



THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS

SHADOW OF
THE PAST

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Kalta-Ar despised the tapping of hammer on chisel and chisel on stone almost as much as he detested the sunless sky that seemed to leech out his soul with its emptiness. The ever-present dusk-like glow sapped his reserves of will as much as the desert heat of his home world had once sapped the energy.

'Is there no way to quieten that infernal tapping?' he snapped at Arkula, his second-in-command.

'I don't think so, brother-cha... Apostle.' Arkula handled the new title with all the ease of a fresh initiate with a primed grenade. 'They have to break the stone somehow.'

Both the Dark Apostle and his coryphaeus were clad in ruddy battleplate, all emblems and designs of their former loyalties obscured by the red, the symbols of their renewed allegiance to the true gods painted upon the armour. Together they continued along the top of a half-built wall, surveying the vast construction site around them. The central cloisters had been raised, and the garrison chambers, while a tent city for the slaves spread across the long, shallow hillside. Four small chapels and the central nave of what would be the main shrine of the *Beneficta Diabola* had their foundations laid. Rickety scaffolding clad the white stone of the outer walls, as well as the two high towers that flanked the nave. Slaves crawled, climbed and laboured everywhere, several thousand of them.

The tips of the two pinnacles crackled with energy, drawing in the power of the aether that surrounded the near-deserted moon. Companion rune-stone monoliths on the perimeter gleamed with the dispersed mystical power, keeping at bay the empyrean mass and the predatory denizens that lurked within.

Kalta-Ar looked up again out of habit, thinking to see a glimpse of a distant star. Just the same ruddy formlessness that had swathed everything since their arrival, slowly stirred by strange currents but otherwise featureless.

Thirty armoured figures were stationed at strategic points around the construction, their bolters and heavier weapons held casually, though the Word Bearers legionaries moved with the same alertness as though in a field of battle.

'It is fascinating, that normal humans are so easily cowed,' observed the Dark Apostle. 'Not a whip or rod in sight, and yet they break their backs for us. Simple threat is enough to bind them to our slightest will.'

'And no chains are needed, nor fence, Apostle,' said Arkula. His gaze moved outside the encompassing walls to a spread of desolation as featureless as the sky, except for the deep furrows of the quarries. Lines of rune-etched barrier stones flanked the causeway between the delving and the *Beneficta Diabola*, protecting a steady progression of naked figures dragging blocks of stones, or pulling empty sleds back to the quarry. Another ten-strong squad of Kalta-Ar's legionaries patrolled the crude road.

'Give them a little food and water and they are happy to endure the worst debasements of body and pride,' said Kalta-Ar. 'They are bred for subservience. As it was ordered by the gods on Colchis, so again will it be on Sicarus by the will of Lorgar Aurelian.'

Mention of the primarch's new capital world drew the eye of both warriors to the artificial mound beyond the far side of the growing temple-settlement. North, Kalta-Ar had dubbed it, for lack of any other means of navigating. The constructed hill was surrounded by its own perimeter of ward-runes, separated by less than a kilometre of open ground naked to the empyrean. At the summit, almost as high as the peaks of the cathedral-town's ward-needles, loomed a great archway of black and gold.

'When will the Urizen come?' asked Arkula. 'Apostle,' he added quickly.

'When the work is complete.'

A giant armoured in dark red hurried towards them up a nearby stone stair, his bolter in one hand. The pair awaited him at the top of the steps, where he halted, banging fist against his chest in salute.

'Dark Apostle, Brother Rigana is missing,' reported Isaikash.

Kalta-Ar's attention snapped to the half-built dormitories in the north-east quadrant where the named warrior was meant to be stationed.

'Missing?' said Arkula. 'Be more specific, brother-sergeant.'

'I cannot, brother-coryphaus,' said the legionary. 'He did not answer the hourly roll call and I investigated. He is not at his post, and I can find no sign of him. He is not answering any comms.'

'And there is still no sign of what happened to Hesta-Pek, Gesuat and Takla-

Gad?' demanded Kalta-Ar. 'That is a total of four legionaries lost in the last twelve hours. This is unacceptable!'

'What can we do, brother-Apostle?' said Isaikash.

Kalta-Ar pulled out the wickedly serrated sacrificial dagger from his belt, its cruel blade shimmering without starlight or sun to reflect. He started down the steps and pointed the dagger towards the centre of the complex, at the original rites chamber where mouldering bones were heaped in pits to either side. A dance of wyrdflame lit the edges of the mystic circles within the open chamber.

'This is daemonsign. The wards must be faltering. Bring me another fifty slaves.'

Letting the corpse fall, its arterial spray spattering the ritual circle in which he stood, Kalta-Ar studied the witch-fire atop the ward pinnacles. He could see no difference to the wan green flames and the shifting aura that connected across the site. A quick survey of the blood-channels etched into the floor of the broad chamber found no blockages - glistening red meta-geometry surrounded him. He even inspected the runes carved into the blade itself, but there was not a mark upon the bloodied knife. The runes shimmered with warp power, coils of tenebrous energy floating from the razor edge.

He gestured for Arkula to bring the next sacrifice. The Word Bearer hauled one of the slaves to its feet by the wrist, almost pulling the limb from its joint. Only a murmur of pain came in response. Kalta-Ar took the wretch's chin between finger and thumb, turning the face one way and the other, looking for some sign of vitality. There was fear, but not much. The slave looked dead already for all the vigour it displayed.

'Perhaps we have made them too docile,' he remarked, slashing open the slave's throat. Blood fountained across his armour as he tossed the rag doll of a carcass away. 'The gods thrive on pain and fear, ambition and despair.'

'They exist without hope, Apostle,' said Isaikash. 'With nothing to live for, perhaps their souls are too weak to please the gods.'

Kalta-Ar considered this as he beckoned for another.

'Did not the great Urizen and Kor Phaeron overturn the altars of the Covenant to punish their laggardly rituals?' said Arkula.

A scream cut across the vox, silencing any reply.

A scream, drawn out, agonised, no sound Kalta-Ar had ever expected to hear from a legionary. It lasted fully five seconds before abruptly ending.

The signal-ident of the transmission came from Brother Kai-Alak.

'Aakas, Hora, Apall-Af,' the Dark Apostle reeled off the names of the closest legionaries. 'Investigate! All brothers, stand at your guard, and watch the slaves.'

It took half a minute for the three legionaries to close in on Kai-Alak's last position. Kalta-Ar paced for the full thirty seconds, agitated.

'Kai-Alak is dead,' Hora told them over the vox.

'Dead, not missing?' Arkula demanded.

'Definitely dead,' said Aakas. *'You'd better see for yourself, Apostle.'*

* * *

The first element of the scene that drew Kalta-Ar was not the blood and body parts, or the broken pieces of armour scattered across the bare stone floor. It was the slaves. Seven of them, standing compliantly to one side, heads bowed but with their eyes fixed on the remains. Two questions immediately surfaced through the tumult of the Dark Apostle's thoughts.

'Why are they still alive, and why aren't they terrified?' he asked nobody in particular. Arkula attempted to answer but Kalta-Ar stopped him with a raised hand. 'I am not interested in your theories, coryphaus. Not yet. Let us observe a little more before we draw conclusions.'

The markings on the broken pieces of armour confirmed that the wearer had been Brother Kai-Alak. He had not only been dismembered and decapitated, but the rest of the remains had been utterly shredded.

'Gods...' muttered Isaikash.

'What have you found?' said Kalta-Ar.

'I was just thinking that we heard him screaming,' explained the legionary. 'He was alive for a while, feeling everything as this was done to him.'

'I think it cut off his arms and legs and then went to work on the rest of him,' added Arkula, with more relish than was entirely appropriate. He picked up half a helm, cloven neatly in twain. Brain matter and blood spilled onto the floor. 'It saved his head for last.'

'They must have seen what happened.' Hora pointed at the slaves, hammers and lever bars still in their hands. 'They were here when we arrived.'

Kalta-Ar approached the closest and looked down at its grimy face. He activated the external vocaliser of his war-plate, the volume dialled down for personal address.

'Did you see what did this?'

The slave nodded dumbly.

'Tell me what you saw.'

'A shadow, lord of lords,' said the slave. It moved a wisp of greying hair out of its face and gazed up into the Dark Apostle's helm lenses. 'A shadow picked him up and cut him to pieces.'

'It has to be a daemon,' said Apall-Af, his bolter pointing to the doorway and then the unglazed windows as if expecting attack. 'Something that came through the wards.'

'The wards are sound,' said Kalta-Ar.

'Perhaps somewhere on the peri—'

'The wards are sound!' Kalta-Ar calmed himself and regarded the slave, thoughts turning slowly into conclusions.

'What if it was a power that has already been summoned?' he considered aloud. 'Something being sustained and hidden *within* the wards already.'

'Sustained by whom?' asked Isaikash. 'The slaves?'

'Some kind of part, perhaps. Maybe they think it will save them. Why else would the daemon not attack them? Why take on an armoured legionary rather than these helpless thralls?'

'What have you done?' demanded Arkula, looming over the slaves. They moved away from him a little, but showed as little emotion as normal. 'What have you unleashed, you gods-damned cretins?'

They stared with vacuous gazes, either not comprehending his meaning, or unable to articulate their response.

'I want a full search of the entire complex.' Arkula thrust a finger towards the door. 'Every room, every hall, every cellar and vault. If they are hiding something, we will find it.'

'Wait,' ordered Kalta-Ar when the others started to move. 'There is another way.' He held up the ritual blade and looked down at the slave he had spoken to.

'You are going to confess your wrongs, or you will know pain greater than anything you have lived through thus far.'

There was a spark of a reaction, a moment of fear.

'I know nothing, lord of lords,' said the slave. It backed away a step, holding up a hand. 'I tell you what I saw. The shadow, it tore apart your warrior. It threw him up and took him to pieces. I saw nothing else.'

The others started to chorus their affirmatives of this position.

'Enough of your lies, scum,' said Arkula. He slapped a hand back across the face of the nearest slave, slamming it into the rough wall. The skull cracked hard, leaving blood on the pale plaster.

Kalta-Ar had expected an outburst - cries of anger, of pain. Not one of the

slaves even moved towards their injured companion. He saw that their attention was fixed not on the wounded slave, nor Arkula, nor the Dark Apostle. They looked at something behind and above him with a mixture of growing horror and disturbing smiles.

He turned quickly, pulling free his crozius. The other legionaries responded with him, bolters raised.

A thing like a shadow waited on top of the wall. It was impossible to make out its actual shape, though there seemed something vaguely humanoid about it. Before any command could leave the Dark Apostle's lips, it sprang upwards. Silhouetted against the ruddy sky, the shadow fragmented with an ear-splitting screech. Dozens of winged shapes fell upon the Word Bearers, beaks like plasteel blades slashing at their armour. Hora went down under the first flurry, losing an arm as he toppled, his war-plate scattering like pieces of torn paper.

'Fall back,' barked Arkula, his commander's instincts taking over in the face of the unnatural apparition. His tone brooked no argument and even Kalta-Ar found himself responding, retreating swiftly through the door.

Bolters roaring, the Word Bearers closed together and followed.

'Stop wasting your ammunition!' snapped Arkula. 'We have little enough as it is. Do you think bolt-rounds will stop this creature?'

The Word Bearers ceased firing. They darted looks towards Kalta-Ar as they closed around their Dark Apostle, seeking insight from their spiritual leader. He held up the sacrificial blade like a shield, smoke-like wisps of power curling across his gauntlet.

'It's in the eastern repository!' The shout over the vox came from Hasda on the other side of the settlement. A crackle of another transmission cut short, the only sound a strangled gurgle.

Bolter fire echoed from behind the Dark Apostle's group and they turned, weapons ready.

'Who is firing?' demanded Arkula. 'Reports, for all that is holy. Remember you are legionaries.'

'There's something moving through the first vaults.' Ghoa-Lok spoke hastily, his words coming fast in a flow of combat stimulants rather than panic. *'I think it's beneath—'*

'A black pool just swallowed Ghoa-Lok, coryphaus. We are falling back along the southern transitorium,' Sergeant Dario continued tersely between short gasps. *'There's something ahead of us. It's seeping through the walk of the southern*

annex. Like oil. We are turning north again, via the presidia.'

'The slaves are att—' a desperate shout from Alekas alerted them to a fresh danger. Bolter fire rang out again and hoarse shouts replied.

'I think this daemon is not so powerful as it pretends,' said Arkula. 'Why does it try to attack us one at a time? Nothing conjured by these wretches could really be a threat to your power, Apostle.'

'You have a plan, coryphaus?'

'Do not fight with bolts and blades what we can overcome with faith,' said the second-in-command. 'It is a daemon, my brother. Banish it, or - better yet - bind it to your will. Turn it back upon the miserable curs that thought to trouble us with the detritus of their worthless prayers.'

'Apostle, the cathedral is not safe for us,' said Isaikash. He broke from the circle and headed towards the corridor on the other side of the chamber. 'If the daemon does not come for us, the slaves will.'

'You suggest that we run from unarmed scum?' Arkula snarled. 'We are not abandoning the *Beneficta Diabola*.'

'The grandest tower can be swallowed by enough grains of sand,' said Kalta-Ar.

Though the idea of using one of the many binding rituals appealed, it took time for such ceremonies. He was not so dismissive of the daemon's power as Arkula either, knowing that all manner of powerful entities were jealous of the construction being raised in honour of the gods' most favoured son. A rival prince would need only the smallest opportunity to strike a blow in this fashion - a creature perhaps beyond his knowledge to control.

The Apostle drew his plasma pistol, though more from habit than any confidence it would be of use against the spectre that hunted them. 'A wise head rules the heart and knows when to concede to greater minds. We do not have the numbers to quell a slave revolt, nor the expertise to defeat this daemon-predator. We will withdraw to the portal bridge and seek the aid of the Urizen.'

The order was transmitted across the vox, though how many of Kalta-Ar's command remained he did not know. Scattered contact reports claimed the apparition was roaming the south-eastern chambers and passageways, which suited the Dark Apostle. His route lay north, though the speed with which the daemon had earlier relocated its manifestation forestalled any hope that they would progress entirely unmolested. The continuing, sporadic weapons-fire from across the half-built settlement also warned of the spreading slave rebellion.

Led by the Dark Apostle, they ran, heading directly for the north gate. They passed through halls lined with partially sculpted statues, the slaves that had

laboured at the figures nowhere to be seen. A threatening silence punctuated by the thud of their boots, distant shouts, the retort of bolters and the hiss of dead vox-links replaced the tick-tap-tick-tap that had irritated Kalta-Ar.

Heading into an antechamber, the knot of Word Bearers came upon a surge of slaves spilling into the opposite doorway. Where before they had been dull-eyed mannequins, now their features were twisted with desperate anger. Frustration boiled into rage, Kalta-Ar's finger tightened on the trigger of his plasma pistol before he gave thought to the consequences. The ball of energy slammed into the closest slave, incinerating it from groin to throat, the burning remains hurled into its companions.

'Fists and blades!' roared Arkula, sprinting into the suddenly howling mob. The warrior crashed into the slaves, trampling the first under armoured boots, lifting a second by the throat to dash its head against the wall.

The others followed swiftly on the commander's heels, armoured fingers breaking bone and pulverising flesh. Kalta-Ar slashed and stabbed with the sacrificial knife, panting with each blow. The ritual blade burned with inner light as the lifeforce of its victims seeped into the etched metal, the escaping soulstuff enriching the Dark Apostle with growing vigour. He grinned as he cut his way through the press, emerging from the back of the mob into an empty corridor. Around his brothers, bodies were piled against the walls, distended and distorted by inhuman blows.

Elation lasted only a moment. A tenebrous mass billowed through the antechamber, twitching the limbs and dead eyes of the slaves with its passage. Mouths with dozens of lightning-fangs opened in the cloud as it fell upon Apall-Af. It seemed as though an invisible blade punctured the Word Bearer's gut and lifted him, erupting through his backpack in a shower of ceramite splinters, shattered bone and blood spray. Armour plates fractured as maws sank their insubstantial teeth into the legionary, snapping limbs and rending bloody welts into the flesh within.

His agonised bellows blanketed the vox for a second until Karla-Ar cut the link. Arkula threw himself at the daemon, chainsword snarling. A bladed limb snared out, taking off his head with an almost contemptuous swipe.

'With me!' cried Kalta-Ar. The Dark Apostle turned and ran again, barrelling along the narrow passageways that led along the northern wall. He heard the thunder of his subordinates' footsteps just behind, the wheeze of powered armour pushed to its limits. He reasoned that if the daemon had been summoned within the boundary of the rune-shield, perhaps it might not be able to pass without.

Of course, that left them prey to the other warp denizens that haunted the locale, but the Dark Apostle was willing to risk an unknown threat to escape a very definite one.

He reached a circular window, its chiselled frame ready to accept metalwork in the form of the Eightfold Star of the gods. A guttural, wet noise from Aakas' vox betrayed his loss to the pursuing daemon just metres behind. The Dark Apostle changed direction, bounding up to the sill of the window. He did not look back as he plunged out into the ruddy gloom. A frisson of static washed through him, a sign that he had passed through the boundary wards.

Sparing not a glance behind, eyes fixed on the arch-tipped promontory ahead, Kalta-Ar pounded across the open ground. Every step was accompanied by the expectation of a semi-substantial claw sliding into his back, or the tell-tale flutter in his thoughts that warned of a daemoniac gaze falling upon him.

He heard the exhalations of a rebreather and finally spared a look back.

Isaikash was just a few paces behind. Beyond him a scattering of other red-armoured figures emerged from doors and windows, sprinting across the featureless expanse. Of the apparition, there was no sign.

Kalta-Ar did not slow until he came to the angular ward-stones that circumscribed the summit of the hill. Within the ring, more Word Bearers oversaw the continuing labours of other slaves piling stones upon each other to raise a temple about the portal gate.

One wore an ornate suit of Terminator armour, its massive armour plates marked with the symbols of a first acolyte. The sigils were known to Kalta-Ar.

'Marduk!' he called out, scattering slaves from his path. 'Where is the Urizen?'

'Calm yourself, brother,' said Marduk, approaching the Dark Apostle with hand raised to halt him.

'You forget your rank, *first acolyte*,' growled Kalta-Ar, coming to a stop a few metres from Marduk. His brothers pounded into the arch-temple and turned, weapons trained back towards the *Beneficta Diabola*.

'I am here by the command of Masters Jarulek and Erebus, and I speak with their authority, Kalta-Ar.' Marduk's own guard gathered about him as he continued. 'What is the meaning of this intrusion?'

'Something powerful, summoned by the slaves, I think. A daemon of considerable wrath. It has already slain half of my company.'

An angry growl issued from the first acolyte as he raised a long-bladed chainsword. 'And you led it here, to our Lord's abode?'

While Marduk snapped commands to his warriors, Kalta-Ar found Isaikash among his brethren.

'How many are left?' he asked his fellow Word Bearer.

'Seventeen have made it to the mound, Apostle. I see no others on the plain.'

Kalta-Ar looked out across the expanse between the hill and the *Beneficta Diabola*. Here and there an armoured body sprawled on the ruddy ground. Dark mists formed close to the corpses, daemonstuff drawn by the escaping souls. Soon other things would come to feed.

'There, Apostle!' The shout came from the right, where Ukna-Tav pointed to the north-western corner of the site. A Word Bearer vaulted a low wall, a stream of naked humans flowing after. The legionary turned and fired his bolter, scything down the first handful of slaves to venture after him.

As he turned to continue for the mound, the ground beneath the Word Bearer darkened. Like tar bubbling from a pit, seeping blackness flowed up his legs, swiftly engulfing him to the waist. The legionary fired down into the morass but his bolts simply disappeared without exploding. The thick blackness continued upwards, rivulets of shadow that snaked along his arms and around his throat.

Growing, the umbra lifted the legionary from the ground, snapping an arm at the elbow, the bolter within his grip falling from the fingers. Kalta-Ar could not suppress an empathic wince as a leg contorted acutely, assuming an unnatural angle. The legionary's vox was clearly not functioning, and he was thankful they were spared more inhuman noises of painful death. Limb-snapping contortions wracked the armoured figure, almost tying the warrior into a knot, ceramite broken, bones shattered.

The daemon-shade dropped the remains to the floor and heaved itself together into the approximation of a human form, though twice as tall as the legionary it had just slain. Tenebrous wings flowed from its back as it advanced, arms ending in spear-like talons.

'What have you brought upon us?' Marduk's voice at his shoulder made Kalta-Ar turn, hearts racing. He dared only a glance at the first acolyte before returning his gaze to the spectre advancing with slow, grim purpose across the level plain.

'I had no choice,' said the Dark Apostle. 'It would have slain us all and come for you without warning.'

'Ah, so it was for our wellbeing, was it?'

'Look at it, brother! This is beyond us. We need the Urizen to face such a creature. You must call him.'

'Must?'

'This is not the time for your vanity, Marduk,' snapped Kalta-Ar. The threat of being ripped to pieces by an unstoppable daemon outweighed any trepidation at offending one of the First Chaplain's favoured servants. He pointed to the dormant portal arch. 'Can you reach Lorgar?'

'The primarch has... higher concerns than your survival, Kalta-Ar.'

The bark of bolters drew their attention back to the ring of wardstones, where Kalta-Ar's warriors met the incoming apparition with a hail of fire. Bolt-rounds detonated across its form, but the fire of their fury disappeared into its darkness.

As it neared, the daemon fluctuated, its smoky exterior becoming like a blizzard, a creature of whiteness with two ebon-black eyes. Forks of black lightning leapt from an outstretched hand, rippling through the body of a Word Bearer. Greasy smoke issuing from rents in his war-plate, the legionary collapsed.

'We have to fall back across the portal bridge,' said Kalta-Ar. 'We must fetch Lorgar.'

'Fetch, Kalta-Ar?'

The voice came from behind them, as pure as molten gold in the Dark Apostle's soul. Its tones lifted his spirit in an instant, filling him with warmth.

He turned, as did the others around him. The archway glowed with power, showing a vista of a gigantic citadel-cathedral through the haze within its black frame. In front stood a gigantic figure, thrice the height of the legionaries, a golden-skinned entity wrapped in cloak and robe of flaming rune-shapes that swirled from its body. In one hand it held a wickedly spiked mace that throbbed with black power. The other bore a rod of intricately wound metal, tipped with a three-eyed skull layered with golden sigils that constantly weaved about each other. Eyes of uniform azure burrowed into Kalta-Ar.

'I heard your woe, my son.'

The voice washed through the Dark Apostle like a soothing balm, stilling his agitation, strengthening his resolve. Still, the presence of his primarch was near overwhelming and he fell to his knees, head bowed.

'My Lord Aurelian, forgive my weaknesses. A creature of daemonic spite has disrupted the great works here.'

'I see no daemon.'

Kalta-Ar glanced back towards his brothers. The entity that had pursued them had reached the top of the hill amid a storm of bolter fire. It cast aside legionaries with sweeps of glittering claws, leaving tattered remains draped across the stonework of the outer shrine.

'This is no daemon.' Lorgar raised his rod, beckoning to the blood-stained whirlwind tearing through the last of the Dark Apostle's warriors. ***'Come to me. Brother.'***

With a last flurry of activity that turned another legionary to shards of ceramite and ribbons of flesh, the apparition coalesced into a recognisable figure. It was of equal height to the daemon primarch, clad in black battleplate with long-taloned gauntlets. A pair of wings stretched from its ornate backpack, fashioned as intricate metallic raven feathers. The face was as pale as snow, gaunt, with eyes as dark as coal, framed by shoulder-length black hair.

Kalta-Ar felt his breath dying in his lungs as he looked up at the unmistakable features of Corvus Corax, the primarch of the Raven Guard. A flurry of questions flooded his thoughts but all remained unanswered as Corax spoke.

'What has happened to you, brother?'

'I have ascended,' said Lorgar. He indicated Corax with a twitch of his rod. ***'I might ask the same of you.'***

The Ravenlord strode forwards, intent on Lorgar Aurelian. Kalta-Ar and his warriors scattered before him, grateful to be free of his wrath. Marduk and his coterie closed about their primarch but a look sent them away.

'I am what I always have been,' said Corax. 'I am vengeance incarnate. I am justice delivered. This place, beyond the veil, has revealed what we all are. Underneath the veneer of humanity our father crafted for us, we are of the warp.'

'Have you come to make oath to the powers that are your true creator?'

'No. I swore to destroy all Chaos taint from the galaxy. You will be the first fallen brother to die beneath my blades.'

'I am not the creature you fought at Isstvan,' said Lorgar, raising his mace.

'Nor am I!'

Kalta-Ar barely followed the lunge of Corax, so swift it was. A black wind threw him aside as dark fire crackled from the rod of Lorgar. With a thunderous shockwave that hurled the Word Bearers to the ground, the two demigods clashed.

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After a long life of bloodshed and devotion to the True Gods there was little that awed Kalta-Ar. The sight of the two primarchs battling within the empyrean sphere left him shocked and breathless.

Infused with the raw primordial force, the combatants were ablaze with power. Corax seemed a towering storm wreathed in white lightning, the cloud formed of

multitudinous ravens. Their cawing was deafening, the flash of their talons and beaks the spark of the tempest.

Into the shadow Lorgar rose like a fireball, alight with a tornado of burning rune shapes. Meteoric sigils rained down on the raven tempest, cleaving ember-edged furrows through the dense mass. They slammed into the buildings around the bridge-arch, shattering masonry, incinerating the corpses of Corax's victims.

The Ravenlord struck back, hails of flaring claws ripping the air itself, leaving rents through the rune-robe of the Urizen. Each stroke left a shriek in its aftermath that shredded the nerves as much as the talons shredded Lorgar's immaterial form.

Kalta-Ar flinched when the sweeping head of the Word Bearer's mace slammed into the chest of his storm-wreathed foe. The impact was greater than any thunderclap, levelling the walls around them.

Rolling to his back, shattered stone pouring from his armour, the Dark Apostle watched the titanic combatants soar past, Corax with a quartet of gleaming spear-talons driven through Lorgar's throat. The Urizen tried to lash out with his mace but was held close by the Ravenlord's inhuman grip.

Together they crashed to the ground, their impact flattening again the few Word Bearers that had regained their feet.

'The portal-bridge!'

Marduk's shout drew Kalta-Ar's attention to the wavering energy field within the archway. Dark sparks rippled across its fluctuating surface. It was visibly weakening.

'We cannot be trapped here,' declared the Dark Apostle stepping towards the waning portal.

'It is sustained by the Urizen's will,' declared Marduk, intercepting him. 'It means our master is losing his power!'

The two primarchs had assumed fully humanoid form again in the heart of the crater their fall had made. Lorgar's left shoulder sagged, his rod swaying low in his grasp. Rune-shapes crawled across his form, no longer a robe of office but forming armoured plates etched with warp-symbols.

Corax flexed claws like sword blades, his expression pitiless as he took a step towards Lorgar.

Marduk opened fire.

The flare of his combi-bolter hit the Ravenlord in the chest and face, a welter of detonations that rocked his stride. Kalta-Ar fired his plasma pistol on instinct, the blast hitting Corax in the midriff, splashing cerulean energy across his ornate

black war-plate.

Other fire joined it, missiles and more bolts from Marduk's guard.

Lorgar summoned a nimbus of power and threw out a shield of force that lifted Corax from his feet, buckling his wings in the unearthly hurricane. The Ravenlord became a flock once more of fire-eyed black birds, but the swell of Lorgar's will continued to hurl the other primarch's incarnations upwards, scattering them to the sky.

'Quickly, our lord,' shouted Marduk.

Lorgar lumbered towards them, his wounds streaming tiny crimson runes like blood.

Kalta-Ar looked up. The Ravenlord gathered again into a single mass, a dark comet headed directly for them.

The Urizen was first through the portal, his massive frame leaving a shadow of his passing as the other Word Bearers dashed through after. Kalta-Ar lunged the last few strides, throwing himself headlong into the miasma under the arch as chill shade swallowed him.

He found himself in a large chamber, colourful mosaic underfoot, the walls covered with fresh murals, white vaulted ceiling and domes far above. Part of the *Templum Inficio*. He had no time for his surroundings, eyes drawn back to the gate.

Shrieking, the raven flock scratched and pecked, but they could not pass the warp barrier.

Lorgar glared at the apparition on the far side, chest heaving as though out of breath, his head crowned with a halo of black warp fronds.

Corax assumed his mortal shape again, one cheek bloodied and bruised, his eye almost closed. There was much damage to his armour, but he leaned close to the portal, eyes boring through the divide.

'I have your scent now, Lorgar,' growled the Ravenlord. His face contorted with monstrous rage. 'I will find you, Lorgar! I will destroy you and every vessel you have filled with your taint!'

Lorgar staggered away and the portal arch fell dull, leaving only bare stone within its pillars.

'We can assemble a force and return, our lord,' said Marduk, hurrying after the primarch.

'All is not lost,' promised Kalta-Ar, not wishing to seem any less dedicated. 'I will rebuild the *Beneficta Diabola*.'

Their entreaties continued as they followed Lorgar through the corridors and halls, heading towards the centre of the grand construction spreading across their new capital on Sicarus. Stairs took them high, to the tower at the heart of everything. Black doors opened at Lorgar's approach and he strode within, no word uttered, no backward glance.

With a noise that echoed in Kalta-Ar's soul as much as his ears, the doors slammed shut, leaving him and Marduk on the threshold. There was no handle, no keyhole, nothing by which they might open the edifice.

A white Colchisian rune burned into life upon the door, and another.

'Deny fate,' read Kalta-Ar. He turned to the first acolyte. 'What does that mean?'

Marduk took several steps back and looked towards the pinnacle of the otherworldly tower. Golden fire burned from the summit.

Others were hurrying from the surrounding cloisters, demanding to know what had happened. Kalta-Ar recognised Kor Phaeron amongst them and suppressed a groan.

'What does this herald?' asked one of the approaching Word Bearers.

'We wait for his return,' replied Marduk. 'Until then, the great work must continue.'