



THE HORUS HERESY

# THE LIGHTNING TOWER

*Dan Abnett*

LIMITED EDITION

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**THE LIGHTNING TOWER**

*Graham McNeill*

**THE DARK KING**

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# THE LIGHTNING TOWER

*by Dan Abnett*

*What are you afraid of? What are you really afraid of?*

THERE WAS ONCE a fine palace, and it sat like a crown of light upon the top of the world. This was in the latter days, when mankind left his birth rock for the second time, to chase a destiny denied him in a previous epoch.

The artisan masters of the many rival Masonic guilds had raised the palace up, block by gilded block, to be a statement of unity, regal and unequivocal. After a dreary, lightless Age of Strife, the warring tribes and creeds of Terra had been alloyed under one rule, and the palace was intended to symbolise that staggering achievement. All the petty dynasts and ethnarchs, all the clan-nations and gene-septs, all the despots and pan-continental tyrants, had been quelled or crushed, overthrown or annexed. Some, the smartest and most prescient, had offered terms and been embraced to the bosom of the new rule. Better fealty than the wrath of the warriors in thunder armour.

Better submission than the enmity of the world's new master.

It was said that once you had seen him, or heard him speak, you were never in doubt again. He was the one, and had always been the one. He had been the Emperor long before there was any such office to take. No one knew his birth name, because he had always, naturally, been the Emperor.

Even the artisan masters of the Masonic guilds, famous for their sanctimonious craft wars and vainglorious quarrels, shut up and, in concert, built the palace for him.

It was monumental. It was not so much an edifice as a handcrafted landmass. The artisan masters built it upon Terra's greatest mountain range, and transformed the monstrous peaks into its bulwarks. It towered above a world laid to waste by centuries of war and perdition, and though that world was being rebuilt, with wondrous cities and architectural marvels blooming in the new age of Unity, nothing could match its magnificence.

For it was beautiful, a euphoric vision of gold and silver. It was said that, when they had finished their task, the artisan masters of the Masonic guilds set down their tools and wept.

By the time it was complete, it was the largest single man-made structure in known space. Its footings sank deep into the planet's mantle, its towers probed the airless limits of the atmosphere. It owned the words 'the palace' wholly, without any need for qualification, as if no other palaces existed.

He had blemished that glory. He had raised dark curtain walls around the golden halls, and cased the soaring towers in skins of armour ten metres thick. He had stripped away the jewelled facades and the crystelephantine ornamentation, the delicate minarets and the burnished cupolas, and in their places he had implanted uncountable turrets and ordnance emplacements. He had dug mighty earthworks out of the surrounding lowlands, and fortified them with a million batteries. He had yoked platforms into synchronous orbits to guard from above, their weapon banks armed and trained, day and night. He had put his men upon the walls, armoured in gold and set for the coming war.

His name was Dorn, and he was not proud of his work.

VADOK SINGH, THE warmason, had a habit of stroking architectural plans as he laid them out, as if they were a beloved pet.

'Necessity,' he said, his favourite word, stroking out the revised schemata of the Dhawalagiri elevation.

'It's ugly,' said Dorn. He stood away from the table, leaning against one of the planning chamber's thick columns, his arms folded across his broad chest.

'Ugly is what they will do if they find the Annapurna Gate weak and flimsy,' Singh replied. He stood back and lit his *boc* pipe from a taper, allowing his flock of slaves to finish laying out the designs and adjusting the brass armature of the viewing lenses that would magnify details and project them onto the chamber wall for closer examination.

Dorn shrugged. 'It's still ugly. The orbis and lazulite work encrusting that gate took Menzo of Travert thirty years to complete. Pilgrims flock here simply to see it. They say it surpasses even the Eternity Gate in its aesthetic.'

'Aesthetic, now?' Singh smiled. He began to pace, trailing blue smoke from the

bowl of his long-stemmed pipe. His slaves followed him up and down the chamber, like a timorous litter of young following their mother. Singh was a tall man, taller than the primarch, but skeletally thin. His guild gene-bred their bloodline to favour height for purposes of surveying and overseeing. 'I do so love our conversations, Rogal. They are quite contrary. You, the warrior, and me, the craftsman, and you lecture me on aesthetics.'

'I'm not lecturing,' Dorn replied. He was aware of Sigismund and Archamus in the corner of the great room, stiffening at the warmason's use of his forename. Dorn would hear about 'proper respect and protocol' again later.

'Of course you're not,' said Singh, 'but it is a necessity. How many Legions does the Upstart have with him now?'

Dorn heard Sigismund rise to his feet. He turned and stared at the first captain of the Imperial Fists. Sigismund glowered back for a second, then left the chamber.

Dorn glanced back at the warmason. 'Too many,' he said.

Singh held out a long, spindly arm in the direction of the schemata. 'So?'

'Begin work tomorrow at sunrise. Dismantle the gate with care, and store the dismantled elements in the vaults. We will put the work back when this is done.'

Singh nodded.

*We will put everything back,* thought Dorn. *When this is done, we will put everything back the way it was.*

A KATABATIC WIND was coming in off the lower bulwarks that night. The palace was so immense, the precipice walls bred their own microclimate. Greasy stars swam in the heat ripple of the palace's new reactors. The void shields were being tested again.

*Not a palace. Not the palace anymore, a fortress.*

Some of those sullen stars were orbital platforms, catching the last backscatter of the sunlight as Terra turned. Dorn put on a fur-edged robe that had been in his possession since his adolescence on Inwit, and went out to walk the parapets of the Dhawalagiri prospect, to dwell upon its beauty one last time. It was one of the last sections of the palace that remained untouched. Adamantium armour plates, drab prestressed rockcrete and auto-turrets had yet to blight its ethereal

lines.

Soon, though. From the wall, Dorn could see the half a million campfires of the Masonic host, the labour army that would invade the prospect come sunrise with their mallets and chisels and cranes.

The robe had been his grandfather's, though Dorn had long since understood that no ties of blood linked him to the Inwit ice-caste that had raised him. He had been created from another genetic line, that most singular line, in a sterile vault deep beneath him in the buried core of the palace.

*Not a palace. Not the palace anymore, a fortress.*

Dorn had been built to rule, built to assist in his father's tireless ambitions, built to make the hard decisions. He had been made as a primarch, one of only twenty in the galaxy, engineered by the master architect of mankind, the arch-mason of genetic code.

*The Imperium needs many things, but foremost it needs the ability to protect itself, to attack when necessary. That's why I gave it twenty strong teeth in its mouth.*

Attacking was a remarkably easy thing to do. Dorn's physical prowess humbled all but twenty human beings in creation, and those twenty were his father and his nineteen brothers. In Dorn's opinion, the real art was knowing when not to attack. His grandfather, the old Inwit sire, patriarch of the ice-hive clan, had taught him that.

Dorn had been the seventh lost son to be reclaimed. By the time his father's forces found him, he had become a system warlord in his own right, ruling the Inwit Cluster as the head of the House of Dorn. His grandfather had been dead forty winters, but still the warlord had slept with the fur-edged robe across his body at night. His people had called him 'emperor' until the true meaning of that title had been demonstrated by a thousand warships in the Inwit sky. Dorn had gone out to meet his father aboard *Phalanx*, one ship against thousands, but what a ship: a fortress. His father had been impressed. Dorn had always excelled in the construction of fortresses.

That was why Dorn had returned to Terra with his gene-sire. Out of love, out of devotion, out of obedience, yes, but most of all, out of necessity, damn Singh. The stars had turned over, and Chaos had spilled out from under them. The

brightest of all had fallen and the unthinkable, the heretical, had become fact.

The Imperium was attacking itself. The Warmaster, for reasons Dorn was quite at a loss to fathom, had turned upon their father, and was committing his forces to all-out war. That war would come to Terra. There was no question.

It would come. Terra needed to be ready. The palace needed to be ready. His father had asked him, as a personal boon, to return to Terra and fortify it for war.

No better man for the task. No better master of defences. Dorn and his Fists, appointed the Emperor's praetorians, could fend off any attack.

Below him, the halls of Terra were silent, and the walls deep. The only sound was the distant, eternal hum of the Astronomican. The Palace Dorn had armoured and defaced sat like a dark crown on the top of the world.

Rogal Dorn had built many of the finest strongholds in creation: the city fortresses on Zavamunda, the pylon spire of Gallant, the donjons along the Ruthan Marches. Impregnable bastions all, palaces for governor lords to rule from. None of them had been so essential as this fortification. None of them had been as painful to accomplish. It had been like blotting out the light or draining a sea. The bright glory of his father's triumph, the enduring monument to Unity, had been entombed inside a crude shell of utilitarian defence.

All because of Horus, because of the brightest bastard son, the bringer of new strife.

Dorn heard stone splinter. He looked down. He had punched his fist, his Imperial fist, through a block of stone in the parapet. He had barely registered the impact. The block was pulverised.

'My lord, is everything all right?'

Archamus had shadowed him from the planning chamber. Never so volatile as Sigismund, Archamus was the master of Dorn's huscarl retinue.

There was a worried look on Archamus's face.

'Just venting my emotions,' Dorn said.

Archamus regarded the splintered block. 'Making work for Singh's artisans, then?'

'Something like that.'

Archamus nodded. He hesitated, and looked out over the high walls towards the distant earthworks of the Mahabarat. 'You have wrought a wonder, you know.'

‘I have ruined one.’

‘I know you hate it, but it had to be so. And no one could have done it better.’

Dorn sighed. ‘You’re kind, old friend, but my heart is lead. This should never have been necessary. I search the limits of my imagination, and still I can conceive of nothing that begins to explain this war. Pride and ambition, insult, jealousy? They are not enough, not nearly enough, not for a primarch. They are too petty and mortal to drive a primarch to such extremity. They might provoke an argument, a feud at the worst. They would not split the galaxy in half.’

Dorn looked up at the night sky. ‘And yet, against all reason, he comes.’

‘Guilliman will stop him.’

‘Roboute is far away.’

‘Russ, then. The Lion. The Khan.’

Dorn shook his head. ‘I don’t think they’ll stop him either. I think he’ll roll on until he reaches us.’

‘Then we’ll stop him,’ said Archamus. ‘Won’t we, sir?’

‘Of course we will. I just wish—’

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You wish what, sir?’ Archamus asked.

‘Nothing.’

The wind suddenly pulled at Dorn’s fur-edged robe. Above them, the shields went out and then test fired again.

‘Can I ask you a question, sir?’ asked Archamus.

‘Of course.’

‘Who are you really afraid of?’

*CONSIDER THE QUESTION, Rogal Dorn. The first axiom of defence is to understand who you defend against. What are you afraid of? Who are you afraid of?*

Dorn paced the halls of the Kath Mandau Precinct where the organs of the Adeptus Terra did their work. The Precinct, an entire city contained within the terraced compounds of the inner palace, never slept. Robed clerks and burnished servitors bustled along the broad concourses. Ministers and ambassadors

conducted business beneath the kilometre-high roof of the Hegemon. The great mechanism of the Imperium whirred about him, its relentless function like a ticking timepiece. This was what Unity had brought, this and the near measureless expanse of worlds and dominions that it guided and administered.

For two hundred years, the Emperor and his primarchs had fought to create the Imperium. They had waged the Great Crusade from star to star, to forge the empire of man, an epic undertaking they had all made without hesitation, because they believed, with utter conviction, in the bright destiny it would shape for their species. They had all believed. *All of them.*

*What was he afraid of? Who was he afraid of? Angron? Not him. Dorn would split his head without compunction if they came face to face. Lorgar? Magnus? There had always been a foetid whiff of sorcery about those two, but Dorn felt nothing towards them he could describe as fear. Fulgrim? No. The Phoenician was a singular foe, but not an object of terror. Perturabo? Well now, their rivalry was old, the spiteful scrapping of two brothers who fought for a father's attention.*

Dorn smiled despite his mood. His years of exchanged insults with Perturabo seemed almost comical compared to this. They were too much alike, too jealous of one another's oh-so-similar abilities. Dorn knew it was a weakness for him to have risen to the Iron Warrior's baiting. But competition had always been a motivating force amongst the primarch brothers. It had been encouraged as a factor to drive them on to greater and yet greater accomplishments.

*No, he was not afraid of Perturabo.*

*Horus-Lupercal, then?*

Dorn's aimless wanderings had taken him to the Investiare. In that broad space, an amphitheatre open to the night sky, statues of the twenty stood on outslite plinths in a silent ring.

There was no one around. Even the Custodian Guard was absent. Lumen orbs glowed on black iron poles. The Investiare was two kilometres in diameter. Under the glittering stars, it felt like an arena, where twenty warriors had gathered to make their combat.

The second and eleventh plinths had been vacant for a long time. No one ever spoke of those two absent brothers. Their separate tragedies had seemed like

aberrations. Had they, in fact, been warnings that no one had heeded?

Sigismund had urged that the effigies of the traitors also be removed from the Investiarey. He had offered to do the work himself. This, Dorn recalled, had made the Emperor laugh.

For the time being, the traitors had been shrouded. Their towering, draped forms seemed like phantoms in the blue darkness.

*Horus, then? Was it Horus?*

*Perhaps. Dorn knew that Horus was the greatest of them, which made him the gravest foe. Could any one of them hope to best Lupercal on the field of war?*

Martial prowess was hardly the point. Dorn had never feared an adversary in his life because of how strong he was or how hard he fought. Combat was only ever a test.

What mattered, what engendered fear, was why an adversary fought. What *made* him fight.

*Oh, now we have it. Now the truth dawns. He felt the hairs on his skin rise. I'm not afraid of Horus. I'm afraid of finding out why he has turned against us. I cannot conceive of any justification for this schism, but Horus must have his reasons. I am afraid that when I know them, when they were explained to my baffled mind, I might... agree.*

'Would you tear them all down?'

Dorn turned at the sound of the voice. For a moment, it had sounded like the soft growl of his father.

But it was just a man, a cloaked and cowled man scarcely half Dorn's height. His robes were those of a simple palace administrator.

'What did you say?' asked Dorn.

The man walked out into the circle of the Investiarey to face Dorn. He greeted him with the old salute of Unity rather than the sign of the aquila. 'You were staring at the statues of your kin,' he observed. 'I asked... would you tear them all down?'

'The statues or my kin, Sigillite?' Dorn replied.

'Both. Either.'

'The statues, perhaps. I believe Horus is doing a fine job with the men themselves.'

Malcador smiled and looked up at Dorn. Like Dorn's, his hair was white. Unlike Dorn's, it was long like a mane. Malcador was an exceptional being, He had been with the Emperor from the inception of the Unification Wars, serving as aide, confidant and advisor. He had risen to become the master of the Council of Terra. The Emperor and the primarchs were genetically advantaged post-humans, but Malcador was just a man, and that was what made him exceptional. He stood on a par with the post human masters of the Imperium, and he was just a man.

‘Will you walk with me, Rogal Dorn?’

‘Are there not matters of state that require your attention, even at this hour, sir? The Council will bemoan your absence from the debating table!’

‘The Council can manage for a while without me,’ Malcador replied. ‘I like to take the air at this time of night. The Imperium never rests, but at night, up here in the thin air of the old Himalazia, I find there is at least an illusion of rest, a time to think and free the mind. I walk. I close my eyes. The stars do not go out because I am not looking at them.’

‘Not yet,’ said Dorn.

Malcador laughed. ‘No, not yet.’

THEY SAID LITTLE at first. They left the Investitory and walked along the beige stones of the Precinct's highest terraces, between the weeping fountains. They walked as far as Lion's Gate, onto the platforms that overlooked the docking rings and landing fields of the Brahmaputra Plateau. The Gate had once been a thing of magnificence, two gilded beasts rising up to lock claws in a feral dispute. Dorn's order of works had replaced them with giant grey donjons stippled with casemates and macro-gun ports. A curtain wall of bleak rockcrete encircled the gate, its edge fletched with void field vanes like the spines of some prehistoric reptile.

They stood and considered it for a long time.

‘I am not a subtle man,’ Malcador said, at length.

Dorn raised his eyebrows.

‘Oh, all right,’ said Malcador, ‘perhaps I am. Guile comes easily to a politician. I know I am considered cunning.’

‘An old word, with no more meaning than “wise”,’ Dorn replied.

‘Indeed. I will accept that as a compliment. All I meant to say was, I will not attempt to be subtle now.’

‘No?’

‘The Emperor has expressed his concerns.’

‘Meaning?’ Dorn asked.

Malcador answered with a slight sigh. ‘He understands you are filled with misgivings.’

‘Only natural, I would think, given the circumstances,’ said Dorn.

The Sigillite nodded. ‘He trusts you to undertake the defence. He counts on you. Terra must not fall, no matter what Horus brings. This palace must not fall. If it is to end here, then it must end in our triumph. But he knows, and I know, and you know, that any defence is only as strong as its weakest part: faith, belief, trust.’

‘What are you telling me?’

‘If there is doubt in your heart, then that is our weakness.’

Dorn looked away. ‘My heart is sad because of what I have been made to do to this place. That’s all it is.’

‘Is it? I don’t think so. What are you really afraid of?’

MALCADOR RAISED HIS hand and the lights in his chambers came on. Dorn looked around. He had never entered the Sigillite’s private apartments before. Ancient images hung on the walls: flaking, fragile things of wood, canvas and decomposing pigments, preserved in thin, blue fields of stasis; the smoke pale portrait of a woman with the most curious smile; garish yellow flowers rendered in thick paint; the unflinching, rheumy gaze of an old fleshy man, cast in shadow, tobacco brown.

Along another wall hung old tattered banners showing the thunderbolt and lightning strike sigil of the Pre-Unity armies. Suits of armour – perfect, glinting thunder armour – were mounted in shimmering suspension zones.

Malcador offered Dorn wine, which he refused, and a seat, which he accepted.

‘I have made a certain peace with myself,’ Dorn said. ‘I understand what I am afraid of.’

Malcador nodded. He had pulled back his cowl and the light shone on his long white hair. He sipped from his glass. 'Enlighten me.'

'I do not fear anyone. Not Horus, not Fulgrim, none of them. I fear the cause. I fear the root of their enmity.'

'You fear what you don't understand.'

'Exactly. I am at a loss to know what drives the Warmaster and his cohorts. It is an alien thing to me, quite defying translation. A strong defence relies on knowing what you are defending against. I can raise all the bulwarks and curtain walls and cannon-bastions I like, and I still won't know what it is I'm fighting.'

'Perceptive,' said Malcador, 'and true of us all. I fancy even the Emperor doesn't fully understand what it is that drives Horus against us so furiously. Do you know what I think?'

'Tell me.'

Malcador shrugged. 'I believe it is better that we don't know. To understand it would be to understand insanity. Horus is quite mad. Chaos is inside him.'

'You say that as if Chaos is a... thing.'

'It is. Does that surprise you? You've known the warp and seen its corrupting touch, that's Chaos. It has touched humanity now, twisted our brightest and best. All we can do is remain true to ourselves and fend it off, deny it. Trying to understand it is a fool's errand. It would claim us too.'

'I see.'

'Don't see, Rogal Dorn, and you will live longer. All you can do is acknowledge your fear. That's all any of us can do. Recognise it for what it is: your pure, human sanity rocked by the sight of the warp's infecting, suffocating madness.'

'Is this what the Emperor believes?' asked Dorn.

'It's what he knows. It's what he *knows* he doesn't know. Sometimes, my friend, there is salvation in ignorance.'

Dorn sat still for a while. Malcador watched him, occasionally sipping from his glass.

'Well, I thank you for your time, sir,' said Dorn eventually. 'Your candour too. I should—'

'There is one other thing,' said Malcador, setting his glass down and rising to

his feet. 'Something I want to show you.'

Malcador crossed the chamber, and took something from a drawer in an old bureau. He walked back to Dorn, and spread that something out on the low table between them.

Dorn opened his mouth but no sound issued. Fear gripped him. 'You recognise these, of course!

Old cards, worn and fraying, discoloured and liver-spotted with time. One by one, Malcador laid them out.

'The Lesser Arcanoi, just gaming trinkets, really, but used widely before the coming of Old Night for divination. This deck was made on Nostramo Quintus.'

'*He* used them,' Dorn breathed.

'Yes, he did. He relied on them. He believed in cartomancy. He dealt his fate out, night after haunted night, and watched how the cards fell.'

'Oh Holy Terra...'

'Are you all right, sir?' Malcador asked, looking up. 'You are quite pale.'

Dorn nodded. 'Curze.'

'Yes, Curze. Had you forgotten him, or simply blocked him out? You have bickered and sparred with many of your brothers over the years, but only Konrad Curze ever hurt you.'

'Yes.'

'He nearly killed you.'

'Yes.'

'On Cheraut, long ago.'

'I remember it well enough!'

Malcador looked up at Dorn. The primarch had risen to his feet. 'Then sit back down and tell me, because I wasn't there.'

Dorn sat. 'This is so long ago or like another life. We had brought the Cheraut system to compliance. It was hard fought. The Emperor's Children, the Night Lords and my Fists, we affected compliance. But Curze didn't know when to stop. He never knew when to stop.'

'And you rebuked him?'

'He was an animal. Yes, I rebuked him. Then Fulgrim told me.'

‘Told you what?’

Dorn closed his eyes. ‘The Phoenician told me what Curze had told him: the fits, the seizures that had plagued Curze since his childhood on Nostramo, the visions. Curze said he had seen the galaxy in flames, the Emperor’s legacy overthrown, Astartes turning on Astartes. It was all lies, an insult to our creed!’

‘You confronted Curze?’

‘And he attacked me. He would have killed me, I think. He is insane. That’s why we drove him out, sick of his bloodletting. That’s why he burned his home world and took his Night Lords off into the darkest parts of the stars.’

Malcador nodded, and continued to deal the cards. ‘Rogal, he is what you are truly afraid of, because he is fear incarnate. No other primarch uses terror as a weapon like Curze does. You are not afraid of Horus and his sallow heretics. You are afraid of the fear that sides with him, the night terror that advances alongside the traitors.’

Dorn sat back and breathed out. ‘He has haunted me, I confess. All this time, he has haunted me.’

‘Because he was right. His visions were true. He saw this Heresy coming in his visions. That is the truth you fear. You wish you had listened.’

Dorn looked down at the cards laid out on the table before him. ‘Do you believe in this divination, Sigillite?’

‘Let’s see,’ said Malcador, turning the cards over one by one: the Moon, the Martyr and the Monster, the Dark King askew across the Emperor.

One other card, the Lightning Tower.

Dorn groaned. ‘A bastion, blown out by lightning. A palace brought to ruin by fire. I’ve seen enough.’

‘The card has many meanings,’ said Malcador. ‘Like the Death card, it is not as obvious as it seems. In the hives of Nord Merica, it symbolised a change in fortune, an overturning of fate. To the tribes of Franc and Tali, it signified knowledge or achievement obtained through sacrifice. A flash of inspiration, if you will, one that tumbles the world you know down, but leaves you with a greater gift.’

‘The Dark King lies across the Emperor,’ said Dorn, pointing.

Malcador sniffed. ‘It’s not exactly a science, my friend.’

THEY HAD BLOWN their way through the massive earthwork defences at Haldwani and Xigaze. The sky at the top of the world was on fire. Despite the bombardments of the orbital platforms and the constant sorties of the Stormbirds and the Hawkings, the Traitor Legions advanced, up through the Brahamputra, along the delta of the Karnali. Continental firestorms raged across Gangetic Plain.

As they entered the rampart outworks of the palace, the streaming, screaming multitudes and the striding war machines were greeted by monsoons of firepower. Every emplacement along the Dhawalagiri prospect committed its weapons. Las reached out in neon slashes, annihilating everything it touched. Shells fell like sleet. Titans exploded, caught fire, collapsed on their faces and crushed the warriors swarming around their heels. Still they came. Lancing beams struck the armour-reinforced walls like lightning, like lightning smiting a tower.

The walls fell. They collapsed like slumping glaciers. Gold-cased bodies spilled out, tumbling down in the deluge.

The palace began to burn. Primus Gate fell; Lion's Gate, subjected to attack from the north; Annapurna Gate. At the Ultimate Gate, the Traitors finally sliced into the palace, slaughtering everyone they found inside. Around every broken gate, the corpses of Titans piled up in vast, jumbled heaps where they had fallen over each other in their desire to break in. The heretic host clambered across their carcasses, pouring into the palace, yelling out the name of their-

'End simulation,' said Dorn.

He gazed down at the hololithic table. At his command, the forces of the enemy withdrew, unit by unit, and the palace rebuilt itself. The smoke cleared. 'Reset parameters to Horus, Perturabo, Angron and Curze.'

'Opposition?' the table queried.

'Imperial Fists, Blood Angels, White Scars. Resume and replay scenario.' The map flickered. Armies advanced. The palace began to burn again.

'Play it out, simulation after simulation, if you like,' said the voice behind him. 'Simulations are just simulations. I know you won't fail me when the time comes.'

Dorn turned. 'I would never knowingly fail you, Father,' he said.

'Then don't be afraid. Don't let fear get in your way.'

*What are you afraid of? What are you really afraid of?*

*The Lightning Tower, thought Rogal Dorn. I understand its meaning: achievement obtained through sacrifice. I'm just afraid of what that sacrifice might be.*

# THE DARK KING

*by Graham McNeill*

WHERE BEFORE THERE had been light, now there was only darkness. The hot, urgent pulse of near death surged in his veins, the bitter flavour of betrayal fully expected, yet wholly unwelcome. This was what it would come to he knew, this was the inevitable result of naïve belief in the goodness of the human heart. Death filled his senses, blood coating his teeth and the sharp reek of it thick in his nostrils.

As though it were yesterday, long buried memories of years spent on the night world of Nostramo emblazoned themselves on the forefront of his thoughts: haunted darkness punctured by stuttering lumen strips that fizzed in the shimmering, rain-slick streets and the stillness of a population kept quiescent with fear.

From out of this foetid darkness had come illumination and hope, the promise of a better future. But now that hope was dashed as the bright lance of the future seared itself into his thoughts...

*...the death of a world and a great eye of black and gold watching it burn...*

*...Astartes fighting to the death beneath a red-lit sky...*

*...a golden eagle cast from the heavens...*

He screamed in pain as images of destruction and the end of all things paraded before his mind's eye. Voices called out to him. He heard his name, the name his father had bestowed upon him and the one his people had given him, in the fearful watches of the dark.

He opened his eyes and let the visions fade from his mind as the sensations of the physical world returned to him. Blood and salty tears stung his eyes and he looked over to the sound of voices calling his name.

Horried faces stared at him in fear, but that was nothing new, Babble spewed from their mouths, but he could make nothing of it, the sense of the words lost in the screaming white noise filling his skull.

What sight could be so terrible? What could evoke such horror?

He looked down as he realised he squatted atop another, living, breathing figure. A giant in torn golden robes, his bone-white hair spattered with gleaming ruby droplets.

A mantle of red velvet trimmed with golden weave spread out beneath him like a bloodstain.

Tanned, iron flesh. Opened and bleeding.

He took in the destruction wrought on the body beneath him, raising his hands, balled into fists. Blood dripped from his fingertips and he could taste the warm richness of the genetic mastery encoded into every molecule upon his teeth.

He knew this giant.

His name was legendary, his stony heart and mastery of war unmatched. His name was Rogal Dorn.

He looked up again as he heard his own name, given voice by a warrior in the golden plate armour of the Imperial Fists who bore the black and white heraldry of its First Captain.

He knew this warrior too...

‘Curze!’ cried Sigismund. ‘What have you done?’

THE EMPTINESS OF space shimmered in the glow of distant suns beyond the armoured glass, faraway planets and unknown systems turning in their prescribed arcs without thought for the dramas being played out on the stage of human endeavour. What did those who lived beneath these suns know of the Cheraut system and the blood that had been shed to pacify it in the name of the emergent Imperium of Mankind?

Curze stifled the anger such questions provoked, staring into his reflection with cold, obsidian eyes that resembled empty sockets in his pallid, sunken features. Lank hair hung to his neck like black ropes and spilled across his wide, powerful shoulders. He turned from his reflection, uncomfortable with the dreadful disappointment he saw there.

Glinting metal caught his sullen gaze: his armour, standing in a shadowed alcove on the far wall. He crossed the chamber and placed his hand on the skull-faced helmet. The gem-like facets of its lenses winked in the low light and the

sweeping dark wings rose from its sides like the pinions of some avenging angel of night. The burnished plates were dark, as befitted the Primarch of the Night Lords, each one contoured perfectly to his form and worked with gold edging that caught the starlight.

Turning from his battle armour, he paced the hard, metallic floor of the gloomy, cavernous chamber that confined him. Thick steel columns supported a great vaulted ceiling, its upper reaches lost in shadow, and the hum of the mighty starfort's reactor beat like a pulse in the metal.

This aesthetic of functional austerity was typical of the Imperial Fists, whose artifice had constructed this mighty orbital fortress as a base of operations with which to begin the compliance of the Cheraut system.

The Emperor's Children had held their traditional victory feast before the first shot had been fired and together with Fulgrim's Legion and the Night Lords, Rogal Dorn's Imperial Fists had broken open the defences of the belligerent human coalition that resisted the coming of the Imperium. Within eight months of hard, bloody fighting, the eagle flew above the smoking ruins of the last bastion, but where Dorn lauded Fulgrim's Legion, the conduct of the Night Lords had earned only his ire.

Matters had finally come to a head amid the silver ruins of Osmium.

Pyres of the dead stained the skies black and Curze had watched his chaplains orchestrating the executions of defeated prisoners when Dorn marched into his camp, his lean face thunderous. 'Curze!'

Never once had Rogal Dorn called him by his forename.

'Brother?' he had replied.

'Throne! What are you doing here?' demanded Dorn, his normal, affable tone swallowed in the depths of his outrage. A phalanx of gold-armoured warriors followed their lord and Curze had immediately sensed the tension in the air.

'Punishing the guilty,' he had answered coolly. 'Restoring order.'

The Primarch of the Imperial Fists shook his head. 'This not order, Curze, it is murder. Order your warriors to stand down. My Imperial Fists will take over this sector.'

'Stand down?' said Curze. 'Are they not the enemy?'

'Not anymore,' said Dorn. 'They are prisoners now, but soon they will be a

population and part of the Imperium. Have you forgotten the Emperor's purpose in declaring the Great Crusade?'

'To conquer,' said Curze.

'No,' said Dorn, placing a golden gauntlet on his shoulder guard. 'We are liberators, not destroyers, brother. We bring the light of illumination, not death. We must govern with benevolence if these people are ever to recognise our authority in this galaxy.'

Curze flinched at the touch, resenting the easy friendship Dorn pretended. Bileous anger bubbled invisibly beneath his skin, but if Dorn was aware of it, he gave no sign.

'These people resisted us and must pay the penalty for that crime,' said Curze. 'Obedience to the Imperium will come from the fear of punishment, you know that as well as anyone, Dorn. Kill those that resisted and the others will learn the lesson that to oppose us is to die.'

Dorn shook his head, taking his arm to lead him away from the curious stares their heated discussion was attracting. 'You are wrong, but we should speak of this in private.'

'No,' said Curze, angrily shrugging off Dorn's grip. 'You think these people will bend the knee meekly to us because we show compassion? Mercy is for the weak and foolish. It will only breed corruption and eventual betrayal. Fear of reprisals will keep the rest of this planet in check, not benevolence.'

Dorn sighed. 'And the hatred planted in those you leave alive will pass from one generation to the next until this world is engulfed in a war the cause of which none of those fighting will remember. It will never end, don't you see that? Hate only breeds hate and the Imperium cannot be built upon such bloody foundations.'

'All empires are forged in blood,' said Curze. 'To pretend otherwise is naïve. The rule of law cannot be maintained by the blind hope that human nature is inherently good. Haven't we seen enough to know that ultimately the mass of humanity must be forced to into compliance?'

'I cannot believe I am hearing this,' said Dorn. 'What has got into you, Curze?'

'Nothing that has not always been there, Dorn,' said Curze, striding away from the mighty, golden figure and hauling one of the few remaining prisoners upright

in front of his tunic. He scooped up a fallen bolter and thrust the heavy gun into the prisoner's trembling hands.

Curze leaned down and said, 'Go ahead. Kill me.'

The terrified man shook his head, the oversized weapon shaking in his hands as though his limbs were palsied.

'No?' said Curze. 'Why not?'

The prisoner tried to speak, but so awed by the terrifying proximity of the primarch that his words were unintelligible.

'Are you afraid you will be killed?'

The man nodded and Curze addressed his warriors, 'No one harms this man. No matter what happens, he is not to be punished.'

Curze had turned and walked back towards Dorn with his arms stretched out to either side of him and presenting his back to the prisoner.

No sooner had he turned away from the armed man than the gun had been raised and the hard crack of a bolter shot split the air. Sparks flew as the explosive shell ricocheted from Curze's armour and he spun on his heel to smash the prisoner's skull to splinters with his fist.

The headless corpse swayed for a moment before dropping slowly to its knees and pitching onto its chest.

'You see,' said Curze, his fingers dripping blood and bone fragments.

'And what was that supposed to prove?' asked Dorn, his features curled in distaste.

'That any chance mortals get they will choose the path of dissent. When he thought he would be punished, he dared not shoot, but the moment he believed himself free from consequence, he acted.'

'That was an unworthy deed,' said Dorn and Curze had turned away from him before he could elaborate, but the Imperial Fists' primarch caught his arm. 'Your warriors will stand down and withdraw, Curze. That is an order, not a request. Leave this planet. Now.'

Dorn's eyes were hard as granite and Curze knew enough of his brother's resolve to realise he had pushed him far enough. 'When this campaign is won, you and I will have words, Curze. You have crossed the line and I will no longer countenance your barbarous methods of war. Your way is not the way of the

Imperium.’

‘I think you might be right...’ whispered Curze.

And he had led his warriors from the field of battle, their dark armour rendering them as shadows in the ruins.

He wondered what might have happened had he taken the debate to its logical conclusion.

Curze shied away from the violence inherent in such a line of reasoning and ran a hand through his dark hair, feeling like a caged animal as the door to his chamber – his prison – slid open and a warrior in gleaming, midnight-blue armour entered. Through the door, he could see the purple-armoured figures of Fulgrim’s Phoenix Guard, their golden halberds and copper scale cloaks glittering in the wan light of the starfort.

Dorn and Fulgrim were taking no chances with his confinement.

The newcomer’s head was shaven bald, pale and angular, with hooded eyes of jet beneath a prominent brown and pugnacious jawline.

Curze nodded in acknowledgement at the sight of his equerry, Captain Shang, and beckoned him in with an impatient wave of his hand.

‘What news?’ asked Curze as Shang bowed curtly before him.

Shag said, ‘The Master of the Fists recovers, my lord. A lesser being than a primarch would he dead thrice over with the wounds you dealt him.’

Curze returned his gaze to the tracts of stars beyond the skin of the station, all too aware of the severity of Dorn’s wounds, having clawed them with his bare hands and teeth.

‘Then I must await the judgement of my peers, is that it?’

‘With respect, my lord, you *did* draw the blood of a brother Primarch.’

‘And for that they will demand blood in return, no doubt...’

He remembered Dorn coming to his chambers, enraged by the slaughters on Cheraut and incensed at what Fulgrim had told him – secrets Curze had told Fulgrim in confidence some days earlier. The fit had come upon Curze as the Phoenician had told him tales of Chemos, pitching him to the floor and wracking his mind with terrifying visions of a nightmare future of death and unremitting darkness.

Moved by Fulgrim’s apparent concern, Curze had confided in his old tutor,

telling him of the visions that had plagued him since his earliest days on Nostramo.

*A galaxy at war.*

*Astartes turning on one another.*

*Death awaiting him at his father's hands...*

Fulgrim's pale, aquiline features had remained stoic, but Curze had seen the unease that flickered in his eyes. He had hoped Fulgrim would keep his confession in confidence, but when Dorn had appeared at his door, he knew he was betrayed.

In truth he had little memory of what had occurred after Dorn's storming accusations of insult to the Emperor... the present had faded and the future had seized his mind with agonising visions of a galaxy locked in a cycle of unending war where the alien, the mutant and the rebel arose to feast on the rotting carcass of the Imperium.

*This then was the future the Emperor was creating? This was the ultimate destiny of a galaxy where the fear of punishment was not the agent of control. This was the inevitable result of allowing weak men to craft the destiny of Mankind and Curze knew that, of all the primarchs, only one had the force of will required to mould the new Imperium from the soft clay of its present form.*

'The time has come to forge our own path, Shang,' said Curze.

'Then this is the moment you foresaw?'

'Yes. My brothers will seize this opportunity to be rid of us.'

'I believe you are correct,' agreed Shang. 'My sources tell me there is talk, and not idle talk, of recalling the Legion to Terra to account for our methods of war.'

'I knew it. Since they cannot kill me, the cowards choose to strike at me through my legion. You see, Shang? They have been waiting for this opportunity for decades. They are weak fools who have not the stomach to do what must be done, but I do, oh yes, I do indeed.'

'Then what is our course, my lord?' asked Shang.

'Fulgrim and Dorn may have betrayed me, but we are not without friends amongst the other Legions,' said Curze. 'But first we must put our own house in order. Tell me, what news of Nostramo?'

'It is as we feared, my lord,' said Shang. 'The regime of Administrator-regent

Balthius has failed. Corruption is rife, criminals govern from the ruined spires of Nostramo Quintus and lawlessness is endemic.'

'Then I have no time to waste while small minded fools decide my fate as though I am a lowly menial to be chastised.'

'What are your orders, my lord?' asked Shang.

'Ready our ships, captain,' said Curze. 'We return to Nostramo.'

'But you have been ordered to remain in seclusion, my lord,' pointed out Shang. 'Lord Fulgrim's praetorians and Dorn's Templars guard your chambers.'

Curze grinned crookedly and said, 'Leave them to me...'

CURZE LIFTED THE last piece of his armour from the shadowed alcove and raised it above his head. He turned towards the door of his chamber and lowered his helmet until the skull-faced visor connected to his gorget with a hiss of pressurisation. His vision shifted subtly and his perceptions broadened as he blended with the shadows of the dimly lit chamber.

He slowed his breathing and stretched out his senses, the darkness a second home to him after so many years spent in its embrace as a predator on the weak and guilty. He felt a moment's regret that it had come to this, but he quashed such notions viciously. Doubt, regret and hesitancy were weaknesses others might suffer from, but not Konrad Curze.

His breathing deepened and the tenebrous chamber came alive to him.

Curze felt power in the darkness; the cold intellect of hunters and creatures of the night that killed beneath its cloak. Lethal instincts honed on a thousand battlefields were now heightened to undreamed of levels and would now serve him equally well on this one.

He spread his arms wide and a ripple of psychic force pulsed like the blast wave of an explosion with Curze at its epicentre. The hanging glow strips filling the chamber exploded in quick succession, detonating one after another in showers of pellucid sparks. Broken glass tinkled musically to the steel deck in a glass rain.

Sputtering power cables swayed from the ceiling, hissing and fizzing like angry snakes as electric discharge strobed blue across the room.

Hostile red warning lights blinked. Cold light eased inside as the door opened

and a handful of armoured warriors stood silhouetted.

Curze leapt straight up, gripping the open lattice structure of the nearest column and swinging himself up into the deeper darkness of the chamber before the light could reach him. His legs swung around the column and he climbed higher as the warriors spread out with their halberds extended before them.

He heard them call his name, their voices echoing in the darkness.

A twist of muscle and he was airborne, a glimmering shadow of dead stars and extinction. The warriors below would have the senses of their battle plate to penetrate the darkness, but they paled in comparison to those of the Night Lords' primarch. Where others saw only light and dark, Curze saw all the myriad hues and shades that were invisible to those who had not become one with its fuliginous depths.

One of the Phoenix Guard stood directly beneath him, scanning the chamber for its captive occupant, unaware that his doom lurked in the shadows above.

Curze spun around the column, looping lower with each revolution and holding his hand out like an axe blade. The warrior died with his head sliced cleanly from his shoulders, the iron flesh of the primarch smashing through his armoured gorget. No sooner was the blow delivered than Curze was in motion, swooping through the darkness like a shadow.

Cries of alarm echoed as his gaolers realised he was amongst them, stabbing beams of helmet lamps crisscrossing madly as they sought to pinpoint his location. With skill borne of decades spent as a murderous hunter of men, Curze ghosted invisibly between the beams of light.

Another warrior fell with his torso ripped open, blood squirting from torn arteries like ruptured pressure hoses. Gunfire split the darkness, starbursts of muzzle flashes, as the warriors opened fire on their unseen attacker. None came close, for wherever they fired, Curze was already far from harm's way, spinning through the air like a malignant phantom and twisting between the bolts and wildly slashing blades.

One of Dorn's Templars backed towards a pool of light and Curze slid through the darkness towards him, moving impossibly silently for an armoured warrior. A sensation unlike anything he had felt previously danced in his blood and Curze savoured it as he understood it for what it was.

Contrary to Guilliman's rash pronouncement, it seemed Astartes *could* know fear.

This fear – such as it was – was something to be treasured. Mortal fear was a rancid, sweaty thing, but this... this was caged lightning in the marrow.

Curze pounced towards the armoured Templar, one of Dorn's best and bravest.

Veteran or not, he died as any other man did – in blood and agony.

'Death haunts the darkness,' shouted Curze. 'And he knows your names.'

He could hear frantic calls for reinforcements, but the superior systems of his own armour easily jammed them as he took to the air once more and vaulted from shadow to shadow.

'No one is coming,' he said. 'You are going to die alone here.'

Spraying blasts of gunfire followed his pronouncements as the warriors sought to pinpoint his location in the darkness.

But Curze *owned* the darkness and no matter what light or senses these warriors depended upon, they were not nearly enough to stop him from killing them. He could see the survivors – a Templar and two of the Phoenix Guard – backing towards the door. They now realised this was a fight they could not win, but had made the mistake of thinking that a fight with Konrad Curze was one you could walk away from.

Laughing with the joy of the hunt, a pleasure he had forgotten without worthy prey to test him, he soared through the air and dropped into their midst like an assassin.

His fist punched through the armour of the first Phoenix Guard, and Curze wrenched his victim's spinal column out. Leaving the bloody curve of crushed bone protruding from the gaping wound, he snatched the dead warrior's halberd and dropped to the floor as the other warriors turned towards the agonised scream.

Before they could react, Curze swept the halberd out in a wide, circular arc, the blade twice the width of a handspan above the deck, The energised edge cut through battle plate, meat and bone with a searing, electric tang.

Both warriors fell to the deck, grunting in pain as they collapsed onto the bloody stumps of their legs. Curze hurled his stolen halberd aside and blocked a return strike from the fallen Phoenix Guard,

He snapped his enemy's weapon in two and jammed the splintered ends through his chest.

The Templar roared in anger, managing to get off a shot before Curze was upon him. He ripped the weapon from his victim's grip and planted one knee on his chest, the other on his left arm.

The pinned warrior reached up with his free arm to strike at him. Cruze caught the blow and ripped the arm from its socket.

Emergency lights began kicking in with a rising hum and thump of relays, and the chamber was suddenly illuminated with a harsh, white glow that dispelled the shadows and banished the darkness.

Where before there had been darkness, now there was only light.

And what had once been a place of imprisonment was now an abattoir. Curling arcs of blood spray coated the walls and floor, and shattered, headless, limbless bodies lay strewn about like spilled surgical waste.

Curze smiled at the scene of slaughter and the persona he had worn like a disguise since he had first knelt before his father fell away like a discarded mask.

Now he was no longer Konrad Curze.

Now he was the Night Hunter.

Night Hunter turned over the last card and his jawline tightened as the familiar pattern emerged once more. The strategium of his flagship was kept dark, the faint blue light of consoles and hololithic displays islands of light in the darkness. The Primarch of the Night Lords paid no attention to his surroundings, ignoring the pregnant pressure of anticipation that bristled from every member of his bridge crew.

A deck of worn cards sat on the softly glowing lectern before him, their edges scuffed and curled from decades of shuffling and dealing. Little more than a parlour game played by the indolent rich of Nostramo Quintus, he had since discovered that variations of these cards had been employed in the hives of Medea and by the tribes of the Franc as a means of divination in the time before Old Night had descended.

The cards apparently corresponded to the stratification of society at the time, with the various suits representing warriors, priests, merchants and workers. Ancient belief held that the future could be read in the patterns of cards known

as the Lesser Arcanoi, but such traditions were outmoded concepts in this colourless, secular galaxy...

Except that no matter how thoroughly he shuffled the cards and dealt them on the polished glass of the lectern, the pattern was always the same.

The Moon, the Martyr and the Monster lay in a triangular pattern. The King lay reversed at the feet of the Emperor on one side of the pattern, and on the other, also reversed, was the Dove – a card academics postulated was a symbol of hope. The card he had just dealt sat at the top of the pattern, a card that had changed little over the centuries and the meaning of which, though often misinterpreted, was unmistakable.

Death.

He heard footsteps and looked up to see Captain Shang approaching, clad in his battle plate and wrapped in his ceremonial black cape of gleaming patagium. His helmet's flaring wings framed a death mask of an alien skull, its tusked lower jaw thrust beyond his throat.

Behind his equerry, Night Haunter could see the gently rotating orb of Nostramo displayed on the viewscreen. Thick clouds of pollutants ringed the grey planet, shot through with emphysemic yellows and leprous browns. The radiation-blasted moon of Tenebor was just visible as a sickly orb emerging from the stained-lung corona of Nostramo's dying sun.

'What it is, captain?' asked Night Haunter.

'Word from the Choir chambers, my lord.'

Night Haunter chuckled mirthlessly. 'My brothers?'

'It would appear so, my lord.' said Shang. 'The astropaths sense a psychic bow-wave that appears to indicate a great many vessels approaching through the Empyrean.'

'Dorn,' said Night Haunter, returning his attention to the cards before him.

'Undoubtedly. What are your orders, my lord?'

Looking once again at the world of his youth, Night Haunter felt the ever-present anger seething under his skin like hot magma beneath the fragile crust of a dying planet.

'Nostramo was once the very model of a pacified planet, Shang,' said Night Haunter. 'Its populace was kept compliant through fear of the harsh punishment

I would mete out to any who broke my laws. Every citizen knew his place and to break the law was death.'

'I remember, my lord.'

'And now we return to this...' said Night Hunter, sweeping the cards from the lectern to reveal a slowly scrolling list of text. 'A murder every eleven seconds, a rape every nine seconds, violent crimes increasing exponentially every month, suicide rates doubling every year. Within a decade, there will be nothing left of the ordered world I left behind.'

'Without fear of reprisal, humanity reverts to its basest instincts, my lord.'

Night Hunter nodded. 'This is it, Shang, the ultimate proof that the Emperor's belief in the goodness of mankind is folly of the worst kind.'

Shang hesitated before speaking again. 'Then you intend to go through with the attack?'

'Of course,' said Night Hunter, staring at the doomed planet. 'Only the most extreme measures will serve as an example of our strength of will. Nostramo is dead to us now. We have come for you all...'

The primarch marched along the central walkway of the strategium to stand beneath the image of Nostramo. The moon was emerging more fully from behind the planet and reflected light glinted on the hulls of the Night Lords' fleet – a half century of vessels arrayed in battle formation above the diseased, corrupt boil that was the labyrinthine, crime-ridden spires of Nostramo Quintus.

Far below was a great wound in the surface, a plunging chasm his fiery arrival had smashed in the planet's crust. Since he had emerged from its hellish depths he had known pain and suffering the likes of which others could not even guess. He had borne the pain of his tortured growth and lived with the awful self-knowledge of his own death.

And his brothers wondered why he appeared moribund...

He heard a commotion beside him and even before the word went out. Night Hunter could feel the tearing pressure of scores of ships emerging from the gates of the Empyrean with senses beyond the five possessed by his minions.

'Too late, my brothers...' he whispered. 'I will be gone before you can stop me.'

Night Hunter took one last look at Nostramo and said, 'All ships. Open fire.'

INCANDESCENT SPEARS OF blinding white light leapt from the barrels of uncounted batteries, stabbing down at the world below. Converging and multiplying their energies, the power of a thousand caged stars coalesced into a pillar of light thicker than the widest spire of Nostramo Quintus.

The great beam dispelled the darkness that shrouded Nostramo, the skies bathed in light and fire blooming into life as the awful heat of the Night Lord's bombardment ignited the air for kilometres in all directions.

The blinding lance of pure energy penetrated the impermeable adamantium crust of Nostramo through the ancient fault line torn by the primarch's arrival. Unimaginable energies tore downwards through the planet's layers until they reached the core in a cataclysmic explosion the likes of which the galaxy had rarely seen.

NIGHT HAUNTER WATCHED the death of Nostramo with calm detachment, feeling the enormity of the action he had just taken settle upon him like a dark shroud. Strangely, it was not the burden he had expected. As he watched tectonic plates split apart and the molten heart of the planet ooze up to swallow the landscape and away burn the atmosphere, the only sensation of which he was conscious was intense relief.

The past was dead and he had shown that the creed he lived by was more than just empty words. The shockwave of this terrifying act would reverberate around the Imperium and come to the attention of those who, like him, understood the sacrifices needed to preserve the galaxy for humanity.

Nostramo burned and Night Haunter said, 'I take this burden of this evil upon myself and I will not fear it, for I am fear incarnate...'