



THE HORUS HERESY

BUTCHER'S NAILS

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*From the New York Times bestselling
author of *The First Heretic**



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Before the primarch's ascension, before his *capture*, the ship had carried a different name. In those more innocent days, it sailed as the *Adamant Resolve*, flagship of the War Hounds Legion.

But time changes all things. Now, the XII Legion were the Eaters of Worlds, and their flagship bore the name *Conqueror*.

It barely resembled the ship it had once been. Ridged by brutal armour plating, spiked by countless weapon batteries, the *Conqueror* had become a crude bastion beyond any other warship in Imperial space.

At the vanguard of an immense battle fleet, it hung in space with its engines powered down, rank upon rank of weapons batteries aimed at a golden warship leading an opposing flotilla.

The enemy ship had never changed its name. Beyond the desecration of the Imperial eagles that once lined its spinal battlements, it remained unchanged beyond battle scars earned in the name of rebellion. Here was the flagship of the XVII Legion, and along its prow, etched in High Gothic, was the name *Fidelitas Lex* – the Law of Faith.

The Bearers of the Word and the Eaters of Worlds stood upon the edge of war. Hundreds of vessels, suspended in the cold void, each side awaiting the order to fire first.

On the bridge of the *Conqueror*, three hundred souls were frozen in their duties. The only sounds were the background mutter of servitors droning about their work, and the omnipresent rumble of the ship's reactor.

Most of the souls, human and post-human alike, felt an alloy of emotion. In some, fear mixed with guilty excitement, while in others, anticipation became a rush of sensation not far from anger. Every set of eyes remained fixed upon the oculus view screen, bearing witness to the fleet that lay beyond.

One figure towered above all others. Armoured in layered ceramite of gold and bronze, he watched the oculus with narrowed eyes. Where others bore a smile, he carried a slit of scar tissue and cracked teeth. Like all of his brothers, he resembled his father as a statue resembles the man it was raised to honour. Yet this statue was flawed by cracks and blemishes – a twitch in the muscles around his eye, a scarred ravine running along his shaven skull.

He reached a gloved hand to scratch at the back of his head, where an old wound would never quite fade. At last, he drew breath to speak, in the voice of a man distracted by pain.

‘We could open fire. We could leave half their vessels as cold husks, and Horus would be none the wiser.’

Behind him, seated on raised throne, Captain Lotara Sarrin cleared her throat.

The statuesque warrior didn’t turn to face her. ‘Hnnh. You have something to say, captain?’

Lotara swallowed before speaking. ‘My lord—’

‘I am no one’s lord. How many times must I speak those words?’ He wiped the beginnings of a nosebleed on the back of his hand. ‘Say what you wish to say.’

‘Angron,’ she said, choosing her words carefully. ‘We can’t go through with this. We have to stand down.’

Now the primarch turned. A tremor shivered its way along the fingers of his left hand. Perhaps a suppressed need to reach for a weapon, perhaps nothing more than the misfiring synapses at the core of an abused brain. ‘Tell me why, captain.’

The captain’s eyes flickered to the left. Several of Angron’s warriors stood by her throne, their helms turned to the screen, the very avatars of cold indifference. She eyed one of them in particular, imploring him to speak. ‘Khâm?’

‘Do not look to Khâm to argue on your behalf, girl. I asked *you* to speak.’ The primarch’s hands were twitching, the fingers shaking like serpents in spasm.

‘We can’t go through with this. If we attack their fleet, even if we win, we’ll be crippled behind enemy lines with a shadow of the force we need to carry out the Warmaster’s orders.’

‘I did not force this confrontation, captain.’

‘With the greatest respect, sir – yes, you did. You have pushed Lord Aurelian’s patience time and time again. Four worlds have fallen to us, and each one was an assault declared against our primary orders. You knew he would react eventually.’ Lotara gestured to the oculus, where the enemy fleet – dozens of warships that had been allies only hours before – drifted ever closer. ‘You forced this engagement, and both the crew and the Legion have obeyed you. We now stand upon the precipice, and it mustn’t go any further. We can’t cross that line.’

Angron turned back to the oculus, his scarred lips curled into something like a smile. He wasn’t blind to the truth in her words, but therein lay the

problem. He hadn't expected his brother to react. He'd never imagined Lorgar would suddenly grow a backbone.

'Khârñ,' murmured Lotara, turning to the assembled captains again. 'Do something.'

The primarch heard his equerry approach from behind. Khârñ's voice was softer than many of his kindred; not gentle by any means, but soft, low, and measured.

'She's right, you know.'

Such informality would be anathema within the other Legions. The World Eaters, however, obeyed no traditions but their own.

'She may be right,' the primarch conceded. 'But I sense opportunity in the winds. Lorgar was always the weakest of us, and his Word Bearers are no better. We could wipe this miserable Legion and their deluded master from the face of the galaxy right now. If you tell me that doesn't appeal to you, Khârñ, I will call you a liar.'

Khârñ removed his helm with a faint hiss of air pressure. Given his life so far, the fact that his face was unscarred seemed nothing less than miraculous.

'Lorgar has changed, as has his Legion. They have traded naivety for fanaticism, and even outnumbered, they would bleed us.'

'We were born to bleed, Khârñ.'

'Maybe so, but we can choose our battles. We've pushed our luck with the Word Bearers, and I agree with Lotara. We should rejoin the fleet, cease attacking worlds on a whim, and continue sailing into Ultima Segmentum.'

Angron exhaled slowly. 'But we could kill him.'

'Of course we could. But would you win a battle and cost Horus the war? That doesn't sound like you.'

The primarch smiled. It was a slow, sinister thing – a curving of the gash where his lips had once been.

'My detractors would say it sounds exactly like me.' As he spoke, he rested his fingertips to his pulsing temples. His headaches never ceased, but they were always at their most vicious when his blood ran hot. Today, the primarch's blood burned.

Lotara ignored the warriors as they conversed. She had other matters to deal with, such as three hundred bridge crew caught between staring at Angron, awaiting his orders, and watching the enemy fleet growing in the viewscreen.

'The *Fidelitas Lex* is matching us. She's accelerated to attack speed, and crossed into maximum weapon range. Her void shields are still up, and her weapon arrays are primed. Her support squadron will reach maximum weapon range in twenty-three seconds.'

Angron snorted blood onto the deck. 'We won't back down.'

'Maintain all ahead full,' Lotara called out. Then, quieter, 'Sir, you have to reconsider this.'

'Watch your tongue, human. Ready the Ursus Claws.'

'As you wish.' She relayed the order, and the shout was taken up across the bridge, officer to officer, servitor to servitor. 'The Ursus Claws will be ready in four minutes.'

'Good. We will need them.'

'Incoming hololithic transmission from the *Lex*,' Lotara called out. 'It's Lord Aurelian.'

The primarch chuckled his bass rumble again. 'Now let's see what the serpent has to say.'

The hololithic image appeared in the air before Angron, casting the master of the World Eaters with a flickering mirror image. Where Angron was broken, Lorgar was flawless; where one brother snarled a smirk, the other offered a cold, fierce smile. When Lorgar spoke after several long moments, he had only one question to ask.

'Why?'

Angron stared at the distorted, crackling image of his brother. 'I am a warrior, Lorgar. Warriors wage war.'

The image stuttered as interference took hold. 'The age of warriors is over, brother. We need crusaders now. Faith, devotion, discipline...'

Angron barked a laugh. 'I have never failed to win a war my way. I buy my victories with the edge of my axe, and I am content with how history will judge me.'

The image of Lorgar shook its tattooed head. 'The Warmaster sent us here for a reason.'

'I would take you more seriously if you did not hide behind Horus.'

'Very well.' The rasp of vox interference stole Lorgar's voice for a moment. 'I brought us here, and my plan stands on the edge of failure because you cannot control your rage. We will lose this war, brother. How can you not see that? United, we will take the Throneworld. Horus will rule as the new Emperor. But divided, we will fall. You may be content now, but will you be content if we lose? If history paints us as heretics and traitors? That destiny awaits us if we grind our Legions together out here in the void.'

Lorgar hesitated, studying the other primarch as if he could glean some hidden answer. 'Angron. Please, don't force this battle, as you've forced so many others.'

Angron's hands began to shake again. He cracked his knuckles, to keep his fingers busy. The ache at the back of his head had become a rolling, tidal throb now – an unscratchable itch within his brain.

‘The Ursus Claws are ready,’ Captain Sarrin said softly. ‘Ready to—’
Her words trailed away as the deck sirens wailed.

They burst into the void in a silent storm. The violence of an Imperial arrival was nowhere to be seen: no vortices of howling light, no battlemented warships of dark iron spilling from wounds torn in reality. These vessels shimmered into existence, as if melting from the backdrop of distant stars. On they came, already cutting ahead at impossible speeds, each one a sleek paragon of bladed majesty.

The *Lex* and the *Conqueror* came about first, each reacting to the new threat in their own way. The *Fidelitas Lex* lessened its thrust, slowing enough for its support squadron to keep pace. As the destroyers and escorts moved into attack formation, the *Lex* led them right into the enemy.

The *Conqueror* powered ahead, heedless of the danger of going in alone. Gun ports rattled open, and the ship's hull thrummed with the massing rise of its weapon batteries priming.

The alien vessels swooped and rolled past the Imperial warship, not even bothering to fire. The faster ships, black against the infinite black, stirred the void around the *Conqueror* without committing a single volley. The World Eaters flagship was already unleashing its rage, spitting payloads in futility, consigning ammunition to the void. The deck guns shuddered as they fired, striking nothing.

The alien vessels ghosted aside, as laser fire streaked the space between stars. More and more of the bladed warships joined the dancing formation, slicing around the surrounded *Conqueror*.

And then, with precision that could never be born of Imperial technology, they opened fire in the exact same moment, in the time it takes a human heart to give a single beat.

Hunting alone as she was, the World Eaters flagship lit up the darkness when her void shields caught fire. Pulsar streams lashed at the energy barriers, breeding violent colours across their domed surface, reflecting the flames back against the shadowed hulls of the alien raiders.

The sirens still wailed on the strategium. The deck shook, as if at the mercy of great winds.

Sarrin reviewed the ship's tactical displays. ‘Shields holding,’ she called.

Angron wiped his lips, grunting at the painful tics twitching the muscles in the left side of his face. When he spoke, his voice was a low, dangerous growl.

‘Someone tell me why we are vomiting all our ammunition into the void and missing every single enemy ship.’

‘We’re firing blind.’ The captain sounded distracted, hammering in commands to the servitors on her throne’s keypads. ‘The enemy’s shields allow them to slip out of target lock.’

‘At this range? These bastard eldar are on top of us!’

‘The rest of our fleet is almost ready to engage from maximum range. The *Lex* is closer – she’ll be with us in under a minute.’ Captain Sarrin swore as her head cracked against the back of her throne. ‘Shields holding,’ she said again. ‘*Though not for much longer,*’ she added in a whisper.

The primarch roared as he aimed his axe at the oculus screen. One of the raiders shivered past the screen, while the slower *Conqueror* struggled to turn and keep it in sight.

‘Enough! I’m tired of shooting at ghosts! Fire the Ursus Claws!’

The *Conqueror* shuddered again, though not because of the assault raining upon its shields. From ridged battlements and armoured ports along the warship’s hull, a tide of what looked like spears burst out into the void. Each of the lances was the size of a smaller escort ship in its own right, and of the dozen fired, seven punctured home in the hulls of alien vessels. Once impaled, the immense spears came active, locking to their prey’s ravaged insides with magnetic fusion.

But while they were effective against conventional foes, the alien vessels were forged from synthetics beyond mere metal. Two of the ships managed to slide free, dragging their ruined carcasses away from the Imperial warship, their cores holed right through and open to space.

They were the lucky ones. The five eldar cruisers still impaled shook as they were dragged off-course, stalling in the void. Their engines burned in silent heat, but each of them remained anchored in place. The spears driven through their bodies were more than projectiles, lances launched to cripple. They were harpoons, fired to claim prey.

With malicious slowness, the *Conqueror* recalled its spears.

The lances began to ratchet back towards the vessel that fired them, dragged home on massive chains. Only the World Eaters would deploy something so barbarous and primitive on such a scale, and only the World Eaters would make such crude weaponry into something so efficient.

Link by link, the *Conqueror* dragged the five ships closer, its massive engines straining against their stagnant thrust. The other eldar raiders broke away, finding it increasingly difficult to fire at the Imperial warship now using five of their own ships as barriers to protect itself.

One ship sought to cut its flailing kindred free, focusing its weapons on the great chains reaching between the *Conqueror* and its prey. Diving close enough to fire brought it within range of the warship's laser batteries, and the eldar raider's shimmering shields collapsed in an anaemic sigh. A moment later, the vessel itself came apart under the *Conqueror's* rage.

Angron watched all of this taking place, a smile on the slit of his lips.

'Release the hounds.'

Boarding pods spat from the *Conqueror's* hull, crossing the short distance in the blink of an eye, and disgorging World Eaters into the bowels of the impaled eldar vessels.

'Retract the Ursus Claws that failed to strike. Khârn?'

'Sire.'

'Come with me. Let us greet these eldar.'

As he strangled the eldar warrior, Angron reflected on an unpleasant truth: perhaps Lorgar had been right.

The warrior kicked in the primarch's grip, struggling against the one hand Angron had wrapped around his throat. A tightening of the fist ended all struggle with the muted wet crackle of ruined vertebrae. He cast the corpse aside, bashing its skull open against the sloping wall.

The eldar vessel sickened him. The sight and smell of it was an assault on the senses. As soon as he'd pulled his way from the boarding pod, chainaxe revving in his hand, the sheer alien foulness of the place set his mind aching. The bizarrely sterile, spicy scent that teased the nose. The odd angles of the walls, the twisting rise and fall of the deck, and the strange un-colours that seemed formed from a hundred shades of black. Beneath it all was the sickly-sweet smell of fear, and the copper tang of vein-fluid, leaking from broken skin. Even alien vessels could smell of blood, when their bellies were sliced open to reveal what lay within. There was purity in the smell – purity and purpose. He'd been born for such things.

Splinters of alien metal clattered against his armour, tearing fresh scars along what little of his skin remained exposed. But what was a scar, really? Neither evidence of defeat, nor a medal of triumph. A scar was nothing more than a mark to show that a warrior faced his enemies at all times, never once showing his back.

Angron shoved his own men aside as he chased the retreating eldar. Their crackable armour and stick-thin limbs had a perverse grace when they moved, but it was a sickening, alien thing. One could admire a snake's lethality, but one could never be deceived into finding it beautiful, let alone worthy of emulation.

His axe fell without heed, without care, each of his merest blows slaying wherever it fell. Ahh, the Butcher's Nails hammered into the back of his head were buzzing now. His muscles burned, and his brain boiled with them. All that mattered was keeping the feeling going. Each sensation was reddened by the delicious justification of honest anger. This was what it meant to be alive. Humanity was a wrathful species, and anger vindicated all of its sins.

Nothing was as honest as rage – throughout the history of the human race, what release of emotion had ever been more worthy and true than depthless anger? A parent confronting their child's killer. A farmer defending his family against raiders. The warrior avenging the deaths of his brothers. In rage, anything was justified. It was the highest state of sentience. With rage came vindication, and with vindication came peace.

Angron charged through another cannonade of splinter gunfire. Blood bathed his neck as he felt the stinging crashes against his head. A sudden nerve-sharp coldness made him wonder, just for the shadow of a moment, if his face was blasted open to the bone. No matter. It had happened before. It would happen again.

He charged on, screaming without realising it, hearing nothing and feeling nothing beyond the disgustingly pleasant whine of the Butcher's Nails in his brain.

The wrath brought clarity. At last, with the spikes buried in the meat of his mind finally spitting their most waspish outpourings, Angron was allowed to drift, to dream, to remember.

Serenity. Never peace, no, never that.

But serenity in rage, like the calm at the heart of a storm.

Three months before, when they'd started this Shadow Crusade, Lorgar had asked him why he mutilated his own Legion. The Butcher's Nails, of course. He meant the Butcher's Nails.

'Do you know what these things do to you? Do you know what they really do to your men?' Lorgar had asked.

Angron had nodded. He knew better than anyone.

'They let me dream,' he admitted. It was one of the few moments in his life he'd ever risked admitting such a thing. He still wasn't sure why he'd said it. 'They make it difficult to feel anything except the most fierce righteousness.' A headache thudded behind his eyes, coiling all the way down his spine. He wasn't in the right frame of mind to have such a talk, but Horus had sent them into Ultima Segmentum to work together. At this stage, so early in their journey, the cracks of tension had yet to show.

Lorgar had smiled sadly and shaken his head. ‘Your Butcher’s Nails were not made for a primarch’s mind, brother. They steal the healing hours of sleep from you, not letting your brain process the day’s events. They also cauterise your emotions, feeding everything back into your basest urges. To kill. To fight. To slay. That is all that gives you pleasure, isn’t it? These implants, crude as they are, have remapped the cartography of your mind.’

‘You don’t understand.’ Perhaps they did do all those things, but they also brought a maddening peace that had to be chased, and the purity of absolute fury. ‘They are not simply a curse, though they may seem that way to you.’

‘Then enlighten me. Help me understand.’

‘You want to remove them. I know you do.’ He’d die before he allowed that. For all the pain, for all the twitches, tics, spasms and aches right to his bloody bones, the Butcher’s Nails brought clarity and purpose. He’d never sacrifice that. He was not weak enough to even feel the temptation.

‘Brother,’ Lorgar had sounded disheartened then, his eyes cooled by concern. ‘They cannot be removed, not without killing you. I had no intention of trying. If it is possible for us to die, you will do so with those wretched things still inside your skull.’

‘You know we can die. Ferrus is dead.’

Lorgar looked away, as if staring through the metal chamber wall. ‘I keep forgetting that. Events are proceeding so very quickly, are they not?’

‘Hnnh. If you say so.’

‘So why would you inflict this upon your Legion? Answer me that, at least. Why would you order your Techmarines to hammer these Butcher’s Nails into the heads of every warrior in your service?’

Angron hadn’t replied at once. He owed Lorgar no answers. But a thought took slow bloom in his mind – the idea that if any of his kindred could understand, it might be Lorgar. After all, the lord of the XVII Legion had inflicted punishments of his own upon his favoured sons. Even now, the Word Bearers in the Gal Vorbak were severed beings, existing with daemons trapped in their hearts.

‘It is all I know,’ he admitted at last. ‘And it has never failed me. This is how I win my wars, Lorgar. You’ve done similar things to win yours.’

‘That is true enough.’

From there, the memory grew hazy and indistinct. The degeneration followed over the course of weeks, as the two Legions suffered the rise of their masters’ tension. Forty thousand warriors in Word Bearer crimson, and seventy thousand in World Eater white, filling the decks and holds of a vast flotilla.

In the beginning, the clashes between Legion ideology had manifested in manageable ways. Word Bearers warriors had been honoured to be invited into the XII Legion's gladiatorial pit fights, and World Eaters had been offered entrance to the XVII Legion's training chambers. It was only as the primarchs' discontent filtered down to their warriors that divisions arose.

The first crack in the alliance had happened at the world of Turem, a planet loyal to distant Terra. The unified fleet had only dropped from the warp to resupply, refuel, and move on deeper into enemy territory. The Legions had cast aside the pathetic excuse for planetary defences with no effort at all, and ransacked the world's refineries for everything they required.

Within a week, the Word Bearers had been ready to move on. The principal cities were put to the cleansing flame, and all icons venerating the Imperium were broken beneath ceramite boots.

But the World Eaters weren't finished. What followed were the long days and longer nights of bloodshed and butchery, as the XII Legion, led by their primarch, pursued the ragged remains of the population across the globe.

Lorgar's initial disagreement gave way to disgust, and in turn became the cold anger for which he was now becoming known. Angron couldn't be summoned, couldn't even be contacted, as he laid waste to what little life remained on the planet.

When the last World Eaters returned to their vessels, the flotilla was ten days delayed, lagging behind its targeted estimates.

Then came Garalon Prime. The first world of the Garalon system turned about its sun at the ideal distance not only to sustain human life, but to allow it to flourish. A rare jewel, a mythological Eden, Garalon Prime stood out as a beacon of Imperial compliance, providing vast numbers of men and women for the oh-so-glorious regiments of the Imperial Army.

After annihilating the modest orbital defences, Lorgar had ordered a portion of the population enslaved, and the world burned. He vowed to leave Garalon Prime as nothing more than a blackened husk, with his fleet's indentured crew and servitor contingents swollen by fresh meat.

But once more, the primarchs' desires diverged. Angron led the World Eaters down to the surface, ransacking the cities and destroying all hope of a cohesive assault. As ever, his tastes ran along bloodier lines. He had no desire to leave a charred cinder of a planet as an example to the Imperium. He would leave a grave-world, a planet of silent cities and a billion bones bleaching in the sun.

And so it continued. World after world, forcing the brothers apart through desire and ideology, bringing two of the Traitor Legions close to a civil war of

their own. When Angron ordered his fleet to break from the warp to attack a fifth world, the primarchs at last came to the edge of violence.

‘If you seek to stop me, Lorgar, you and your deluded Legion die first.’

‘So be it, brother. We will not fire the first shot, but we will not allow you to pass us and waste lives and resources on worthless butchery.’

‘It is not worthless. They are the enemy.’

‘But not the true enemy.’

‘All enemies are true, Lorgar.’

Strange, how Angron could remember those words with such biting clarity, but not the look upon his brother’s face. It had only been a few hours ago, yet it felt as intangible now as a childhood dream.

‘Sire.’

The voice reached him from a great distance, faint through the coppery euphoria of absolute anger. Rage that deep left its taste on the tongue – something not far from fear or ecstasy, but sweeter than both.

‘Sire,’ the voice said again.

He turned, but for a moment he couldn’t see, until he wiped the blood from his eyes.

One of his warriors stood before him, carrying a black iron chainaxe, its teeth-tracks clogged with meat.

‘Sire,’ the warrior said. ‘It is done.’

Angron’s sigh released the last of his clinging fury. In its place, pain swept back into his skull, filling the void once more. The muscles of his right hand spasmed, and he almost lost his grip on his own axe.

‘You know I despise that title, even in jest. Hnnh. Back to the *Conqueror*.’ He hesitated a moment, looking about himself, at the dark walls streaked with blood dappling. ‘The ship is still. No movement. No shaking. No thunder.’

Khârn stood with his boot on a fallen alien’s breastplate. The dead warrior’s armour was sculpted in the image of the spindly, thread-thin musculature beneath.

‘The battle is over.’ He knew better than to ask if Angron had failed to hear the vox-net broadcasting the void battle’s resolution. The primarch never took kindly to reminders of his wandering mind. ‘The enemy flotilla disengaged. Our combined fleets were more than enough to break them.’

Angron watched the blood dripping from his chainaxes. ‘The battle made no sense from its very beginning. What did they hope to achieve?’

‘Captain Sarrin believes xenos witchery allowed them to foresee the moment that the *Conqueror* would be vulnerable, as it charged ahead of the fleet.

Perhaps they sought to strike at us, kill the Legion's command structure, and run back into the night.'

'How many escaped?'

'Most of them. Once the ambush failed, they ghosted back into the void before our fleet could engage.'

Angron mused upon this, as he watched the red droplets fall from the edge of his axes. Each one bred tiny ripples in the pool of blood by his boots.

'We will chase them.'

Khârn hesitated. 'Lord Aurelian has already ordered the fleet to form up and proceed deeper into the segmentum as planned.'

'Do I look like I care what he wishes, Khârn? No one runs from the *Conqueror*.'

He faced the hololithic image, doing all he could to bite back the pain and keep his temper in check. The Butcher's Nails itched and thumped with their own pulse, and concentrating through their maddening beat was a trial in itself. They never ceased, for they were never appeased. Even with bloodshed so recent, they wanted more.

In truth, so did he. The Nails' curse was to make him crave that serenity at the heart of rage.

Lorgar's image wavered with distortion, crackling in the interference of his flagship readying its warp engines.

'Need I remind you that our Legions were on the brink of battle before that pathetic alien diversion? Angron, my brother, this is our chance to reunite and let calmer thoughts lead us onward.'

'I will pursue the eldar. Your consent is irrelevant to me. Once we've hunted them down, we will rejoin your fleet.'

'Divided we fall,' Lorgar sighed. 'You are supposed to be the warrior between us, yet you ignore the most basic tenets of staying alive in battle. If you leave me with a third of my Legion at the edge of Ultramar, do you believe there will be anything left for you to rejoin after your idiotic void-dance is concluded? Do you think what remains of your World Eaters will be able to withstand a full assault if you are caught by the Thirteenth Legion? Or Russ? Or the Khan?'

'If you fear being outnumbered, perhaps you shouldn't have sent countless thousands into the meatgrinder at Calth.' Angron sniffed back another trickling nosebleed. 'Then they would be here with you now, instead of sailing towards death in the Ultramarine's stronghold. Why not call them back before they strike? Perhaps they will hear you shouting from the moral high ground.'

Both brothers stared at each other's hololithic images for a long moment. It was Angron who broke the pregnant silence, but not with another insult.

This time, he laughed. He laughed for a long time, until tears ran down the ruination of his statuesque face.

‘I fail to see what is so amusing,’ Lorgar spoke through the vox-crackle, more irritated than confused.

‘Have you ever considered the easiest way to resolve this, my priestly brother, might be to just *come with us*?’

Lorgar said nothing.

‘I am not making some foolish jest,’ Angron laughed again. ‘Come with us. We’ll crush these alien bastards beneath our boots, and burn their fragile ships from the inside out. Tell me, do your crusaders have no wish to punish the filthy aliens that dared attack us?’

‘We have a duty to perform here, Angron. A sacred duty.’

‘And we will perform it. Our duty is to bleed the segmentum dry, to cleave right into the heart of the Imperium’s far reaches. We will do it together. You, I and the Legions that follow us, but in the name of the gods you claim are real, let us spare *no one*. And let us begin with these foul eldar. *Vengeance*, Lorgar. Taste that word. *Vengeance*.’

And, at last, Lorgar smiled. ‘Very well. We will play this game by your rules, for now.’

Captain Sarrin had never tried to track an eldar fleet before. She was finding that it didn’t compare to anything else in her experience.

‘Warp signature?’ she asked.

‘Negative,’ came the servitor’s dead-voiced response.

‘Not even from a focused auspex sweep with the coordinates I gave you?’

‘Negative.’

‘Well... Try again.’

‘Compliance.’

She tried not to sigh. Lord Angron – her master and commander, whether he liked to be addressed as ‘lord’ or not – had demanded she lead the combined Legion fleet in pursuit of the enemy. The problem with that was simple: she had no idea how. The eldar hadn’t run. They’d vanished.

The keen rumble of active armour drew her attention to the side of her throne. Khârn was approaching, his features masked by his crested helm as usual.

‘Angron’s patience is wearing thin.’ He sounded calm, casual, almost resigned.

‘So is mine.’ Lotara narrowed her eyes. ‘And I don’t take kindly to threats, Khârn.’

‘That is one of the many reasons you were given command of the *Conqueror*. And it was not a threat. Merely an offer of information.’

‘He’s asking me to chase phantoms. Eldar ships leave no warp signature, so how am I to follow them? My Mistress of Astropaths senses nothing. My Navigator can find no warp-wake to pursue. The auspex sees nothing.’ She looked at Khârn, her own temper mounting. ‘With the greatest respect, what does he want me to do? Fly the ship around in wide circles and hope the enemy returns?’

Khârn said nothing. He merely watched her impassively.

‘I have one idea,’ she confessed. Lotara reached back to tie her hair into a loose ponytail, keeping it from her eyes. ‘We can still punish the eldar. Angron wishes to see the enemy dead before him. I think I can arrange that.’

‘And how do you plan to do it?’ Khârn asked at last. ‘If you cannot chase them...’

‘They attacked when the *Conqueror* moved ahead alone, outpacing the rest of the fleet. Their target was us. More specifically, their target was our primarch. When they struck, they’d been waiting for the chance to catch us while we were vulnerable, and they were willing to risk a great many lives to see Angron dead. I’m betting they’ll run the risk again.’

‘I believe I see where this is leading.’

‘Sometimes it seems that Angron cares not from whence the blood flows. But he wants revenge, and I will give it to him. Order your warriors to battle stations, and ready your elite companies for when we prime the Ursus Claws.’

‘The Devourers will undoubtedly be ready, captain.’ He sounded amused, pleased with her plan. They knew one another well, for Lotara had served on the flagship as a helm officer for years before her promotion. Captain Sarrin enjoyed risks as much as any warrior in the Legion she served. ‘What brings that smile to your lips, Lotara?’

‘We’re about to prove the great truth of the Twelfth Legion, Khârn. No one runs from the *Conqueror*.’

They sailed alone, deeper into the void, farther from distant Terra and away from their own fleet. Lotara didn’t know when the aliens would strike again, only that they would. Eleven hours into their sedate drift into isolation, she was still on the strategium, reclining in her throne and staring into the reaches of space. She ardently refused to give rest to her aching, bleary eyes. Not while there was a job to do.

‘*Come on*,’ she whispered, little realising the words had become a murmured mantra. ‘*Come on*.’

‘Captain Sarrin?’

Lotara turned to her first officer. Ivar Tobin wore the same crisp white uniform as his captain, and looked considerably less tired. The only difference in their attire was the red palm print in the centre of her chest – a rare mark of honour awarded to the Legion’s most worthy servants. She’d earned this accolade from the Eighth Captain himself upon her ascension to the *Conqueror*’s command throne.

‘Something to report, Tobin?’

‘All auspex tracking shows nothing but dead space.’ He spoke again after a brief pause, unable to keep the concern from his voice. ‘You should sleep, ma’am.’

She grinned. ‘And you should watch your mouth. This is my ship as much as the primarch’s, and I’ll not sail into the enemy’s clutches with my eyes closed. You know me better than that.’

‘When did you last sleep, captain?’

Rather than admit the truth, she chose to hide behind a lie. Perhaps it would make Tobin leave her alone. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘Then I will tell you. You last slept forty-one hours ago, ma’am. Would you not rather be well-rested when we engage the xenos?’

‘Your concern is noted, Officer Tobin. Back to your duties, if you please.’

He snapped a sharp salute. ‘As you command.’

Lotara breathed out, low and slow. She stared at the stars panning past the oculus, and let the hunt continue.

Sixteen hours later, once the *Conqueror* was well and truly out of range of its support fleet, the bridge sirens began to wail again.

Lotara sat forward in her throne, smiling despite her bone-aching weariness.

‘Let’s try this again, shall we? Voxmaster Kejic?’

‘Aye, captain.’

‘Open a focused pulse transmission to the largest eldar vessel, if you please.’

‘Opening, ma’am. Priming now. Transmission ready.’

Lotara rose from her throne, moving to grip the handrail at the edge of her raised dais. ‘This is Captain Lotara Sarrin of the Twelfth Legion warship *Conqueror* to the miserable alien fleet ghosting into existence across our bow.’ She smiled, and felt her heartbeat quicken. This was what she lived for, and why she’d been given command of such a mighty vessel in the first place. Let the legionaries fight with axe and sword. Her arena was the void, and the ships that danced within it. ‘I wish to offer congratulations on the last mistake you will ever make.’

To her surprise, a voice crashed back over the vox. Flawed by incompatible communication systems, the words barely emerged from a tide of churning noise.

‘Mon-keigh filth. You will bleed for the thousands of sins your mongrel breed has committed in its pathetic lifespan.’

‘If you wish to kill us, alien, you are more than welcome to try.’

‘Dog-blooded mon-keigh. It is a miracle you mastered even this crude speech. Your mutilated prince with the pain engine inside his skull must die this night. He will never be given the chance to become the Blood God’s son.’

‘Enough of your religious madness.’ She was smiling now, not bothering to hide her malicious amusement at their arrogance.

‘History will be so much cleaner when you are erased from its pages.’

‘Brave talk from a race on the edge of extinction,’ she replied. ‘Why not come closer? Bring those pretty ships in range of my talons.’

With a shriek of wounded noise that may or may not have had organic origins, the eldar severed the link.

‘A charming species,’ Lotara gripped the handrail.

‘Enemy fleet inbound,’ Tobin called from across the strategium.

‘Deck Officer Tobin, prime everything we’ve got – all gun ports open, all weapons live, all engines burning hot. Tactical hololithics are to update in two-second pulses to compensate for the enemy’s speed. Gunnery, fix primary targets by threat level and assign secondary targets by range. Void shields to full layer extension. Helm, accelerate to attack speed, and be ready to kill thrust with inertial resistors when we fire the Ursus Claws. All stations, status report. Deck officer.’

‘Aye, ma’am.’

‘Tactical.’

‘Hololithics live, captain.’

‘Gunnery prime, secondary and tertiary stations.’

‘Aye.’

‘Aye.’

‘Ready, ma’am.’

‘Void shields.’

‘Compliance.’

‘Helm.’

‘Aye, captain.’

Lotara sat back in her ornate throne, feeling all traces of tiredness wash away with her racing heartbeat. She keyed in the eight-rune code to activate shipwide vox.

‘This is Captain Sarrin. All crew to battle stations. We are engaging the enemy.’

The *Conqueror* cleaved through the alien flotilla, broadsides booming, stinging lashes of enemy fire dancing in mad colours across the abused void shields. This time, the warship focused its hunt on a single target, chasing it down with the lumbering inevitability of a mammoth’s charge.

The enemy flagship was a contoured thing of arched wings and curving blades, all reaching from a lengthy, ridged hull – a torture device, given size and power enough to sail the stars. It rolled with insidious grace, dancing aside from the *Conqueror*’s dive. In its wake, its knife-winged support ships unleashed their crackling fire against the World Eaters warship’s shields. They sparked with unnatural fire, glowing as bright as Terra’s own sun, and burst with a brutal lack of ceremony.

The *Conqueror* dived on, heedless, uncaring. It rammed one alien vessel aside, crashing into it amidships and sending the shattered hulk spinning away into the void. The raider vented air in a long, final breath, and spilled its crew into space as though they were drops of blood running from a wound.

Still, the *Conqueror* dived. Its armour earned new scars, new burns, new injuries carved along the dense plating by the cutting kiss of alien lasers.

The enemy flagship was running now. It recognised the warship’s intent: not to fight off the entire fleet, but to ignore the lesser craft in favour of crippling the only one that truly mattered. With impossible agility, the eldar cruiser banked and rolled away again, boosting away from its bulky pursuer.

The *Conqueror*’s engines roared white-hot, wide open beast-mouths screaming into the silence of space. As the warship’s immense shadow eclipsed the fleeing raider, Captain Lotara Sarrin gripped the armrests of her shuddering throne, and through the smoke streaming across the strategium, she shouted a single command.

‘Fire the Ursus Claws!’

No wide dispersal of fire, this time. No attempts to puncture several enemy vessels and separate the boarding forces. The *Conqueror* fired all eight of its forward-arc spears. Every one of them struck home, punching right into the body of the nimble enemy flagship. For a single second, it jerked the *Conqueror* ahead, before the Imperial ship’s thrusters asserted their greater, more stubborn strength.

Like a bear gripping a wolf, the *Conqueror* began to pull, to crush, to heave. The immense chains ratcheted back, clanking link by clanking link, hauling the eldar flagship closer.

Boarding pods were already spilling between the ships, pinpricking into the enemy's hull.

Lotara heard two voices crackle over the vox. Two brothers, fighting together for the first time.

'We are in,' Lorgar voxed. 'The smell of these wretched inhumans is toxic to my senses.'

Angron replied with a grunt. 'Follow me, brother.'

Few were the archives that could claim a legitimate record of two primarchs battling side by side. Even in an age of war and wonder, it was the rarest of events.

Angron perceived all his actions through the wrath-haze of the buzzing Butcher's Nails. In those long moments of berserk clarity, he saw his brother fighting for the first time.

They couldn't have been less alike in how they moved, and how they killed. Lorgar advanced in slow, driving steps, gripping his spiked crozius mace in two hands, and letting it fall in wide, sweeping arcs. Each strike tolled long and loud, as if some great temple bell heralded every death blow. When the maul crashed into packs of the slender, shrieking eldar, it sent their broken forms flying aside. These unfortunate wretches impacted against the ship's curved walls, and slid down in the aftermath, like a horde of ruined puppets with cut strings.

In contrast to Lorgar's lucid, meticulous fury, Angron was lost to his emotions and the mechanical tendrils vibrating inside his brain. His twin axes, Gorefather and Gorechild, fell in frenzied, hacking chops, ripping his foes apart, killing through decapitation as often as by cleaving the enemies in twain. Blood misted around him in gouting sprays, flecking his bronze armour until it became a crimson akin to Lorgar's.

As the brothers advanced through a vast domed chamber, Lorgar drew alongside the Eater of Worlds.

'You should just paint it red, brother.'

Angron's focus was on the flow of blood, the rending of meat, and the breaking of bone. It took him several seconds to tune back to being able to comprehend others' words.

'What?'

'Your armour,' Lorgar paused, turning to hammer his crozius down at an eldar carrying a spear. He pounded the warrior almost flat, and crushed the remains beneath his boot. 'Your armour. Just paint it red.'

Angron felt a grin peeling his lips back from his replacement iron teeth. His brother was far from the first person to speak those words, but the fact

Lorgar had actually been serious earned him a chorus of fraternal laughter.

The World Eater kicked another eldar aside, and bisected a third with a backhanded swing of his chainaxe. He saw Lorgar at his side, slaying three aliens with a single swing.

‘You kill well now,’ Angron said. Saliva stringed between his teeth. Blood ran in hot, slow trickles from both nostrils, and his right eye was weeping red, making a mess of his cheek. ‘You’ve changed, Lorgar.’

The Word Bearer took the compliment with silent grace, killing at his brother’s side, but he could only hold his tongue so long.

‘Those implants are killing you.’

Angron roared in the same moment, surging ahead, butchering his way down the angular corridor and painting the walls red with the chemical stink of alien blood.

‘I know you hear me, brother,’ Lorgar said quietly, into the vox. ‘Those implants are killing you.’

Angron didn’t even look back. He was a blur of gore-streaked bronze armour, both toothed axes rising and falling in efficient, rhythmless murder.

Rather than defend the ship in hopeless desperation, the eldar captain awaited his uninvited guests in the comfort of the bridge. Angron came through the door first, after sawing through the xenos metal bulkhead with the snarling edges of Gorechild and Gorefather.

A withering hail of splinter projectiles clattered and clashed against his ceramite armour, blasting chips and scraps from the war plate. Venomous barbs sank into what little of his flesh was exposed, but Angron ignored the poison pumping through his veins, trusting his genhanced physiology to purify his blood.

Oh, how the Butcher’s Nails sang. They pounded at the core of his skull, as if drilling deeper into the brain-meat to avoid the caress of eldar venom.

He endured this savage hail of fire, and amidst the second volley, he levelled his axe at the figure seated upon the throne of sculpted alien bone.

Lorgar came through after him, a tepid disregard written plain across his golden features. The merest raising of his gloved hand formed a kinetic barrier around them both, psychically shielding them from the hail-fall of eldar splinter shells.

‘Have you ever set foot on the *Nightfall*?’ Lorgar asked, his calm eyes drinking in the foul scene. Corpse pits ringed the central throne, with the husks of men and aliens impaled on unclean spikes. Hooked chains dangled from the ceiling, many of them ripe with stinking fruit, in the form of inhuman bodies hanging without limbs or skin.

Angron could barely reply. Wracking twitches pulled his features tight, and forced his fingers to gun the triggers of his chainaxes in muscular spasms.

‘No. Never been on the Eighth Legion flagship.’

Lorgar’s lip curled. ‘This... This looks like Curze’s bedchamber.’

The World Eater crashed his axes together. ‘Let this be *done*, brother.’

‘As you wish.’

The primarchs raised their weapons, and charged as one. First, the white-masked wielders of klaive swords. Angron sawed his path through them, while Lorgar hammered them aside with his maul, or sent them reeling with bursts of psychic fire. For the first time in either of their lives, the two brothers fought in unity with another being. Angron turned, disembowelling a dark-armoured bladesman seeking to attack Lorgar from behind. In turn, the Bearer of the Word protected his blood-spattered kin, deflecting an eldar’s thrust with his maul’s head, and killing the warrior on the backswing.

The union was effort to control and maintain, for it didn’t come naturally to either of them. But they held it until only one other soul remained alive on the bridge.

‘Any last words?’ Lorgar asked. The ship shook around them with greater force now. The Ursus Claws had bitten too deep. The *Conqueror* was pulling its prey apart purely by the strength of its grip.

Angron staggered to his brother’s side, drooling and dizzy – a flawed statue of the perfect warrior, ruined by mistreatment. As bloodstained as they both were, they could almost have been twins.

The alien prince was a thing clad in baroque, ceremonial armour; a creature of angelically consumptive features and the foul stench of impure blood beneath oiled skin. The eldar lord’s final words hissed into the air, spat from pale lips.

‘Two mon-keigh god-princes. There was only supposed to be one. The one to become the Blood God’s son. The pain engines bend the soul to the Eightfold Path. That path leads to the Skull Throne.’

‘The Blood God’s son...’ Lorgar’s focus drifted to Angron, as the possibilities played out behind his soothing eyes. ‘It cannot be.’

Angron raised his axes. The raider didn’t move a muscle.

‘Wait.’ Lorgar reached for Angron’s shoulder. ‘He said–’

But the axes fell, and the alien captain’s head rolled free.

Three days later, the *Conqueror* limped back to its fleet. While its hull had sustained extensive damage, most of it was superficial. The real losses had been in terms of crew; fully half the indentured serfs and trained mortal adepts were

dead. On a ship of such grand size, the several thousand that remained alive were almost counted a skeleton crew.

Of the three thousand warriors Angron took with him aboard the flagship, barely a third had returned. The eldar reaped a bloody toll in their defeat, and the XII Legion's funerary rites lasted day and night, while the ship sailed back to its kindred. The airlocks opened and closed, silent maws yawning into the void, exhaling the shrouded bodies of slain World Eaters and crew.

Lorgar made ready to depart the *Conqueror*, and bid farewell to his brother on the embarkation deck.

'It was good to purge some of the bad blood between us,' Angron said. To his credit, he kept his rebellious muscles from twitching, no matter how the Butcher's Nails stabbed at his nervous system.

'For now,' Lorgar agreed. 'Let neither of us pretend it will last forever.'

Angron wiped his bleeding nose on the back of his hand. 'You said something on the enemy ship. Something about the Nails.'

Lorgar mused for a moment. 'I do not recall.'

'I do. You said the implants were killing me.'

Lorgar shook his head, offering his kindest, most sincere smile. In his mind, he heard the eldar reaver's words once more. *The one to become the Blood God's son. The pain engines bend the soul to the Eightfold Path. That Path leads to the Skull Throne.*

'I was wrong, and my concern was foolish. You have survived this long. You will endure into the future.'

'You are lying to me, Lorgar.'

'For once, Angron, I am not. Your Butcher's Nails will never kill you, I am certain of that. If I could ease some of the pain you must be suffering, then I would, but they cannot be removed, and tampering with them is likely to kill you just as quickly as removing them. They are as much a part of you now as the weapons you wield and the scars you carry.'

'If you not lying, you are at least hiding something.'

'I am hiding many things.' Lorgar spoke through a smile, deceitless in his regret. 'We will speak of them in time. They are not secrets, merely truths that cannot bloom until the moment is right, and the pieces of this great puzzle begin to fall into place. There is much I do not yet understand myself.'

The World Eaters primarch bared his teeth in a metallic smile. It contained nothing of warmth.

'Back to your ship then, crusader. It was a pleasure to shed blood with you, while it lasted.'

Lorgar nodded, not looking back over his shoulder as he ascended the ramp into his gunship.

‘Farewell, brother.’

Angron watched the gunship leave the docking bay, and streak away towards the *Fidelitas Lex*.

‘Khârn,’ he said quietly. The equerry moved forward from his master’s honour guard, who stood silently in their hulking Terminator armour.

‘Yes?’

‘Lorgar has changed, yet he still keeps his secrets beneath a forked tongue. What is the name of the Word Bearer you duel with?’

‘Argel Tal. The Seventh Captain.’

‘You have known him long, yes?’

‘Decades. We fought together in three compliances. Why do you ask?’

The primarch didn’t answer at once. He reached up to scratch the back of his head. The flesh felt raw, swollen. The headache was worse than usual, coming to a crest. He could feel a trickle of blood worming a warm trail down his neck, running from his ear.

‘We have many months of difficult unity with the Word Bearers ahead of us. Remain vigilant, Khârn. That is all I ask.’

The two warriors duelled the very next night: the sons of the crusader and the gladiator facing each other in the pit, chainaxe against power sword. Argel Tal’s crimson war plate was undecorated, missing the scrolls of faith and devotion he wore in battle. Khârn’s white ceramite was similarly unadorned, but for the chains binding his weapons to his arms.

Both warriors ignored the cheers and cries of their comrades at the pit’s edge. Helmetless, they duelled in the sand, blade cracking against blade.

When their weapons locked again, the two warriors squared against each other, boots grinding back through the sand as they sought leverage. Their faces were inches apart, breathing acid-stinking breath as they struggled to break the deadlock. Argel Tal’s voice betrayed a curious duality, his twin souls speaking through one mouth.

‘You are slow tonight, Khârn. What steals your attention?’

The World Eater redoubled his efforts, muscles straining to throw his enemy back. Argel Tal responded in kind, ichor forming stalactites along his upper teeth.

‘Not slow,’ Khârn forced the words through a sneer. ‘Difficult... to fight... *two* of you.’

Argel Tal gave a toothy grin. As he drew breath to speak, it was all the edge Khârn needed. The World Eater leaned into a turn, letting his adversary

overbalance. The revving chainaxe howled through the air, only to crash against the Word Bearer's golden sword edge yet again.

'Not slow,' he chuckled breathlessly, showing his exhaustion as plainly as Khârn showed his own. 'But not fast enough.'

The accursed implants sent a bolt of jagged pain sawing down the World Eater's spine. Khârn felt one eye flicker, and his left arm spasm in ungainly response. The Butcher's Nails were threatening to take hold now. He disengaged, backing away with his axe raised, taking a moment to spit out the acidic saliva brewing beneath his tongue. Chains rattled against his armour as he came *en garde*.

The chains were a personal tradition, spread even among the other Legions after their popularity had escaped beyond the fighting pits of the World Eaters. Sigismund, First Captain of the Imperial Fists, had taken to the custom with his usual zeal, binding his knightly weapons to his wrists on dense black chains. He'd made an impressive name for himself here in the bowels of the *Conqueror*, duelling with the XII Legion's finest warriors late in the Great Crusade. The Black Knight, they called him, in honour of his prowess, his nobility and his personal heraldry.

The Flesh Tearer was another to earn great glory in the World Eaters pits – Amit, a captain of the Blood Angels, who'd fought with the same savagery and brutality as his hosts. Before Isstvan, Khârn had counted them both among his oath-brothers. When the time came to lay siege to Terra and bring the palace walls tumbling down, he would regret slaying those two warriors above all others.

'Focus,' Argel Tal growled. 'You are drifting, and your skill fades with your attention.'

Khârn disengaged with a twist of his axe blade, and attacked in a series of vicious, howling cuts. Argel Tal wove back, dodging rather than risk missing a block.

The Word Bearer caught the last strike on his sword's edge, and locked Khârn in place again. Both warriors stood unmoving as they pushed against one another with equal force.

'The war to come,' said Khârn. 'Does it not feel ignoble to you? Dishonourable?'

'Honour?' Argel Tal's twin voice was throaty with amusement. 'I do not care about honour, cousin. I care about the truth, and I care about victory.'

Khârn drew breath to reply, just as the chamber's vox crackled live.

'*Captain Khârn? Captain Argel Tal?*'

Both warriors froze. Argel Tal's stillness was born of inhuman control over his body. Khârn was motionless, but not entirely still – he trembled with tics from the Butcher's Nails cooling in the back of his skull.

‘What is it, Lotara?’ he asked.

‘We’re receiving word from the fleet. Lord Aurelian is sending a mass-pulse from all Word Bearers vessels, focused by the Lex. Kor Phaeron’s armada has just launched its assault on Calth.’ She paused, taking a breath. *‘The war in Ultramar has begun.’*

Khârn deactivated his axe and stood in silence.

Argel Tal chuckled, a threatening lion’s purr in his daemonic twin-chorus. ‘It is time, cousin.’

Khârn smiled, though the expression held nothing of amusement. The Butcher’s Nails still hummed in the meat of his mind, flicking out their pulses of pain and irrational anger.

‘Now the Shadow Crusade begins, while Calth burns.’