

THE HORUS HERESY<sup>®</sup>

# THE WATCHER

*C Z Dunn*

Finding a grievously wounded Space Wolf,  
the Knights Errant investigate

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# THE WATCHER

C Z Dunn

‘Please. We may not have much time.’

The Knight Errant quickens his pace at the urging of the former Mechanicum adept. It has been three minutes since Tharcadian Samuel entered Ison’s chamber within the fortress watch-post to tell him of the shuttle, and only five minutes since the craft had been forced to land.

‘What is it, Samuel?’ he asks calmly. ‘What has been returned to us?’

The red warning lights flashing in the hangar bay reflect from the metal that makes up more than half of Samuel’s body, his devotion to the cult of Mars apparent in every aspect of his appearance. He regards Ison through the slit of his visor, perma-grafted over his eyes with rivets bonded to flesh. Ison thinks it gives Samuel the aspect of an underhive thug or fringe world criminal, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Semuel is a good man – an honourable man, as Ison well knows.

‘My mind is open to you, Lord Ison. Take the information that you need.’

*Lord.* The word almost makes Ison wince. Once, long ago, he would have revelled in all the honorifics lavished upon him by mortal servants. Since childhood, his gifts have elevated him above other men and, by virtue of being born on a civilised world, he has not been made a pariah nor shunned or cast out for them.

But now he has made *himself* an outcast, even from his own former Legion.

‘That is selfless of you, tech-priest. But I would not put you through that sort of intrusion unless it were absolutely vital. Besides, it seems we are—’

Ison stops dead in his tracks.

‘Holy Terra!’ he gasps. ‘Is that... Is that a... *Space Marine*?’

The thing before Ison resembles a legionary no more than a piece of parchment folded to form wings might resemble a Thunderhawk. What the torn, bleeding remains *do* look like is meat – crudely butchered meat, left out to rot and spoil. Blood trickles down the side of the ammunition crates, upon which the Space Marine has been placed, from weeks-old wounds that refuse to clot. The weak beating of a secondary heart visible through the deep gouge in his ribs is the only other sign that he yet lives.

Semuel’s fear is apparent, even in the artificial modulation of his vocaliser unit. ‘What in the name of the Omnissiah could have done this? Xenos perhaps? I’ve heard tell that the greenskins are a ferocious and unrelenting—’

‘No ork did this,’ Ison assures him. ‘I have seen the damage wrought by their kind. It is brutal, barbaric and without mercy. The violence they employ when battling a foe is without equal anywhere in the galaxy, and the damage they can inflict upon a body is beyond imagining.’

‘Not that I doubt you, Lord Ison, but based on what you’ve just told me... what exactly is it that makes you think this *isn’t* the handiwork of orks?’

Ison’s reply is barely a murmur. ‘Because he’s still alive.’ He rubs away dried blood from the stricken Space Marine’s torso with his gauntlet, and traces the outline of one of the numerous deep cuts. ‘You said that this was a message, Semuel. What made you say that?’

‘The wounds. Some of them look like words.’

‘And you thought orks did this?’

A series of clicks come from the tech-priest’s cranial implants as he accesses stored data files. ‘From my understanding of greenskin culture, crude pictograms are the basis of their language.’

Semuel gestures to the body, blink-clicking pict captures for later reference.

‘There. Just below the throat.’

Fresh blood oozes from a puncture above the collarbone, and Ison forms a dam with his other hand to prevent it from flooding the wound. ‘This isn’t how orks operate. They don’t send messages. They possess neither the intellect nor the malice to keep a prisoner on the threshold between life and death, carve his body with sigils and then send him back where he came from...’

‘I don’t think they sent him back,’ Semuel replies, straightening. ‘I think he did that himself. The controls of the shuttle are covered in bloody handprints. Human handprints.’

The Knight Errant sighs. ‘I have been a Space Marine for nigh on two centuries. If there’s blood on a legionary’s hands, it isn’t usually his own...’ He furrows his brow. ‘Which hand were the prints from? Left or right?’

‘Uhh... both. Why?’

‘Because without being crude, Samuel, this warrior only has one arm.’

‘Are you suggesting that–’

Semuel and the horrified deck crew recoil in shock as the wounded warrior takes a sudden gasp of the cold hangar air, bloody fluid gurgling in his chest.

A single word escapes his lips. ‘...*Iltahamara*...’

Ison recognises the language instantly. More importantly, he knows the word.

‘That’s Fenrisian.’

Had he not heard the utterance with his own ears, he would scarcely believe that the thing before him could be one of the sons of Russ, such is the extent of the desecration of the warrior’s body.

Semuel twitches uncomfortably. ‘A Space Wolf? What is he saying?’

Ison has fought alongside the Wolves twice before, the first time before he and his brothers had even been reunited with their own primarch. On the second occasion, Ison witnessed the combined wrath of their Legions and one other – the Legion that he believes the dying Space Marine is trying to identify.

‘*Nightfall*. It’s Fenrisian for nightfall.’

‘This is Sixth Legion shuttle *Rauha* calling the *Nightfall*. Acknowledge. Over.’

No reply came. Only the hiss and click of a monitored vox-channel.

Brutvald shrugged. ‘Perhaps our father’s brother does not like visitors, Fyodor. You know his reputation as well as I.’

Fyodor Stromgren knew Konrad Curze’s reputation better than Brutvald did, or any of his other brothers on board the shuttle. He had been there on Cortonis when the Allfather and the Night Hunter had annihilated the abhuman panteratine. And again, when they plunged further into the system to wipe out the human cultures who had allied with the xenos, refusing to bow to the Emperor’s will.

He had been there when Curze fought alongside the Blood Angels and the Wolves to burn the Grey Worlds, and once more when the Hunderax Autonomy fell. He had seen first-hand what Curze and his Legion were capable of, the depths to which they would sink to secure victory, the lines that they would cross without pause or thought.

‘Aye,’ he muttered. ‘And he knows the Sigillite’s authority. Even Curze would

not defy the Regent.’

Despite Fyodor’s surety, Brutvald and the three other sons of Russ cast each other sceptical glances. He opened the link again.

‘This is Fyodor Stromgren of the Sixth Legion, *Einherjar* champion of the Nine Eastern Tribes. I am here on the orders of Malcador the Sigillite, Regent of Terra and Voice of the Emperor. I request permission to board the *Nightfall*. Acknowledge. Over.’

The small craft banked, its human pilot guiding it to run parallel with the *Nightfall*’s starboard side. The flagship’s weapons lay idle, not registering *Rauha* as a threat.

‘There. Look,’ said Brutvald, jabbing a finger in the direction of a bright spot on the dark hull of the Night Lords lead vessel. The huge legionary’s bulk and mane of pure white hair had earned him the nickname ‘Yhethee’ amongst the wolf-brothers of *Tra*, but his eyes were sharp.

Fyodor peered at the distant opening.

‘The hangar bay doors are open and the landing lights are on. Do we have permission to come aboard? Repeat. Do we have permission to come aboard?’

Still, there was nothing but silence.

Brutvald placed a hand on Fyodor’s pauldron. ‘I have a bad feeling about this...’

Fyodor sighed. If they landed *Rauha* on board Konrad Curze’s own ship without authorisation, then their actions could be considered an act of war. On the other hand, the hangar bay looked like it was prepared to accommodate an incoming vessel, and Fyodor’s orders from the Sigillite were clear.

He turned to the pilot. ‘Take her in.’

They manoeuvred cleanly around the projecting hull-plates of the *Nightfall*, and slipped through the containment fields protecting the marked hangar.

Through the viewports of the shuttle, the blackness of the void was replaced by the midnight shades of Legion armour – rank upon rank of Night Lords assembled to meet the incoming craft. At their head stood the Night Hunter, his visage devoid of emotion, his focus solely upon the tiny shuttle that had dared to board his flagship.

‘By the Allfather,’ Brutvald cursed under his breath. ‘That must be half of Curze’s Legion out there.’

Fyodor scanned the expanse of the hangar deck. ‘No. A fifth at most. According to the fleet logs, they’re heading for a system called Isstvan.’

‘Never heard of it.’

Following the lines of the landing apron, the pilot engaged the final retros and put *Rauha* down in front of the waiting Night Lords. Fyodor rose from his seat. ‘Quickly, brothers. Ready yourselves. Let us not antagonise him further by keeping him waiting.’

The Fenrisians smoothed down the pelts at their shoulders, and adjusted their buckles and ornamentation. Though the Sons of Russ bore a reputation for being rough and ready, over time they had learned the importance of ceremony and appearance when it came to Legion matters. Their father had drilled them well enough that most warriors of the Rout would now make the effort without too much protestation.

A bolter slide was racked, chambering a single round.

Fyodor spun on his heel. Young Hreidersson stared back at him wide-eyed, like a small animal caught in the searchlights of disapproving looks from his four elders.

‘Have you run mad, pup? There are tens of thousands of Night Lords out there – led by the Night Haunter himself, no less – and you want to meet them with your bolter on show? No weapons, any of you. Not even a hunting blade.’

He drew his pistol and tossed it into the empty seat.

‘And let me do the talking.’

Fyodor marched down the ramp at the head of his pack, any apprehension he felt kept well in check, both in his body language and upon his face. The Night Lords pinned them with their gazes, like hungry prisoners eyeing scraps of rancid meat or tiny rodents that had ventured into their cell.

Without breaking stride, Fyodor’s four packmates formed a line at the base of the shuttle’s ramp, leaving him to advance closer to the waiting primarch. From beneath lank hair that covered his eyes, Konrad Curze regarded the legionary impassively.

When Fyodor was only a few paces away from the primarch, he halted and waited for the Lord of the Night to hail him.

No hail was forthcoming.

‘Greetings, Lord Curze. I am Fyodor Stromgren and this is my pack, in fealty to Tra of the *Vlka Fenryka*.’ He waited for a returned salutation, or any other response. The Night Haunter merely looked on, uninterested. ‘We are here at the behest of Malcador the Sigillite, Regent of Terra and Voice of the Emperor, and endorsed by the Wolf King of Fenris, Lord of Winter and War.’

Met again only by cold silence, Fyodor reached under the thick, white wolf pelt

draped across his shoulders and produced a scroll. He held it out before him.

‘Our credentials should be to your satisfaction, Lord Curze. These are our orders, bound with both the seal of the Wolf King and the sigil of Malcador.’

Long seconds passed but still the primarch made no move. Fyodor withdrew his arm and placed the rolled parchment back under his furs.

‘My brothers and I were on our way back to Fenris when we received them, re-routing us to your fleet and assigning us to your Legion as observers. Lord Malcador has dispatched others of the Rout to—’

Curze’s features split in a wide grin. He began to chuckle to himself, though the mirth was cold to Fyodor’s ears.

The Night Lords began to stir, the ravenous glint in their eyes becoming like balefire as they advanced on Fyodor’s pack.

‘We are here with the authority of the Sigillite and the Wolf King,’ he protested. ‘The Emperor Himself has willed th—’

Fyodor’s words were cut short by the first blade entering his flesh, followed in quick succession by another, and another. He swung his arm back, ready to deliver a blow to his assailants, but three Night Lords grasped hold of it, tearing his armour from him and dragging him to the floor.

Through the forest of armoured legs, Fyodor witnessed the demise of his packmates. Old Anek was the first to die, the veteran of almost two hundred wars bleeding out on the deck, the foes arrayed against him so many that he barely had a chance to fight back before he was down.

Hreideresson was next. Bereft of his armour, dozens of Night Lords had encircled him, taking turns to kick and punch, his muscular body becoming a tapestry of bruises and welts as his bones broke.

Anders Drakenvolk was the third of the pack to perish. Disobedient to the end, he had pulled the knife concealed in the folds of his cloak and had taken down three of the Night Lords before a single blow had been landed upon him. His resistance was short-lived, however, and a host of VIII Legion warriors pried the blade away from him before plunging it into his flesh, over and over again.

Brutvald died the best of them. Sensing what was about to happen, he had gone for Curze, barrelling through the press of dark ceramite that sprang up like a wall before him. The Night Lords punched and stabbed at him but still the massive legionary ploughed on, getting to within five metres of the Night Haunter before he was finally brought low.

The traitors dragged his corpse back to where the rest of the pack were being butchered, and dumped it alongside Fyodor. Brutvald’s pure white hair was now

stained crimson, and only a single dead eye remained in his head. Through the pain, Fyodor laughed weakly at the irony.

A cruel voice rang out over the din. ‘No. Keep that one alive.’

Fyodor felt a shadow fall over him, and an iron grip hauled him up from the floor.

The Night Haunter.

Pulling a blade from his belt, the primarch of the Night Lords began to carve a word into the legionary’s exposed flesh, still grinning like a madman. ‘This one still has a use...’

Ison severs the psychic link with the dying Space Wolf, the etheric feedback from the second-hand violence finally overwhelming him. Thick, dark blood trickles from his nostrils. He turns to look at Semuel with bloodshot eyes.

‘Curze. Curze did this.’

Semuel has no words. In the months since he fled Mars, he has witnessed many depraved and barbaric acts, atrocities that no man should ever see. But this... This is something altogether more horrifying.

Ison wipes away the blood from Fyodor’s forehead, revealing the word gouged into his flesh by the primarch’s blade. It is written in Low Gothic, in contrast to the others that defile the legionary’s remains, so crudely etched in Nostraman script.

Semuel accesses his internal data-link, searching for anything that might help.

‘We can still save him, Lord Ison! The sarcophagi I brought with me from Mars are yet to be transferred to the Othrys project. I could have him interred within the hour – we could keep him alive until the new Dreadnought frames have been completed!’

Ison cannot take his eyes from the crimson letters. ‘No. This is a true son of Fenris, born to roam the ice plains and the tundra. I have been inside his head, and this Wolf is not for caging.’

He carefully lifts what is left of Fyodor from the crates and cradles him in his arms. The grey of his Knight Errant’s armour stains red. It is pleasing to Ison. It reminds him that he no longer wears the colours of the Legion that he has abandoned, nor follows a primarch whom he detests to his very bones.

‘Run ahead to the medicae and brief the Apothecaries. Make them understand that his life is to be saved at all costs. That I, acting with the Sigillite’s authority, order it so.’

Semuel does not hesitate. He sets off from the hangar at pace.

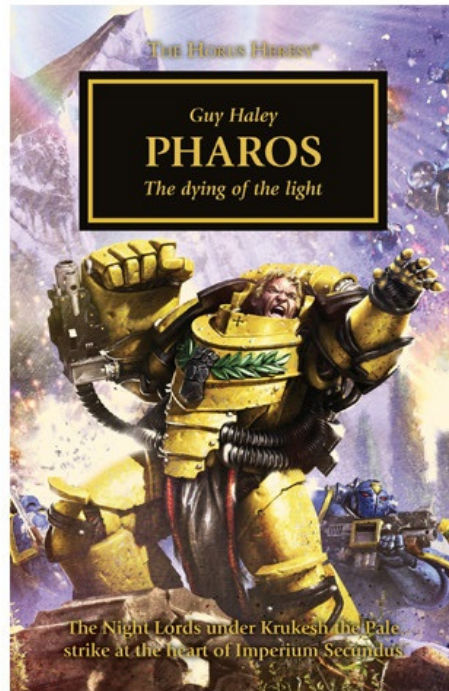
Ison follows. The word – the Night Hunter's message to the Sigillite, to the Emperor and to the Imperium as a whole – burns in his mind.

'Stay strong, brother. Curze was right – you do still have a use. Just not the one he intended.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Domiciled in the East Midlands, **C Z Dunn** is the author of the Space Marine Battles novel *Pandorax*, the novellas *Crimson Dawn* and *Dark Vengeance* and the audio dramas *Trials of Azrael*, *Ascension of Balthasar*, *Terror Nihil*, *Bloodspire* and *Malediction*, as well as several short stories.

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