered machine, and that my decisions had been correct. It was a weakness and like everything built on weakness it was doomed.

'Look at it, brother.' Tyr's eyes flicked back to the machine, skimming over its broken form. 'The sensors, the augur and communication sifters. The psychic screams we all felt were not attacks. They were a message.' He looked up at me and I saw that he understood at last. 'It was no attack, brother. It was a prelude to one.'

The Imperial Palace, Terra

Silence followed the messenger. The click of her staff echoed through the corridors as she approached the planning chamber. Figures pulled back before her, their eyes following her steps, their whispered conversations stalling as if they could sense the weight of the news she carried. Four gold-plated Custodians flanked her and black sentinels followed in her wake like armoured mourners.

Within the planning chamber Sigismund caught the movement from beyond the chamber's open door and looked up. He saw the approaching messenger and the look on the astropath's withered and blind face. Something cold ran over his flesh at the sight. He knew the astropath: her name was

Armina Fel. She had served the Imperium for three decades. That service had bent her spine and turned her hair to the white of raw cotton. She had brought countless messages to Dorn. Most of the news was bad, some frustrating, but none of it had required an escort. It was almost as if what she brought needed to be guarded like a prisoner in case it slipped its bindings and ran free.

Sigismund turned to look at his father, but if Rogal Dorn had seen the approaching procession he gave no sign. Vadok Singh was outlining his proposed fortification of the Imperial Palace. The war mason paced amongst the broad pillars, perfumed smoke puffing from his mouth as he sucked on his long-stemmed pipe. Dorn stayed in the centre of the room, frowning down at the plans spread across the table at the room's centre. Brass projection apparatus hung from the ceiling, scattering images of Singh's plans across the chamber's sandstone walls. The room seemed almost peaceful, but Sigismund knew that this short moment of calm was a lie. He had returned from Mars to find the atmosphere of uncertainty and fear growing stronger with every day. It was as if the whole of Terra was holding its breath and waiting to see where the next blow would fall.

'The Dhawalagiri Elevation?' said Dorn, scowling at the sprawling schematics. 'You think that necessary?'

'Not *necessary*,' purred Singh. 'A *necessity*, Rogal.' The war mason flicked a skeletal finger at one of his silk-robed slaves and the man changed the focus on one of the projection lenses. 'Look at the inherent weakness in the alignment of the outer elements. You of all people must see that if this section of the palace is to hold we must remake it, and remake it now.' Normally the war mason's familiarity would have angered Sigismund, but he barely heard the words.

The procession was at the chamber's open doorway. Behind Sigismund, Dorn gave a low snort.

'Necessity is a word that makes me suspicious, old friend,' said Dorn.

Sigismund watched Armina Fel and her escort pause on the threshold. The astropath brought her hand up to the empty pits that were her eyes. Pearls of moisture glittered on her cheeks. *She is crying* he realised. Beside her one of the Custodians brought the butt of his spear down three times on the stone floor. The sound of the blows rippled through the pillared chamber.

Dorn raised his head slowly.

'There is news,' he said in a flat voice, and looked at Armina Fel. For a moment Sigismund thought he saw an unreadable expression flicker across his father's face. 'It is all right, mistress. Please tell us what you must.'

The woman's lips were trembling.

'There is word from Isstvan, my lord.' She took a ragged breath. Dorn stepped forwards, his black robes falling back from his arms as he reached out. He gently raised her face until her empty eyes looked up at him.

'Mistress,' he said softly. 'What has happened?'

Armina shook herself, poise and strength returning to her features, as if some of Dorn's stillness and strength had flowed into her. She began to speak, her voice the monotone drone of precise recall.

'Imperial counter-strike massacred on Isstvan V. Vulkan and Corax missing. Ferrus Manus dead. Night Lords, Iron Warriors, Alpha Legion and Word Bearers are with Horus Lupercal.'

Nothing moved in the chamber. The black sentinels and Custodians stood like statues of jet and gold. Vadok Singh simply stared at Armina, the ember in the bowl of his pipe cooling to grey ash. For a moment Sigismund felt nothing, as if what he had heard had stripped all sensation away. A primarch dead. Two lost. Three Legions gone, and four gone from friend to enemy in the space of a handful of words.

This is it, thought Sigismund. As she showed me. This is the true beginning of the end. If four more

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