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**2011/12**

THE HORUS HERESY

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# **DEATH OF A SILVERSMITH**

original release by DarkChaplain

edited by fractalnoise

v1.1 (2012.01)

## **The Horus Heresy**

*It is a time of legend.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I AM DYING, that much I know. What I do not know is why. My throat has been crushed, and what little breath I can manage will not keep my brain functioning for long. He did not kill me outright, though he could have easily. I remember him looking down on me as my feet scrabbled at the floor of my workshop, gasping for air like a fish tossed onto a riverbank. He watched me as though fascinated by the transition of my body from life into death. But I am stronger than I look, and I was not going to die quickly.

But now that I think about it, perhaps that is what he wanted.

He did not even stay to watch me die, as though he had no interest in how long it took, only that it would be a drawn-out event. In fact, I think he used the precise amount of pressure needed to crush my larynx just enough to make my death slow. If I were not dying, I would almost admire the exacting attention to detail and controlled strength that such an act requires.

He wanted me dead, slowly, but did not care to watch the outcome.

What sort of a mind thinks like that?

I have no gods to pray to, no one does. The Emperor has shown us the folly of worshipping invisible deities whose existence is falsehood. The fanes and temples have all been torn down, even the last one across the silver bridge. The heavens are empty of supernatural agencies that might hear my dying thoughts, but right now I wish they were not.

Any witness to my death would be better than none. Otherwise it will be just a statistic, a report filed by the armsmen of this mighty vessel. Only if someone were to hear my last words or understand my last thoughts will they matter. I suspect that you would not forget a man dying in front of you.

Even though he killed me, I wish he had stayed to the end. At least then I would have had something to look at instead of the blackened ceiling of my workshop. The lumen globes maintain a steady glow, though I think they are fading.

Or is that me?

I wish he had stayed to watch me die.

He was so much bigger and stronger than me. Engineered, of course, but still, even before his genetic enhancements, I am sure he would have been more than a match for me. I have never been a violent man, the physical and martial pursuits never having interested me. From an early age, I was a tinkerer, a dismantler of working parts, and I possessed a fastidious mind that moved like the most intricate clockwork. My father wanted to apprentice me to the Mechanicum of Mars, but my grandfather would not hear of it. The priests of the red planet had been the enemies of Terra two generations ago, and my grandfather, a lapidary with exquisitely long fingers who fashioned incredible bracelets and neck ornamentation in the style of Ascalon's Repousse and chasing, still held grudges from that chaotic time.

Making weapons and war machines for the Imperium of Man was a waste of time for someone with the skills I possessed. My grandfather was an artisan in the true sense of the word, a craftsman worthy of the name, and the raw talent evident in his work had skipped my father and passed straight to me. Not that my father was ever jealous; far from it. He lauded my triumphs and proudly displayed my work, even from an early age when the brooches, earrings and glittering chokers I produced were, at first, amateurish and derivative. I worked for many years, learning my trade and developing my talent until it became clear that my ability now outstripped that of my grandfather. Crystallisation of his joints had turned his hands to claws, and it was a day of tears when at last he hung up his pliers and draw plate.

Work was never hard to come by, even though the last death spasms of the war still jerked and spat in the far reaches of Terra. The ethnarchs and despots had fallen one by one yet, even during times of strife, always there was a general's mistress who desired a fashionable necklace, a tetrarch in need of a more impressive sword hilt or a bureaucrat seeking to impress his peers with a filigreed quill.

As the wars drew to a close, and stability of a sort was restored to Terra, money began to flow around the globe in glittering golden rivers. And with it came the desire to spend copious sums commemorating Unity, lamenting the fallen or immortalising the future. I had never been so busy, and the frenetic demand drove my creativity to new heights of wonder.

I remember a particular piece I fashioned for the Lord General of the Anatolian

Theatre. His soldiers had been lucky enough to fight alongside the Astartes of the X Legion prior to their despatch into the glory of the Crusade. A rebellious branch of the Terawatt clans had thought to retain control of their Urals forges instead of turning them over to the Iron Hands, and had fought their mortal representatives.

Vengeance was swift in coming, and the forge complex fell after a month of heavy fighting, in which the Anatolian brigades bore the brunt of the strange and deadly weapons wielded by the blind clan-warriors. But, so the Lord General told me, the primarch of the X Legion had been so impressed by the courage of his soldiers that he snapped the iron gauntlet from one of his Chapter's banners and presented it to the Noyan in command of the first brigade to breach the gates to the inner furnaces.

Needless to say, that particular commander never got to keep the finial, but dutifully passed it to his superior, and so on, until it reached the hands of the Lord General. Who in turn brought it to me, instructing me to create a worthy reliquary – though he laughed at the antiquated term – for the gift.

To work on so incredible a piece was an honour, and I lavished all my skill upon this particular commission. The gauntlet itself was clearly a trifling piece for the Iron Hands, but as I studied the intricacy and precision of the workmanship, I appreciated the incredible skill that had gone into its creation. I had heard of the miraculous hands of the great Ferrus Manus, but to think that I worked on a piece touched by a primarch himself, one of the Emperor's sons, gave me purpose and inspiration beyond my wildest dreams.

Day and night I worked, eschewing all human contact and turning away many wealthy patrons in the process. The brilliance of the gauntlet drove my passion and skill to new heights of invention and within the month I had created a wonder, a golden reliquary of such exquisite detail, delicate filigree and precious gems that it might have sat next to any ancient repository for the bones of one regarded as a saint, and not looked out of place.

Though the Emperor had forbidden the worship of false gods and unclean spirits, I had a number of old, mildewed books rescued from the ruins of a toppled fane by a friend in the Conservatory who knew of my interest in such things. Though their talk of gods and spirits and magic was clearly nonsense and lurid hyperbole, the artwork and symbolism inspired by such belief was

extraordinary. Swirling lines, interconnecting weaves and spirals of such breathtaking complexity and perfect geometries that I could stare for hours at their beguiling patterns without losing interest.

In those books I found the perfect inspiration, and the finished piece was a thing of beauty.

The Lord General wept when he saw it, and I knew from our many meetings that he was not a man given to expressing his emotions. He embraced me and paid me twice the cost of the commission, and it took all my self-control not to hand the money back. Simply being allowed to work on such a piece was payment enough.

Word of the reliquary spread, and my talents became more in demand than ever, but nothing ever moved me to such creative heights as had my work on the reliquary. Even so, my work was astonishing, and it was not long before it came to the attention of those who were shaping the future of this world and those beyond the star-sprayed heavens. On a wintry day, as I worked upon an onyx pommel stone wound in a globe of silver, the course of my life was changed forever.

A man, noble in bearing but unassuming in mien, entered my workshop in the foothills of the Sahyadri Mountains and politely awaited my attention. He spoke with a cultured voice in an accent I could not place, and told me that I was being offered a place within an unofficial artel he wished to establish. I smiled at his use of the old word, for none here now used it – too redolent of a long-dead tyrant. When I enquired who would form this artel, the man spoke of craftsmen, poets, dramatists and historians, men and women who would travel the stars with one of the Emperor's crusade fleets and bear witness to the greatest endeavour our species had ever known.

We were to show that such an organisation was necessary, to add weight to the growing chorus of voices urging a more formal and authoritative celebration of mankind's reunification. We would show what such an organisation could achieve. Our task would be no less vital than that of the warriors of the Expedition Fleet!

He saw my amusement, and smiled as I declined his offer. I was happy on Terra, and had no wish to venture into the unknown reaches of space. Pulling back his hood, he allowed long white hair to spill around his shoulders and told

me that the very highest authority had requested my cooperation. I wanted to laugh in his face, but dared not as I saw a depth of understanding and a world of memory in his eyes. This man, this ordinary man with the weight of the world in his eyes, simply placed a cream envelope upon my workbench and told me to think carefully before I refused this offer.

He left without another word, leaving me alone with the envelope. It was many hours before I dared lift it, turning it over in my long fingers as though I might understand what lay within without opening it. To open it would indicate a tacit acceptance of his offer, and I had no wish to leave the comfort of my workshop. The flap was sealed with a blob of crimson wax, and my heart skipped a beat as I recognised the crossed lightning bolts and double-headed eagle.

But, as are all men of a creative bent, I was cursed with insatiable curiosity. I eventually opened the envelope, as my visitor had known I would, and read its contents. Though worded as a request, the words were so eloquent, so passionate and so full of hope and power that I immediately knew who had written them. The stranger, whose identity I now knew, had not lied when he had told me the importance of the individual who requested my presence.

Within the day I had packed my meagre possessions and was on my way north to the mountains of the Himalazia to join the rest of my hastily assembled companions. I will not attempt to describe the immense majesty of the Palace, for words alone can do it no justice. It is landmass rendered in geological architecture, a wonder of the world that will never be surpassed. The artisan guilds strove to outdo one another in their efforts to glorify the Emperor's deeds, creating a monument worthy of the only being who could ever bear such a honorific without need of a true name.

Those early days are a blur to me now, though that may be because my brain is beginning to die from lack of oxygen. Suffice to say, I was soon travelling into the darkness of space, where shoal after shoal of starships thronged the heavens and greedily sucked fuel and supplies from the enormous continental plates locked in geostationary orbit.

At last I saw the vessel that would be my home for nearly two hundred years, a leviathan that shone in the reflected glow of the moon. It gleamed whitely as it spun gracefully to receive the flotilla of cutters and shuttles rising from the planet below. This was the *Vengeful Spirit*, flagship of Horus Lupercal and his

Luna Wolves.

I quickly established myself on board, and though my possessions were meagre, my wealth was substantial, and my vanity only scarcely less so. All of which allowed me to extend my span and retain the appearance of youth with superlative juvenat treatments.

As I lie here on the floor of my workshop in the artisan decks of the *Vengeful Spirit*, I wish I had not bothered. What difference do a few less lines around the eyes and smoother skin make when every breath might be the last and a pleasing bliss enters my mind as portions of my brain begin to fade out?

I prospered on the flagship of the 63rd Expedition, creating many fine works and obtaining many commissions for embellished scabbards, honour markings, oaths of moment and the like. I made friends among the rest of my fellow remembrancers (as we came to be known after Ullanor): some good, some ill-chosen, but all interesting enough to make my time aboard ship extremely pleasurable. One fellow, Ignace Karkasy, wrote such hilariously irreverent poetry concerning the Astartes that I fear he may one day wear out his welcome.

The work of the Expeditionary fleet continued, and though many worlds were made compliant by the work of warriors and iterators, I saw little of them save in the words and images of my fellows. I created a lapis lazuli recreation of the world map found in the depths of one uninhabited planet, and embossed many helmets with icons of fallen brothers after the war on Keylek.

Yet my greatest commission was to come in the wake of the Ullanor campaign.

From the accounts of those who had fought on that muddy, flame-lit world, it was a grand war, a towering victory that could have been won by no other warrior than Horus Lupercal. Ullanor marked a turning point in the crusade, and many were the war-leaders who came to my workshop, looking to celebrate their presence on that historic battlefield with an ornamented sword or cane.

The Emperor was returning to Terra, and a great Triumph was held in the ruins of the greenskin world to forever stamp that moment on the malleable alloy of history.

In the Emperor's absence, Horus Lupercal would lead the final stages of the crusade, and such a weighty duty required an equally weighty title.

Warmaster.

Even I, who had little taste for war or the tales of its waging, savoured the sound of that word in my mouth. It promised great things, glorious things, and my mind was awl with the magnificent works I might fashion to commemorate the honour the Emperor had bestowed upon Horus Lupercal.

As the Warmaster was anointed, so too were we accorded an honour. The founding of the Remembrancer Order is one of my proudest memories, one that made me weep when I heard of its ratification by the Council of Terra. I remembered the white-haired man who came to my workshop and raised many a glass to him in the liquor halls of the ship.

The day after the Triumph, a warrior came to me, a beautiful man encased in battle plate that gleamed white with lapping powder and smelled of scented oils. His name was Hastur Sejanus, and never have I been so captivated as I was by his countenance. He showed me his helm, cut with a crude marking just above the right eye. Without asking, I knew it was the crescent image of the new moon.

Sejanus bade me fashion four rings, each in silver, each set with a polished moonstone. One stone would bear the crescent moon of his own helmet, another the half moon, a third the gibbous and the fourth the full. For this work, I was to be paid handsomely, but I declined any remuneration, for I knew to whom these rings would be presented.

The Mournival.

Abaddon would bear the full moon, Aximand, called Little Horus by some, the half moon, and Torgaddon the gibbous. Sejanus would bear the final ring of the new moon.

It was honour enough to craft these things for warriors of such pedigree.

For weeks I laboured, shaping each ring with all the skill I possessed. I knew such warriors would despise frippery and over-ornamentation, so I kept my more elaborate design flourishes to a minimum until I was sure I had created rings worthy of the Warmaster's closest lieutenants.

With my work on the rings complete, I awaited the return of Hastur Sejanus, but the demands of war kept him from my workshop, and other commissions came across my workbench in due course. One such commission, simple enough in its conception, proved to be my undoing, coming also from a warrior of the Luna Wolves.

I never knew his name, for he never volunteered it, and I never dared ask. He was a blunt-faced man with a deep scar across his brow and a belligerent demeanour. He spoke with words accented with that particular harshness of Cthonia, so typical of the older warriors of the Luna Wolves.

What he wanted was simple, so simple it was almost beneath me.

From a pouch at his waist the warrior produced a silver disc, like the blank die of a coin, and placed it upon my workbench. He slid it towards me and told me that he wanted medals made, each bearing the image of a wolf's head and a crescent moon. Rarely do I take such specific commissions. I prefer to bring my own design sensibilities to each project, and told him so. The warrior was insistent to the point where I felt it would be dangerous to refuse. A wolf's head and a crescent moon. No more, no less. I was to craft the mould for such a medal, which he would then take to the engineering decks to have produced in greater numbers in a hydraulic press.

So banal a task did not interest me, but I nodded and told him a mould would be ready within the day for him. I did not miss the similarity in motif to that required by Hastur Sejanus, but said nothing. Words could only antagonise this warrior, for he had the air of one to whom casual, shocking violence was no stranger. To fear the Astartes was natural, they were, after all, bred to be killers, but this was something else, something more immediate than simply the recognition of his purpose in existing.

He left, and I immediately felt the air of my workshop become lighter, as though it had been pressing down on my skull. The animal part of me knew I had been in terrible danger, and screamed at me to flee, but my higher self could find no reason for that fear. If only I had listened to my instinctual heart and fled, but where could I hide aboard this starship that one of the Warmaster's chosen would not find me?

I turned my attention to the silver, pushing aside all thoughts save those of working the metal. Such a simple task should have taken only a few hours, but I found I could not free myself from thoughts of the warrior and his threatening presence. Each carving lacked life and any spark of inspiration, so I turned to the same dusty books I had consulted when crafting the reliquary for the Lord General.

Within their pages, I found plentiful references to wolves and the moon: the

Neuroi of ancient Scythia transforming into wolves once a year; the fear that the eyes of a she-wolf could bedazzle the senses of men. Some saw wolves as omens of victory, while others saw them as heralds of the world's last days. In the end, I found a fragmented tale of a chained wolf that broke its bonds and swallowed the sun before being slain by a one-eyed god. Given that my carven wolf was to be set against the moon, it seemed an apt choice.

With the design set in my mind's eye, I quickly sculpted the piece, rendering the wolf with simplicity and elegance. A noble creature, set proudly against a crescent moon, head tilted back as though about to loose a wild howl. Though the work was not difficult, and the design plain, I was, nevertheless, proud of it. I felt sure my nameless patron would be pleased with the final piece, and my fear of the violence that lurked at his core receded.

As promised, he returned the next day as the ship's bells sounded the beginning of the evening cycle. He demanded to see what I had created and smiled as I placed the silver carving on his absurdly huge palm. He turned it this way and that, letting the light catch the embossed image. At last he nodded to me and complimented my work.

I bowed my head, pleased my creation had met with his approval, but no sooner had I raised my gaze than his hand fastened upon my neck. Fingers like iron cables closed around my throat and I was lifted from my feet, kicking the air as I felt the inexorable pressure of his grip. I looked into his eyes, struggling to understand why he was doing this, but I could see nothing to explain his murderous attack.

I could not cry out, for his hand prevented anything other than a strangled wheeze escaping my mouth. Something cracked and I felt a tearing pressure inside me. Then I was falling, landing hard on the floor of the workshop and scrabbling my feet as I struggled for breath. Only tiny wisps of oxygen made it through my ruined throat to my lungs, and I watched as he knelt beside me, with a sardonic expression on his blunt features.

Words struggled to reach my cyanotic lips, a thousand questions, but I had breath for only one.

*Why?*

The warrior leaned down and whispered in my ear.

An answer of sorts, but one that made no sense.

I was dying. He could see that. Within minutes I would be dead, and without waiting to watch my last moments, the warrior turned and left my workshop.

I am stronger than I look, and though I cannot know for certain, I do not believe I am dying as swiftly as my killer might have imagined. I draw the thinnest of breaths, enough to sustain me for moments longer, but not enough to live. My sight grows dim, and I feel my body dying.

This silversmith is no more, and I fear no one will ever know why.

Yet, what is this?

Is that a draught of wind across my skin, the sound of a shutter door opening?

It is! I hear a cry of alarm, and heavy footsteps. Something huge and pale looms above me. Beautiful features swim before me, like the face of a rescuer viewed from beneath the waters of a still lake.

I know this warrior.

No finer figure in Mark IV plate.

Hastur Sejanus.

Even as he lifts me from the floor, I know he will not be able to save me. I will not survive, no matter how swiftly he brings me to the medicae, but I am sanguine. I will not die alone, someone will watch as I shuffle off this mortal coil. I will be remembered.

As he lays me upon my workbench, he is not careful of my possessions, and sweeps a tray of completed commissions aside. My head lolls to the side and I see four rings fall onto the floor. I watch him accidentally tread on one of them, flattening it completely beneath his bulk.

It is the ring I made for him.

He leans over me, his words urgent, and his grief at my passing is genuine.

Sejanus barks questions at me, but I can make little sense of them.

Life is slipping away. My eyes close, but before I am gone, I hear Sejanus ask his last questions.

Who did this? What did he say?

With my last spark of life, I dredge the dying memories left to me and force my killer's last words up through my ruined larynx.

*I can't say.*