

THE HORUS HERESY

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

# AURELIAN

*The Eye stares back*



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## **The Horus Heresy**

*It is a time of legend.*

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Earth have conquered the galaxy in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races have been smashed by the Emperor’s elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons.

Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful and deadly warriors.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superheroic beings who have led the Emperor’s armies of Space Marines in victory after victory. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor’s genetic experimentation. The Space Marines are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

Organised into vast armies of tens of thousands called Legions, the Space Marines and their primarch leaders conquer the galaxy in the name of the Emperor.

Chief amongst the primarchs is Horus, called the Glorious, the Brightest Star, favourite of the Emperor, and like a son unto him. He is the Warmaster, the commander-in-chief of the Emperor’s military might, subjugator of a thousand thousand worlds and conqueror of the galaxy. He is a warrior without peer, a diplomat supreme.

As the flames of war spread through the Imperium, mankind’s champions will all be put to the ultimate test.

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# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

## *The Primarchs*

LORGAR AURELIAN, Primarch of the Word Bearers

FULGRIM, Primarch of the Emperors Children

ANGRON, Primarch of the World Eaters

HORUS LUPERCAL, Primarch of the Sons of Horus

PERTURABO, Primarch of the Iron Warriors

ALPHARIUS OMEGON, Primarch of the Alpha Legion

MAGNUS THE RED, Primarch of the Thousand Sons

KONRAD CURZE, Primarch of the Night Lords

MORTARION, Primarch of the Death Guard

## *The Word Bearers Legion*

ARGEL TAL, Lord of the Gal Vorbak

KOR PHAERON, Captain, First Company

## *The Emperor's Children Legion*

DAMARAS AXALIAN, Captain, Twenty-ninth Company

## *Inhabitants of the Great Eye*

INGETHEL THE ASCENDED, Viator of the Primordial Truth

AN'GGRATH THE UNBOUND, Guardian of the Throne of Skulls

KAIROS FATEWEAVER, Oracle of Tzeentch

*'Three things cannot long be hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.'*

– Ancient Terran proverb

*'I wish, with every fibre of my soul, that I had killed him when I had the chance. That momentary flicker of disbelief and sorrow, that second's hesitation for the abhorrence of fratricide, cost us more than anyone can measure. Horus leads the Legions into heresy, but Lorgar is the cancer in the Warmaster's core.'*

– The Primarch Corax

*'All I ever wanted was the truth. Remember those words as you read the ones that follow. I never set out to topple my father's kingdom of lies from a sense of misplaced pride. I never wanted to bleed the species to its marrow, reaving half the galaxy clean of human life in this bitter crusade. I never desired any of this, though I know the reasons for which it must be done.*

*But all I ever wanted was the truth.'*

– Opening lines of the Book of Lorgar, First Canticle of Chaos

# PROLOGUE

## HERALD OF THE ONE GOD

### **Colchis** **Many years ago**

THE ARCHPRIEST WATCHED from the cathedral window as his city burned below.

‘We should do something.’

His voice was a bass rumble, yet edged by a softness that smoothed his words into something almost delicate. His was a voice made to reason, to question, to reassure – not to scream and froth and rage.

The archpriest turned from the window. ‘Father? When will the fires stop burning?’

Kor Phaeron walked across the chamber, his wizened scowl deep-set on his face, like a scar cut into old leather. He busied himself with the scrolls on the central table, his thin lips moving as he read each one in turn.

‘Father? We cannot remain here while the city burns. We must help the people.’

‘You have not spoken since we claimed the Cathedral of Illumination.’ The ageing man glanced over for the merest moment.

‘And your first words after winning this war are to ask when the fires will be drowned? You have just conquered a world, boy. You have greater matters to concern yourself with.’

The archpriest was a young man, beautiful in a way that transcended notions of physical attraction. His tan skin gleamed with tiny tattoos of gold-inked scripture. His eyes were dark without being cold, and he could spend days without smiling, yet never seem sinister.

He turned back to the window. In his mind's eye, he'd always pictured the crusade's end in this very place, the avenues of the City of Grey Flowers flooded by cheering crowds, their joyous prayers reaching into the skies, shaking the slender towers of their former rulers.

The reality didn't quite approach it. The streets were crowded, that much was true, but crowded with rioters, looters and clashing bands of robed warriors, as the last lingering remnants of the Covenant's defenders fought to the last against the tide of invaders.

'So much of the city is still aflame,' the archpriest said. 'We must do something.'

Kor Phaeron murmured to himself as he read the tattered parchments.

'Father.' The archpriest turned again, watching the older priest discard another scroll.

'Hmm? What is it, boy?'

'Half of the city is ablaze. We must do something.'

Kor Phaeron smiled, the expression ugly but not unkind. 'You must prepare for your coronation, Lorgar. The Covenant has fallen, and the Old Ways will be cast down as blasphemy against the One God. You are no longer merely Archpriest of the Godsworn, you are the Archpriest of all Colchis. I have given you a world.'

The golden figure turned back to the window, eyes narrowed. Something crept into his voice then, something rigid and cold, a foreshadowing of all that would be in the centuries to come.

'I do not wish to rule,' he said.

'That will change, my son. It will change when you see that no one else around you is as fit to rule as you are. In a moment of realisation, it will change out of your own selfless need. That is how it always works for men of power. The road to every throne is paved with good intentions.'

Lorgar shook his head. 'I wish for nothing more than our people to see the truth.'

‘The truth is power,’ the other priest went back to the scrolls. ‘The ignorant and the weak must be dragged into the light, no matter the cost. It doesn’t matter how many bleed and cry out on the way.’

Lorgar watched his new city burn, seeing his followers slaughter the last of the Old Ways blasphemers in the streets below.

‘I know I have asked so many times before,’ he said softly, ‘but does it not give you pause, even as the crusade ends? You once believed as they do.’

‘I still believe as they do,’ Kor Phaeron gave an assured smile. ‘But I believe as you do, as well. I keep to my old faith that there are many gods, Lorgar. Your One God is simply the most powerful.’

‘He will come to us soon.’ The archpriest looked to the darkening sky. Colchis was a thirsty world, and rainclouds rarely made a call in the heavens. ‘Perhaps a year from now, but no longer. I have seen it in my dreams. On the day he arrives, his vessel will descend through a storm.’

Kor Phaeron came closer, resting his hand on the taller man’s forearm. ‘When your One God comes, we will see if I was right to believe you.’

Lorgar was still staring up at the blue sky, watching it become choked by the rising smoke from the burning city. He smiled at his mentor’s words.

‘Have faith, Father.’

Kor Phaeron smiled then. ‘I have always had faith, my son. Have you ever dreamed this god’s name? The masses will ask for it, soon enough. I cannot but help wonder what you will tell them.’

‘I do not believe he has a name.’ Lorgar closed his eyes. ‘We will know him only as the Emperor.’

*Aaron Dembski-Bowden*

PART ONE

# THE SEVENTEENTH SON

# ONE

## FRATERNITY

### *The Vengeful Spirit* Four days after Isstvan V

EIGHT OF HIS brothers were present, though only half of them truly stood in the room. The absent four were nothing more than projections: three of them manifested around the table in the forms of flickering grey hololithic simulacra, formed of stuttering light and white noise. The fourth of them appeared as a brighter image comprised of silver radiance, its features and limbs dripping spiral lashes of corposant witchfire. This last projection, Magnus, inclined its head in greeting.

*Hail Lorgar, his brother bred the words within his mind.*

Lorgar nodded in return. 'How far away are you, Magnus?'

The Crimson King's psychic projection showed no emotion. A tall man, his head crested by a sculpted crown, Magnus the Red refused to make contact with his one remaining eye.

*Very far. I lick my wounds on a distant world. It has no name but that which I brought to it.*

Lorgar nodded, not blind to the nuances of hesitation in his brother's silent tones. Now was not the time for such talk.

The others acknowledged him one by one. Curze – a cadaverous, pulsing hololithic avatar of himself, gave the barest suggestion of a nod. Mortarion, an emaciated wraith even in the flesh, was hardly improved by this electronic etherealness. His image faded in and out of focus, occasionally dividing in the bizarre mitosis of distance distortion. He lowered the blade of his Man-reaper scythe in greeting, which was in itself a warmer hail than Lorgar had been expecting.

Alpharius was the last of those present through long-range sending. He stood helmed, while all others were bareheaded, and

his hololithic image was stable while each of the others suffered corruption from the vast ranges between their fleets. Alpharius, almost a head shorter than his brothers, stood scaled in crocodilian resplendence, his reptile-skin armour plating glinting in the false light of his manifestation. His salute was the sign of the aquila, the Emperor's own symbol, made with both hands across his breastplate.

Lorgar snorted. How quaint.

'You're late,' one of his brothers interrupted. 'We've been waiting.' The voice was a graceless avalanche of syllables.

Angron. Lorgar turned to him, dispensing with any attempt at a conciliatory smile.

His warrior brother stood hunched in the threatening lean that characterised his body language, the back of his skull malformed from the brutal neural implants hammered into the bone and wired into the soft tissue of his brainstem. Angron's bloodshot eyes narrowed as another pulse of pain ransacked through his nervous system – a legacy of the aggression enhancers surgically imposed upon him by his former masters. While the other primarchs had risen to rule the worlds they'd been cast down upon, only Angron had languished in captivity, a slave to technoprimitives on some forsaken backwater world that never deserved a name. Angron's past still ran through his blood, nerve pain sparking in his muscles with every misfired synapse.

'I was delayed,' Lorgar admitted. He didn't like to look at his brother for too long at a time. It was one of the things that made Angron twitch; like an animal, the lord of the World Eaters couldn't abide being stared at, and could never hold eye contact for more than a few moments. Lorgar had no desire to provoke him.

Kor Phaeron had once made mention that the World Eater's face was a sneering mask made of clenched knuckles, but Lorgar found no humour in it. To his eyes, his brother was a cracked statue: features that should have been composed and handsome were wrenched into a jagged, snarling expression, flawed by

muscle twinges that bordered on spasms. It was easy to see why others believed Angron always looked on the edge of fury. In truth, he looked like a man struggling to concentrate through epileptic agony. Lorgar hated the bleak, crude bastard, but it was hard not to admire his unbreakable endurance.

Angron grunted something wordless and dismissive, looking back at the others.

‘It has been nine days, and we know our tasks,’ he growled. ‘We are already spread across the void. Why did you gather us?’

Horus, Warmaster of the cleaved Imperium, didn’t answer immediately. He gestured for Lorgar to take his place around the table, at Horus’s own right hand. Unlike his Legion’s sea-green ceramite, Horus stood clad in layered, dense armour of charcoal black, adorned with the glaring cadmium Eye of Terra on his breastplate. This last sigil, the symbol of his authority as master of the Imperium’s armies, had its black core refashioned into a slitted serpent’s pupil. Lorgar wondered, as he met Horus’s pale, elegant smirk, just what secrets Erebus had been whispering into the Warmaster’s ears in recent months.

Lorgar took his place between Horus and Perturabo. The former presided at the head of the table, all pretence of equality done away with in the aftermath of Isstvan. The latter stood in his burnished, riveted war plate, leaning on the haft of an immense hammer with an admirable air of casual disregard.

‘Lorgar,’ Perturabo murmured in greeting. Two-dozen power cables of various thicknesses plugged directly into the Iron Warrior’s bare head, even at the jawline and temples, linking him to the internal processes of his gunmetal-grey armour. Chains draped over the tiered plating rattled as he gave a cursory nod.

Lorgar returned it, but said nothing. His dark eyes drifted across the others, seeking his last brother.

‘So.’ Horus’s indulgent smile was all teeth. ‘We have gathered again, at last.’

All eyes fell upon him, except for Lorgar's. The seventeenth son's distraction went unmarked as Horus continued.

'This gathering is the first of its kind. Here, now, we unite in one another's presences for the first time.'

'We gathered on Isstvan,' Angron grunted.

'Not all of us,' Alpharius's colourless hololithic image still hadn't turned its helmeted face. The projection's voice held little in the way of corruption-crackle, and just as little emotion.

The nine Legions had scattered after Isstvan. With a galaxy to conquer and great armies to raise on the long road to Terra, the Legions loyal to Warmaster Horus broke apart into the void, boosting away from a world left dead in their wake.

Angron narrowed his eyes, as if fighting to remember. He nodded agreement a moment later. 'True. Lorgar refused to come. He was praying.'

Horus, his handsome features lit from the low glow of his gorget, offered a smile. 'He was meditating on his place in our great plan. There is a difference, brother.'

Angron nodded again without really committing to agreement. He seemed to care for nothing but shrugging the conversation from his shoulders and moving on to other matters.

Horus spoke up again. 'We all know the costs of the coming campaign, and our destinies within it. Our fleets are underway. But after the, shall we say, unpleasantness of Isstvan, this is the first time we have gathered as a full fraternity.' Horus gestured with an open palm to his golden-skinned brother. Intentionally or not, the movement was threatening when made with the massive clawed Mechanicum talon sheathing his right hand. 'I hope your meditations were worthwhile, Lorgar.'

Lorgar was still staring at his final brother. He'd not taken his eyes off the last figure since he'd looked away from Perturabo.

'Lorgar?' Horus almost growled now. 'I am growing ever more weary of your inability to adhere to established planning.'

Curze's chuckle was a vulture's caw. Even Angron smiled, his scarred lips peeling back from several replacement iron teeth.

Lorgar slowly, slowly, reached for the ornate crozius mace on his back. As he drew the weapon in the company of his closest kin, his eyes remained locked on one of them, and all physically present felt the deepening chill of psychic frost riming along their armour.

The Word Bearer's voice left his lips in an awed, vicious whisper.

'You. You are not Fulgrim.'

## TWO

### BLOOD AT THE COUNCIL TABLE

TIME CHANGES ALL things.

The son that had never found a place in his father's empire was not the same soul that drew his weapon now. Lorgar was already moving before even the keenest of his warrior brothers knew what was happening.

Fulgrim had a scarce moment to draw a breath, to instinctively reach for his own weapon in a futile attempt to ward the coming blow.

Lorgar's crozius mace struck with a bell's toll, echoing around the war room. Fulgrim crashed into the back wall – a porcelain doll in shattered ceramite – and crumpled to the ground.

The golden primarch turned his fierce eyes upon his other brothers. 'That is not Fulgrim.'

The others were already advancing, drawing their own weapons. Lorgar's crimson armour, painted in honour of his Legion's treachery against the Throne, reflected the stuttering hololithic avatars of the four brothers present only in spirit.

'Stay back,' he warned those that still advanced upon him, 'and heed my words. That wretch, that thing, is not our brother.'

'Peace, Lorgar.' Horus approached, his own armour joints purring with low snarls. In times past, the merest threat of a confrontation had been enough to quell Lorgar from any rash action. He'd scarcely ever spoken a harsh word to any of his brothers, nor had he ever relished the many times they'd rebuked him for his perceived flaws. Unnecessary conflict was anathema to him.

As they faced him now, even Horus was wide-eyed in the changes wrought since Isstvan. The Word Bearer primarch clutched his maul in both red gauntlets, defying his brothers with

narrowed eye. In the voice of a poet turned to hate, he warned 'Stay back,' a second time.

'Lorgar,' Horus lowered his voice, softening it to match his brother's. 'Peace, Lorgar. Peace.'

'You already knew.' Lorgar almost laughed. 'I see it in your eyes, brother. What have you done?'

Horus gave a brittle smile. This had to end now. 'Magnus,' he said.

The psychic projection of Magnus the Red shook its crested head. 'I am on the other side of the galaxy, Horus. Do not ask me to contain our brother. Keep order on your own flagship.'

Fulgrim moaned as he began to rise from the decking. Blood made lightning trails down his face from the edges of his lips. Lorgar rested an armoured boot on the prone primarch's chestplate.

'Stay down,' he said, without looking at Fulgrim.

Fulgrim's pale, androgynous features twisted in false amusement. 'You think you—'

'If you speak,' Lorgar kept his boot on the fallen primarch, 'I will destroy you.'

'Lorgar,' Horus growled now. 'You are speaking madness.'

'Only because I have seen madness.' He met his brothers' eyes in turn, looking from one to the other. The kindest among them looked upon him with pity. Most were merely disgusted. 'I alone know what the truth looks like.' He pushed down with his boot, pressing on Fulgrim's shattered ribcage, driving ceramite armour shards into the broken body. Fulgrim choked on blood. Lorgar paid it no mind.

Horus turned to the others with a melodramatic sigh. Indulgence was plainly writ across his handsome features, as if sharing some old jest between the rest of his family.

'I will deal with this. Leave us for now. We will reconvene shortly.'

The hololithics flickered off immediately, but for Alpharius, who stood watching Lorgar for several moments longer. Magnus the Red was the last to fade, his projected self nodding to Horus at last, and dispersing like mist in the wind. For several moments, his sourceless voice hung in the empty air. *To manifest here requires a significant effort of will, Horus. Bear that in mind next time.*

‘The Cyclops is right,’ one of the others objected. ‘We delay over nothing. Let the fanatic claim what he wishes. We will restrain him and be done with it. We have a war to plan.’

Horus sighed. ‘Just go, Angron. I will summon you back from the *Conqueror* when we are ready.’

In the clash of irritation and amusement that coloured most of their discussions, Perturabo and Angron trudged from the war room; one speaking, the other listening.

With the chamber sealed again, Lorgar aimed the immense maul at Horus’s bare head.

‘So you send them away to protect a secret that should never be kept. Do you think they will suspect nothing? If you believe I will allow you to concoct a tale of my insanity to aid in your deception, you are misleading yourself.’

Horus wouldn’t be baited. ‘That was incautious, Lorgar. Explain your actions.’

‘I can see the truth, Horus.’ Lorgar risked a glance down at whatever was wearing his brother’s skin and armour. ‘His soul is hollowed through. Something nestles within this body, like eggs lain inside a host.’ Lorgar raised his eyes again. ‘Magnus would have sensed it also, had he not been drained from sending his image such a great distance. This is not Fulgrim.’

Horus released a breath. ‘No,’ he admitted. ‘It is not.’

‘I know what this is.’ Lorgar rested the mace’s spiked head against Fulgrim’s temple. ‘What I cannot understand is how this happened. How have you allowed it to come to pass?’

‘Is it so different from your own Gal Vorbak?’ the Warmaster countered.

Lorgar's gold-inked features, ruthlessly similar to their father's, broke into patient sympathy. 'You do not know of what you speak, Horus. One of the Neverborn, puppeteering the soulless body of our own brother? There is no balance of human and divine elements here. No graceful alignment of two souls in harmony. This is desecration, blasphemy, not ascension.'

Horus smiled. Lorgar could always be relied upon to seethe with such theatrics. 'Consider this another unpleasant truth. I did not orchestrate Fulgrim's demise. I am merely containing the aftermath.'

Lorgar exhaled slowly. 'So he is dead, then. Another sentience rides within his body. This husk is all that remains of Fulgrim?'

Horus's reply was preceded by a grunt of annoyance. 'Why does it matter to you? You and he were never close.'

'It matters because this is a perversion against the natural order, fool.' Lorgar spoke through perfect, clenched teeth. 'Where is the harmony in this joining? A living soul annihilated for its mortal shell to house a greedy, unborn wretch? I have walked in the warp, Horus. I have stood where gods and mortals meet. This is weakness and corruption – a perversion of what the gods wish for us. They want allies and followers, not soulless husks ridden by daemons.'

Horus said nothing. He didn't even respond to Lorgar's insult, though his lip curled.

Lorgar cast his eyes down to the fallen primarch. Fulgrim, whatever was within him, stared back with blood flecking the pale skin around his eyes.

*Get off me*, the voice ghosted through Lorgar's mind. It wasn't Fulgrim's voice. It wasn't even a close approximation.

+ Be silent + he psychically pulsed back, with enough force to make Fulgrim tremble.

*Lorgar...* the creature's voice was weaker, raspier, a tremulous breath of wind. *You know my kind. We are kin, you and I.*

The primarch of the Word Bearers moved away, his sneer painted plain. The desperation in the creature's silent voice made his skin itch.

'How did this happen?' he asked Horus.

The Warmaster watched Fulgrim rise. Lorgar did not – he spat onto the decking and tossed his crozius onto the table. Its ornate spiked head sent cracks lightning-bolting across the table's surface.

On his feet, Fulgrim was a slender, willowy figure – svelte even in his contoured war plate. Lorgar saw none of the grace when he turned: he saw only the sickening unlight behind his brother's eyes, and the intelligence of another being at the body's core.

Fulgrim smiled someone else's smile.

'Lorgar,' he began, using Fulgrim's curiously tender voice.

+ I will learn your true name and banish you back into the warp. Perhaps in its tides, you will relearn restraint. +

He held back as he forced the speech into the other's mind, but it was still harsh enough to make Fulgrim snort blood onto his lips.

*Lorgar... I—*

+ You have desecrated the flesh in which you ride. Nothing more. This is not the holy union of humanity and Chaos. You violate the purity of the gods' Primordial Truth. +

Fulgrim sagged back against the wall. Blood was running from his eyes.

'Lorgar,' Horus rested his unclawed hand on his brother's shoulder. 'You are killing him.'

'It is not "him"'. It is an it. And if I wished to kill it, then it would already be destroyed.' Lorgar narrowed his eyes at Horus's restraining grip on his shoulder.

+ Remove your hand, Horus + he sent.

Horus obeyed, though he tried not to. The Warmaster's fingers shivered as they withdrew, and his grey eyes flickered with unhidden tension.

'You have changed,' he said, 'since crossing blades with Corax.'

Lorgar gathered his crozius and rested the immense maul on his shoulder guard. 'Everything changed that night. I am returning to my ship, brother. I must think upon this... this foulness.'

## THREE

### MAGNUS AND LORGAR

HE DID NOT wait long, nor had he expected to. Indeed, his brother awaited him in his chamber.

*We must speak, you and I.*

The phantasm's form rippled, bright with witchfire, beaming myriad reflections across the angled walls of Lorgar's inner sanctum. The chamber was cold, always too cold, and the air was forever moist as it ran through the filtration system. The primarch missed the dry climes of Colchis.

He rested Illuminarium, the immense crozius maul, against the wall.

'Magnus,' he said to the wraith. The figure formed of silver fire gave a graceful bow.

*It has been a long while since we spoke anything of substance.*

Once, not so long ago, he would have smiled to see his wisest, most powerful brother. Now, the smile read false, and didn't reach Lorgar's eyes.

'You exaggerate. We have spoken many times in recent years.'

Magnus's remaining eye followed his brother's steps as Lorgar moved over to his writing table.

*Our last talk of any real worth was in your City of Grey Flowers, almost half a century before. Have anything beyond the shallowest pleasantries passed between us since then?*

Lorgar met Magnus's eye. The silvery form flickered as Lorgar's voice resonated around it.

+ Times change, Magnus. +

The Cyclops visibly shuddered, though he kept smiling. *I felt that, even here. You have grown strong.*

+ I saw the truth on the very Pilgrimage you demanded I never make. And after Isstvan, a veil lifted from my eyes. There is no longer any need to hold back. If we restrain ourselves, we will lose this war, and humanity will lose its only chance at enlightenment. +

The distant primarch's image wavered again. For a moment, Magnus looked pained.

*You scream your strength into the warp without care. A vessel must sail with the aetheric tides, Lorgar, lest it break against them.*

Lorgar laughed, a gentle, patient sound. 'A lecture, from you? I have seen your past and future, Magnus. You stand with us only because our father exiled you. You stand as the crowned king of a Legion of the damned.'

*My Legion? Of what do you speak?*

Lorgar felt his brother's questing probes, the softest psychic touch within his skull. It took the barest effort to hurl the insidious psi-touches aside.

+ If you ever seek to pry into my thoughts again, I will make sure you regret it. +

Magnus's smile became forced. *You truly have changed.*

'Yes,' Lorgar nodded, writing upon a scroll. 'Everything has changed.'

*What did you mean about my Legion?*

Lorgar was already distracted as he worked. 'Watch for the greatest snarl in fate's skeins, brother.' He dipped the quill into an inkpot and resumed his scribing. 'You are not free of the flesh-change your Legion once feared. Beware those among your sons that fail to embrace it as the gift it is.'

Magnus fell silent for some time. The only sound in the room was the scritch-scratch of Lorgar's quill-tip, and the omnipresent bass murmur of the generators on the enginarium decks.

*Fulgrim is dead.*

'So it seems.' Lorgar stopped writing long enough to look up. 'How long have you known?'

Magnus moved to the wall, reaching out as if his ethereal fingers could touch the paintings of Colchis hanging there.

I knew it as soon as I reached into Horus's war room. He withdrew his fingers, curling them back with slow care. Like you, I am no stranger to the entities within the warp. One of them animates his body now.

+ Entities? Name them as they are, brother. Daemons. +

Magnus's image wavered again, almost disincorporated in the winds of Lorgar's silent voice.

*Control your strength, Lorgar.*

Lorgar went back to his writing. 'You should have told me the truth fifty years ago.'

Perhaps. The melancholy bleeding from Magnus was almost strong enough to caress the skin. Perhaps I should have. I sought only to protect you. You were so certain, so arrogant in your beliefs.

Lorgar spoke as he kept writing. 'I stand at the right hand of the new Emperor, commanding the second-largest Legion in the Imperium. You are a broken soul, leading a shattered Legion. Perhaps I was never the one that needed protection, nor did my arrogance lead to my downfall. You cannot claim the same, Magnus. We both knew the truth, but only one of us faced it.'

And such a truth. Bitter amusement lapped at Lorgar's senses. The galaxy is a foul place. We are only making it fouler. Have you considered that it might be better to die in ignorance than to live with the truth?

Lorgar repelled his brother's creeping emotions with a burst of irritation. The spectre shimmered again, almost dissolving into the air.

+ Have you considered it, Magnus? If so, why do you yet live? Why did you not surrender to the howling death that came for you, when Russ broke your spine over his knee? +

Magnus's ghost-image laughed, but it was a forced sound, barely reaching Lorgar's mind. Is this what we have come to? Is this

the bitterness you have hidden from all of us for half a century? What did you see at the end of your Pilgrimage, my brother? What did you see when you stared into the abyss?

+ You know what I saw. I saw the warp, and what swims within its tides. + He hesitated a moment, feeling his fingers curl, forming fists in his rising rage. + You are a coward, to know of the Primordial Truth yet fail to embrace it. Chaos Incarnate is only grotesque because we see it with mortal eyes. When we ascend, we will be the chosen children of the gods. When— +

*Enough!*

Three of the paintings burst into flame; the crystal sculpture of the Covenant's tower palace shattered into worthless glass chips. Lorgar winced at his brother's psychic release. He had to sniff blood back into his nose.

*I am finished with this petty banter. You believe you know the truths behind our reality? Then show me. Tell me what you saw at the end of your accursed Pilgrimage.*

Lorgar rose to his feet, extinguishing the small fires with a gentle gesture. Frost glinted on his fingernails as the flames hissed into nothingness, starved of air. For a moment he felt a twinge of regret, that he and his closest brother should be reduced to this.

But time changed all things. He was no longer the lost one, the weak one, the one brother plagued by doubt.

Lorgar nodded, his eyes thinned to dangerous slits.

'Very well, Magnus.'

PART TWO

THE PILGRIM

# FOUR

## A DEAD WORLD

### **Shanriatha**

### **Forty-three years before Isstvan V**

HE TOOK HIS first steps onto the world's surface, hearing the soft percussion of his steady breathing within the enclosed suit of armour. Targeting cross hairs moved over the emptiness in a sedate drift, while the delicate electronics of his retinal display listed his own bio-data in ignorable streams.

Slowly, he moved into the wind. Dust crunched underfoot, soil so absolutely dead and dry that it defied the possibility of life. His musings were accompanied by the rattle of grit in the breeze, clattering against his thrumming armour plating.

For just a moment, he turned and looked back at his gunship. The racing winds were already painting it with a fine layer of the powdery red dust that existed in abundance on this world.

This world. He supposed it had once possessed a name, though it had never been spoken by human lips. Its bleak, rusty desolation reminded him of Mars, though Terra's sister world was a bastion of industry with few wild lands remaining. It also laid claim to calmer skies.

He didn't look up; he didn't need to, for there was nothing new to see. From horizon to horizon, a blanket of tortured clouds bubbled and churned, thunderheads crashing together to make tides of white, violet, and a thousand reds.

The warp. He'd seen it before, but never like this. Never around a world. Never in place of true weather. Never crashing through thousands of solar systems in a migraine tide, like a nebula rotting in the void.

*Lorgar*, said a genderless, breathless voice behind him, from a place where no one had been a moment before.

He didn't spin to face it, nor did he bring his weapon to bear. Instead, the primarch turned slowly, his eyes laden with patience and a bright, too-human curiosity.

'Ingethel,' he greeted the aberration. 'I have sailed into the mouth of madness. Now tell me why.'

INGETHEL SLITHERED CLOSER. Its claim to a humanoid form ended at its waist, which became the thick, ridged tail of a deep-sea worm or serpent. Mucous membranes along its underside were already coated with dust. Even its torso was human in only the loosest sense: four skeletal arms reached from its shoulders, in divine mockery of some ancient Hindusian deity, and its skin was a grey, mottled spread of dry leather.

*Lorgar*, it said again. Malformed teeth clacked together as the creature's jaw chattered. What had once been the face of a human female was now a bestial ruin – all fangs and dusty fur, with a leonine mouth that couldn't close around its deformed dental battlements. One eye stared, swollen and ripe with blood, bulging from its socket. The other was a sunken, useless nugget half-buried in the beast's skull.

Why did you choose this world? the creature asked.

The primarch saw its throat quiver with the effort of speech, but no human words left the trembling jaws.

'Does that matter?' *Lorgar* wondered. His own voice emerged from the snarling vox-grille in the mouth of his helm. 'I do not see why it would.'

*From orbit, you must have known several things: you cannot breathe the air of this world, nor is there any sign of life upon its surface. Yet you chose to land and journey across it.*

'I saw the ruins. A city drowned in the dust plains.'

*Very well*, it said, as if expecting such an answer. The creature hunched its shoulders against the wind, turning its head to shield its swollen eye. From its spine and shoulder blades rose several black pinions of burned bone – an angel's wings, with no muscles or feathers.

‘What are you?’ Lorgar asked.

The beast’s tongue bled as it licked its armoury of teeth. *You know what I am.*

‘Do I?’ The primarch towered above any mortal man, but Ingethel was taller still, rising high on its coiled tail. ‘I know you are a creature incarnated without a soul. I see nothing of the same life I see in humanity. No aura. No glimmer in the core of your being. But I do not know what you are; only what you are not.’

The wind picked up, tearing at the parchment scrolls fastened to Lorgar’s war plate. He let the storm claim them, not watching as they were ripped away, flapping in the air. A retinal warning flashed by the edge of his right eye, it was proclaiming another fall in the temperature. Was night falling? Nothing had changed in the sky above; no sun could be seen, let alone one that seemed to be setting. Lorgar cancelled the warning with a blink at the pulsating rune, just as his armour began to hum louder. The back-mounted generator growled as it churned out more power, entering a void-thaw cycle.

‘It is over two hundred degrees below the point water would freeze,’ he said to the monster. ‘Almost as cold as naked space.’

*Another reason I wonder why you chose to walk upon this world.*

Lorgar bared his teeth behind the granite-grey faceplate. ‘I am armoured to survive such extremes. What are you, to stand here and ignore an atmosphere cold enough to turn blood to ice in the time it takes the human heart to beat a single pulse?’

*This is where the realm of flesh and spirit meet. Physical laws mean nothing here. There is no limit on what might be. That is Chaos. Endless possibility.*

Lorgar took a deep breath of the clean, recyc-scrubbed air of his war plate. It tasted of ritual cleansing oils, coppery in his sinuses. ‘So I could breathe here? I would not freeze?’

*You are unique among the Anathema’s sons. All of your brothers are whole, Lorgar. You alone are lost. They have mastered their gifts since*

*birth. Your own mastery will come with understanding. When it does, you will have the strength to reshape entire worlds on a whim.*

Lorgar shook his head. 'I am bred from the best of humanity, but I am still human. You may stand unarmoured in this storm. It would destroy me in a moment. We are too different.'

The creature faced the primarch, its swollen eye cataracted by a film of red grit. Only one difference exists between the warp and the flesh. In the realm of flesh, sentient life is born ensouled. In the realm of raw thought, all life is soulless. But both are alive. The Born and the Neverborn, on both sides of reality. Destined for symbiosis. Destined for union.

The primarch crouched, letting dust fall through his gauntleted fingers. 'Neverborn. I have studied the history of my species, Ingethel. That is no more than a poetic word for "daemon".'

The creature turned its back to the wind again, but said nothing.

'What is this world called?' Lorgar looked up, but did not rise. The dust hissed away in the racing wind, leaving his fingers in a gritty stream.

*The eldar called it "Ycressa" before the Fall. After the birth of Slaa Neth, She Who Thirsts, it was named "Shanriatha".'*

The primarch gave a soft laugh.

*You know the meaning of this word?*

'I learned the eldar tongue when my Legion first met them. Yes, I know the meaning of the word. It means "never forgotten".'

The daemon flicked a slit tongue over its maw, heedless of the bloody scratches it inflicted upon itself. *You have met the soulbroken?*

'The soulbroken?'

*The eldar.*

Lorgar rose to his feet, brushing the last of the dust away. 'The Imperium has encountered them many times. Some expeditionary fleets have clashed with them, to drive them from Imperial space. Others have passed in peace. My brother Magnus was al-

ways one of the more lenient when encountering them.’ He hesitated for a moment, turning to the creature. ‘Your kind know of my brother Magnus, do they not?’

*The gods themselves know Magnus, Lorgar. His name is threaded through destiny’s web as often as your own.*

The Word Bearer looked back to the horizon. ‘That gives me little comfort.’

*It will, in time. Speak of the soulbroken.*

He continued, slower now. ‘My Legion encountered them not long after we sailed from Colchis the very first time. A fleet of elder, their vessels built of bone, drifting through the void powered by immense solar sails. I met with their farseers, to determine their place in Mankind’s galaxy. During those weeks, I mastered their tongue.’

Lorgar took another breath, thinking back to that time. ‘It was easy to despise them. Their inhumanity made them cold; their skin stank of bitter oil and alien sweat, and their vaunted wisdom came at the cost of sneering condescension. What right did a dying breed have to judge us inferior? I asked them this, and they had no answer.’

He laughed again, the same gentle sound. ‘They named us *mon-keigh*, their term for so-called “lesser races”. And yet, while they were easy to hate, there was much to admire in them, as well. Their existence is a tragic one.’

*And what of your Legion?*

‘We destroyed them,’ the primarch admitted. ‘At great cost, in both warships and loyal lives. They care for nothing but survival, the ferocious need to continue their existence saturates their whole culture. None of them ever die easily, nor do they fall cleanly.’

He paused for a moment. ‘Why do you name them “soulbroken”?’

If such a thing as Ingethel could be said to smile, it did so now. You know what this place is. Not this world, but this whole re-

gion of space, where gods and mortals meet. A goddess was born here. Slaa Neth. She Who Thirsts.

Lorgar looked to the sky, watching the cosmic afterbirth raging above. He knew without being told that this storm would rage forever. And it would spread, over the coming centuries, engulfing ever more solar systems. It would spread far and wide, opening to peer into the galaxy's core like a god's staring eye.

'I am listening,' he said quietly.

*In her genesis, brought about by the eldar's worship, she claimed the spirits of the entire race. They are the soulbroken. When any mortal dies, its spirit drifts into the warp. It is the way of things. But when the eldar die, they are pulled right into the maw of the goddess they betrayed. She thirsts for them, for they are her children. She drinks them as they die.*

Together, the daemon and the Emperor's son began to move west. Lorgar moved against the wind, his helmed head lowered as he listened to the creature's psychic speech. Ingethel closed its eyes as best as its deformed face allowed, its slithering passage leaving a sidewinder trail in the dust.

The marks they left didn't last long, for the storm soon obliterated all evidence of their passing.

'Something you said, it matches the Old Ways of Colchis.' He quoted verbatim from the texts of the very religion he'd once overthrown in the name of Emperor-worship. 'It is said that "upon death, the unshackled soul drifts into the infinite, to be judged by thirsting gods".'

Ingethel made a choking, coughing gargle. It took Lorgar a moment to realise the creature was laughing.

*It is the core of a million human faiths throughout your species' lifespan. The Primordial Truth is in humanity's blood. You all reach for it. You all know that something awaits after death. The faithful, the loyal, will be judged kindly and reside in their gods' domains. The faithless, the unbelievers, will drift through the aether, serving as prey for the Neverborn. The warp is the end of all spirits. It is the destination of every soul.*

‘That is hardly the Heaven promised in most human faiths,’ Lorgar felt his lip curling.

*No. But it is the same hell your species has always feared.*

The primarch couldn’t argue with that.

*You wish to see the ruins of this world,* Ingethel weaved as it slithered alongside him.

‘This was once a grand city.’ Lorgar could make out the first fallen towers on the horizon, shrouded in generations of carmine dust. Whatever tectonic devastation had claimed this world long ago dragged the city into a crater, spilling its spires to the ground. What protruded from the earth now resembled the ribcage of some long-dead beast.

*These ruins were never a true city. When the soulbroken fled the goddess’s birth, the survivors boarded vast domed platforms of living bone, carrying the remnants of their species into the stars on a final exodus.*

‘Craftworlds. I have seen one,’ Lorgar kept trudging forward, into the wind. ‘It was magnificent, in its own alien, chilling way.’

Ingethel’s chittery laugh wasn’t quite stolen by the wind. Many of the fledgling craftworlds failed to escape Slaa Neth’s birth scream. They dissolved in the void, or fell to die on the faces of these abandoned worlds.

Lorgar slowed in his pace, casting a glance at the daemon. ‘We walk to the grave of a craftworld?’

Ingethel rasped another laugh from its malformed jaws. *You are here to witness wonders, are you not?*

AND SO THEY came to a dead city, fallen from the void to bury itself in the world’s lifeless dust.

Red-stained bone architecture reached as far as the eye could see, jutting from the fundament with all the grace of a mouth filled by shattered teeth. Lorgar and his guide stood at the crater’s lip, staring down into the grave of the alien void city.

The primarch was silent for some time, listening to the howl of the wind and the accompanying grit-rattle against his armour.

When he spoke, he didn't break his gaze from the ancient annihilation below.

'How many died here?'

Ingethel raised itself higher, peering down with its foul eyes. Four arms spread in a grand gesture, as if laying claim to everything the daemon beheld.

*This was craftworld Zu'lasa. Two hundred thousand souls burst in the moment Slaa Neth was born. Unguided, with madness rampant in its own living core, the craftworld fell.*

Lorgar felt a small smile take hold. 'Two hundred thousand. How many in the entire eldar empire?'

*A whole species. Trillions. A decillion. A tredecillion. A goddess was born in the brains of every living eldar, and tore itself into the realm of cold space and warm flesh.*

The daemon hunched itself, leaning with all four arms on the crater's edge. *I sense your emotions, Lorgar. Pleasure. Awe. Fear.*

'I have no love for the galaxy's xenos breeds,' the primarch confessed. 'The eldar failed to grasp the truth of reality, and I feel no sorrow for them. Merely pity that any being can die in ignorance.' He took a breath, still staring down at the buried craftworld. 'How many of these failed to escape the goddess's birth?'

*A great many. Even now, some drift in the warp's tides – the silent homes of memories and alien ghosts.*

Lorgar ignored the wind tearing at his cloak as he took his first step on the crater's slope.

'I sense something, Ingethel. Something down there.'

*I know.*

'Do you know what it is?'

The daemon wiped its abused eyes with careful claws. A revenant, perhaps. An echo of eldar life, breathing its last if it still breathes at all.

Lorgar drew his crozius maul, his thumb close to the activation rune. The weapon caught the tumultuous light above, reflecting the storm on its burnished spines.

'I'm going closer.'

# FIVE

## ECHOES

GHOSTS WALKED THE streets, wraiths of wind and dust, forming tantalising shapes in the tempest. They lived at the edge of his vision, slaughtered by the storm each time Lorgar sought to see them more clearly. There, a fleeing figure, obliterated back into the breeze the moment Lorgar turned to see it. And there: three reaching, shrieking maidens, though there was nothing more than whirling dust when the primarch turned again.

He clutched the crozius tighter. Ahead, always ahead, there thrummed that aching sense of something barely alive – weakened, trapped, almost certainly dying. The bleak resonance reaching into his mind spoke of something like a caged, diseased animal: something that had been dying for a long, long time.

Lorgar moved with care, stepping around dust-coated rubble, treading through the skeleton of a city. The gritty wind carried distant voices in its grip – inhuman voices, screaming in an alien tongue. Perhaps the gale played tricks of its own, for even with a grasp of the eldar language, he couldn't make out the words being cried into the storm. Trying to comprehend individual voices merely made the others louder, eclipsing any hope of focus.

As he moved deeper through the emaciated city, Lorgar ceased turning at every half-formed image, unfocussing his eyes and letting the teasing wind shape whatever it chose. In the thrashing gusts, faint spires stood at the corners of his eyes, alien towers reaching up with impossible grace into hostile skies.

The primarch looked back, seeking Ingethel and seeing nothing. *Ingethel*, he reached out with his stuttering psychic sense, unsure if the call even pierced the wind. *Daemon. Where are you?*

The storm howled louder in answer.

TIME SEEMED TO lose its grip. Lorgar's thirst grew raw, though he never slowed in weariness, all the while walking for over seventy hours beneath an unending dusk. The only certain evidence of time's passing was his retinal chrono, which degenerated into unreliable fluctuation at the tip of the seventy-first hour. The digital display began to pulse with random runes, as if finally surrendering to the unnatural laws of this warp-drowned realm.

Lorgar recalled Argel Tal's face: gaunt, almost vampiric in its skeletal ferocity, when the warrior had claimed his vessel had sailed the warp's tides for half a year. To Lorgar and the rest of the fleet, the *Orfeo's Lament* had been gone no longer than a few heartbeats.

Idly, he wondered how long would pass in the material universe while he lingered here, walking along the shores of hell.

What little of the craftworld's architecture remained above ground was a victim of erosion, worn down and scarred by the blistering winds. Lorgar stalked down yet another avenue of dust, his boots grinding down on the ancient rock. Perhaps this had once been an agricultural dome, fertile and forested with xenos flora. Perhaps it had been nothing more than a communal chamber, though. Lorgar sought to restrain his imagination, refusing to let it be stirred further by the dancing shapes in the dust storm.

Another hundred metres, scuffing through worthless soil, and the curious, queasy ache of struggling life began to throb below his boots. To his left, to his right, nothing but the fallen towers of a dead civilisation.

The primarch crouched to grip a fistful of the red soil. As before, he let it fall through his fingers, watching as it was snatched away by the wind. The presence, such as it was, waxed and waned in arrhythmia. Lorgar took a breath, aiming a thin pulse of psychic energy to trickle downward. He felt nothing in response. Not even a tremor of awareness. It could've been a metre below the ground, or all the way down to the world's core. Either

way, it was a weak, irregular thing; seemingly untouchable and only barely reminiscent of life.

Sentience resided in hiding, but it didn't feel alive.

Curious.

He pushed deeper, scenting, seeking, but the same buried core of resistant nothingness met his questing touch.

In grudging defeat, Lorgar withdrew his hesitant psychic probing, curling his perception back into his skull's senses.

That did it. Even as he was cursing his erratic talents, he felt something stir beneath, burrowing upward. The presence beneath the sand chewed its way up, an icy bloodhound sentience straining to sniff after his retreating psy-caress.

Lorgar recoiled on instinct, shuddering at the sense of desperation wrenching closer from below. With gritted teeth, he forced a blast of repellent thought back at the grasping presence – the psychic equivalent of smashing a drowning man's fingers as he grasped for a lifeline. The presence ebbed for a moment, regrouped, and clawed upwards again.

Its crest broke the surface: raw feeling crashing against the primarch's mind in a splash of cold ferocity, absolutely devoid of any other emotion. Lorgar staggered back from the fountain of rising awareness, deflecting its jagged intensity as best he could. When the hand burst from the sand, the primarch already stood with his crozius in his fists.

He watched, shielding his mind from a spit-spray of formless psychic hate, as the statue of a dying god dragged itself from a grave of scarlet soil.

It couldn't stand. In its struggles to rise, the creature crawled closer, hands digging into the earth to find loose purchase. But it couldn't seem to stand. The primarch watched it crawl, unable to see any distinct spinal injury along its cracked armour plating. The long mane of hair falling to either side of its snarling death-mask face looked to be composed of smoke. It streamed out, captured by the wind, a slave to the storm's breath.

Lorgar backed away with slow care, boots crunching the dust, his own features bare of anything beyond curiosity. Whatever the crippled thing was, its wrath poured from it in an aura of physical pressure. Lorgar took another retreating step, still watching closely.

For all the god-statue's majesty, it was plainly ruined by supernatural decay. A husk crawled where once a great entity would be striding over the land. Lorgar saw its banished glory when he narrowed his eyes, peering at the flickering after-images through his lashes. A being of tectonic armour plating: with eyes of white flame; a heart that beat magma over bones of unburnable black stone; a towering manifestation of incarnate rage and holy fire. Lorgar saw all of this through the swirling sand, and even smiled as the wind formed a false heat haze around the creature – another weak echo of what should have been truly majestic.

Had it been able to stand, it would have risen taller than a Legion Astartes dreadnought. Even prone and destroyed, it was an immense thing, leaving a wretched trail in the dust.

He almost pitied it, in this devastated incarnation. Its black skin was faded to a greyish charcoal, split in old cracks that bled smoke into the storm. Lava-blood had dried to a sluggish flow of ember sludge; scabby crusts spoke of its own blood cooling, drying as it left its body. Where eyes of witchfire had once blazed, hollow eye sockets twisted in sightless, feral expressions.

'I am Lorgar,' he told the crawling god. 'The seventeenth son of the Emperor of Man.'

The god bared black teeth and grey gums, seeking to shout. Nothing but ash left its snarling lips, spilling onto the sand beneath its chin, while the psychic aftershock of the denied scream battered uselessly against Lorgar's guarded mind.

It crawled closer. Two of its fingers broke against the ground. Congealing magma oozed from the stumps, blackening as it dried.

'I know you can hear me,' the primarch kept his voice calm. His crozius hammer flared with energy, lightning sparking in a mad dance over its spiked head. 'But you cannot answer, can you?'

He took another step backwards. In response, the god's statue gave another soundless roar.

'I see you cannot.' The primarch's smile faltered. 'Nothing is left to you but this dull ache of unquenchable hatred. That is almost tragic.'

*Lorgar.*

Ingethel? He reached for the daemon's voice. Ingethel? I have found... something. An echo. A wraith. I believe I will put it out of its misery.

*It is an Avatar of Kaela Mensha Khaine.*

Lorgar nearly shrugged. The name means nothing to me.

*The war god of the soulbroken. You have disturbed the city's heart, bringing living warmth to the coldest of places.*

He returned the psychic equivalent of a snort. Whatever it once was, it is dying now. It has been dying for a long time, entombed beneath this poisonous soil.

*As you say. A pause. A sense of amusement. Lorgar. Behind you.*

The primarch turned from the crawling god, to face the slender figures walking from the gritty wind. He could see nothing in the way of detail; they were silhouettes in the storm, drifting closer, curved blades in their hands.

A dozen, two dozen, all ghosting closer. Not a single one of them betrayed the warm resonance of living sentience.

'Mon-keigh,' whispered the wind. 'Sha'eil, Sha'eil, Sha'eil.'

He knew the word. Sha'eil. Hell. A place of absolute evil.

Lorgar blasted each of the silhouettes apart with focused projections of psychic force. It took no more than a moment's focus. Heat haze shimmered in the wake of their disincorporation – the primarch laughed as he realised he was wasting his strength on mirages.

A groaning, grinding moan rang out from behind. Lorgar turned again, in time to see the god's statue finally rising to its knees. From the red sand, it drew forth an ancient and cracked blade. Through clenched teeth that wheezed with ash, it coughed its first words.

'Suin Daellae,' growled the withered god. The blade in its hands, used more as a crutch than a weapon, streamed with unhealthy black smoke, but didn't burst into flame.

Lorgar watched the trembling creature with a cautious eye. *Suin Daellae*, he sent to his distant guide. *I am not familiar with the words.*

*The Doom that Wails. It is the name of the blade in its hands.*

Lorgar watched the Avatar topple again, crashing onto its hands and knees. *I almost feel pity for the thing.*

He was aware of the daemon taking form behind him, shaping itself from the wind, but felt no compunction to turn and face it.

*You should not pity it, Lorgar. There is a lesson in this.*

The primarch was sure there was, but he cared little for such unsubtle teachings. The Avatar's skin cracked and peeled away by each of the statue's joints.

'I am ending this,' he said aloud.

*As you wish*, Ingethel's words drifted back.

Lorgar stepped forward, his mace heavy in his hands.

*Remember this moment, Lorgar. Remember it for what it is, and what it stands for.*

He drew closer to the collapsing statue and raised his crozius high, every inch the image of an executioner.

The Avatar's cracking hand gripped his armour greave. Another of its fingers broke off.

'I will end the misery of your ignorance,' said Lorgar, and let the hammer fall.

A SINGLE STRIKE. A blow to the back of the head.

The crash of iron against stone. The hiss of dust captured by the wind. The rattle of grit against sealed ceramite.

*There is a lesson here.*

On the red soil, an outline of black ash marked the shape of a god's grave.

*Lorgar. Do you see it?*

Lorgar turned back to the daemon. Ingethel was slavering, its jaws dripping with clear saliva that somehow failed to crystallise in the intense cold.

Do you see? it asked, unblinking. A divine being can be as ignorant, as lost, as blind as any mere mortal. They can be as stubborn in their defiance, and just as grave a threat to the truth. Look at the revenant you destroyed – an echo of a faith that failed long ago. Now it is gone, this world can heal, untainted by false and heathen belief. Do you see?

The irritation left his vox-grille as a raucous grunt. 'You asked that question of my son, Argel Tal, and I do not wish for the same blunt instruction. Yes, Ingethel. I see.'

*Even a god may die, Lorgar.*

He laughed again. 'Subtlety is poison to you, isn't it?'

*Even a god may die. You will remember those words, before the end.*

The daemon's silent tone gave him pause. 'You speak of the end as if you know its outcome.'

*I have walked the paths of possibility. I have seen what might be, and what is almost certain to be. But one cannot see what will be, until it has become what was.*

Lorgar no longer felt like laughing. 'What is most likely, then? How will this end?'

The daemon licked its maw clean of dark ash and red dust. *It ends as it began, Emperor's son. It ends in war.*

TWO WORDS WERE all it took.

'Show me.'

PART THREE  
IN WAR

## SIX

### THE ULTIMATE GATE

‘I KNOW THIS place,’ he whispered into the silence. ‘This is the Eternity Gate.’

Lorgar stared down the endless hall – wide enough to admit a thousand men marching abreast, long enough to house every banner of honour from each of the Emperor’s regiments. A hundred thousand banners, just in range of his genhanced eyesight. A million reaching beyond it. Two million. Three.

More and more and more, as far as the eye could see, proudly heralding world after world clutched in the Imperium’s grip. Each world raised countless regiments, their war flags hanging here to form an infinite tapestry. The hall itself, stretching for hours upon hours, was part cathedral, part museum, part sanctum of honour.

In the furthest reaches, shadowed by the darkness abounding, stood two wolf-masked Warhound Titans, their city-killing guns trained upon the marble steps leading towards the great gate they guarded.

The portal itself defied description. Words such as “door” and “gateway” implied comprehensible scope, something mortal minds could fathom without difficulty. This was no such thing. To construct such a barricade must have taken a full quarter of the remaining adamantium deposits on Mars, even before the ornate gold was added in layers upon the outer core of dense ceramite plating.

A barrier so grand, so impossible in scale and majesty, could only be protecting the secrets of one soul, above all others. Lorgar had been here but rarely, for the Eternity Gate was the portal to his father’s innermost sanctum, where the Emperor kept his personal genetic laboratory sealed away from his sons and servants.

For a time, Lorgar stood beneath the company banners of an Army regiment hailing from a world called Valhalla. The image-

ry upon the flags was one of a white world and cloaked men raising pennants in the Emperors service. Lorgar had never set foot upon their world and wondered how far it lay from Terra in the night sky. Perhaps its people were as cold and unwelcoming as the frost upon which they trod.

‘Why did you show me this?’ he asked, turning from the hanging banners.

Ingethel slid from the shadows, the fur around its swollen eye dark and wet with secreted fluids.

‘Are you weeping?’ Lorgar asked the thing.

*No. I am bleeding.*

‘Why?’

The daemon’s uneven jaws clicked together. It does not matter. Tell me, what do you see in this place?

Lorgar took a breath, tasting the hot and sweat-ripened air of his armour’s internal ventilation. ‘Can I breathe here?’

*Yes. We are no longer on Shanriatha.*

Lorgar disengaged the seals at his collar and lifted the helm clear. Cold air caressed his face, while his next breath pulled a welcome chill into his burning lungs.

He turned his calm, scholarly eyes upon the daemon. ‘How did we leave the dead world?’

*We are there, and we are here. You will understand one night, Lorgar. For now, explanations are a waste of time and breath. Some truths cannot be contained by the mortal mind.*

The primarch smiled to hide the curl of his lip. ‘For a guide, you are doing precious little guiding.’

I am an emissary. A viator. Ingethel slithered along the lush red carpet, leaving a slug’s smear. You are here, for all that it matters. You can breathe here, and die here, if we are not careful. The warp is everything and nothing, and you are adrift in its tides.

‘Very well.’ That would do, he supposed, for now.

*Do you hear that, Lorgar?*

Lorgar took another refreshing breath, letting the chill fill his chest. ‘Battle, in the distance?’ He shook his head. ‘This vision is a lie. The Imperial Palace has never been besieged.’

*No? You look upon this endless chamber with mortal eyes. Use an immortal’s sight.*

Easier said than done. His sixth sense, never reliable, was a curled core within his mind, suddenly resistant to being unlocked in this place. With concentration, he managed to pry his psychic gift open, as if pulling apart the fingers of a stiffened fist.

Lorgar managed to say ‘I...’ before he was drowned in the battle raging around him.

GHOSTS WAGED WAR in every direction, their spectral bodies falling victim to the bite of each other’s bolters and blades.

The illusion was complete enough to force his body into a physical response – a quickening of the heart, a shallowness of breath, the crucial urge to draw steel and leap into the fray. He considered himself a seeker, a scholar before a soldier, but the battle’s intensity demanded instinctive reaction. Through clenched teeth, Lorgar watched warriors in the clashing shades of Legionis Aspartes armour fighting and dying at his feet.

Amongst their chaotic ranks were beings of twisted inhumanity, their wrenched faces and bleeding bodies serving as ironclad evidence of their Neverborn origins. Claws snapped and cleaved; fleshy tendrils of barbed skin lashed and coiled in strangling embrace; eyeless faces howled above the grating clatter of bolters. Thousands upon thousands of warriors, mortal and immortal alike, grinding and slaying, shrieking and roaring. Many bore wings of flame and smoke; while others soared to the high ceiling on chiropteran pinions, casting bats’ shadows on the fighting below. These last daemons hurled the struggling bodies of captured Imperial Fists down, bombarding the warriors below with their own brothers.

Lorgar released a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. In a voiceless exhalation, he said the words, 'Witness before me, the very heart of heresy.'

Ingethel hunched next to him. A reflection of the tumult showed plain in his swollen eye. *Your own words, Emperor's child?*

'No. A quote, from an old Covenant text.'

Lorgar stared as a towering figure, taller even than a primarch, waded through a broken phalanx of Imperial Fists. The creature was clad in cracked fragments of ceramite armour, warped into a colossal image of Legionary purity. The brutal familiarity of a Mark II snarl-mouthed helm had become a jawed monstrosity, crested by great, curved horns of iron and ivory. Its hands, once human fists in armoured gauntlets, were swollen into gnarled claws ending in scything black barbs, akin to a bird of prey's talons. Even from this distance, the aberration reeked of something poisonous – a perversely pleasant, cloying malignancy, promising death the moment its sweetness ever touched a tongue. The lethal, deceptive scent poured off the leviathan in waves.

'That creature,' Lorgar watched with wide eyes. 'It wears the armour of the Legions, but I cannot mark its allegiance.'

Ingethel gestured with its two left arms. Do you see the warriors clad in cardinal red?

Lorgar couldn't fail to see them. An entire Legion unknown to him, their bolters crashing as they advanced in mixed ranks with the bellowing Neverborn. Imperial Fists fell back before them, their numbers diminishing with each passing moment.

*They are the Bearers of the Word.*

'They...'

*Yes, Lorgar. They are.*

And they were. His Legion, his own loyal sons, armoured in a shade of spilled blood and oxidised iron. Prayer scrolls marked their armour, their piety declared with defiance even as the parchments were ripped and scorched in the heat of battle. Many helms bore horns in mimicry of officer crests, and every shoulder

guard showed a daemon's twisted visage, wrought in blackened bronze.

Watching them brought their chants to life. Who were these warriors, to adorn themselves in skulls and daemons' faces, chanting ritual verse as they advanced? What had become of his Legion?

Ingethel pried the thoughts from Lorgar's mind. *The future holds many changes, primarch.*

He didn't answer. Lorgar moved among the warring Legionaries, utterly ignored by all of them. The warriors moved to fire around him, but paid no more heed to his existence. With a hesitant shove, he pushed one of the red-clad Word Bearers' shoulder guards. The warrior cursed at a missed shot, moving aside and adjusting his aim. The bolter started up its thunderous refrain a moment later.

Surrounded by advancing Legionaries, the primarch looked back to his guide. Ingethel slinked closer, its sinuous, muscled worm's body parting the crowded warriors with the same ease.

*This moment is fifty years distant from when we stand on Shanriatha.*

'Why do they wear red?'

Ingethel reached to one of the Word Bearers, its nails streaking over the daemon's visage on the warrior's pauldron. The Legionary hesitated; for a moment Lorgar wondered if the daemon had made their presence known. Instead of noticing them, the warrior reloaded, immediately adding his fire back to the assault.

*The Legion's old armour was cast aside to herald the changes taking hold of humanity. They are no longer the Bearers of the Emperor's Word, Lorgar. They are the Bearers of yours.*

'This cannot be true.' The primarch flinched as a bolt shell detonated nearby, killing the Word Bearer closest to him. 'You have still not told me what that creature is – the one that wears the armour of my Legion five decades from now.'

He watched it move, its bunched musculature in concert with the exposed power cables and layered crimson ceramite armour.

As it pulled one of the Imperial Fists apart with its immense claws, the black smoke misting from its wings was an acidic shadow, slowly eating into the golden armour of every Imperial Fists warrior nearby.

‘Throne of the God-Emperor,’ Lorgar whispered. In the great beast’s grip, the bisected Imperial Fist fought on, firing his bolter down into the daemon’s face. The armoured creature hurled the warrior’s legs aside, turning its corrupted helm from the shells cracking against its faceplate. Lorgar watched in silence as the winged daemon slammed the halved Imperial Fist onto its taurine crown, impaling the Legionary on its right horn. That, at last, stilled the warrior’s defiance. His bolter fell from his hands, clattering down the shadow-wrapped wings. The daemon fought on, untroubled by the weight of the armoured torso punctured onto its ivory crest.

‘What is that thing?’ the primarch asked again. ‘Its soul is... I do not have the words for it.’ Lorgar stared through the grinding crash of unfolding carnage, peering to see beneath the monstrosity’s flesh. Where a flaring emanation would pulse in a living being, and a hollow chasm would swallow light within one of the Neverborn, this creature possessed both. An ember burned hot in the blackness beneath its skin.

‘It is not human,’ Lorgar’s voice was strained by the effort it took to pierce the black mist shroud rising from the creature’s wings. ‘But it was.’ He turned his eyes to Ingethel. ‘Wasn’t it.’ The words weren’t a question.

This time, Ingethel’s tone betrayed some of the daemon’s own hesitation. The moment inspired some reluctance, perhaps a reverence, in the daemon itself.

*That is your son, Lorgar. That is Argel Tal.*

A peal of thunder roared from the Eternity Gate itself, as another winged figure landed amidst the melee. Its wings were torn and stained, ragged with rips and the white feathers streaked by blood. Its armour was a shattered ruin of split steel and burnished gold, while its face was masked by a golden helm. The

blade in its hands rippled with psychic flame, bright enough to sear the sight from a watcher's eyes.

'No,' Lorgar managed to whisper.

And that is your brother, the daemon pressed. Sanguinius, Lord of Angels. This is how Argel Tal will die.

LORGAR FROZE AFTER the first step forward. He began a breath in the hall before the Eternity Gate, and released it under a sky tortured by groaning volcanoes.

The air had a ripeness to it – that spoiled, blackening reek of an open tomb. Despite the horizon aflame and choking on ash from the erupting mountains, little warmth reached his exposed skin. No wind stirred to freshen the air. The ground quivered in a prolonged shudder, giving a low, moaning rumble of tortured tectonics far below the grey earth. The planet itself objected to what was taking place on its surface.

Lorgar's vision couldn't penetrate the blanket of ash swallowing the sky. To cover the heavens like that, the volcanoes had to have been erupting for months, at the very least.

He turned to the daemon, sensing its approach from behind.

'Where are we? Why did you bring us here?'

*A nameless world. We are here because you saw all you needed to see.*

The primarch laughed without intending to. Just as he mustered enough control to speak again, a second burst of laughter broke from his lips.

*I fail to see the amusement, Lorgar.*

'You show me my armies laying siege to my father's palace, allied with daemons, waging war against my brothers, and you ask why I wished to see more than handful of seconds?' Lorgar shook his head, the laughter dying down. 'I am finished with being led by the nose into your prepared lessons, creature.'

Ingethel drooled. Watch your tone when addressing one of the gods' chosen.

'I am here by my own choice. I will leave here by the same virtue.'

Yes, the daemon stood straighter, eliciting several wet cracks from its vertebrae. *Keep telling yourself that, Lorgar.*

The primarch gripped his crozius, aching to draw the weapon and wield it out of spite, swinging it in anger, reasserting control over life through the use of violence. In this, he was as any of his brothers, and he knew it. The desire was always there. What better way to bend reality to one's desire? Bleed those who would defy your choices and there is no longer any opposition. The destroyer's way was always an easy one. It fell to the builders, the visionaries, to do the difficult work.

Lorgar did something none of his brothers would have done in his place. He released the weapon, leaving it undrawn, and took a calming breath.

'I am here to learn the truth of the gods, Ingethel. And you are here to show it to me. Please do not force my temper.'

The daemon said nothing. Lorgar stared into its bloated eye, still weeping ichor. 'Do you understand me?'

Yes.

'Now tell me why you summoned me here. I heard the call of this place, the shrieking of my name through the solar storms. I came to maturity on a world where our ancient holy texts spoke of this dead alien empire as a heaven for humanity. I want answers, Ingethel. I want them now. Why have I been shaped from birth to be brought to this place? What does fate want of me?'

The daemon drooled again. Its gums were bleeding now and two of its arms were curled close to its glistening chest.

'What is wrong with you?'

*I am nearing the end of this incarnation. My essence sits uneasily in this cage of bone and flesh.*

'I have no wish to see you die.'

*I will not die, as you perceive the concept. We are the Neverborn. We are also the Neverending.*

Lorgar swallowed a pulse of irritation, not letting it rise to the fore. 'True immortality?'

*In the only possible way.* The daemon looked to the horizon, just as Lorgar had done only minutes before. Its gaze milked over, going turgid with thought. *You ask a question, despite already knowing its answer. You are here, now, because you have been summoned, you are here, now, because your life was engineered to ensure this moment took place. You are here, now, because the gods wished it. In the tangled skeins of time's web, I have seen innumerable possible futures where you never came to us, Lorgar.*

*In one, you died in youth, the golden child-martyr of Colchis, slain by assassins seeking to restore the Old Ways. When the Imperium came to reclaim you, they found a world dead by its own hand, lost to the crusades of bitter fanatics.*

*In another, you were poisoned only three nights after retaking the capital in your holy war for the hearts of Colchis's people. You were murdered by the wine in your cup, with the poison placed there by the hand of one you called Father, for he feared you could no longer be manipulated.*

*In another, you were not the master of your own temper, much like many of your brothers: in a confrontation with Sanguinius, you sank a knife into his back, and were in turn butchered by Horus for your sin.*

*In yet another, you defied the Anathema – the creature you name the Emperor, falsely considering it to be human – and you were executed by your brothers Curze and Russ. Your heart was cut from your corpse, and a great sorcery of alchemical and genetic power was wrought upon all who shared your bloodline. Your Legion was poisoned, reduced to madness, and finally annihilated by the fleets of the Ultramar Kingdom.*

*In another, you—*

'Enough.' Lorgar felt pale, and suspected only his gold-inked skin hid that very truth. 'Enough, please.'

*As you wish.*

The mountains continued to rumble with distant bellows as the world breathed fire into its own sky.

Lorgar opened his eyes at last. ‘Why me? Why was I brought here? Why not Horus or Guilliman? They are the generals I will never be. Why not Sanguinius or Dorn?’ He laughed then, a sneering, private snort. ‘Why not Magnus?’

Ingethel grinned, insofar as its mangled mouth would allow. The gods have touched many of your brothers in ways both obvious and occluded. One of them bears wings upon his back. Is that part of your Emperor’s genetic intent? Did he not wish to destroy all religious reference? Why then would he breed a son that stands as an angel incarnate?

Lorgar brushed the point aside. ‘Enough cryptic idiocy. Why not Magnus? He is the most powerful of us all, without a shadow of doubt.’

Magnus. Magnus the Red. The Crimson King. Ingethel laughed inside Lorgar’s mind, and gestured out onto the plains. He is already with us, whether he admits it or not. He came to us without needing to be summoned, and without ever considering the notion of faith. He came for power, because that is why all things of flesh come to us. And in five short decades, when the galaxy begins to burn, he will come here himself.

*Behold this very world, Lorgar, in fifty years.*

# SEVEN

## CITY OF LIGHT

FOR A MOMENT, to even face the light was painful. Silver in its artificiality, as cold and far removed from the warm gold of a natural star as could be imagined. Shadowing his face from the austere glare, Lorgar looked across the plains where Ingethel had gestured.

Shapes resolved themselves into an uneven skyline. Lorgar knew it instantly, for he had studied there for almost a decade, living among its people and coming to adore them as he loved the people of Colchis.

‘Tizca,’ he said the word only after swallowing his horror. Cracked spires of human ingenuity; great pyramids of white stone, pale metal and shattered glass; city walls fallen to nothing more than lumped rubble – this was the great and enlightened city of the Thousand Sons, reduced to the edge of devastation.

‘What madness do I see before me? What lies cruelly given shape?’

*Tizca will burn in the crucible of the coming war. It must be so.*

‘I will never allow this to come to pass.’

*You will allow it, Lorgar. You must.*

‘You are not my master. I would never hold faith in a god that controlled its worshippers. Faith is about freedom, not slavery.’

*You will allow this to come to pass.*

‘If this is the future, Ingethel, I will tell Magnus in the past. When I return to the Imperium, it will be the first thing to leave my lips.’

*No. This is the final incident in Magnus’s illumination. Betrayed by the Emperor, betrayed by his own brothers, he will bring his city to the warp in order to escape final destruction. Here, he forges a bastion for the war to come.*

‘What war?’ Lorgar spat the words. ‘You keep speaking of betrayals, of crusades and battles, as if I can already see into the same futures you describe. Tell me, damn you, what war?’ Lorgar started to move towards the ruined city, but Ingethel gripped his armoured shoulder.

*The war you will begin, but will never lead. The war to bring all these truths to the Imperium. You came to find the gods, Lorgar. You have found them, as they always intended for you. Their eyes are turned towards humanity now. We said this to Argel Tal, as we say it to you now: Humanity must embrace the truths of divine reality, or suffer the same fate as the eldar.*

Lorgar looked back to the city.

*You already knew it would come to war. A holy crusade, to bring the truth to Terra. Too many worlds will resist. The Emperor’s grip on their lives is too complete, too merciless. The Anathema starves them of any chance to grow on their own, so they will languish – and then they will die – while shackled by his narrow vision.*

The primarch smiled, the expression a mirror of his genetic father’s own faint amusement. ‘And in place of order, you offer Chaos? I have seen what walks on the faces of those eldar worlds lost in this great, drowned empire. The seas of blood and the cities of howling Neverborn...’

*You look upon an empire that failed to heed the gods.*

‘Even so, there are horrors no human will willingly embrace.’

*No? These things are horrors only to those who look upon them with mortal eyes. Without belief in the true gods, humanity will fall to its own faithlessness. Alien kingdoms will break the Imperium apart, for humanity lacks the strength to survive in a galaxy that loathes your species. Your expansion will fade and diminish, and the gods will smite all who turned from the offer of true faith. Your kind can embrace the Chaos you speak of or it can taste the same fate as the eldar.*

‘Chaos.’ Lorgar tasted the word, weighing it on his tongue. ‘That is not the correct word, is it? The immaterial realm may be one of pure Chaos, but it is changed when bonded with the material universe. Diluted. Even in this Great Eye, where the gods

stare into the galaxy, physical laws are broken but it is not a place of pure Chaos. It is no random ocean of seething psychic energy. It is not the warp itself, but a meshing of here and there, the firmament and the aether.'

The primarch breathed in the ashy air, feeling it tickle the back of his throat. 'Perfect order would never change. But pure Chaos would never rise in the first place. You desire a union.'

He turned to Ingethel. Blood ran from both the daemon's eyes now, darkening its fur in bleak lightning streaks.

'You need us,' Lorgar said. 'The gods need us. They cannot claim the material realm without us. Their power is strangled when they have no prayers or deeds offered in worship.'

*Yes, but the need is not a selfish one. It is a natural desire. The gods are masters of Chaos as a natural force. The warp is every human emotion – every emotion from any sentient race – made manifest into a psychic tempest. It is not the enemy of life, but the result of it.*

Lorgar breathed deeply, tasting more of the ash on the wind.

He said nothing, for there was little to say. Argel Tal had brought these words back with him, and now they were Lorgar's to hear firsthand.

*Chaos seeks symbiosis with life: the Ensouled and the Neverborn in natural harmony. Union. Faith. Power, Lorgar. Immortality and endless possibility. Sensations beyond mortal comprehension. The ability to feel maddening delight at any agony. The gift of ecstasy even when you are destroyed, making even death a great joke, knowing you will incarnate in another form over and over until the suns themselves go black.*

*And when the stars die, Chaos still lives on in the cold – still perfect, still exultant, still pure. This is everything humanity has ever dreamed of – to be unchallenged in the galaxy, to be omnipotent above all other life, and to be eternal.*

Lorgar would no longer look at the fallen city. 'You have chosen poorly. I am pleased and proud to have discovered the truth. I am honoured to be chosen by beings powerful enough to be considered divine by the truest meaning of the word. But I will

struggle to bring this light to humanity. I cannot win a war against the god sat upon the Terran Throne.'

*Life is struggle. You will strive, and you will succeed.*

'Even if I believed all of this...' Lorgar's blood ran cold. 'I have one hundred thousand warriors. We will be dead the moment we make planetfall upon the Throneworld.'

*You will attract more, as you liberate world after world. It is written in the stars; after you sail from here, your Legion no longer spends years crafting perfect worlds venerating the Anathema as the God-Emperor. You will crush resistance beneath your boots, and draw fresh, faithful humans into your service. Some will be slaves in the bowels of your warships. Others will be your flock, to shepherd them toward enlightenment. Many more will be taken into your genetic harvester asylums, and bred into Legionaries.*

The primarch resisted the urge to curse. 'I am growing increasingly uneasy with you discussing my future in such definite terms. None of these events have happened yet and may never occur. You have still not answered the one question that matters. Why must it be me?'

*It has to be you.*

His teeth clenched together, hard enough to squeak. 'Why? Why not one of the others? Horus? Sanguinius? The Lion? Dorn?'

*Each of the other Legions would die for their primarchs, and lay down their lives for the Imperium. But the Imperium is the cancer killing the species. Even when some of your brothers turn against the Emperor, they will fight to command the Imperium. Only the Word Bearers will die for the truth, and for humanity itself.*

*Faith and steel must now be joined. If humanity becomes an empire instead of a species, it will fall to alien claws and the wrath of the gods. It is the way of things. What has happened before will happen again.*

Lorgar pulled a sealed scroll from his belt, unrolling it with exaggerated care. Red dust clung to the parchment from the surface of Shanriatha, as did a few speckles of blood from carnage beneath the Eternity Gate. They dotted the cream page, bold against the pale paper, almost like tiny wax seals.

His son's blood. The lifeblood of one of his Legion, fifty years from now. A warrior destined to die on the home world of humanity, countless systems away from where he'd been born. Had that warrior even been born, yet?

Lorgar screwed up the parchment, destroying the Colchisian cuneiform scripture, and let it fall to the cold ground.

'Is Magnus here now? Are we here, fifty years from the night I entered the Great Eye?'

*Yes. Where we stand now is mere days after something humanity will come to recall as the Razing of Prospero. Magnus fell victim to his own arrogance, and now resides in the tallest tower of his broken city here, lamenting the destruction of his Legion and the death of his hopes. He intended only the best, but his curiosity saw him damned in the eyes of the Emperor. He looked too deep, too long, into ideals the Emperor did not hold.*

Lorgar nodded, expecting nothing less. It was hardly unprecedented, after all. His own Legion – a hundred thousand Word Bearers kneeling in the dust of Monarchia...

He shook his head, looking back to the city, and the tower at the heart of it.

'Why does he come here, to the empyrean?'

*To hide where the Emperor's dogs cannot catch him. He is here to lick his wounds. For his sins, Magnus was sentenced to censure. He chose exile over execution.*

Lorgar started walking.

'I am going to speak with him.'

*You will not be allowed to stand before the Crimson King.*

He didn't need to turn to know the daemon was smiling. 'We will see,' he called over his shoulder.

There was no answer. Ingethel was gone.

HE WAS THREATENED by an abortion wearing the cardinal red ceramite of the Thousand Sons Legion.

‘Denlcrrgh yidzun,’ it demanded. A bronze bolter was wrapped in the quivering flesh-coloured tentacles it used as arms. Behind this lone sentry, the fallen city wall of Tizca rose in mounds of rubble.

Lorgar breathed a slow exhalation. Even from a dozen metres away, the Thousand Son reeked of spoiled meat and the rich, coppery tang of aetheric secrets. What remained of its face looked as if it’d melted down the front of its skull.

‘I am Lorgar, Lord of the Seventeenth Legion.’ He gestured to the bolter in the thing’s limbs. ‘Lower your weapon, nephew. I am here to speak with my brother.’

Another attempt at speech left the Thousand Son’s ravaged features as a meaningless blur of syllables. It seemed to recognise its own inadequacy in this regard, for a gentle, cultured voice drifted into Lorgar’s mind a moment later.

*I am Hazjihn of the Fifteenth Legion. You cannot be what you appear.*

Lorgar buried his discomfort beneath his father’s smile. ‘I could say the same words to you, Hazjihn.’ The ground gave a particularly violent shudder. Glass shattered in the lowest levels of the closest pyramid as more rocks tumbled from the ruined city wall.

The Crimson King tells us we are the only human life on this world. Hazjihn’s dripping face snuffed back a mouthful of air in ungainly respiration. You cannot be Lord Aurelian of the Word Bearers.

Lorgar spread his hands in a display of unarmed beneficence. ‘You know me, Hazjihn. Do you recall the evening I lectured on the Khed-Qahir Parables, in the west garden district of the City of Grey Flowers?’

The bolter lowered a fraction. I recall it well. How many of my Legion’s warriors were present that night?

Lorgar nodded in respect to the Thousand Son. ‘Thirty-seven, among a mortal crowd of over twenty thousand.’

The warrior’s sloping eyes blinked slowly. And what is the fiftieth principle of Qahir?

‘There is no fiftieth principle of Qahir, for he died of a consumptive sickness soon after penning the nineteenth. The fiftieth principle of Khed is to maintain cleanliness of flesh and iron as surely as one would maintain purity of soul, for the external inexorably bleeds into the internal.’

The warrior lowered his bolter. You may yet be a deceiver, but I will take you to my lord. He will judge you with his own eye.

Lorgar inclined his head again, this time in thanks. He followed the limping figure of Hazjihh, ascending the mounds of rubble to enter the city proper. The warrior’s halting stride set his armour’s servo joints snarling.

Lorgar watched the warrior’s limping movements. Whatever benefits the mutations offered, they were hidden by the Legion’s armour. Above all, a randomness lay in Hazjin’s corruption. Lorgar couldn’t help contrast it to the shaped, lethal warping of Argel Tal in his previous vision. His own son’s alterations had all the hallmarks of malicious intent, as if a greater intellect had kneaded the Word Bearer’s flesh, rewriting his life at the genetic level, crafting him into a living engine of war.

Hazjihh’s mutation showed no such design. If anything, he seemed diseased.

‘Nephew,’ Lorgar kept his voice soft, ‘what has happened to you? How many of my brother’s sons are as changed as you are?’

Hazjihh didn’t look back. This place, this world, it has altered so many of us. The Powers bless us, my lord.

Blessed. So the daemon Ingethel had spoken the truth: physical considerations faded when one embraced union with the gods. With psychic mastery and the ascension of consciousness to immortal levels, evidently the struggles of the flesh were increasingly irrelevant. Perhaps it made a sick kind of sense: when one was omnipotent, functions of the flesh hardly mattered. Power to such a degree overshadowed lesser concerns.

Yet even for one who prided himself on his enlightened perspective, it was a bitter pill for Lorgar to swallow. The truth may

be divine, but that hardly rendered it any more appealing to the human race. Some truths were too ugly to be easily embraced.

A rancid, unwanted smile claimed his mouth for a moment. It would be a crusade, then. Another crusade to bring the truth to the masses at the point of a sword.

Humanity would never, could never, be relied upon to reach its own enlightenment. He found it the sorriest, saddest aspect to the species.

‘How long have you been here, Hazjih?’

*Some of us insist it has been months. Others claim mere days have passed. We cannot record the time accurately, for it flows in all directions. Chronometers dance to tunes of their own devising. The warrior made a strangled gargle, approaching a laugh. However, the primarch tells us mere days have passed in the material realm.*

*Lorgar. Ingethel’s voice, not Hazjih’s. Turn back. This future is not yours to see.*

The primarch held his tongue as they walked into Tizca, the City of Light.

AS HE LOOKED upon Magnus, Lorgar reconciled logic with emotion, forging both into understanding. This was not the Magnus he knew – this was Magnus five decades older.

In fifty years, he had aged a hundred. The Crimson King had abandoned the pretension of armour, clad now in nothing more than divine light that left aching after-images in the minds of all who looked upon him. Yet beneath the psychic grandeur, a broken brother stared at Lorgar’s arrival. His remaining eye showed little of its former pearlescent gleam and his features, never those of a handsome man, were now cracked by time’s lines and the ravines of tortured thought.

‘Lorgar,’ the figure of Magnus said, breaking the library’s stillness and silence. The witchlight roiling from him in waves illuminated the scrolls and books lining the walls.

The Word Bearer entered slowly, his purring armour joints adding to the breach of silence. Standing too near Magnus bred a

painful tingling behind the eyes, as if white noise had evolved into a physical sensation. Lorgar turned his gentle gaze aside, taking in his brother's collection of writings. Immediately, his glance fell upon one of his own books – *An Epilogue to Torment* – written the very same year he had won the crusade against the Covenant's old ways on Colchis.

Lorgar traced a gloved fingertip down the book's leather spine. 'You do not seem surprised to see me, brother.'

'I am not.' Magnus allowed himself a smile. It only deepened the lines marring his face. 'This world holds endless surprises. What game is this, I wonder? What incarnated hallucination am I addressing this time? You are a poor simulacrum of Lorgar, spirit. Your eyes do not burn with the fire of a faith only he and his sons understand. Nor do you bear the same scars.'

Magnus remained standing by his writing desk, but made no move to go back to his reading. Lorgar turned to him, narrowing his eyes at the glare.

'I am no apparition, Magnus. I am Lorgar, your brother, in the final nights of my Pilgrimage. Time, as you see, is mutable, here.' He hesitated. 'The years have not been kind to you.'

The other primarch laughed, though the sound held no humour. 'Recent years have been kind to no one. Begone, creature, and leave me to my calculations.'

'Brother. It is me.'

Magnus narrowed his remaining eye. 'I grow weary of this. How did you ascend my tower?'

'I walked, in the company of your warriors. Magnus, I—'

'Enough! Leave me to my calculations.'

Lorgar stepped forward, hands raised in brotherly conciliation. 'Magnus...'

+ Enough. +

The explosion of whiteness stole all sense, save for the feeling of falling.

PART FOUR

CHOSEN OF THE  
PANTHEON

# EIGHT

## QUESTIONS

HE OPENED HIS eyes to see a familiar horizon, boiling in rebellion against the laws of nature. Dusk claimed this world, which was surely Shanriatha. Yet he could breathe now. And the temperature, while cold, was far from lethal.

Slowly, Lorgar picked himself up from the sand. The parchment scrolls were gone from his armour, burned away in the face of Magnus's sorcerous dismissal. A tightness in his lungs didn't bode well. He felt the muscles in his throat and chest clenching in uncertain spasm.

Not enough oxygen in the air. That was all. He reached for the helm mag-locked to his belt, and resealed his armour. The first breath of his internal air supply was surprisingly soothing. He breathed in the incense of his armour's sacred oils.

Only then did he see Ingethel. The daemon lay curled upon itself on the ground, a foetal nightmare slick with the slime of gestation. Red sand clotted its moist skin.

He kicked it gently, with the edge of his boot. Ingethel rolled, baring its bestial features to the evening sky. Neither of its eyes could close, but both had made the attempt. They snicked open, and its jaw cracked as it heaved itself from the sand. The moment the daemon righted itself, blood gouted from its maw in a hissing flood. Things writhed in the pool of stinking liquid, squirming into the sand as soon as they came into contact with the air. Lorgar had no desire to examine them any closer.

'Daemon,' he said.

Not long now. Soon. This flesh will rot away. I will need to incarnate again. Its bones clicked and cracked as it rose to its slouched height. It cost me much, to pull you from Magnus's tower.

'My brother would not speak with me.'

*Your brother is a tool of the Changer of the Ways. Are you still so blind, Lorgar? Magnus is a creature unaware of his own ignorance. He is manipulated at every turn, yet believes himself the manipulator. The gods work in many ways. Some of humanity's leaders must be lured by offers of ambition and dominance, while others must be manipulated until they are ready to witness the truth.*

The primarch spoke through clenched teeth. 'And I?'

*You are the chosen of the pantheon. You alone come to Chaos from idealism, for the betterment of the species. In this, as in all things, you are selfless.*

Lorgar turned and began walking. The direction was irrelevant, for the desert was a featureless sprawl as far as the eye could see.

Selfless. Magnus had once accused him of the same thing, making it sound more like a critical flaw. Now the daemon used it with a honeyed tongue, as his greatest virtue.

It didn't matter. Immune to vanity, he would not be lured by silken words. The truth was enough, despite the horror of it all.

'Do I survive this crusade?' he asked aloud.

Ingethel dragged itself alongside his bootprints, slower now, its breath sawing in and out of heaving lungs.

*The Imperial Great Crusade is already over for you. All that remains is to play the role fate offers.*

'No. Not my father's crusade. The true crusade, yet to come.'

*Ah. You fear for your life, if you turn against the Terran Emperor?*

Lorgar kept walking, a relentless trudge over the sand dunes. 'The vision of Magnus said I had suffered in his era. At some point in the coming five decades, I must struggle to survive. It stands to reason that I may die. If you have stared down the paths of possible futures, you must know what is likely to occur.'

*Once the betrayal breaks across the galaxy, there are countless moments in which you may meet your end. Some likelier than others.*

Lorgar crested another dune, pausing to stare down at yet more endless desert. 'Tell me how I die.' He looked at the daemon, fix-

ing it with his gentle glare. 'You know. I hear it in your voice. So tell me.'

*No being may know its future written out before it, in absolute terms. Some decisions will see you almost certainly dead. On a world named Shrike, if you interfere in an argument between Magnus the Red and the brother you name Russ, there is a concordance of possibility that you will be slain in their duel.*

'And?'

*If you ever draw a weapon against your brother Corax, in a battle you can never win, you are almost certain to die.*

Lorgar laughed at the maddening unlikelihood of it all. 'You cannot offer me choices I will not have to make for many years.'

The daemon sprayed spit as it growled. Then do not ask questions of the future, fool.

Lorgar had no answer to that, though he found the daemon's tone amusing. 'Where are we?' he said at length. 'Shanriatha again?'

*Yes. Shanriatha. The past or the present, perhaps a possible future. I cannot say.*

'But the air isn't as cold as the void, here.'

The warp changes all things, in time. Ingethel paused, seeming to sag. Lorgar. You must be aware of the task ahead of you. I cannot remain incarnate for much longer, so hear my words now. In the course of the Emperor's Great Crusade, you will come to many worlds. Those populated by alien breeds are useless to you. For the next few decades, let your brother primarchs purge those. You have a more solemn duty.

*Find the worlds rich in human life. Find those with harvestable populations for your armies, with as little deviation from purestrain humanity as possible. Your Legion is one hundred thousand strong now. Over the next five decades, you must add a thousand warriors each year. For every Legionary to fall, you will replenish your Word Bearers with two more.*

He shook his head, still staring out at the sea of dunes. 'Why have you brought me back here? What lesson is there in this?'

*None. I dragged you from Magnus's chamber with crude force, not guile. It was not my intention to show you this world again. Something else pulled you here. Something very strong.*

Lorgar felt his skin crawl at the creature's tone. 'Explain yourself.'

Even with its bloody, inhuman face, Ingethel's worthless eyes were wide in something not far from fear.

*You did not believe even the chosen of the pantheon will be allowed to leave the realm of the gods without first passing their tests, did you? It was chosen that the gods would elect one vizier to send, to stand judgment upon you.*

The primarch drew his crozius with slow, careful intent. 'If this is all proceeding as planned, why then do you tremble in fear?'

*Because gods are fickle beings, Lorgar, and this was not the plan at all. One of the gods has overstepped the boundary, and violated the accord. It must wish to test you itself.*

He swallowed. 'I do not understand. Which god?'

He heard no answer. Ingethel's psychic shriek went through him like a blade. For the first time since the maiden on Cadia had become his daemonic guide, he heard the girl within the creature.

She was screaming with it.

# NINE

## THE UNBOUND

THE SOUND BEGAN as the promise of thunder. Lorgar raised his head just as the tortured sky went black.

A gargoyle shape cast darkness across the clouded heavens, blasting wind downward from its beating wings. He saw it descending in a graceless spiral but, despite his eye lenses tinting to reduce the greasy glare of warp space, he could make out little detail in the figure's form.

It struck the ground a hundred metres distant, sending up a vast spray of powdery sand. The ground shuddered beneath Lorgar's feet; stabilisers in his armour's knee joints clicked and thrummed harder to compensate for the quake.

Its wings rose first – huge, bestial black wings, the membranes between the muscles and bones as tough as old leather, cobwebbed by thick, pulsing veins. Scarred fur coated much of its body, while the rest of its bunched musculature was encased in great brass armour plating. Its horned head defied easy description – to Lorgar it resembled nothing but the malicious features of Old Terran's greatest devil-spirit, the Seytan, as seen in some of the oldest scrolls. It did more than tower over any mortal man – it stood above them as a colossus. Its fists, each the size of a Legionary, gripped two weapons: the first, a lashing whip that thrashed of its own accord, sidewinding across the sands; and the second, an immense axe of beaten brass, its surfaces encrusted with dense metal runic scripture.

It stalked from the crater it had made, each fall of its armoured hooves sending tremors through the world's surface.

The targeting reticules and streams of biological data across Lorgar's retinal displays offered no insight at all. One moment

they listed details in a runic language the primarch had never learned. The next they told him nothing was there.

When he spoke, his voice was a breathless exhalation, crackling through the lowest frequency of his helm's vox-grille.

'What, in my father's name, is that...'

Ingethel had slithered away while Lorgar stood rapt, yet it still heard his voice. Hunched upon itself, doubled over and leaking fluids from every orifice on its head, the daemon's psychic sending was a weak stroke.

*The Guardian of the Throne of Skulls. The Deathbringer. Lord of Bloodthirsters. First of Kharnath's Children. The Avatar of War Given Form. In the mortal realm, it will come to be known as An'ggrath the Unbound.*

*It is the revered champion of the Blood God, Lorgar. And it has come to kill you.*

He opened his mouth to reply, but all sound was stolen in a tempest of breath as the creature roared. The scream was loud enough to disrupt the electronics in the primarch's helm, causing his aural intakes and retinal displays to crackle with static. Lorgar tore the helmet free, choosing to breathe the thin air over fighting deaf and blind.

His lungs reacted immediately, clenching like twin cores within his chest. The granite-grey helm fell to the sand by his boots. Fear didn't clutch at him, the way it would a mortal. He feared nothing but failure. Defiant irritation set his skin crawling, that the deities would test him this way. After all he had endured. After being the one soul to seek the truth.

Now this.

Lorgar raised his maul, activating the generator in the haft. A rippling energy field bloomed around the weapon's spiked orb head, hissing and spitting in the wind. Sparks streamed away from its spines, like halogen rain.

The daemon thundered closer, step by step.

*This was never part of the Great Plan. You are not a duellist to match the Lion. You are not a brawler to match Russ, nor a fighter to match Angron, nor a warrior to equal the Khan. You are not a soldier like Dorn, nor a killer like Curze.*

*'Be silent, Ingethel.'*

*Kharnath has violated the accord. Kharnath has violated the accord. Kharnath has v—*

*'I said to be silent, creature.'*

The winged daemon roared again, its fanged maw wide, and the veins in its taut throat as thick as a man's thigh. Even braced against the gale, Lorgar was forced back several metres in a skidding slide over the gravel. The primarch breathed a stream of Colchisian invective and, as the stinking wind died down, he replied with a shouted challenge of his own.

Before sanity could wrest control of his limbs, he was charging, boots pounding onto the red sand, his crozius raised in both hands.

THE FIRST BLOW struck with the force of a gunship falling from the sky, and with an impact at the same volume. The cleaving blade crashed against the golden maul, both weapons banging together and locking fast. Sparks sprayed from the elbow joints of Lorgar's armour as the muscle-mimicking servos overloaded and shorted out. But he did it. He blocked the first blow. In spiteful retaliation for the beast's presence, his crozius kissed the axe's edge with leaping bolts of electrical force. With a cry that wouldn't have shamed a feral world carnosaur, the primarch hurled the bloodthirster's axe backward in a heaving shove, and brought his warhammer to fall on a downstroke, smashing into the creature's knee.

At the moment of connection, faster than mortal reactions could process, the weapon's power field protested at the kinetic treatment and burst outward in a blast of force. Something in the daemon's leg cracked with the wet rip of a tree trunk falling.

First blood. Lorgar was already scrambling back, stumbling over the quaking sand, when the lash found his throat. The spiked coils bit as they wrapped tight, turning the trial of breathing into an absolute impossibility.

In the panicked rush of distorted senses, he saw the creature driven to one knee, its back-jointed bull-legs bent in submission. The primarch's first blow had near crippled it. Had he been able to take in any air, he'd have roared in exaltation. Instead, he crashed to his knees, clawing at the serpentine weapon encircling his shoulders and throat. One arm was pinned to his body by the lash's wrapping caress. The other clutched and pulled, dragging the whip off in a mess of snarling armour joints. For a flickering, red-stained moment, he remembered a painting in his father's palace: a restored oil work of an oceanic sailor – in the era when Terra had possessed such large bodies of water – entangled by a krahkan sea monster.

Lorgar heard the bloodthirster's wings rattling, felt the force of more wind as they beat again. Another acidic spurt of panic knifed through his thoughts: the daemon sought to take off, and drag him into the sky with it.

He rolled into the whip, trapping himself further, for the chance to tear his crozius from the fist wedged against his body. The lash around his throat squeezed in leathery embrace, freed of all resistance now. As he was dragged across the sand towards the daemon, Lorgar hurled his maul one-handed, with a strangled cry and the last of his strength.

It struck the bloodthirster's face with the juicy crack of shattering bone, silencing the victory roar that had been brewing in the beast's lungs. Fangs clattered down onto the primarch's armour in a discoloured enamel hail. One sliced his cheek open with the daggerish fall of a stalactite. Had he been able to breathe, he'd have laughed, but pulling himself free of the slackened whip was enough.

Lorgar's first three steps carried him to his crozius. Numb fingers slapped onto the hammer's haft and he hauled it back into

his grip. He turned in time to catch a face full of sprayed blood and spit, shaken from the daemon's broken maw. It stung his skin, even as he wiped it away. The rest ate into his armour with hissing, smoking slowness.

'Let this be finished,' he bared his teeth, unaware how his expression reflected the daemon's. For a wonder, it replied through its broken jaws and architecture of cracked teeth. Its voice was pulled right down from the thunderheads colliding above.

'All the strength in the flesh. And the bitter caress. And the taste of blood on my tongue.'

He knew those words. He knew them well.

Perhaps the beast had intended them as a distraction. Perhaps it was channelling mockery straight from the mouth of a god. Either way, Lorgar met the next attack with a laugh. The bloodthirster's axe crashed against his swinging maul. One of the weapons shattered with the same ease as the daemon's teeth. Metal debris burned in the air, flickering with ghost-white fire, before clattering across the sand.

Lorgar advanced, his maul still raised. 'You quote my home world's holy scrolls to me? Is even this moment supposed to be a lesson? Even this?'

The daemon's wings snapped out at full reach, darkening all view of the horizon. The display sent the foetid, spicy reek of spoiled meat emanating afresh from its pinions. It wasn't finished. It wasn't even close. It needed no axe when it bore such claws. It never needed to walk, when it possessed those wings.

But it was bleeding now, and Lorgar's disquiet had long since burned away in the wind. He didn't fear the thing. Every broken fang heralded triumph, as did every droplet of molten brass blood running from its black gums and each grinding crackle from its shattered knee.

'I will not die here,' the primarch promised the daemon.

The bloodthirster's answer was to roar again. This time, it threw the primarch from his feet, sending him tumbling across the

rocky ground. Dull snaps sounded from beneath his armour; jagged spurts of pain pinched inside his chest. Even the fibre-cable cushioning wasn't enough to prevent broken bones. He crashed to rest against a jutting rock, and in dragging himself back to his feet, he caught sight of Ingethel – its warmish form coiled as it crouched in the sand.

Cracked ribs stole the strength of his voice, rendering it a wheeze. 'Help me, you spineless bitch.'

Ingethel slithered away, chittering with frightened laughter, leaving a thick sidewinder trail in the red dust.

'You die next,' Lorgar breathed at its retreating back. That, too, was a promise.

But Ingethel could wait. Thumbing the trigger brought his crozius back to electric life, just in time to fall under the shadow again.

Sonic booms rent the air with each thrash of the whip. Its lashing impact carved ravines in the sand – canyons Lorgar rolled to avoid, while desperately evading each strike. Each breath brought fresh pain to his broken bones. Each inhalation was strife in the thin atmosphere.

Another rift in the rocky sand yawned to the side as he weaved away from the touch of the lash. It split the ground with a thunderclap, throwing him off balance again, beyond the means of armour stabilisers to adjust for. The daemon's immense hand, deprived of its axe, reached to clutch at the prone primarch, and Lorgar reacted purely by instinct. He raised his hand to meet the downward grasp, little caring how his eyes burned and streamed with psychic fire. The great red fist crashed against a psychic barrier, knuckles crackling like loose gravel.

Lorgar struck. The crozius sang its tempestuous song, thudding against the curled claws and pulverising the black iron bones beneath its flesh. Blood sprayed from the split skin, splashing molten brass across the primarch's gauntlets and chestplate.

The whip lashed back, snake-keen and vicious. It spiralled around his arm and crozius, biting with barbs. Lorgar staggered, his armour joints whining at the sudden, harsh movements as the wounded daemon pulled him closer. Its breath hit him in another rancid blast, though the creature didn't roar. It was done with such displays; as Lorgar leaned back, boots scraping across the sands, he could see the beast's intentions all too easily. Its jaws were already falling open, offering up broken fangs as a weapon where an axe and whip had failed.

In the past, he'd imagined his death more often than he cared to admit – wondering if it would come in the distant cold of a deep-void battle, or the burning warmth of a blade to the back.

Despite their vaunted immortality, despite the invulnerability bred into their bones, a primarch was still a being of flesh and blood. One of Angron's snorted witticisms came back to him in those moments Lorgar mused over mortality: if something bled, it could be killed.

*Everything bleeds, Lorgar.* His brother's words, cutting right to the quick even years after they were first uttered. Tanks bled fuel and coolant. Aliens bled blood and ooze. Angron had never stood upon a battlefield and failed to apply his own brand of tortured logic to the conflict.

Lorgar hauled back against the drag, succeeding in doing nothing beyond pulling the coiled lash tighter. The daemon's clumsy, shattered hand reached for his torso, and the primarch's kick crunched into its thumb, mangling it further.

With a roar, it lifted him from the ground. In the time it took to spit a curse, the beast snapped its jaws on his free arm, cracked incisors scraping across the ceramite. Melted brass droplets dripped from the creature's bleeding gums.

He was not used to pain – at least not physical agony. The pressure constricting his arm was incomparable to anything else he'd experienced. Ceramite split in metallic rips, threatening the sealed integrity of his armour plating. Something in his elbow clicked, then crunched, then snapped entirely. The fist at the end

of his arm fell loose, the fingers relaxing, no longer obeying his mind's impulses.

With a fury even his brother Angron would have admired, the primarch wrenched his crozius free with a final scream. The hammer head crashed against the bloodthirster's temple in a cacophony of breaking bone, shattering its cheek, eye socket, and the hinge of its jaw. The grip relaxed immediately, dropping the primarch to the sand.

He landed hard, heaping more abuse on his ruined arm, but kept a grip on his power maul. With a roll through the beast's stampeding hooves, Lorgar struck the creature's other leg, smacking a blow right against the thing's kneecap. This time, the crack of splitting bone was enough to cause him to wince even through his own pain.

The bloodthirster howled as it fell, crippled, to the sand. Worthless legs stretched out behind it. Before the wings could even beat twice, Lorgar vaulted its back, boots clinging tight to the leathery flesh, and pummelled a single strike to its ridged spine. Another tectonic crackle heralded the daemon's backbone giving way for good. One wing ceased its ignoble flapping, slapping against the sand and twitching with spasms.

The primarch hammered its club-hands aside as they reached back, deforming the fingers beyond use. Only then did he move around to face it once more, meeting its fevered, bleeding eyes. The blood running from its maw was already cooling in the sand, fusing its jaw to the ground.

A nasty smile coloured his lips. 'What did you learn from this?' he asked the creature.

It snuffed at him, almost dumbly bestial but for the enraged sentience drowning in its eyes. Even crippled and broken, it sought to drag itself forward, as if the primarch's very life was some intolerable insult.

'Rage without focus is no weapon at all.' Lorgar raised his crozius. 'Take this lesson back to the Blood God.'

For the second time, his hammer fell, butchering the incarnated essence of a god.

# TEN

## ORACLE

THIRTEEN SECONDS LATER, Lorgar collapsed alone.

He didn't feel the crozius fall from his nerveless fingers. He didn't feel anything but the breath sawing in and out of his abused body. On instinct, he dragged his broken bones closer, curling upon the sand in foetal echo of the time he spent gestating in his genetic life-pod.

He could taste blood. His own blood. How different it was from the chemical-thick piss running through a Legionary's veins, or the molten, sick richness of the dead daemon.

*The air is too thin.* In his heavy-eyed delirium, his own thoughts came in Ingethel's voice. *And my lungs are pierced by spears of rib.*

For a time he lay there, struggling to stay alive, breathing blood-wet air into weak lungs.

The daemon died with the same maddening dissolution of so many aetheric insanities in this haunted realm. As for Ingethel, the primarch had no idea. He would check soon. Not yet. Soon. He... he had to...

'No more tests, Anathema's son,' said a voice.

'One last test, Anathema's son,' said another, similar to the first, but somehow flawed. It was as if a botched cloning had lightly scarred the voice's timbre.

The primarch hauled himself over, blinking bloody eyes up at another winged figure. This one was grotesquely avian, with stinking, withered wings and two vulture's heads. While it would have towered above a mortal man, it was a hunched and decrepit thing by the standards of its daemon kin, closer in size to Ingethel.

'I am the one sent to judge you,' both heads said at once.

'I am tired of being judged.' The primarch lay on the sand and laughed, though he couldn't think what was funny.

'I bring the chance for a final truth,' said one of the creature's heads, in a corvidian caw.

'I bring the final lie you will hear,' its second head croaked, just as sincere as the first. No shade of amusement shone in any of the four pebble-black eyes.

'I am done with this,' the primarch grunted. Even rising to his feet was a trial. He could feel his bones sliding awkwardly together, jagged pieces of a puzzle that no longer fit cleanly. 'That,' he breathed, 'is most unpleasant.'

'Lorgar,' said the creature's right head.

'Aurelian,' said the left.

He didn't answer them. Limping, he moved to retrieve his crozius from the sand. Its active power field had scorched the ground to black glass. When he lifted it, it had never felt so heavy.

'Ingethel,' Lorgar sighed. 'I am done with this. I have learned all I need to learn. I am returning to my ship.'

There was no answer. Ingethel was nowhere to be seen. The bland desertcape offered no hope of determining direction.

He turned back to the two-headed creature.

'Leave me be, lest I destroy you as I destroyed the Unbound.'

Both wizened heads bobbed in acknowledgement. 'If you could banish the Unbound,' the first said, 'you could easily banish me, as well.'

'Or perhaps I am more than I appear to be,' the second hissed. 'Perhaps you are weaker now and you would fall before my sorcery.'

Lorgar shook his head, seeking to tame his swimming senses. The air was so painfully thin, it made all thought difficult.

'I bring you a choice, Lorgar,' both heads spoke at once, sharing the same serious, watery-eyed expression.

He limped over to his overturned helm, lifting it from the ground and shaking sand from its interior. Both eye lenses were cracked.

‘Speak then.’

The daemon fluttered its wings. Vestigial, skinny things – Lorgar doubted the creature could even fly. Small wonder that it squatted on the sand, leaning upon its bone staff as a crutch.

‘I am Kairos,’ both heads said at once. ‘The mortal realm will come to know me by another name. Fateweaver.’

Lorgar’s desire to show respect for the gods’ agents had faded somewhat in the last hour. The words came through gritted teeth.

‘Get on with it.’

‘The future is not entirely unwritten,’ both heads spoke again. Their wrinkled features were strained by effort, as if speaking with unity was a great challenge. ‘Confluences exist as sureties. There will come a time when war breaks out across the Imperium of Man, and you will once again face the brother you despise.’

Lorgar’s kindly eyes, already weary, now grew cold. ‘I do not despise my br—’

‘You cannot lie to me,’ one head said.

‘And if you try, I will always see through to the truth,’ said the other.

The primarch forced himself to nod, before placing his helm back on. It took a moment for the cracked eye lenses to flicker into clarity, but a grainy picture materialised soon enough. Curiously, Lorgar couldn’t see the daemon through his left eye lens, merely the horizon beyond. In his right eye, the creature sat in hunched repose.

‘Get on with it,’ he growled this time. Three of his teeth were loose and bleeding.

‘It will happen at Calth,’ the right head said.

‘Or it will happen, yet not at Calth,’ said the left, though its placid tone wasn’t one of argument.

Lorgar still tasted blood in the back of his mouth. His eyes wouldn’t stop watering, and he suspected the pain in the bridge of his nose was a mashing break that would need resetting.

‘What will happen?’

‘You will face Guilliman,’ both heads squawked in eerie unison. ‘And you will slay him.’

Lorgar hesitated. To consider it, truly, was almost beyond him. Even if there was no way to avert the coming crusade, did it truly have to come to such measures as fratricide?

His own selfishness was a surprise. With a shake of his head, he considered the other side of the coin. Was fratricide worse than genocide? The loss of life would be immense on both sides of the divided Imperium, among the faithful and the ignorant.

He had to focus.

‘Go on.’

‘I am Kairos, the Oracle of Tzeentch,’ said both heads. ‘I am bound to always speak one truth and one lie.’ The creature rattled its withered wings. Several blue-black feathers, the colour of ugly bruises, drifted from its pinions. ‘But this is a moment of great divinity. A nexus of possibility. A fulcrum. The Great Gods have bound me to speak only the truth, in this moment of moments.’

‘I am sworn now to stand before the chosen of the pantheon, and offer a choice. Now, and never again, I may speak with one mind. No lies. No words of deceit from one mouth, and words of truth from another. This, now, is too important. The gods are in alignment for the first time in an eternity.’

‘And the Unbound?’

Both heads regarded Lorgar with impassive, unblinking eyes. ‘Kharnath violated the accord. But the Blood God is still bound by it. Still oathed to it. The pantheon of heaven is kin to the primarch pantheon of your species. They wage war amongst them-

selves, just as you will wage war against your brothers. Existence is strife.'

'To strive,' the second head added, 'is to live.'

The thought chilled Lorgar's blood. A convocation of warring gods. 'I understand.'

'No,' the first head said. 'You do not.'

'But you will,' the second nodded, 'in the decades to come.'

'I bring you a choice,' added the first head. 'Face Guilliman and slay him.'

'Or let him live,' finished the second. 'And taste the shame of defeat.'

Lorgar wanted to laugh, but the creeping sense of unease held the mirth back. 'How is that a choice?'

'Because of Calth,' both heads replied. One was silently weeping now, the other grinning with beakish malice. Could a bird grin? Somehow, this one did. Lorgar couldn't help but stare.

'You must choose whether you walk a path of personal glory, or one of divine destiny,' said the first head.

The second spoke through its crystalline tears. 'You must choose whether you will stand among your brothers as an equal, with vengeance as your goal, or work in the name of the gods, tasting shame for a greater victory.'

'I am not a vain man.' Lorgar felt his broken ribs aching as they slowly re-knitted beneath his armour and flesh. 'I seek enlightenment for the species, not self-glorification.'

'You will end this war with many scars,' the first head lowered in bizarre respect.

'Or you will end it dead,' nodded the second, 'in one of a thousand ways.'

'Get,' Lorgar forced the words through a barricade of teeth, 'to the point, creature.'

'Calth,' the first head intoned. 'You will be given one chance – and only one chance – to shed Guilliman's blood. It is written in

the stars, by the hands of the gods. If you face him at Calth, you will slay him.'

'But you will lose the war,' said the second. 'You will earn your brothers' respect and awe. You will savour your vengeance. But your holy war will falter. The Emperor's defences will be enriched by too many defenders, drawn there by fates that would otherwise have been denied. You may never even reach Terra.'

Lorgar turned from the daemon, shaking his head in wonder at their offer. Like ruined wings, the remains of his cloak flapped in the breeze.

'Is this prophecy? If I fight Guilliman, I am destined to win, yet I will lose all I sought to achieve?'

The daemon's first head hawked and spat bloody saliva in a thick string. As it coughed, the second head spoke. 'It is prophecy. You will not always be the lost one, Lorgar – the weakest of your brothers. You will find your strength in this faith. You will find fire and passion, and become the soul you were born to be. That is why Guilliman will die at your feet, if you choose to make it so. Fight him at Calth, and you will finish the battle with his blood on your face. You crave that temporal triumph, and it could be yours.'

The first head twitched with sudden movement, regarding him with its beady bird's eyes. 'But the cost is high. To bring about this future, you will be at Calth, instead of standing in the place your species most needs you to be in that ordained hour. If you face your brother Guilliman, and choose human honour over the destiny of your species, you will kill him. Yet in doing so, you will fail in your hopes of setting humanity free from ignorance.'

'I say again, that is no choice at all.'

Both heads laughed. 'Is that so? You are human, whether you choose to confess to it or not. You are a slave to mortal emotions. The primarchs are far from a perfection of the human recipe, despite their individual might.'

‘There will come a time,’ the first head smiled with beak-creaking amusement, ‘when your pride and passion will demand that you destroy the Warrior-King of Ultramar.’

The second nodded in accord. ‘But weigh the balance, Emperor’s son. A moment of personal glory, proving to your brothers that you are ascendant among them... Or paving the way for the future of your species. All prophets make sacrifices, do they not? This will become one of yours.’

‘If,’ the first finished, ‘you live long enough to make it.’

Lorgar said nothing for some time. He listened to the wind toying with his tattered cloak, and the withered feathers on the daemon’s wings.

‘Show me,’ he said in a soft voice.

#### THE SHIP BURNED.

On the deck around him lay a hundred dead mortals and slain Ultramarines. The walls of the strategium shuddered, venting air pressure and feeding the flames sweeping across the entire bridge deck. Thrones stood in flames. The fire was already cremating those that had fallen in the last few minutes.

Lorgar saw himself at the heart of the flames, his crozius in his gauntlets. The image wore red armour, in mirror of the Word Bearers he had seen at the Eternity Gate, and cast its maul aside with an angry flourish. Whatever battle it had been fighting had taken its toll; the image of himself stood in cracked armour, with its face blackened by burn scarring.

‘For Monarchia,’ the image of Lorgar raged through bleeding gums and split lips. ‘For watching me kneel in the dust of my many failures.’

At first, Lorgar couldn’t make out who his image was addressing. Then, with grim and wounded majesty, Guilliman staggered from the flames. Silently defiant even as his armour blackened into a burning ruin, the Lord of Macragge drew a gladius. His helm was gone, baring a face that remained stoic despite a crushed skull. One arm was gone, ending at the elbow. Blood ran

in viscous rivulets from the joints of his armour. His white cloak was aflame.

Lorgar's image threw his hand forward. Psychic energy, so intensely golden it aborted direct sight, haloed and crowned his head with three aetheric horns. A wave of unseen force pounded into the Ultramarine liege, hurling him back through the fire and against the wall beyond.

Guilliman crashed to the deck, a twitching, ragged marionette with severed strings. And then, with his remaining hand, he reached for the fallen gladius again.

Lorgar crushed the hand beneath a crimson boot.

'This, my brother, is for every life lost in the name of a lie.' Lorgar hauled the Lord of Macragge up by the throat, smashing him back against the wall even as he strangled him. 'Your fleet burns. Your astral kingdom dies next.'

Guilliman managed to smile.

LORGAR FACED THE twin-headed daemon again.

'I must see more.'

'You have seen all you need to see,' both heads chorused.

'I do not understand. At the last, he seemed amused.' The primarch winced at the pain of his heart thudding against broken ribs. 'How can that be?'

But he knew. At least, he could guess. He had seen that look in Guilliman's cold, warlord's eyes before. Not anger. Not wrath. Disappointment, bordering on disbelief. *What have you done wrong this time?* The accusation came in Guilliman's arch, solemn voice, as if proclaimed by their father himself. *What have you ruined now? What lives have been lost because of your foolishness?*

Lorgar's lip curled. 'He knew something. Even as he died, he knew something.'

'He hates you,' said the daemon's first head. 'He was amused to learn he was right about you. That you were, as he always suspected, a traitor in waiting.'

The second head shook in dismissal. 'No. He has never loathed you, Lorgar. You have always imagined his hatred. He does not respect you, for you are too different to find common ground, but your imagination has always been the source of the feud between you.'

The primarch cursed. 'Which one of you is telling the truth?'

'I am,' they both said at once.

Lorgar swore again. 'Enough. Tell me then, if I am not at Calth, where should I be? What path must I walk to enlighten my species?'

'I am not your seer, Emperor's son,' the first head rasped. 'I have given you the choice. You will make it in time.'

'If,' the second matched its tone completely, 'you live that long.'

The creature spread its wings.

'Wait, please.'

It didn't wait. 'All will be decided in Ultima Segmentum, Lorgar. Vengeance, or vision. Glory, or truth.'

The primarch raised his hand to plead for more time, but the daemon was gone in the time it had taken to blink.

HE FOUND HIS prey coiled upon itself, curled in some grotesque foetal parody of reptilian gestation.

But all rage had bled from him. He couldn't help but see the young maiden shaman that had whored her life away to become this thing. Not for glory or gain, but for faith. He doubted she existed as more than an echo in the creature's mind, but the idea itself was enough to bleed the anger from his body.

'Ingethel,' he said. 'Do you live?'

Its fingers twitched, several of them, on all four of its hands. The sky was darkening now. With the night came the cold. Lorgar replaced his cracked helm, breathing deep of his internal air supply.

'Ingethel,' he said again.

The daemon's bones creaked as it slowly rose. *I live. Not for much longer. But for now, I live.* It turned its monstrous face to his. Cataracts milked its abominable eyes. *All is done. You have witnessed all that had to be seen.*

'How much was true?' demanded Lorgar.

*All of it, replied the daemon. Or none. Or perhaps something in between.*

Lorgar nodded. 'What if there was more I wished to see? You have shown me what the gods demanded I bear witness to. Now show me what I wish to see.'

The daemon curled its twiggish arms close against its broad, speckled chest. *This is permitted. What would you have me show you, Emperor's son?*

He paused for a moment, seeking the right words. 'I've seen what I must do to ensure victory. I've seen the fate of the galaxy if the Emperor's lies are not challenged. Now, I wish to walk other worlds in this Great Eye. If this is the gateway to the heaven and hell of human myth, show me more of it. Show me the possibilities in these mutable worlds. Show me what the warp can offer humanity, if we concede to this merging of flesh and spirit.'

*I can do all of this, Lorgar. As you wish.*

The primarch hesitated. 'And before I return to the Imperium, there is one thing I must see above any other.'

*Name it.*

Lorgar smiled behind the emotionless faceplate. 'Show me what happens if we lose.'

PART FIVE

CRUSADE'S END

# ELEVEN

## COUNCIL

### *The Fidelitas Lex* Four days after Isstvan V

MAGNUS WAS SILENT for a long time. Lorgar continued his writing, pausing only to tap the quill into one of the nearby inkpots. The traditionalist in him adored Colchisian rusticism; he couldn't shake the lingering notion that Holy Scripture should not be written upon a data-slate, unless no other implements presented themselves. In truth, he enjoyed the expression of recording his thoughts and prayers through flowing cursive lettering. There was more beauty in such creation, and gave his apostles something to copy in its entirety.

'Brother,' Magnus said at last. 'I remember banishing that vision of you from my tower. It was mere days ago for me. Strange to think of the games time plays with us, is it not?'

Lorgar finally laid the quill to rest. When he turned to Magnus, it was with amusement in his eyes, and something more. It took his brother several moments to really see it, to truly understand what was different.

Few things in the galaxy could unnerve Magnus the Red, but the sight of absolute conviction burning in the embers of Lorgar's eyes was suddenly revealed to be one of them. He'd seen that look before, in the eyes of madmen, prophets and fanatics of alien races and other human worlds. Above all, he had seen it in the eyes of his father, the Emperor, where it warred with a patient affection. But he had never seen it in the eyes of a brother – never in the eyes of a being who commanded enough power to reshape the galaxy against the codes of the Imperium.

'The Great Crusade is over,' Lorgar smiled. 'The true holy war begins now.'

'Will you face Guilliman?'

Lorgar's smile didn't fade, though it took on a kinder warmth, rather than the full and unhealthy heat of fervour. 'My Legion leaves for the Calth system as soon as Horus's council concludes.'

Magnus's image wavered, affected by his own unease. 'That does not answer my question.'

'The Ultramarines must be crippled at Calth. Their backs need to be broken, lest they race ahead to Terra and bolster our father's defences.'

Magnus struggled to equate the purred assurances of military tactics with his most scholarly brother's soft voice. It all seemed somehow incongruous, yet Lorgar had never looked so bizarrely complete. Gone were the furtive, soulful glances and the hesitations before speaking.

The duel with Corax had done more than grant him scars upon his face and throat.

'That does not answer my question, either,' Magnus pointed out.

'My fleet will divide. We will storm Ultima Segmentum, for there is more to attack than Guilliman's little empire.'

'Where? Why?'

Lorgar's chuckle sent distortions rippling through Magnus's image. 'You may know our plans when you join us fully.'

A chime sounded, followed by a stern, careful voice over the vox.

'The Warmaster requests your presence, lord.'

Lorgar rose to his feet, not bothering to take his weapon this time. 'Thank you, Erebus. Inform the *Vengeful Spirit* that I am coming aboard immediately.'

THIS TIME, THE council chamber was almost empty. Lorgar dismissed his warrior escorts, letting Kor Phaeron lead them away. He walked to the central table alone, not concealing his bemusement at the lack of presences in the room.

'Brothers,' he greeted Horus and Angron.

The Warmaster's expression was a sour indication of how he'd cast the atmosphere of indulgent fraternity aside. Angron's distracted scowl showed he'd never paid heed to such a notion, anyway.

'Lorgar,' Horus fairly seethed the name through an insincere smile. Gone was the charismatic demigod so adored by his followers. In his place stood the truth offered by privacy: a brother among kin, and on the edge of black temper.

'I came as requested,' said the Word Bearer. 'I see you have no desire to discuss Fulgrim.'

'You have spoken your piece on our beloved brother. For now, you will have to trust me that all is in hand.'

Lorgar snorted. 'I have seen horrors and truths you are only now beginning to imagine, Horus. It is you who should be trusting me.'

The Warmaster's features were taut and blue-veined. He scarcely looked himself these nights.

'I have trusted you, Lorgar. Look at what we brought about in this system. Now it is time for you to repay my trust with some of your own.'

'Very well. But where is "Fulgrim"?''

'He walks the surface of Isstvan V once more, attending to the withdrawal of his Legion's final forces. Now, enough of such talk. We have a great deal to plan.'

Lorgar shook his head. 'No. Enough planning. We have spent months, years, speaking of plans. There is no more to discuss. I am taking my Legion into the galactic east. If all goes well, I will rejoin you on the crusade to Terra. If the battles go badly, then I will still rejoin you, though with significantly fewer warriors.' He ended his assurances with a smile.

Angron stared into the middle distance, distracted by the stabbing thoughts of his neural implants. The occasional tic pulled his facial muscles tight, but he seemed to pay no attention to the conversation.

Horus released a slow breath. 'We have argued over this many times, and I was a fool to let your enthusiasm run as wild as your imagination for this long. You do not have enough warriors to achieve what you plan.'

'And I have told you, brother, my apostles are prepared to sail into Ultramar. We have made pacts with divine forces you still struggle to comprehend. Daemons, Horus – true daemons, born of the warp, will answer our summons. Our cargo holds heaven with the bodies of faithful mortals, taken from the worlds we have conquered. The Seventeenth Legion has not been idle these last years.'

'You need Legionaries.' Horus leaned on the stellar cartography table, his fists eclipsing the galaxy's outermost stars. 'If you divide the Word Bearers fleet according to your desire, you will need more Legionaries.'

Lorgar threw his hands up in surrender. 'Fine. Give them to me. Give me a few of your companies, and I will take them with me into the east.'

'I will give you more than that,' Horus gestured to the other brother in the chamber. 'I will give you another Legion.'

Angron turned his scarred features upon Lorgar. His smile was the ugliest thing the prophet had ever seen.

# TWELVE

## COUNTERMEASURES

THE WORLD STILL smelled of betrayal. The smoky reek of it, thick and piquant, hung heavy in the air.

But then, that was no surprise. The civil war to divide the Imperium had begun there only four nights before. Many of the Legions loyal to Horus were still engaged in the arduous process of withdrawing their forces back into orbit. The pyre marking the final resting place of the tens of thousands of slain warriors was more than an ashen burial ground – it was a beacon of cinders, proclaiming the overthrowing of humanity’s stagnant oppressor. The blackened earth and scorched, empty suits of armour from over two hundred thousand Legionaries lay at the heart of a tank graveyard. Those war machines suitable for plunder were already claimed by the victorious Legions. The wrecks too far gone to repair sat where they’d died, consigned to rust and corrode when the rebels moved on.

Captain Axalian of Twenty-ninth Company watched his warriors’ progress from atop the burned-out hull of a Raven Guard Land Raider. The aquila still stood out upon his breastplate, as was his right as one of the Emperors Children Legion. Many of his brothers were already defiling the Imperial symbol as they altered their armour with little but their own blades and ingenuity, but he kept his wargear as pristine as possible. The emblem could be removed by the tech-adepts once his planet-side duties were complete. Until then, he would tolerate no damage to the ceramite he’d miraculously managed to keep unbroken through the insane battle earlier that week.

He had no need to raise his voice. His men, and the servitors working alongside them, operated fluidly and efficiently with only a little spoken direction. His role was one of organiser, not an overseer, and he took pride in the smooth operation taking

place in his allotted section of the field. Axalian watched another of the black-hulled battle tanks being connected to the lifter claws of an Emperor's Children transporter gunship. The servitors backed away, and a warrior nearby raised his hand. The captain nodded in reply.

'This is Axalian,' he spoke into the vox. 'Sector 30, requesting clearance.'

'Request acknowledged, Captain Axalian. Please hold.'

Another gunship, this one in the sea-green of the Sons of Horus, rattled overhead, pregnant with stolen Rhino troop carriers. About a minute after it, an Iron Warriors' lander shook the ground as it lifted off on guttural engines.

'Captain Axalian,' came the reply from the Techmarine overseer at Reclamation Command, to the east. 'You are clear, with five minutes to make your assigned launch window. If you fail to meet this requirement, you will surrender the launch window to the next vessel in line. Do you understand?'

Of course he understood. He'd been doing this for four days. He'd heard that same refrain, from the same Sons of Horus Techmarine, at least two hundred times.

'I understand.'

'Your launch window has commenced.'

He switched vox-channels. 'Thunderhawk transporter *Redeemer*, you are clear for orbital return.'

'Order received, captain. Launching now.'

The flyer's thrusters started cycling up. Axalian watched it rise, shuddering with the weight of its plunder.

That was the moment a shadow passed overhead. The Reclamation Command bunker blurted an emergency code in screeching binaric cant across the communications channels.

'Abort!' Axalian called into the vox. '*Redeemer*, this is Axalian, abort launch immediately. Land and cut engines at once.'

The Thunderhawk thudded down heavily on its landing gear. 'Sir?' voxed the pilot.

‘Stay down,’ said Axalian. ‘We have inbound.’

Three of them, and inbound without clearance. He watched the grey gunships roar overhead, spiralling down in landing trajectories, uncaring of the discord they sowed in their approaches.

‘Word Bearers.’

With an annoyed grunt, he jumped down from the Land Raider hull. Two of his warriors stood watch over a gang of servitors nearby; he gestured for them to leave their charges and follow him.

‘Self-righteous bastards,’ one of them voxed, ‘coming in like that.’

Axalian was irritated enough not to reprimand the Legionary for the breach of protocol. ‘Let us see what this is about,’ he said.

The gunships were kin to all Legion troop drop-ships: thick-hulled, swoop-winged and avian in a strangely hulking way. With a mechanical unison that could only have been intentional, the three ramps lowered as one. Axalian stood before the closest Thunderhawk, flanked by his guards.

‘I am Captain Axalian of the Third Legion. Explain yourse—’

‘Captain,’ both of his warriors hissed at once.

Leading the squad of Word Bearers was a towering figure in ceramite painted the red of fine wine. He stalked down the gang-ramp, ignoring how it shook beneath his boots. The primarch’s unmasked face was pale, given life and colour by the tattooed stripes of runic scripture inked in gold upon the white flesh. Axalian could claim the honour of standing in the Emperor’s presence a number of times, and this being resembled the Master of Mankind more than any other, but for the changes he wrought to himself to appear different.

‘My Lord Aurelian,’ Axalian saluted.

‘Tell me,’ Lorgar bared his perfect teeth in something that wasn’t quite a smile, ‘where is my brother Fulgrim?’

‘THE SCARS SUIT you.’

They faced each other in a mausoleum of tank husks, while their warriors looked on. Thirty Word Bearers held their bolters in loose fists – half of them in their Legion’s traditional granite-grey ceramite, the other half clad in betrayers’ red. Change had come to the Seventeenth Legion after the Dropsite Massacre. Great change indeed.

Lorgar stood at the head of his phalanx. Fulgrim, clad in burnished purple and gold, needed no such formation. His Emperor’s Children surrounded the intruders; some stood in neat squad rankings in the presence of two primarchs, others remaining by the hulls of battle tanks, awaiting orders to close into formation. All of them sensed the unpleasant tension in the air, few fingers strayed far from bolter grips. Legionaries firing upon brother Legionaries may have seemed madness only weeks before, but the age of innocence and inviolate trust was over. They had buried it forever on this very battlefield.

Fulgrim’s effortless charm manifested in a warm smile, a brotherly glint in his eyes. He made no effort to reach for a weapon, as if such behaviour was beyond conception.

‘I am not making a jest,’ Fulgrim said, ‘the scars suit you.’ He stroked his fingertips along his own pale cheeks, tracing a mirror image of where the scars were carved down Lorgar’s face and neck. ‘They blend well with your tattooed scripture, almost like understated tiger’s stripes. They ruin any hopes of refining your features to perfection, certainly, but they are not entirely unattractive.’

Lorgar’s own smile seemed genuine enough to all who looked upon the scene from the sidelines, at least as sincere as Fulgrim’s.

‘We must speak, you and I, my beloved brother.’

Fulgrim gave an elaborate shrug, his face a guileless picture. ‘Whatever could you mean? Are we not speaking now, Lorgar?’

Several of the Emperor’s Children chuckled through vox-speakers. Lorgar’s smile didn’t fade. He said two words into his own open vox-channel. A name.

‘Argel Tal.’

CAPTAIN ROUSHAL OF the Emperor’s Children destroyer *Saturnine Martyr* covered his eyes as his command deck exploded in light and noise. The peal of thunder shattered several consoles, cracking glass instruments and driving a thick crack through the oculus screen.

He was already yelling into the vox for an emergency containment and repair team, while cursing at his on-board cult of techadepts for whatever laxity allowed such a grievous malfunction.

Several of the returning shouts insisted it was a teleport flare. Either way, alarms were ringing.

When Roushal dragged himself off the floor, waving a hand through the dissipating mist, the first thing he encountered was the muzzle of a bolt pistol. Fat-calibred and painfully wide, it broke his teeth on the way into his mouth, and rested hideously cold and bitter on his tongue. He tried to swallow. Three of his teeth went down with the saliva. They tasted smoky and bitter.

‘Unguh?’ he managed to gasp.

The mist cleared enough to reveal the massive arm clutching the pistol, and the Word Bearer in traitors’ red to whom the arm belonged.

‘My name is Argel Tal,’ said the warrior. ‘Remain silent, on your knees, and you will be allowed to survive the next hour.’

FULGRIM HESITATED.

‘Yes, Captain Axalian?’

The captain needed a second attempt to speak. The primarch was clearly unconnected to the main vox-net, and he was the ranking officer in his lord’s presence. It fell to him to appraise the Legion commander of the orbital... situation.

‘Lord, we are receiving a mass-aligned signal from forty-nine of our vessels. One signal, coming from the *Saturnine Martyr*, is the source pulse. The others are confirmations, aligned to the source message.’

Fulgrim ground his teeth together. The smile died in his handsome eyes. 'And what is the message, Axalian?'

Before the captain could reply, Lorgar clicked his gorget's voxspander to a louder volume. The voice that came through was crackled by distance distortion, but the words were clear enough.

'This is Argel Tal of the Gal Vorbak. Objectives achieved, my lord. No casualties. Awaiting order to teleport back to our ships.'

Lorgar silenced his vox. 'Now, brother,' he smiled at Fulgrim, and there was no mistaking the absolute sincerity in the expression. 'Let us talk alone.'

Fulgrim swallowed, too composed to ever reveal his discomfort, but unable to force life and colour to his strained features.

'You have changed, Lorgar.'

'So everyone keeps telling me.'

# THIRTEEN

## LA FENICE

THEY HAD SPOKEN for hours, walking together by the edge of the battlefield, weaving between the barricades and firebases established by the Iron Warriors Legion. They kept their voices low, watching one another with careful eyes, while any Legionary or servitor nearby scattered before their slow path. It seemed clear, in no uncertain terms, that the brothers had no wish to be interrupted.

By the time Lorgar left the surface, night had fallen upon the killing fields of Isstvan V. The work continued, with Axalian and his cohorts returned to work hours before, lifting the salvage and leaving the scrap. The captain was close enough to witness the brothers finish their discussions, noting that the Seventeenth Primarch's saccharine amusement had abated, as had the anger simmering within his gaze.

As for Fulgrim, he seemed similarly dispassionate, adopting neither the familiar smile he usually wore in Lorgar's presence, nor the subtle signs of fraternal condescension that had so thoroughly marked their decades of brotherhood.

When the teleport flare faded, Axalian voxed for his waiting Thunderhawk to hold position, and switched communication channels.

'This is Axalian to the *Heart of Majesty*. Priority request.'

The expected delay lasted almost a full minute, before a voice fuzzed back on fragile vox. 'Captain Axalian, priority request acknowledged. How may we illuminate you, sir?'

'What is the status on the forty-nine vessels with Word Bearer "visitors"?'

Again, the delay. 'Fleet reports indicate the Seventeenth Legion is recalling its embarked guests via teleportation.'

Ah, Third Legion pride at work. No warship captain would confess to being taken by surprise like that, let alone boarded by those they'd trusted. Embarked guests. Axalian almost grinned. How delightful.

He was just about to reply when his battle-brother's voice rasped back from the *Heart of Majesty* in the heavens above. 'Captain Axalian, we are receiving conflicting reports on the primarch. Where is Lord Fulgrim? The fleet is calling out for immediate visual affirmation of his location.'

The captain looked to where the flare of teleportation fog was little more than a disseminating glimmer.

'I had visual confirmation on the primarch until a few moments ago. Inform the fleet, he teleported with Lorgar.'

With morbid curiosity, he listened to the slipstream of voices in conflict across the orbital vox-net. It took almost five minutes for sense to break through and when it did, it wasn't what he'd been expecting.

'This is the flagship to all vessels. The primarch is aboard. Repeat: this is the *Pride of the Emperor* to Third Legion fleet. Lord Fulgrim is aboard.'

THE CHAMBER LAY in darkness. It assaulted the other senses to make up for its lack of the most important one: the smell of decay was a raw musk hanging thick in the cold air, and never before had Lorgar considered that absolute silence could have an oppressive presence all its own.

'Lights,' the primarch said aloud. His voice echoed dramatically, but nothing answered.

'The acoustics in here have always been wonderful,' Fulgrim said, and his brother could hear the grin in those words.

The Word Bearer lifted his fist. A moment's thought wreathed it in heatless, harmless psychic fire, but it was a parasitic luminescence, seeming to eat the darkness rather than banish it. Still, it was enough.

Lorgar regarded the devastated theatre. Whatever last performance had taken place here had been one of supreme decadence. Bodies, already gone to rags and bones, slumbered in cadaverous repose across the chairs and aisles. Discarded weapons and broken furniture lay strewn across the scene. Nothing was unmarked by the black stains of old blood.

‘I see your Legion’s pursuit of perfection does not extend to cleanliness,’ Lorgar said softly.

Fulgrim grinned again. He could see it now, his brother’s teeth orange by the amber witchlight.

‘This is holy ground, Lorgar. You of all souls should respect that.’

Lorgar turned and moved on, walking over the bodies toward the stage. ‘You are the puppet-slave of a single god. I am the archpriest of all of them. Do not tell me what I should respect.’

The stage was riven by damage and darkened by shed blood. Both primarchs ascended the steps to the platform itself, their ceramite boots forcing the reinforced wooden boards to creak and whine.

‘There it is,’ Fulgrim gestured behind the thin, silk curtain. Lorgar had already seen it. He brushed the gauzy veil aside with the gentle push of a man moving an unbroken spiders web.

The Phoenician. The painting stole his breath for a long moment, and he was complicit in his awe, glad to let it do so. Few works of art had moved him as this one did.

Fulgrim, triumphant in this rendering, wore his most ostentatious suit of armour, as much Imperial gold as Third Legion purple. He stood before the immense Phoenix Gate leading into the Heliopolis chamber on board his flagship, a vision of gold against even richer gold. At his shoulders, reaching out in angelic symmetry, the great fiery pinions of a phoenix cast burning light against his armour, lighting the gold to flame-touched platinum and enriching the purple to a deep Tyrian hue.

All of this, from the look of haunting purity in the pale eyes to the last and least strand of white hair, was formed from a mortal's craft. To stare with a primarch's eyes, even from this respectful distance, showed the faint topography of brush strokes across the canvas. Only the most divine muse could inspire mortal hands to create such a masterpiece.

'My brother,' Lorgar whispered. 'What a man you were. A paragon among wolves and wastrels.'

'He always enjoyed flattery,' Fulgrim smiled. 'Do you so quickly forget how he sneered at you, Lorgar? Does his disregard slip from your memory so fast?'

'No,' the Word Bearer shook his head, as if reinforcing the denial. 'But he had every right to think less of me, for I was never whole. Not until now.'

The thing wearing Fulgrim's skin peeled back its lips in a smile the true primarch would never have made.

'You asked to see your brother, chosen one. Here he is.'

'This is a painting. Do not mock me, daemon. Not after we at last reached an accord.'

'You asked to see the brother you had lost.' The smile didn't leave Fulgrim's face. 'I have upheld my end of our agreement.'

Lorgar was already reaching for the crozius on his back.

'Peace, chosen one,' Fulgrim held up his hands. 'The painting. Look longer, look deeper. Tell me what you see.'

Lorgar turned again and stared at the exquisite masterwork. This time, he let his eyes slip across the image, seeking no details, merely drifting until they rested where they may.

He met the image's soulfully-rendered eyes, and at last, Lorgar breathed through the faintest of smiles.

'Hail, brother,' he finally said.

'Do you see?' the daemon at his side asked. For a moment, for those three words, it wasn't Fulgrim's voice at all.

'I see more than you realise.' The Word Bearer turned to face his brother's captor. 'If you think to relish all of eternity while play-

ing puppeteer to my brother's bones, you will find yourself fatally disappointed one night.'

'You speak the lies of a desperate and foolish soul.'

Lorgar laughed with a rare and sincere grin, perhaps the only expression that ever broke his resemblance to his father.

'Your secret is safe with me, daemon. Enjoy your stewardship while it lasts.'

He gave Fulgrim's shoulder a comradely slap and walked through the aisle still decorated with corpses, chuckling as he left the graveyard theatre.

When he closed the door, he took his witchlight with him, leaving Fulgrim and the painting together in the darkness.

OUTSIDE THE DOORS, Argel Tal waited with his honour guard. Most of the Legion had repainted their armour in the same crimson as the Gal Vorbak – another sign of the changing times. Each of these warriors wore betrayers' red.

'Sire,' Argel Tal greeted him. The horns on his helm lowered as the Legionary nodded. Lorgar felt the palpable heat of the man's twin souls – one living, one parasitically leeching from the first in imitation of life, replacing its theft with a symbiotic flood of power.

Harmonious. Pure. Divine. This was the unity of Chaos, when flesh and spirit met.

'My son, tonight we convene the Council of Sanctity, and I will speak once more of Calth. Then, in the hours that follow, I will summon you and your most trusted subcommanders. After the Council of Sanctity has dispersed, I will speak to you not only of Calth, but of what follows it.'

The warrior hesitated before speaking. 'I do not understand, lord.'

'I know. But you will. There is a great difference between glory and sacrifice, Argel Tal. Sometimes, fate takes care of itself. In those times, you may follow your heart and do whatever you

will. You may chase the glory you seek. And other times, destiny needs the courage and blood of mankind to force it through to a better future. Even at the cost of passion and vengeance. Even at the cost of a glory most highly deserved. We all make sacrifices, my son.'

Argel Tal bristled, though he sought to hide his offence from his primarch's eyes. 'I would like to believe I know enough of sacrifice already, my lord.'

Lorgar conceded with a nod. 'That is why I turn to you with the truth this evening, and not Kor Phaeron or Erebus. You, like me, have looked into the gods' eyes. And you, like me, have other wars to fight even as the Calth system burns.'