

THE HORUS HERESY®

THE WOLF OF ASH AND FIRE

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PART ONE

“A son can bear with equanimity the loss of his father, but the loss of his inheritance may drive him to despair.”

– The Black Tacitus of Firenze.

1.

The Hand of the Ship Oaths of Censure Speartip

‘I was there,’ he would say, right up until the day he died, after which he spoke only infrequently. ‘I was there the day Horus saved the Emperor.’ It had been a singular moment, the Emperor and Horus shoulder to shoulder in the fiery, ash-choked depths of the scrapworld. Blood-lit in the broil of combat for almost the last time, though only one of them knew that.

Father and son, back to back.

Swords drawn and their foe all around.

As perfect an encapsulation of the Crusade as any later immortalised in paint or ink.

Before remembrance of such times became a thing to be feared.

The scrapworld of Gorro; that was where it had happened, deep in junkyard space of the Telon Reach. The greenskin empire that once claimed dominion over its stars was in flames, assailed on all sides by the inexhaustible armies of the Imperium. The aliens’ empire was being overturned, their muddy fortress-worlds burning, but not quickly enough.

Gorro was the key.

Adrift in the distant light of a bloated red sun, where no planet had ever been wrought by inexorable time and gravity, it drifted on an erratic path. Not a wanderer, an intruder.

Its destruction was made the Crusade’s highest priority.

The command came from the hand of the Emperor himself, and his most favoured and brightest son answered this call to arms.

Horus Lupercal, primarch of the Luna Wolves.

Gorro wasn’t dying easy.

Any expectation that this would be a swift strike to the heart was dashed the

moment the Sixty-Third expedition surged towards the system boundary and saw the scale of the scrapfleet protecting it.

Hundreds of vessels, pulled back from the fighting at the core of the Reach to defend its warlord's planetoid citadel. Vast corpse-ships brought to hellish life with flaring plasma reactors at their heart. Warhulks welded together from rusted wreckage scavenged from celestial graveyards and returned to life by hideous mechanical necromancy.

Anchoring the fleet was a colossal, hollowed-out asteroid fortress, a mountainous rock encrusted with pig-iron and ice. Kilometres-wide engine cowlings were bolted deep into its bedrock and its craggy surface was thick with immense batteries of orbital-howitzers and mine-lobbers. It lumbered towards the Luna Wolves as rabid scrapship packs raced ahead like feral, club-wielding barbarians. The vox howled with baying static, a million tusked throats giving voice to the primal instinct of the ork.

The engagement volume became a swirling free-fire zone, an impossibly tangled mass of entwined warships, collimated laser fire, parabolic torpedo contrails and explosive debris fields. Void-war engagements normally fought at ranges of tens of thousands of kilometres now began so close that ork marauders with crude rocket-packs were launching boarding actions.

Atomic detonations fouled the space between the fleets with electromagnetic distortion and phantom echoes, making it almost impossible to separate what was real and what was a sensor ghost.

The *Vengeful Spirit* was in the heart of the fiercest fighting, its flanks ablaze with broadsides. A hulk tumbled away, bludgeoned into molten submission by multiple decks of concentrated explosive ordnance. It trailed scads of burning fuels and arcing jets of plasma. Thousands of bodies spilled from its ruptured innards like spores from a fungal mass.

There could be nothing subtle in such a fight. This wasn't a battle of manoeuvre and counter-manoeuve, it was a brawl. It would be won by the fleet that punched hardest and most often.

And right now, that was the orks.

The *Vengeful Spirit's* superstructure groaned like a living thing as it manoeuvred far faster than anything as massive should ever be asked. Its ancient hull shuddered under thunderous impacts, and the deck vibrated with the recoil of multiple broadside decks firing in unison.

Space between the brawling fleets was thick with debris storms, atomic

vortices, duelling attack squadrons and flash-burning vapour clouds, but within Lupercal's flagship, discipline held firm.

Cascading data-slates and shimmering wire-frame holos bathed the vaulted strategium in a rippling, undersea light. Hundreds of mortal voices conveyed the shipmaster's orders, while chattering machine tickers recited damage reports, void strengths and ordnance firing schedules over the binary cant of Mechanicum priests.

A well-drilled bridge crew in battle was a thing of beauty, and were it not for the caged-wolf pacing of Ezekyle Abaddon, Sejanus might have been properly able to appreciate it.

The First Captain slammed a fist on the brass rim of a hololithic table displaying the engagement sphere. The scratchy, flickering threat vectors burped with angry static, but the grim picture of battle surrounding the *Vengeful Spirit* didn't alter.

Greenskin warships still vastly outnumbered those of the Luna Wolves, outgunning them and appearing – in defiance of all reason and sense – to be outmanoeuvring the commander.

It was most vexing, and Ezekyle's choler wasn't helping.

Nearby mortal crew, their faces limned by data-light, turned at the sudden sound, but looked away as the First Captain glared at them.

'Really, Ezekyle?' said Sejanus. '*That's* your solution?'

Ezekyle shrugged, making the plates of his armour grate together and the gleaming black of his topknot shake like a shaman's fetish switch. Ezekyle loomed, it was his *thing*, and he tried to loom over Sejanus as though he actually thought he could intimidate him. Ridiculous, as it was only the topknot that made him taller.

'I suppose you have a better idea of how to turn this disaster around, Hastur?' said Ezekyle, glancing over his shoulder and careful to keep his voice low.

The pale ivory of Ezekyle's armour gleamed in the light of the strategium. Faded gang markings survived on those plates that hadn't been replaced by the armourers, faded gold and tarnished silver. Sejanus sighed. Almost two hundred years since leaving Cthonia, and Ezekyle still held onto a heritage best left in the past.

He gave Abaddon his best grin. 'I do, as it turns out.'

That got the attention of his other Mournival brothers.

Horus Aximand, so like the commander with his high, aquiline features and sardonic curl of the lip that they called him the truest of the *true sons*. Or, if

Aximand was in one of his rare, lighter moods, *Little Horus*.

Tarik Torgaddon, the idiot joker whose dark, saturnine features had avoided the transhuman flattening common among the Emperor's legionaries. Where Aximand would puncture the humour of any given moment, Torgaddon would seize upon it like a hound with a bone.

Brothers all. The confraternity of four. Counsellors, war-brothers, naysayers and confidantes. So close to Horus, they were likened unto his sons.

Tarik gave a mock bow, as though to the Emperor himself, and said, 'Then please enlighten us poor, foolish mortals who are grateful merely to bask in the radiance of your genius.'

'At least Tarik knows his place,' grinned Sejanus, his finely sculpted features robbing the comment of malice.

'So what *is* your better idea?' said Aximand, cutting to the heart of the matter.

'Simple,' said Sejanus, turning to the command station behind them on a raised dais. 'We trust in Horus.'

The commander saw them coming and raised a gauntlet in welcome. His perfect face was all finely chiselled lines, piercing ocean-green eyes flecked with amber and freighted with aquiline intelligence.

He towered over them all, the broad sweep of his shoulder guards swathed in the pelt of a giant beast slain on Davin's plains many decades ago. His armour, white-gold even in the battle light of the strategium, was a thing wrought from wonder and beauty, with a single staring eye fashioned across the breastplate. Graven across its vambraces and pauldrons were armourers' marks, the eagle and lightning bolt of Lupercal's father, esoteric symbolism that Sejanus didn't recognise and, almost hidden in the shadows of overlapping plates, hand-scratched gang markings from Cthonia.

Sejanus hadn't noticed them before, but that was the commander for you. Each time you stood in his presence you saw something fresh to delight the eye, some new reason to love him more.

'So how do you think it's going so far?' asked Horus.

'I have to be honest, sir,' replied Tarik. 'I feel the hand of the ship on me.'

Lupercal smiled. 'You don't have faith in me? I'd be hurt if I didn't know you were joking.'

'I am?' said Tarik.

Horus turned his gaze away as the strategium shook with a pounding series of percussive impacts on the hull. Shells from the many guns of the asteroid

fortress, judged Sejanus.

‘And you, Ezekyle?’ said Horus. ‘I know I can rely on you to give me a straight answer and not fall back on superstition.’

‘I have to agree with Torgaddon,’ said Ezekyle, and Sejanus suppressed a grin, knowing that admission would have cost Ezekyle dearly. Tarik and Ezekyle were so alike in war, but polar opposites when the killing was done. ‘We’re going to lose this fight.’

‘Have you ever known me to lose a fight?’ the commander asked of his namesake. Sejanus saw the imperceptible tilt at the corner of Lupercal’s lips and knew the commander had engineered the First Captain’s answer.

Horus Aximand shook his head. ‘Never, and you never will.’

‘A flattering answer, but a wrong one. I am as capable of losing a fight as any other,’ said Horus, putting up a hand to forestall their inevitable denials. ‘But I’m not going to lose this one.’

Lupercal ushered them to his command station, where what looked like a skeletal armature of gold and steel with embedded portions of pale meat stood plugged into the main battle hololith.

‘Adept Regulus,’ said Horus. ‘Illuminate my sons.’

The emissary of the Mechanicum nodded and the hololith bloomed to life. The commander’s station gave a clearer rendition of the battle, but, if anything, that only made his current orders more confounding.

The hololith’s low light shadowed the commander’s eye sockets while sheening the rest of his face in deep red. The impression was of an ancient chieftain squatting at a low-burning hearthfire in his wartent, gathering his generals on the eve of battle.

‘Hastur, you always had the best grip on void tactics,’ said Horus. ‘Take a look and tell me what you see.’

Sejanus leaned over the hololithic plotter, his heart swelling in pride at Lupercal’s words. It took an effort of will not to puff his chest out like one of the III Legion peacocks. He took a deep breath and stared at the grainy, slowly-updating schemata of battle.

The greenskins made war without subtlety, no matter in what arena the battle was fought. On land they came at you in a berserk horde, braying, foaming and smeared with faecal warpaint. In space their rad-spewing reaverhulks stormed into the fray with every gun-deck throwing out shells and atomic warheads with abandon.

‘Standard greenskin tactics, though I baulk at dignifying this mess with the

term,' said Sejanus, swaying as sequentially enacted orders from the commander's station threw the *Vengeful Spirit* into a savage turn. Echoes of crashing detonations travelled through the flagship's structure. Whether they were impacts or outgoing fire was impossible to tell.

'Their sheer force and numbers is bending our line back on itself,' he continued, as Regulus shifted the focus of the hololith to highlight the fiercest fighting. 'The centre's retreating from that asteroid fortress, we just don't have the guns to hurt it.'

'What else?' said Horus.

Sejanus pointed to the slowly rotating image. 'Our right and upper quadrants are being pushed out too far. The left and lower quadrants are the only ones holding firm.'

'What I wouldn't give for another fleet,' said Tarik, nodding at an empty region of space in an upper quadrant of the volume. 'Then we'd have them on two flanks.'

'No use wishing for what we don't have,' said Little Horus.

Something wasn't right, and it took a moment for the suspicion to crystallise fully in Sejanus's mind.

'Adept, bring up the tally of enemy launch-to-impact ratios,' he ordered. Instantly, a glowing pane of data light appeared in the air before Sejanus. He ran his eyes down the statistics and saw his suspicion confirmed.

'Their damage capability assessment is far above average,' he said. 'They're on-target with over seventy-five per cent of their launches.'

'That's got to be a mistake,' said Ezekyle.

'The Mechanicum do not make *mistakes*, First Captain,' said Regulus, his voice like steel wool on rust and pronouncing *mistakes* like the vilest of curses. 'The data is accurate within tolerances of local parameters.'

'Greenskins are as likely to hit their own ships as any other,' said Sejanus. 'How are they doing this?'

Horus pointed towards the crackling outline of Gorro and said, 'Because these greenskins are atypical in that I suspect they are ruled, not by warriors, but by some form of tech caste. It's why I petitioned Adept Regulus to join the Sixteenth Legion in this prosecution.'

Sejanus looked back at the display and said, 'If you suspected that, then it makes all this doubly confusing. If I may be candid, sir, our fleet tactics make no sense.'

'What *would* make them more tactically sound?'

Sejanus considered this. ‘Tarik’s right. If we had another fleet element *here*, our current strategy would be sound. We’d have them between hammer and anvil.’

‘Another fleet?’ said Horus. ‘And I am supposed to simply conjure one from thin air?’

‘Could you?’ asked Tarik. ‘Because that would be really useful right now.’

Horus grinned and Sejanus saw he was savouring this moment, though he couldn’t imagine why. The commander looked up to one of the tiered galleries rising up behind the command deck. As if on cue, a solitary figure stepped to the ironwork rail, bathed in the lambent glow of a spotlight whose arc of illumination was too providential to be accidental.

Slender and spectral in her white gown, the *Vengeful Spirit*’s Mistress of Astropathy, Ing Mae Sing, pulled back her hood. Gaunt-cheeked and with sunken, hollowed-out eye sockets, Mistress Sing was blind to one world, while being open to another secret world Sejanus knew little about.

‘Mistress Sing?’ called out Horus. ‘How long now?’

Her voice was faint. Thin, yet with an authority that carried effortlessly to the main deck.

‘Imminent, Primarch Horus,’ she said with a faintly scolding tone. ‘As well you know.’

Horus laughed and raised his voice for the entire strategium to hear, ‘You’re quite right, Mistress Sing, and I hope you will all forgive me this little moment of theatre. You see, something magnificent is about to happen.’

Horus turned to Adept Regulus and said, ‘Send the manoeuvre order.’

The adept bent to the task, and Sejanus asked, ‘Sir?’

‘You wanted another fleet,’ said Horus. ‘I give you one.’

Space parted as though cut open by the sharpest edge.

Amber light spilled out, brighter than a thousand suns and simultaneously existing in many realms of perception. The blade that cut the void open slid through the passage it had made.

But this was no blade, this was a void-born colossus of gold and marble, a warship of inhuman proportions. Its prow was eagle-winged and magnificent, its length studded with vast cities of statuary and palaces of war.

It was a starship, but a starship unlike any other.

Built for the most peerless individual the galaxy had ever known.

This was the flagship of the Emperor himself.

The Emperor Somnium.

Flocks of battleships attended the Master of Mankind. Each was a titanic engine of void-war, but the immensity of their master's vessel rendered them ordinary.

Still crackling with shield ignition, the Imperial warships surged into battle. Molten spears of lance fire stabbed into the exposed rear and flanks of the greenskin hulks. A thousand torpedoes slashed through space, followed by a thousand more. A glittering flurry of booster contrails painted the void in a web of glittering vapour-wakes.

Ork ships began exploding, gutted by timed warheads or cut in half by precision-aimed lances. Secondary explosions rippled through the hamstrung xenos fleet as raucous plasma reactors achieved critical mass and engines running insanely hot spiralled into explosive death throes.

The ork attack paused, turning to face this new threat.

Which was just what Horus Lupercal had been waiting for.

The XVI Legion fleet – which had been on the verge of being overwhelmed – halted its dispersal, its vessels turning about with astonishing speed and banding together in mutually-supporting wolf packs.

And what was once a fleet in apparent disarray transformed in minutes to a fleet on the attack. Individual greenskin vessels were overwhelmed and bombarded out of existence. Larger groups banded together, but they were no match for two coordinated war fleets led by the galaxy's greatest warriors.

The greenskins drew together around their monstrous asteroid fortress as the *Vengeful Spirit* and the *Imperator Somnium* bore down upon it. Escorting warships blasted a path through the stricken reaverhulks, clearing the way for Horus and the Emperor to deliver the killing blow.

Coming in at oblique angles, both ships raked the asteroid with unending broadsides. Void flare and electromagnetic bursts from the cataclysmic volume of ordnance wreathed the hulking fortress in flaring detonations. This was planet-killing levels of fire, the power to crack open worlds and hollow them out as thoroughly as ceaseless industry had done to Cthonia.

At some unseen signal, the Imperial vessels pulled away as hellish firestorms engulfed the asteroid. The nightmare machinery at its heart, which empowered the guns and engines, exploded and split the rock apart.

Geysers of green-white plasma energy, thousands of kilometres long, arced around its corpse in crackling whips of sun-hot lightning. Like attracted like, and the lightning sought out the plasma cores of the greenskin vessels and ripped

them apart in coruscating storms that burned everything it touched to ash.

Barely a handful escaped the tempest of destructive energies, and those that did were savaged by the prowling wolf pack squadrons.

Within the hour of the Emperor's arrival, the ork fleet had been reduced to a vast cloud of cooling debris.

An incoming vox-hail echoed through the *Vengeful Spirit's* strategium. The storms of plasma boiling in the greenskins' graveyard made inter-ship vox choppy and unreliable, but this transmission was so clear the speaker could have been standing next to Lupercal.

'Permission to come aboard, my son,' said the Emperor.

The moment was so sublime, so unexpected and so awe-inspiring that Sejanus knew he would remember it for the rest of his life. It had been a long time since Sejanus had found himself awed by someone other than his primarch.

The Emperor went without a helm, his noble countenance bearing a wreath of golden laurels about his brow. Even from a distance it was the face of a being worthy of eternal fealty, conceivable only as an impression of wonder and light. No god ever demanded respect and honour more. No earthly ruler had ever been so beloved by all.

Sejanus found himself weeping tears of unbridled joy.

Father and son met on the main embarkation deck of the *Vengeful Spirit*, and every legionary aboard had mustered to honour the Master of Mankind.

Ten thousand warriors. So many that every Stormbird and Thunderhawk in the deck had been flown out into the void to make room.

No order had been given. None had been needed.

This was their sire, the ruler who had decreed the galaxy to be humanity's domain and wrought the Legions into being to turn that dream into reality. No force in the universe could have kept them from this reunion. As one, the Luna Wolves threw back their heads and loosed a howling cheer of welcome, a pounding, deafening roar of martial pride.

Nor were the legionaries the only ones who came. Mortals came too – waifs and strays the Luna Wolves had swept up in the course of the Great Crusade. Itinerant poets, would-be chroniclers and promulgators of Imperial Truth. To see the Master of Mankind in the flesh was an opportunity that would never come again, and what mortal would miss the chance to see the man who was reshaping the galaxy?

He came aboard with three hundred members of the Legio Custodes, god-like

warriors cast in the mould of the Emperor himself. Armoured in gold plate with crimson horsehair plumes streaming from their peaked helmets, they carried shields and long polearms topped with armed photonic blades. Warriors whose sole purpose was to give their lives in order to protect his.

The Mournival followed Horus at the head of the entire First Company, marching in a long column alongside the warriors of the Legio Custodes.

As all warriors do, Sejanus measured them against his own strength, but could form no clear impression of their power.

Perhaps that was the point.

‘Jaghatai taught it to me,’ said Horus in answer to a question of the Emperor’s. ‘He called it “the *zao*”. I can’t pull it off anything like as fast as the Warhawk, but I make a passable fist of it.’

Sejanus saw Horus was being modest. Not enough to keep pride from his voice, but just on the right side of arrogant.

‘You and Jaghatai were always close,’ said the Emperor as they marched between the proud lines of Luna Wolves. ‘Of all of us, even me, I think you know him best.’

‘And I hardly know him at all,’ admitted Horus.

‘It is how he was made,’ said the Emperor, and Sejanus thought he detected a note of profound regret.

They marched between the thousands of cheering legionaries, leaving the embarkation deck and moving up through the grandest processions of the *Vengeful Spirit*. Companies of Luna Wolves peeled off the higher they went, until only Ezekyle’s Justaerin elite and the Mournival remained.

They marched down the Avenue of Glory and Lament, the soaring antechamber with embossed columns of dark wood that bore the weight of a shimmering crystalline roof, through which the roiling, plasmic death throes of the greenskin fleet could be relished. Coffered panels running fully half the length of the avenue bore hand-painted lists of names and numbers, and the march to the bridge only stopped when the Emperor paused to kneel by the newest panel.

‘The dead?’ asked the Emperor, and Sejanus heard the weight of uncounted years in that simple question.

‘All those where the *Spirit* was present,’ said Horus.

‘So many, and so many more yet to come,’ said the Emperor. ‘We must make it all worthwhile, you and I. We must build a galaxy fit for heroes.’

‘We could fill this hall a hundred times over and it would still be a price worth

paying to see the Crusade triumphant.’

‘I hope it will not come to that,’ said the Emperor.

‘The stars are our birthright,’ said Horus. ‘Wasn’t that what you said? Make no mistakes and they will be ours.’

‘I said that?’

‘You did. On Cthonia, when I was but a foundling.’

The Emperor stood and put a mailed gauntlet upon Lupercal’s shoulder, the gesture of a proud father.

‘Then I must prove worthy of your trust,’ said the Emperor.

They met later, when the order for war had rung out all across the *Vengeful Spirit*. There was much yet to be done, battle group formations to be decided upon, assault preparations to be run through and a thousand other tasks to be completed before the attack on Gorro could begin.

But first *this*.

‘I don’t have time for your pointless little ritual, Hastur,’ declared Ezekyle. ‘I’ve a company to ready for war.’

‘We all do,’ said Sejanus. ‘But you’re doing this.’

Ezekyle sighed, but nodded in acquiescence. ‘Fine, then let’s get on with it.’

Sejanus had chosen a seldom-visited observation deck in the rear quarters of the ship for their meeting. A vivid screech of plasma storms blazed beyond the crystalflex dome, and forking trceries of lightning danced on the polished terrazzo floor. The walls were bare of ornamentation, though scratched with Cthonian murder-hexes, bad poetry and gruesome images of murdered aliens.

A deep pool of fresh water filled the heart of the chamber, glittering with starlight and made bloody with light from the system’s bloated red star.

‘It’s not even a proper moon,’ said Ezekyle, staring at the pallid reflection of Gorro in the mirror flat waters.

‘No, but it will have to do,’ answered Sejanus.

‘The Justaerin are going to be fighting alongside the Emperor,’ said Ezekyle, mustering one last objection to a ceremony he’d never liked being party to. ‘And I’ll not have us shown up by those golden martinets.’

‘We’ve been doing this since Ordoni,’ said Tarik, kneeling to set the gleaming silver of his gibbous moon token next to Aximand’s half-moon medal at the edge of the pool. ‘It’s what keeps us honest. Remembering Terentius.’

‘I don’t *need* keeping honest,’ snapped Ezekyle, but he too knelt to place his lodge medal. ‘Terentius was a traitor. We’re nothing like him.’

‘And only by constant vigilance will that remain so,’ said Sejanus, and the matter was settled. He set his crescent-moon token next to those of his brothers and said, ‘The Legion looks to us. Where we lead, they follow. We’re doing this.’

Sejanus drew his sword and his Mournival brothers drew theirs. The XIII Legion favoured the short, stabbing gladius, but Lupercal’s sons bore long-handled war blades, capable of being wielded one-handed or as brutal double-handers.

‘Who are we?’ asked Sejanus.

‘We are the Luna Wolves,’ said the others.

‘Beyond that,’ said Sejanus, almost growling the words.

‘We are Mournival.’

‘Bound together by the light of a moon,’ roared Sejanus. ‘Sworn to a bond that only death will break.’

‘We kill for the living,’ shouted Ezekyle.

‘We kill for the dead!’ they cried in unison.

Their swords lowered, each warrior resting the tip of his blade on the gorget of the man to his left.

Sejanus felt Ezekyle’s sword at his neck as he held his own on Aximand, who in turn placed his at Tarik’s neck. Lastly, Tarik placed his sword on Ezekyle, grinning at the faintly treasonous action of baring a blade to the First Captain.

‘You have your Censures?’

Each warrior held out a folded square of oath paper that would normally be used to record an objective to be achieved in battle. Such oaths would be affixed to a warrior’s armour, a visible declaration of martial intent.

Each Mournival brother had written upon their paper, but instead of a deed of honour, they had chosen a punishment for failure. These were Oaths of Censure, something Sejanus had instituted in the wake of the war in the Ordoni star cluster against the traitor Vatale Gerron Terentius.

His brothers had resisted the idea, claiming that to threaten punishment was to impugn their honour, but Sejanus had insisted, saying, ‘We hold to the essential, unchanging goodness of the Legions, in their rational appraisal and rejection of evil. We invest our primarchs with divine qualities, with moral and rational faculties that make them both just and wise. We simplify the complexity of the galaxy by believing there is an unbreakable wall between good and evil. The lesson of Terentius is that the line between good and evil is all too permeable. Anyone can cross it in exceptional circumstances, even us. Believing that we

cannot fall to evil makes us more vulnerable to the very things that might make it so.'

And so they had reluctantly agreed.

Sejanus held out his helmet, its transverse crest pointed to the deck. His censure paper was already in the helmet, and the other three dropped their punishment in with it. Then, each warrior reached inside and selected a paper at random. Aximand and Ezekyle tucked theirs into their belts. Tarik placed his into a leather loop on his scabbard.

Sejanus had read of the tradition from the ancient texts of Unity, where the ochre-painted warriors of Sarapion each crafted censures and cast them into a vast iron cauldron on the eve of battle. Each man would file past and draw a punishment should they fail their king. None knew which punishment they had chosen, thus no warrior could devise a lighter punishment and expect to receive it himself.

By the time the drop pods launched, each of the Mournival would have an Oath of Censure wax-sealed onto a secret place upon his armour.

In the years since the first censure had been written, not one had ever been read.

And none ever will, thought Sejanus.

The Oaths of Moment had been sworn, the straining Stormbirds let fly. The Luna Wolves were en route to Gorro. Drop pods and gunships in the tens of thousands raced to the surface, ready to hollow the scrapworld from the inside out.

Gorro's death was to be won the hard way.

Field technology unknown to the Mechanicum bound the layered depths of Gorro together, and those same technologies made it virtually invulnerable to bombardment.

Macro cannons capable of levelling entire cities barely scratched its rust-crusted surface. Magma bombs and mass drivers with the power to crack continents detonated in its atmosphere. The lethal radiation of destroyer warheads dissipated into the void, half-lives of tens of thousands of years degraded in hours.

Lupercal watched his warriors race to battle from the golden bridge of his father's vessel. He wished he was part of the initial wave, the first to set foot on Gorro's alien surface. A wolf of ash and fire, bestriding the world as an avenging destroyer god.

Destroyer? No, never that.

‘You wish you were with them, don’t you?’ asked the Emperor.

Horus nodded, but didn’t turn from the viewing bay.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Horus, feeling the might of his father’s presence behind him.

‘What don’t you understand?’

‘Why you wouldn’t let me go with my sons,’ said Horus.

‘You always want to be first, don’t you?’

‘Is that so bad?’

‘Of course not, but I need you elsewhere.’

‘Here?’ said Horus, unable to mask his disappointment. ‘What good will I do from here?’

The Emperor laughed. ‘You think we’re going to watch this abomination die from here?’

Horus turned to face the Emperor, now seeing his father was girt for battle, towering and majestic in his gold-chased warplate of eagle wings and a bronze mantle of woven mail. A bluesteel sword was unsheathed, rippling with potent psychic energies. Custodians attended him, weapons at the ready.

Upon the largest teleporter array Horus had ever seen.

‘I believe you call it a speartip, yes?’ said the Emperor.

PART TWO

“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.”

– The Blind Poet of Kaerlundein.

2.

Cthonia in Iron Brothers Divided Into the Abyss

A blaze of light, a vertiginous sense of dislocation and a world out of joint with itself. No sense of movement, but a powerful sense of time. Phosphor bright light faded from Horus's eyes, replaced by a furnace coal glow of seething workshops and volcanic fissures.

The bridge of the Emperor's flagship was gone.

In its place was a vision conjured straight from his youth.

Cthonia rendered in iron and mud.

Horus had explored the very depths of his adoptive home world, beyond the deepest ore-delvings, where the insane and the crippled waited to die. He'd even ventured beneath the dripping cadaver pits, avoiding the screeching murder-haruspex with their disembowelling knives and organ cloaks.

Cthonia was a warren of nightmarish rookeries filled with unimaginable horrors at every turn, its claustrophobic tunnels lit with pulsating light from magma fissures. Thick with ash, a toxic miasma clogged the lungs, fouled the eyes and stained the soul.

This was just like that. Bowing ceilings laced with knotworks of rusted reinforcement, caged bulbs that sputtered with fitful light and a fug of sulphurous fumes.

The scrapworld stank of hot iron and flames, of oil and sweat and waste matter left to rot. The chamber was rank with the stench of beasts, as though the herds of livestock were kept here and never mucked out. This was the fetor of the ork, ammoniac and strangely redolent of spoiled vegetable matter.

A thousand or more greenskins roared to see several hundred armoured warriors appear without warning in the midst of the wide chamber. Every ork was encased in rusted plates of hissing iron, strapped and bolted to their swollen bodies. Horus's suspicion of a ruling tech class was all but confirmed at the sight of the wheezing pneumatics, cracking power generators and hissing, lightning-edged weapons.

‘At them!’ bellowed the Emperor.

Much to Horus’s chagrin, the Custodians moved first, bracing their spears and letting fly with an explosive volley of mass-reactives from their guardian spears. The Justaerin opened fire a heartbeat later and the ork line bloomed with fiery detonations.

Then the Emperor was amongst them.

His sword was a bluesteel shimmer, too fast to follow with the naked eye. He moved through the orks without seeming to move at all, simply existing at one point to kill before appearing elsewhere to reap greenskin lives by the score. Each blow struck with the force of an artillery impact, and shattered bodies flew from his sword as though hurled aside by a bomb blast.

Nor was his sword the Emperor’s only weapon.

His outstretched gauntlet blazed with white-gold fire, and whatever the flames touched disappeared in explosions of red cinders and ash. He battered orks to bonelessness with bludgeoning blows, he crushed them with invisible coils of force and he repelled their gunfire with thoughts that turned their rounds to smoke.

They came at him in their hundreds, like iron filings to the most powerful magnet, knowing they would never find another foe so deserving of their rage. The Emperor killed them all, unstoppable in his purity of purpose.

A crusade of billions distilled in one numinous being.

Horus had fought alongside the Emperor for well over a century, but the sight of his father in battle still had the power to awe him. This was war perfected. Fulgrim could live a thousand lifetimes and never achieve anything so wondrous.

Horus fired his storm bolter, decapitating a monster with twin rotating hooks for hands. It spun around and gutted another greenskin that stared stupidly at its unspooling entrails for a moment before collapsing. Horus followed his father into the mass of alien flesh and steel. His sword slashed low, taking the leg from a towering ork of absurdly oversized machine-musculature. He crushed its skull beneath his boot as he pushed over its thrashing body.

The Justaerin fought to his left and right, a solid wedge of black-armoured terminators battering their way through an ocean of iron-hard green flesh. Ezekyle led them with characteristic bullishness: shoulders squared against the foe, fist sawing back and forth like a relentless piston as his twin-bolter spat explosive death.

Horus had waged every form of warfare imaginable, but never relished it more

than in a bloody broil with the greenskin. Hundreds of greasy bestial bodies surrounded him, howling, yelling, screaming and braying. Fangs snapped on his vambrace. Roaring cleavers shattered on his shoulder guards. He shrugged off every impact, rolled with every blow, killing his attackers with pure economy of force.

Stinking alien viscera coated him, hissing from the blade of his sword and the barrels of his storm bolter. Next to him, Ezekyle slew with furious urgency, pushing himself to the limit to stay by his primarch's side.

The Custodians hewed the orks with precisely aimed blows of their guardian spears. They could wield them in lethally inventive ways, but this was not the place for elaborate fighting styles. Here it was kill or be killed. Strikes that would end any other life form thrice over had to be repeated again and again just to put a single beast down.

The orks fought back with all the primal, animalistic fury that made them so dangerous. Even terminator armour could be breached, their legionaries killed.

The orks were doing both.

At least a dozen Custodians were dead. Perhaps the same again in Justaerin. Horus saw Ezekyle go down, a colossal spiked mace, twice the height of a mortal, buried in his shoulder. An ork war-captain, ogryn-huge, wrenched the mace clear and swung the weapon around its immense body to deliver the death blow.

A shimmering sword sliced in to block the descending mace.

Bluesteel, two handed and wreathed in fire.

The Emperor rolled his wrist and the monstrous weight of the spiked head fell from its wire-wound haft. The Master of Mankind spun on his heel and the fire-edged sword licked out in a shimmering figure-of-eight.

The towering greenskin collapsed in four keenly-sliced segments. Its iron-helmed head still bellowed defiance as the Emperor bent to retrieve it from the deck. He waded into the orks, the roaring war-captain's truncated torso in one fist, sword in the other.

Horus dragged Ezekyle to his feet.

'Can you fight?' demanded Horus.

'Aye,' snapped Ezekyle. 'It's just a scratch.'

'Your shoulder is broken and the bone shield on your left side is fractured. As is your pelvis.'

'They'd need to break every bone in my body keep me from your side,' said Ezekyle. 'As it is for you and the Emperor, beloved by all.'

Horus nodded.

To say more would be to shame Ezekyle. ‘No force in the galaxy will keep me from his side.’

As if Ezekyle’s words were a dare to the galaxy, Gorro convulsed in the grip of a violent quake that ripped up from far below.

‘What was that?’ asked Ezekyle.

There could be only one answer.

‘The gravitational fields keeping Gorro coherent are spinning out of control,’ said Horus. ‘The scrapworld’s tearing itself apart.’

No sooner had Horus spoken than the deck plates buckled throughout the chamber. Metres-thick sheets of steel ripped like paper as geysers of oily steam belched from the depths. Bulging walls collapsed inwards and debris rained from the splintering ceiling. Cracking fissures spread across the bloody ground, tearing wider with every second as Custodians, Justaerin and orks fell into the scrapworld’s fiery depths.

Horus fought for balance, pushing to where he saw the golden light of the Emperor surrounded by greenskin marauders.

‘Father!’ yelled Horus.

The Emperor turned, one hand outstretched to Horus.

Another quake struck.

And the scrapworld swallowed the Emperor whole.

Sejanus had no idea where they were. Everything was smoke and ash and blood. Three of his squad were dead already, and they hadn’t even laid eyes on the enemy. Red light painted the interior of the smoke-filled drop pod, dripping wet where Argeddan and Kadonnen’s bodies had been explosively gutted by spikes of penetrating debris. Feskan’s head rolled at his feet, leaving spirals of blood on the floor.

The drop pod’s boosters had failed and what should have been a controlled landing with the rest of the Fourth Company instead became a violent descent through hundreds of layers of honeycombed scrap towards Gorro’s core.

According to the squalling, static-filled sensorium on his visor, his company was around two hundred kilometres above him. The reek of scorched metal and rotten food poured in through tears in the side of the drop pod.

Sejanus heard the booming, clanking, screeching sound that was the hallmark of greenskin technology. And behind that, the guttural bark-language of orks. The sound had a grating metallic quality to it, but he didn’t have time to dwell on

that now.

‘Up!’ he shouted. ‘Up now! Get out!’

His restraint harness endlessly ratcheted as the deformed metal tried to unlock. He wrenched it away and pushed himself upright, turning to rip his bolt pistol and sword from the stowage rack above. For good measure, he took a bandolier of grenades as well. The rest of his squad followed suit, freeing and arming themselves with complete calm.

The base of the pod was canted at a forty-five degree angle, the drop-hatch angled towards the ground. Sejanus kicked the emergency release. Once, twice, three times.

It gave, but only a little.

Two more kicks finally freed it, and the panel fell out with a heavy clang. He dropped through the hatch and spun out from underneath its groaning remains. One by one, the survivors of his squad joined him on the scorched ruin of the deck. They followed him out from under the drop pod, bolters ready.

The ground was rumbling, the after-effects of a quake or something more serious? Powerful forces travelled through the ironwork lattice of Gorro. Metal and crushed rock lay in dust-wreathed heaps.

Sejanus looked up to see a rain of debris tumbling from the high ceiling, a wire-tangled hole marking their drop pod’s entry to the crackling, lightning-filled vault.

Smashed machinery surrounded the crashed pod. Spars of metal and bodies had been pulverised by their impact and the quake. Arriving this deep had caught the half-dozen ork survivors here by surprise, but the clanking, smoke-belching things closing in on them weren’t greenskins.

At least not of the flesh and blood variety.

‘Throne, what are they?’ said Sejanus.

Heavily armoured in what appeared to be all-enclosing suits of crudely-beaten iron, he’d taken them for ork chieftains, brutish war-leaders able to demand the heaviest armour, the biggest, loudest weapons.

But that wasn’t what they were at all.

Their skulls were metal, as were their bodies. No part of them was organic, they were entirely formed of rusted iron, perforated vent chimneys hulking buzz saws and enormous cannons with flanged barrels.

Hundreds of tiny, shrieking, green skinned menial *things* surrounded them. Cackling, mean-looking serviles by the look of them, though even they were augmented with primitive bionics. Some carried smoking ad-hoc pistols, others

held what looked like miniature blowtorches or tools more surgical than mechanical. Sejanus dismissed them as irrelevant.

The clanking, hissing metal greenskins stomped towards them and a hail of wild fire blasted from their guns. Sejanus skidded into cover. The gunfire was hopelessly inaccurate, but there was a *lot* of it. Grating speech that sounded like a machine badly in need of oiling ripped from the ironclad orks.

It always surprised Sejanus that the greenskin had mastered language. He supposed it was to be expected, given the incongruent levels of technology they possessed, but that so bestial a race *communicated* offended him on a gut level.

Shells exploded overhead, tearing through the heavy machine sheltering him. Almost immediately after, the snapping, cackling servile creatures swarmed over the top. They were tiny, virtually inconsequential. Until one started blowtorching the side of his helmet.

Sejanus pulverised it with a sharp headbutt. It exploded like a green blister over his helm. He rolled and wiped the stinking mess of its demise from his visor. They were all over him, cutting, stabbing and shooting their tiny pistols.

He scraped them off. He stamped on them like insects.

He'd dismissed them as irrelevant, and individually they were. But throw a hundred of them into a fight, and even a legionary had to take them seriously.

Because while he was killing them by the score, the ork ironclads were still coming. The swarm kept attacking, fouling the joints of his armour with their ridiculous little tools, screeching with glee as they sawed serrated blades into seams between plates. The rest of his squad fared little better, fouled like prey beasts in a net.

'I don't have time for this,' he snarled, snapping off the string of frags from his belt. He snapped the arming pins and lobbed them into the air.

'Brace for impact!' shouted Sejanus, dropping to a crouch with his arms over his head.

The frags blew out with a rippling thunderclap of sequential detonations. Red-hot shrapnel scythed out in all directions. Fire engulfed Sejanus, and the overpressure threw him forward against the hulking machine. His armour registered a few penetrations where the creatures had managed to weaken the flexible joints at his knees and hip, but nothing serious.

The serviles were gone, shredded to bloody scraps on nearby machinery, like leavings from an explosion in a doll manufactory. Only a few remained alive, but even those were no threat. He rose to his feet, slathered in alien blood, and aimed his pistol at the oncoming ironclads.

‘Take them,’ ordered Sejanus.

The Glory Squad, that’s what they called the warriors Sejanus commanded. Dymos, Malsandar, Gorthoi and the rest. Favoured by Horus and beloved by all, they had more than earned the name. Some thought the name vainglorious, but those who had seen them fight knew better.

Malsandar killed a beast with twin blasts from his plasma carbine, the ironwork effigy going up like a volcano as the searing beam set off a secondary detonation within it. Gorthoi put another down with a slamming right hook from his power fist, going on to tear it limb from limb as though he were back in the kill-pits of Cthonia.

Dymos and Ulsaar kept another at bay with concentrated bursts of bolter fire while Enkanus circled behind it with a melta charge. Faskandar was on his knees, his armour aflame and ceramite plates running like melting wax. Sejanus could hear his pain over the vox.

Sejanus picked his target, an ironclad with enormous bronze tusks welded into a serrated metal jaw. Its eyes were mismatched discs of red and green, its body a barrel-like construction with grinding pneumatics and beaten-metal weapon limbs. He put his bolt-round through the centre of its throat. The mass-reactive detonated and blew its head onto its shoulder in a shower of flame and squirting bio-organic oils.

The thing kept coming, raising a heavy, blunderbuss-like weapon with a flared muzzle. Sejanus didn’t give it time to shoot and vaulted from cover. His boots thundered into its chest. The ironclad didn’t fall. It was like slamming into a structural column.

A claw with monstrously oversized piston-driven motors snapped at his head. Sejanus ducked and thumbed the activation stud on his chainsword’s hilt. The saw-toothed blade roared to life and he hacked through the last remnants of spurting oils and whirring chains holding the ironclad’s head in place.

Its horned skull fell to the deck, and Sejanus stamped down on it. Metal splintered, and viscous fluid, like that cocooning the mortal remains of a mortis brother within his dreadnought, spilled out alongside a twitching root-like spinal cord. Sejanus felt his gorge rise as he saw what lay within the iron skull.

A spongy, grey green mass of tissue, like a fungal cyst of knotted roots filled the skull. Two piggish, red eyeballs hung limp on stalks from the broken metal, both staring madly up at him from the ruin of the metallic skull.

His horror almost cost him his life.

The headless ironclad’s snapping claw fastened on his chest and lifted him

from the deck. Black smoke jetted from the exhausts on its back as its pincer claw drew together. The plates of his armour buckled under the crushing pressure. Sejanus fought to free himself, but its grip was unbreakable.

Mars-forged plate cracked. Warning icons blinked to life on his sensorium. Sejanus cried out as his bones ground together and blood began filling the interior of his armour.

He braced his feet against the ironclad's chest and twisted to bring his pistol to bear. The red eyes within the slowly draining helm were looking up at him, relishing his agony. The bolt-round exploded and the brain matter of the ironclad and its body convulsed with its destruction. The claw spasmed, dropping Sejanus to the deck.

He landed badly, his spine partially crushed. White light smeared his vision as palliatives flooded his body to shut the pain gate at the nape of his neck. He'd pay for that later, but this was the only way to ensure there *was* a later.

Sejanus took a moment to restore his equilibrium.

The other ironclads were dead.

So too was Faskandar, his body reduced to a gelatinous mass by the fire of the unknown greenskin weapon. Dymos knelt beside their fallen brother.

'He's gone,' he said. 'Not enough even for an Apothecary.'

'He will be avenged,' promised Sejanus.

'How?' demanded Gorthoi, belligerent to the point of requiring admonishment.

'In blood. In death,' said Sejanus. 'Our mission is unchanged. We move out and kill anything we find. Does anyone have a problem with that plan?'

None of them did.

Dymos looked up at the ragged hole their drop pod had torn.

'The rest of the company's got to be hundreds of kilometres above us,' he said. 'We're on our own down here.'

'No,' said Sejanus, 'we're not.'

His armour's systems were picking up an Imperial presence.

'Who else is this deep?' asked Malsandar.

Sejanus had never seen this kind of signature, but whoever it was, not even the electromagnetic junk fouling the air and the hostile emissions from the ork machinery at scrapworld's core could obscure his presence.

Only one person would be visible this deep in Gorro.

Sejanus grinned. 'It's the Emperor.'

Horus dropped down through the scrapworld's interior, a pearl-white angel trailing wings of fire as he fell. He'd jumped without a second's hesitation, blind to any thought other than following his father.

The quake had ripped the structure of Gorro apart. Its sedimentary levels of agglomerated junk were coming undone. Layers were separating and compacted debris was crumbling as its structural integrity collapsed at an exponential rate.

That meant two things.

Firstly, Horus was able to follow roughly the same route his father had fallen.

And secondly, the spaces opening up below him were getting wider, meaning his descent was getting faster. He smashed down through warrens of dwelling caves, stinking feeding pits and labyrinthine workshops that blazed with emerald fire.

Horus endured impacts that would have killed even a legionary as the scrapworld's death throes tossed him around like a leaf in a hurricane. He looked up, seeing tiny figures in black and gold falling after him.

Justaerin and Legio Custodes.

They'd followed him down, heroic and selfless.

But, ultimately, doomed.

They weren't primarchs. They could not endure what he could.

He saw Justaerin incinerated by a gout of plasmic fire billowing from a ruptured conduit. Custodians who dropped in arcing dives were smashed by falling debris or deforming structural elements. Their limp, lifeless bodies followed him down into the depths.

Eruptions flared up from the depths in kilometres-long forks of lightning. Ork war-machines exploded and swirling contrails of wildly corkscrewing ammunition ricocheted from every surface. Some of it struck him, scorching his armour and blistering his flesh.

Horus dropped through cavernous spaces filled with towering engines that no adept of Mars would ever dare build, let alone get to function. The world spun around him as Gorro's structure twisted and screamed with its imminent destruction. Cliff-like walls slammed together, giant girders wrought from the keels of wrecked starships bent like wire, and gouts of molten metal poured from collapsing foundries.

Horus slammed into a wall that might once have been a deck plate. Angled enough to slow his descent, but only just. The ground below was a nightmarish mass of cascading debris and fire. Horus punched his fist through the metal, ripping a jagged furrow in his wake to slow his descent.

Even with his speed reduced, Horus still slammed into the ground too hard. He bent his knees and rolled through the flames, feeling the heat of them scorch his armour and reach through to his flesh.

The deck plate shuddered and tore free of its moorings.

It tipped him over a yawning abyss limned in blue-white radiance from below. For a second, Horus was held aloft in an incandescently bright void of competing gravitational forces, wrenched in a thousand directions at once. Then one force, stronger than all the others combined, took hold of him and drew him down.

Horus fell and only at the last instant managed to right himself. He slammed down, bending his knee and punching a crater into the ground with the force of his impact.

For an instant he couldn't believe his senses.

The space in which he'd landed was a vast, spherical chamber where endlessly reconfiguring gravimetric forces were at play. There was no up or down, no cardinal direction in which gravity would act. Lightning leapt from enormous brass orbs spaced at random intervals around its inner surfaces, and a dizzyingly complex series of impossibly inverted walkways and gantries surrounded a colossal vortex of energy. At least a thousand metres wide, it seethed like a caged beast of plasma fire. Lashing silver fire forked from its expanding mass, tearing at Gorro's structure and breaking it apart.

As blinding and mesmerising as the runaway plasma reaction was at the scrapworld's heart, it was to a beleaguered golden light that Horus's eye was drawn.

The Emperor was fighting his way through a howling mob of the largest greenskins Horus had ever seen. Most were the equal of a primarch in stature. One even dwarfed the Emperor himself.

His father fought to reach a fragmenting ring of iron surrounding the blinding plasma core, but the greenskins had him surrounded.

This was a fight not even the Emperor could win alone.

But he was not alone.

Sejanus and his Glory Squad fought through the disintegrating ruins of the scrapworld in the old way. No subtlety, no finesse. Like a raid on a rival warlord's territory back in the day, when all that mattered was brute force and shocking violence. Where you stabbed and bludgeoned and shot until you either killed everyone in front of you or were dragged down in blood.

His armour was pearl-white no more, but slathered in viscera. He'd been forced to discard his pistol when a mechanised slug creature had latched onto it and tried to detonate the ammunition. His sword broke on the armoured skull of another ironclad, spilling its disembodied, fungal brain to the deck.

None of that mattered.

His fists were weapons.

His mass was a weapon.

Enkanus and Ulsaar were gone, murdered with motorised cleavers and energised hooks.

All that mattered was that they reach the Emperor.

Sejanus had settled into a rhythm of battle, that cold void within a warrior where his world shrinks to a sphere of engagement. Where the truly great are separated from the merely skilled by virtue of their ability to be aware of everything around them.

Dymos fought on his left, Gorthoi his right.

They pushed ever onwards, wading knee deep in greenskin blood and flesh. The stench of the abattoir and offal pit was overpowering, but Sejanus blocked it out. The raging tide of orks was a mass of green flesh clad in beaten armour. They saw more of the ironclads, and many other technological abominations that made them seem almost comprehensible.

In the course of the Great Crusade, Sejanus had seen many examples of the crudely effective greenskin technology, but what lay beneath the surface of the scrapworld were orders of magnitude more advanced and abhorrent.

The Emperor's signal never once wavered in his visor, though every other return fizzed and screamed with distortion.

Ahead, Sejanus saw a ragged archway through which spilled blazing white light. The Emperor lay beyond it.

'We're here,' he gasped, even his phenomenal transhuman physique pushed to the limits of endurance by this fight.

He stormed through the archway and into a vast, spherical chamber with the brightest sun at its heart.

'Lupercal...' breathed Sejanus.

Horus's sword was broken, his twin bolters empty of shells. The sword had snapped halfway along its length, the edge dulled from hewing countless greenskin bodies. He'd fought his way onto a stepped bridge, killing scores of monstrously swollen orks to reach a crumbling ledge just below the Emperor.

Blood drenched him, his own and that of the orks.

His helmet was long gone, torn away in a grappling, gouging duel with an iron-tusked giant with motorised crusher claws for arms and a fire-belching maw. He'd broken the beast over his knee and hurled its corpse from the bridge. Rogue gravity vortices hurled it up and away.

More of the greenskins followed him onto the bridge, grunting and laughing as they stalked him. Their grim amusement was a mystery to Horus. They were going to die, whether he killed them or they were burned to ash by the colossal plasma reactor's inevitable destruction.

Who would laugh in the face of their death?

The Emperor fought an armoured giant twice his height and breadth. Its skull was a vast, iron-helmed boulder with elephantine tusks and chisel-like teeth that gleamed dully. Its eyes were coal-red slits of such vicious intelligence that it stole Horus's breath.

Horus had never seen its equal. No bestiary would include its description for fear of being ridiculed, no magos of the Mechanicum would accept such a specimen could exist.

Six clanking, mechanised limbs bolted through its flesh bore grinding, crackling, sawing, snapping, flame-belching weapons of murder. The Emperor's armour was burning, the golden wreath now ashes around his neck.

Chugging rotor cannons battered the Emperor's armour even as claws of lightning tore portions of it away. It was taking every screed of the Emperor's warrior skill and psychic might to keep the mech-warlord's weaponry from killing him.

'Father!' shouted Horus.

The greenskin turned and saw Horus. It saw the desperation in his face and laughed. A fist like a Reductor siege hammer smashed the Emperor's sword aside and a fist of green flesh lifted him into the air. It crushed the life from him with its inhuman power.

'No!' yelled Horus, battering his way through the last of the greenskins to reach his father's side. The Mech-Warlord turned his spinal weapons on Horus, and a blistering series of lightning strikes hammered the walkway.

Horus dodged them all, a wolf on the hunt amid the ash and fire of the world's ending. He had no weapon, and where that wasn't normally a handicap to a warrior of the Legions, against this foe it was a definite disadvantage.

No weapon of his would hurt this beast anyway.

But one of its own...

Horus gripped one of the warlord's mechanised arms, one bearing the spinning brass spheres and crackling tines of its lightning weapon. The arm's strength was prodigious, but centimetre by centimetre Horus forced it around.

Lightning blasted from the weapon, burning Horus's hands black. Bone gleamed through the ruin of his flesh, but what was that pain when set against the loss of a father?

With one last herculean effort, Horus wrenched the arm up as a sawing blast of white-edged lightning erupted from the weapon. A searing burst of fire impacted on the Mech-Warlord's forearm and the limb exploded from the elbow down in a welter of blackened bone and boiling blood. The beast grunted in surprise, dropping the Emperor and staring in dumb fascination at the ruin of its arm.

Seizing the chance he had been given, the Emperor bent low and surged upwards with his bluesteel sword extended. The tip ripped into the Mech-Warlord's belly and burst from its back in a shower of sparks.

'Now you die,' said the Emperor, and ripped his blade up.

It was an awful, agonising, mortal wound. Electrical fire vented from hideous metal organs within the wreckage of the greenskin's body. It was a murderous wound that not even a beast of such unimaginable proportions could take and live.

Yet that was not the worst of it.

Horus felt the build up of colossal psychic energies and shielded his eyes as a furious light built within the Emperor. Power like nothing he had ever seen his father wield, or even suspected he possessed. All consuming, all powerful, it was the power to extinguish life in every sphere of its existence. Physical flesh turned to ash before it and what ancient faiths had once called a soul was burned out of existence, never to cohere again.

Nothing would ever remain of he who suffered such a fate.

Their body and soul would pass from the finite energy of the universe, to fade into memory and have all that they were wiped from the canvas of existence.

This was as complete a death as it was possible to suffer.

That power blazed along the Emperor's sword, filling the greenskin with killing light. It erupted in a bellowing golden explosion, and lightning blazed from the coruscating afterimage of its death, arcing from ork to ork as it sought out all those who were kin to the master of Gorro. Unimaginable energies poured from the Emperor, reaching throughout the entirety of the chamber and burning every last shred of alien flesh to a mist of drifting golden ash.

Horus watched as the power of life and death coursed through the Emperor,

saw him swell in stature until he was like unto a god. Wreathed in pellucid amber flames, towering and majestic.

His father never claimed to be a god, and refuted such notions with a vengeance. He had even castigated a son for believing what Horus now saw before him with his very own eyes...

Horus dropped to his knees, overcome with the wonder of what he was witnessing.

‘LUPERCAL!’

He turned at the sound of his name.

And there he was, his wolf on the hunt.

Sprinting along the bridge was Hastur, howling his name over and over while pumping a fist in the air. He had fought beyond the limits of endurance and sanity to stand at the side of his primarch and his Emperor.

The wondrous light behind him was eclipsed by blue-white plasma, and Horus turned to see the Emperor silhouetted in the cold fire of Gorro’s seething core.

His back was to Horus, sword sheathed at his hip and arms raised high. The same golden fire that had so comprehensively destroyed the greenskin warlord dripped from his spread fingertips like immaterial fire.

Horus had no knowledge of the insane mechanics behind the greenskin power core, but any fool could see that it was spiralling to destruction. The powerful tremors shaking Gorro apart was evidence enough of that, but to see the bound starfire straining against its bonds was to know it for certain. Had the death of the Mech-Warlord been the final straw in breaking whatever bonds of belief held its monstrous power in check?

How long would it be before it exploded? Horus had no idea, but suspected it would be long before any of them could escape the depths of the scrapworld.

‘This can’t be how it ends,’ whispered Horus.

‘No, my son,’ said his father, gathering the golden light within him once again. ‘It is not.’

The Emperor clenched his fists and the air around the seething plasma ball *folded*. It turned sickeningly inwards, as though reality was merely a backdrop against which the dramas of the galaxy were played out.

And where it folded, the spaces behind were horribly revealed, great abysses of crawling chaos and unlimited potential. Howling voids where the combined lives of this galaxy were but motes reflected in the cosmic dust storm. An empyrean realm of the never-born, where nightmares were birthed in the foetid womb of mortal lust. Things of void-cold form writhed in the darkness, like a

million snakes of ebon glass coiled in endless, slithering knots.

Horus stared deep into the abyss, repulsed and fascinated by the secret workings of the universe. Even as he watched, the Emperor drew the fabric of the world together, sealing them around the greenskin plasma core. The effort was costing him dear, the golden light at his heart waning with every passing second.

And then it was done.

A thunderous bang of air rushed to fill the void left by the plasma fire, and the backwash blew back into the chamber in a gale of sulphurous wind.

The Emperor fell to one knee, his head bowed.

Horus was at his side a heartbeat later.

‘What did you do?’ said Horus, helping his father to his feet. The Emperor looked up, colour already returning to his wondrous features.

‘Sent the plasma core into the aether,’ said the Emperor, ‘but it will not last long. We must withdraw before the warp fold implodes and takes everything with it. The entire mass of this scrapworld will be soon crushed as surely as if it had fallen into the grip of a black hole.’

‘Then let’s get off this damn thing,’ said Horus.

They watched the final death agonies of Gorro from the bridge of the *Vengeful Spirit*. With the Mournival before them, the Emperor and Horus stood at the ouslite disc from which he had planned the void war against the scraphulk fleet.

‘The greenskins will never recover from this,’ said Horus. ‘Their power is broken. It will be thousands of years before the beast arises again.’

The Emperor shook his head, drawing a shimmering orrery of light from the disc. Gently glowing points of light rotated around the edge of the disc, scores of systems, hundreds of worlds.

‘Would that you were right, my son,’ said the Emperor. ‘But the greenskin is a cancer upon this galaxy. For every one of their ramshackle empires we burn to the ground, another arises, even greater and ever more deeply entrenched. Such is the nature of the ork – and this is why their race is so hard to destroy. They must be eradicated wholesale or they will return all the stronger, time and time again, until they come at us in numbers too great to defeat.’

‘Then we are to be cursed by the greenskin for all time?’

‘Not if we act swiftly and without mercy.’

‘I am your sword,’ said Horus. ‘Show me where to strike.’

The Emperor smiled, and Horus felt his heart swell in pride.

‘The Telon Reach was but a satrapy of the largest empire we have ever encountered, one that must fall before the Crusade can continue,’ said the Emperor. ‘It will be magnificent, the war we will wage to destroy this empire. You will earn much honour in its prosecution, and men will speak of it until the stars themselves go out.’

‘And this is it?’ asked Horus, leaning over the glowing hololith. First one, then dozens, and finally hundreds of worlds were outlined in green.

‘Yes,’ said the Emperor. ‘This is Ullanor.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GRAHAM MCNEILL has written a host of novels for Black Library, including the ever popular Ultramarines and Iron Warriors series. His Horus Heresy novel, *A Thousand Sons*, was a *New York Times* bestseller and his Time of Legends novel, *Empire*, won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award. Originally hailing from Scotland, Graham now lives and works in Nottingham.



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