

THE HORUS HERESY<sup>®</sup>

# TEMPLAR

*John French*

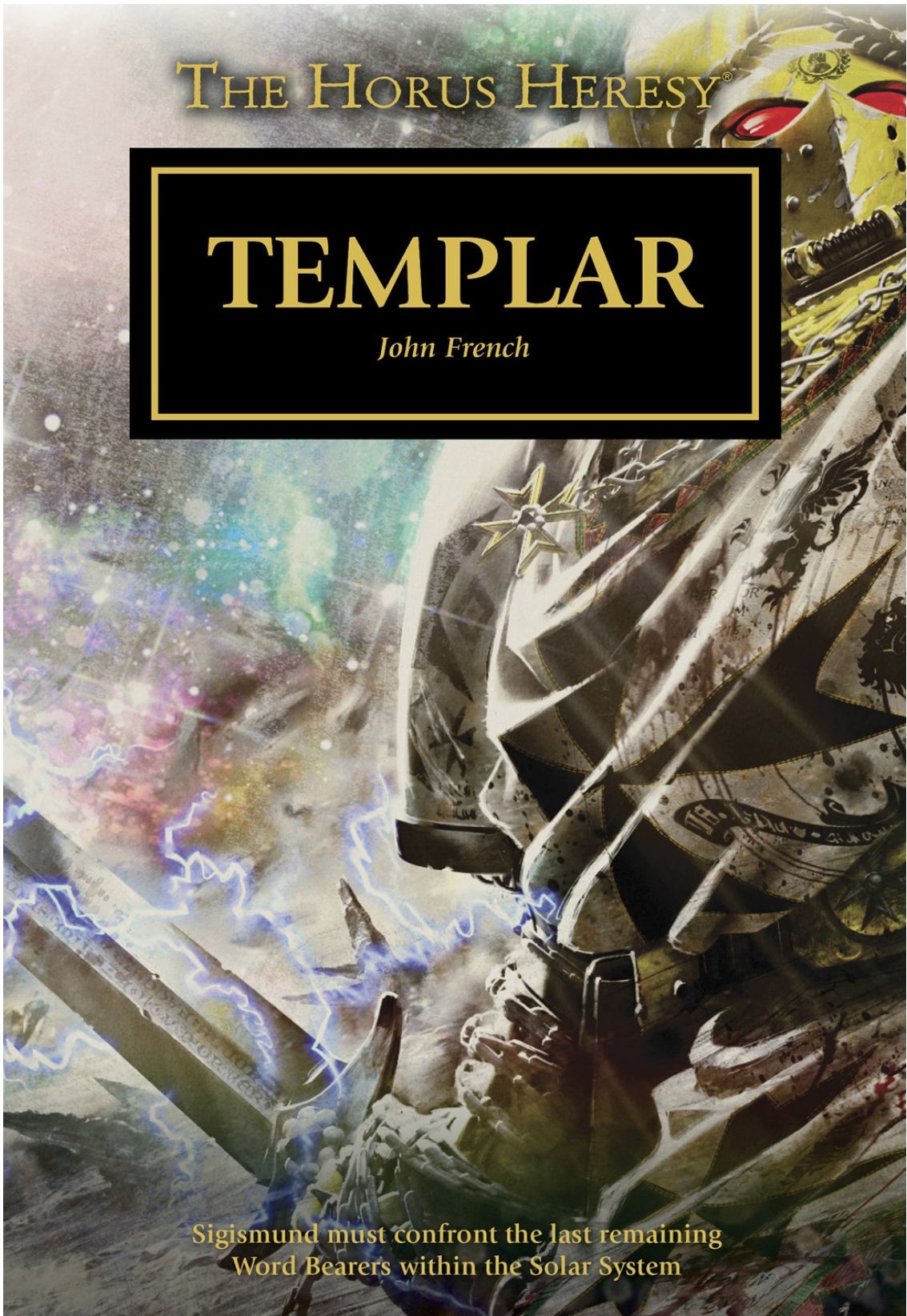
Sigismund must confront the last remaining  
Word Bearers within the Solar System

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# TEMPLAR

*John French*

*'The value of a warrior can be seen in their deeds, and in their deeds alone.'*

– Khârn the Bloody

*Sutaris*

*990.M30*

*The water danced on the curved blade. Sigismund watched it run from the perfectly still edge. Above him, the iron clouds rolled wet curtains of rain across the broken landscape. Fires still burned close by, clinging to wrecks and rubble, fighting the downpour. Ten thousand warriors stood on the slopes of the macrocrater, blood and battle marking their armour. All were looking down at him, their faces a wet blur on the edge of sight.*

*He was barely aware of the silent throng. The legionary opposite him was the only thing that was real now. Every twitch of the White Scar's pale armour, every breath between his sharpened teeth, every raindrop upon the silver smile of the guan dao blade – Sigismund saw and felt them all.*

*He began to wrap a chain around his wrist. The White Scar tossed his head, and pointed the tip of the guan dao at the iron links.*

*'Why do you do that?'*

*Sigismund held his gaze steady on the curved blade and kept winding the chain tighter. Tighter.*

*The other legionary smiled, eyes dancing in a hawk-proud face. He spun the glaive, armoured hands blurring around the weapon's haft, droplets scattering as it sliced the rain.*

*'Are you afraid of losing your sword?' the White Scar asked, laughter dancing in the words. 'A blade is freedom, son of Dorn. It is the wind and storm flash. Chain it, and you chain yourself.'*

*Sigismund was not listening. The world was closing in around him, narrowing to a point that held only the flicker of the blade, and the instant after it. This was his realm, as much a part of his life as the air that filled his lungs, and the iron in his blood.*

*The chains rattled as he wrapped another loop around his wrist. His pulse slowed with the coiled links. The flow of time became heavy, like oil spreading over ice.*

*He had not wanted to do this, but the White Scar had insisted. It was not enough that two Legions had bled and died together fighting the same enemy upon the same battlefield. The White Scars had not expected the Imperial Fists to be there. They had not expected to share the victory, and that left something unresolved.*

*A champion had emerged from their lines and thrust his blade into the ground at Sigismund's feet. He had looked from the blade to the warrior's smile, and known that there was no choice.*

*There was never a choice.*

*Sigismund fastened the chain to his vambrace. He flexed one hand upon the hilt of his sword, feeling its weight shift in his grip. In the decade he had carried it to war, it had never failed him. He raised it above his head. He felt the muscles in his shoulders settle, listened to the slow rise and fall of blood in his veins.*

*The White Scar spun his weapon, then snapped it to stillness. Dirty rivulets of water streamed down the creases of his face. 'Do you not want to know my name?'*

*Sigismund looked up into the grey of his opponent's eyes. Jubal Khan – Lord of Summer Lightning, and the Death that Comes with Laughter – was still smiling at him.*

*'I know your name,' he replied.*

*'Good.'*

*Jubal looked into Sigismund's eyes and nodded. The White Scar held his glaive low at his side, the edge facing back. Sigismund watched him, weighing the rhythm of his stillness, listening to the instant stretch out.*

*A single droplet of water formed on the blade's point.*

*His pulse was still in his chest. His hearts paused between beats.*

*The drop of water fell.*

*Jubal whirled forwards. Sigismund cut down, and his opponent spun back, his blade a blur around his body. Sigismund swung again and again, his sword like a smear of steel and scattered rain. He was scything low and high, blade whistling, and the White Scar laughed as he ducked a cut and leapt into the air. The guan dao's edge winked as it arced down.*

*Sigismund froze. Jubal's eyes were wide above bared teeth as his blow fell.*

*Sigismund jerked aside, the curved razor-edge sighing as it passed his head. His sword flashed out. Jubal pulled back, snake-fast, his glaive rising, and for the first time the two blades clashed with a ring of steel.*

*Sigismund came forwards, hammering blows down one after another, feeling the sword shuddering in his grasp as the rain streamed past his eyes.*

*The White Scar's face was locked into a snarling mask, his smile gone. Soaking hair whipped above wide eyes as he ducked and spun aside. The guan dao was a razor blur, the play of weapons a spiral of slices and parries.*

*'You are everything they say you are...' Jubal called out. Sigismund saw the slight twitch at the corner of his eye, and slid past a sudden thrust. '...and you are more.'*

*The words washed over Sigismund. In his mind there was only the feel of his own sword, only the play of cuts and angles and balance that flowed through him like blood and breath.*

*Like life.*

*Jubal leapt again, twisting like a bladed hurricane. He was fast, so very fast. 'But you are missing something, for all your skill!'*

*He flicked his blade out and cut down, and Sigismund raised his sword to turn the glaive. He felt a blow ring against his forearm, and then Jubal was stepping back, sodden, topknot flicking to the side. Sigismund glanced down at his arm. The links of the chain binding the sword to his wrist had been severed.*

*Sigismund lunged. Jubal swayed like a tree in the wind, and the sword sliced through empty air. An armoured heel flashed out and snapped Sigismund's head back with a crack of bone and a spray of blood. Rainbow explosions detonated in his vision.*

*The cries of the watching White Scars roared into the deluge.*

*Sigismund reeled, his own blood blinding him, thoughts raging inside his skull: anger, and pain, and doubt, and...*

*Everything was still.*

*He let the drumbeat of his hearts roll through him. His world was the moment, his existence was the sword in his hand. There was nothing else. There needed to be nothing else.*

*Jubal's next move was already unfolding. Sigismund could not see it, he could not see anything, but he could feel it, like the silence before thunder.*

*His sword met the blow.*

*The force of the impact shook his teeth in his skull. He felt his sword move, felt it ring as it deflected strike after strike. He was going backwards, his vision a clotting blur, his feet skidding in the mud.*

*Jubal was a scything spiral, delivering blow after blow. He was fast, faster than the wind, faster than the blink of distant lightning. But there, suddenly – like a flicker of sunshine through storm clouds – was an opening.*

*Sigismund shifted and cut downwards. He felt the impact, and struck twice more before the clang of the first strike had faded. Then Jubal was gone, spinning back out of reach.*

*Sigismund paused, checking his instinct to follow the White Scar. The sound of rain pattering on ceramite filled the waiting quiet.*

*Jubal stood once again at the edge of the circle. Blood marked his armour, diluting in the rain as it ran over the ivory-white plates. The guan dao was steady in his grip, but his left arm was twisted, the elbow joint leaking red. His gorget was crumpled, and cracks spidered his right thigh plate. The dancing glimmer had gone from his eyes – his gaze was suddenly older, patient, knowing.*

*'I will not beat you,' said Jubal, and there was weariness in his words. 'I know this. You know it too.' His lips cracked wide to show sharp, white teeth. 'But the song was worth the singing.'*

*Sigismund opened his mouth, forming words with a jaw that felt broken. 'You were beaten because you lack focus.'*

*'And you lack joy.'*

*'We exist to serve.'*

*'And there is nothing more?'*

*Sigismund shook his head. 'Nothing more.'*

*Jubal looked around, blinking, as though seeing the watching ranks of legionaries for the first time. Then he turned back to Sigismund, and spun his weapon with his good arm.*

*'Come, let us finish this,' he said.*

‘Have you killed a Space Marine before?’

The crone’s voice pulls him from the memory. He opens his eyes slowly; the hold of the gunship is a shadow-filled cave. Amber light sheens the armour of the warriors seated beside and opposite him. There are twenty. Half are the chosen of his Templars, their white surcoats reduced to folds of grey in the gloom. The other half are Seneschal Rann’s men, their battered armour and shields marked by the twin axes of the line-breakers.

Around them, the frame of the gunship rattles and sings as it plunges through the void, and the distance to the comet shrinks with each passing minute.

News had come from Isstvan of the death of a primarch and the treachery of four more Legions. Within the Solar System, remnants of those new betrayers linger still – perhaps forgotten, perhaps ready to strike. They must be hunted down and destroyed. Rogal Dorn has tasked Sigismund with that duty, and he would see it done by his own hand.

His eyes move to the emissary. She sits between the armour-bloated forms of her gene-bonded bodyguards. Her exoskeleton gleams with chrome and polished carbon. Beneath the crystal of her visor, her face is a landscape of wrinkles, and hard bones under pale skin, but her eyes sparkle darkly as she stares back at him.

Her name is Harpocratia Morn, and Sigismund would not have chosen to have her here. That decision, like many others in recent times, is simply one that he has to accept.

She smiles at him, lips twitching as though amused by a joke only she has heard.

‘So,’ she asks again, ‘have you?’

‘Be silent, crone,’ growls a harsh voice. It is Rann, of course. The captain of the assault cadre is not wearing a helm yet, and his black hair stirs from his sharp face as he leans towards Morn. ‘Your words itch like flies. Keep them to yourself.’

His fingers are tapping on the hafts of twin axes locked to the back of his shield. Morn looks at him as though she has only just noticed that he is there. He meets the emissary’s gaze, and bares his teeth. Morn raises an eyebrow and looks back to Sigismund.

‘So what is the answer, First Captain?’

‘Be–’ begins Rann.

‘Be what? The representative of the Emperor and his Regent? The emissary of the Council of Terra? Or merely a general who has stood on fields of blood and victory since before this Imperium was won?’ Morn’s face no longer looks

decrepit. It looks hard and cold, like a notched sword that still has a killing edge. She holds Rann's gaze for a long moment. 'Which of these things would you have me be, Faffnir Rann?'

Rann says nothing. He is utterly still, fingers frozen where they rest upon the haft of one axe. Then his lips twitch around, and the snarl becomes a grin. He leans back, still grinning, but says nothing.

'I see why you like silence,' says Morn, her eyes still on Rann. 'It suits you.'

The gunship pilot's voice filters through the hold. '*One hundred kilometres to target. Ready condition crimson.*'

Red lights blink. As one, the warriors grip their weapons. Sigismund glances down to his own sword – the blade is a reflected sliver of polished night held across his knees. A snaking iron chain binds it to his wrist.

He remembers Jubal's crooked smile, and the rain dancing upon his blade's edge.

The moment is coming. This is the threshold of the future that the treachery of Horus has made for them. He wants to embrace it, but wonders if that will change anything. He wishes that Morn had not asked her question.

Rann pulls on his plough-fronted helm. Morn arms a pair of chromed serpenta pistols, and he turns to her. 'Why ask if he has killed our kind?'

'Because we are about to go into battle against them,' Morn replies. 'Because in spite of the ideals of Unity, Space Marines have died upon the blades of their own kind before. Because the answer might mean that he bears a weakness that he does not yet see.'

'Is that why you are here?'

'I am here because the Sigillite wishes it.'

'He will not hesitate,' Rann mutters, and Sigismund imagines that he feels the warrior's eyes flick to him.

'You are sure?' asks Morn.

'Have a care.' Now there is no humour in Rann's words, only a sharpness like an axe's edge.

The noise of the engines rises in pitch. An alert begins to chime inside Sigismund's helmet.

'*Forty kilometres to target,*' comes the pilot's voice again. '*Breaching missiles loose.*'

Sigismund closes his eyes. In the corner of his visor display, the rune to release his mag-harness glows red. He takes a slow breath, feels calm spreading through thought and muscle. He remembers all the faces of enemies and friends reaching

back into the darkness.

And through it all, he wonders if he will meet them again before the end.

‘They say that he always kills with one cut,’ says Morn.

‘Only when he isn’t swinging his sword like a farmer swatting flies,’ Rann chuckles, though the words drain to cold sincerity. ‘He has looked defeat in the eye, and smelled its breath too, but no one mentions that.’

‘But you do?’

‘I can say what I like of him. I have bled for the right. And – no matter how good he is – he would take more than a scar if he decided to take offence. You do not have that right, no matter who you are.’

‘But is it true that he has *never* been defeated, never lost a duel, never failed?’

‘Never,’ says Rann with a shake of his head. ‘It’s one of the things that make him so difficult to like.’

‘Let us hope that he will not break the habit.’

Alert sirens sound. ‘*Breach impact countdown commencing.*’

‘No,’ says Sigismund, and opens his eyes. The mag-harness holds him firmly, but he looks down at Morn’s dark eyes and sunken face. ‘The answer is no.’

He returns his gaze to the assault ramp. Rann braces himself.

The engine noise is a rising thrum through armour and muscle alike. Sigismund tenses, ready for battle. His sword is a dead weight in his grip.

‘*Five...*’ The pilot’s voice is a vox-filtered shout over the scream of the fuselage and the blare of sirens.

‘The answer to what?’ calls Morn.

‘*Four...*’

What is about to happen will change everything. He is about to step through a doorway into a new age, a new meaning of what it means to be a warrior of the Imperium.

‘*Three...*’

And beyond that, another future waits for him.

‘*Two...*’

‘I have never killed my own kind,’ he admits.

‘*One...*’

### ***The Temple of Oaths, Phalanx***

**977.M30**

*Sigismund did not move when he heard the footsteps approaching. It had been twenty hours since he had set himself before the temple doorway, and it would be*

*four more before he moved. His armour had gone into a low power cycle, runes winking in slow amber at the edge of his visor. His hands remained still upon the hilt of the sword, which rested point-down between his feet.*

*Overhead, the domed vault of the temple hung above the candle-diluted gloom. Great pillars soared, shadows snagging on the names cut into the black granite. Banners hung beneath the vault, their designs ragged and stained by the blood and fire of a hundred battles.*

*Silence always filled the great space, unbroken by the sounds of the star fort beyond its walls. Even in times of battle, the Temple of Oaths was a void of calm amidst the clamour. It had been designed that way, a reminder from Rogal Dorn that what this chamber represented stood untouched by all else.*

*Here, carved into every surface, were the names and oath words of every Imperial Fist who served or had served the Imperium. On this floor, all – from highest praetor to lowest legionary – had knelt and pledged loyalty. No door sealed the arch of its only entrance, but no one entered it unbidden.*

*To be a Templar was to be a guardian of that tradition, and with it the oaths of all Imperial Fists.*

*A lone figure walked out of the darkness beyond. The candlelight caught the gloss of black lacquered armour, and folded across a long robe of pale fabric. A hood cowled the warrior's features, but Sigismund did not need to see the face to know the man.*

*The figure stopped five paces from the doorway. Sigismund did not move.*

*Slowly, the figure reached up and slid the hood from his head. Dark hair framed a face set with green eyes. His name was Alajos, Captain of the Ninth Order of the Dark Angels, and one of the finest warriors ever to raise a blade in battle.*

*'You may not enter here, kinsman,' said Sigismund.*

*'I have no wish to,' Alajos replied.*

*'Then why have you come?'*

*'I have come to talk to you.'*

*Sigismund shook his head once, but did not move from beneath the arch. There was no point in talking, not now, not while the brooding anger of Dorn and the Lion filled the Phalanx like a growing thundercloud. A dispute between these two paragons of war and nobility should not have been possible, but that had not stopped it from happening.*

*It was not a matter of pride, or of insult. It was simply a matter of two beings – both so vast in power, so alike, and yet so different – clashing together like land and sea.*

*There had been other incidents in the past, other moments when the ideals of the Great Crusade seemed to do little but fuel discord. Curze, Ferrus Manus, Perturabo. The anger of all had risen against Dorn, at one time or another. Sigismund hoped that this new divide with the Lion would pass as quickly as it had formed. It was wasteful, a crack in what should be the perfect blade of the Legiones Astartes.*

*'There is nothing to say, Alajos. My lord has spoken.'*

*'Yes, and my father also has spoken,' the Dark Angel replied.*

*'This... dispute will pass.'*

*'And if not? How will it be resolved then?'*

*'Not by blood.'*

*'No?'*

*'No. We are warriors of the Imperium, we were made to fight its enemies, not one another. Break that brotherhood and we are nothing.'*

*Alajos smiled. 'Tell that to the World Eaters. Tell it to the Wolves.'*

*'Such bloodshed serves nothing. It will not happen, not between our Legions. Not now. Not ever.'*

*Sigismund remained unmoving. After a moment Alajos nodded at the vaulted space behind him. 'This is the Temple of Oaths, is it not?' he asked, stepping forwards as he spoke.*

*Suddenly, Sigismund's blade was barring Alajos' path.*

*The Dark Angel raised an open hand. 'Peace, brother. I will not cross the threshold. No Imperial Fist may do so, save to make or renew an oath, and none who are not of the Seventh Legion may enter and live. That is right, isn't it?'*

*'The primarch has permitted three of his brothers to enter, over the years.'*

*'And if I took one more step...'*

*'Then you would never take another,' Sigismund replied curtly.*

*'What would my blood shed upon this floor serve?'*

*'Duty.'*

*The Dark Angel smiled, though the warmth did not reach his eyes. 'What are we? Us two, what are we?'*

*'We are warriors.'*

*'But here and now we are more than that. We are champions. If blood is needed to satisfy honour, then it will not be our brothers' or our fathers'. It will be ours. We are our Legions, and we are our oaths. We draw our swords, but they do not belong to us. The hand that cuts, and the eye that guides the cut are not the same.'* Alajos gestured to Sigismund's drawn blade. *'Duty. It binds us, it keeps*

*us, it guides us. It is—'*

*'Everything.'*

*'Aye. No matter where it leads us, or to what end.'* He smiled again, and Sigismund recognised the emotion in the Dark Angel's eyes. *It was sorrow. 'The storm may pass, but if it does not, then I wanted to be certain that we... understood one another.'*

Sigismund explodes from the assault ramp, into the clamour of battle. The outer chamber of the shrine extends before his eyes. He has never set foot upon the comet before, but he has heard his father speak of it many times.

Walls of stacked skulls and polished bone arch above him. Words cover their faces, words that tell of who they were in life, and the deeds that brought them here in death. Each bone and skull belonged to a hero of the long Terran wars for Unity, sent here to orbit in the light of Sol as a memorial to the price paid for humanity's dream, for all time.

The XVII Legion had been the appointed keepers of the comet shrine since its creation. A hundred warriors of the Word Bearers stood guard within its halls, ever watchful, ever dutiful.

But now that duty had become treachery.

Left here by their brothers, they would die beneath the empty eyes of dead heroes.

Boltgun fire greets him as he charges. Shrapnel rings from his armour, but he does not falter. He is a blur, a flash of hard edges and blade's sharpness. The first Word Bearer is in front of him, bolter rising, his desecrated crimson armour glistening with reflected gunfire. Sigismund sees unspeakable glyphs etched through the glossy red and into the grey ceramite beneath.

There are more Word Bearers close behind the first, ten at least. The barrel of the boltgun is a wide eye staring back into his own. The steady drumroll of his twin heartbeat rises as the last stride of his charge falls.

The Word Bearer's finger grips the trigger.

Sigismund cuts.

Blood, wet-black in the flicker of bolt detonations, slashes outwards. The dead Word Bearer's grip tightens and a spit of flame roars. Sigismund feels the fiery breath of the boltgun rattle his helm.

He is already moving before the corpse even begins to fall.

He cuts again and again, each step a fresh kill. He is moving forwards, and his world is a rising beat of fragmented sensations. A torso cleaved from clavicle to

groin. A hand reaching for a blade. The roar and surge of bolt-fire.

He hears and feels it all, but he is not a part of it. He is a single line of focus, slicing forwards, flowing from blow to blow like a river.

He is aware of his brothers following behind him, forming a wedge with him at its tip. They are driving forwards, firing at sentry turrets, hacking at red-armoured figures. Voices flicker across the vox as the rest of the force strikes directly into the shrine itself.

The resistance they have encountered so far is weak – the enemy numbers few, their tactics poor. Sigismund knows all this without thinking, without pausing from the scything rhythm of his sword.

A Word Bearer comes at him, faster than the rest, his head bare and skin webbed with inked sigils. Sigismund sees a blade whipping towards his neck, broad and jagged-edged. The blow is powerful, the product of training and experience. It is intended as a kill stroke, and a clean one at that.

Sigismund's murderous rhythm does not even falter. He slips the blow, turns and brings his own sword down.

Only then does he see the dagger. It is small, a spike of rough obsidian bound to a bone handle, and seems to shimmer in and out of sight as though dissolving in a heat haze. The Word Bearer thrusts the blade up – his eyes are wide in his tattooed face, his teeth bared in a snarl of triumph.

Sigismund twists aside, yanking his sword down to try and block the thrust. The black knife gouges across his plastron plate. Pain whips through him as his flesh burns against the armour. His sword strikes the Word Bearer's left arm, but the blow lacks power. The Word Bearer stumbles, recovers and thrusts again.

An axe head mashes into the Word Bearer's skull. Lightning explodes from the impact in a thunderclap of pulped meat and shattered armour. Rann shoves the corpse out of his way.

'You deserved to die to that, First Captain. You are getting sloppy.'

His armour and the face of his shield are a mass of metal scars and blood splatter. He does not look around as Sigismund closes with him. They stand shoulder to shoulder, the scarred butcher and the knight. More Imperial Fists lock into line beside them, shields and swords ready, firing as they reform.

A spiked mace crashes into Rann's shield and he rocks back under the force of the blow. Another Word Bearer stands before them, his armour bloody, his feet planted on the bodies of the dead. Sigismund waits for a fraction of a heartbeat, waits until he can feel the Word Bearer begin to pull the mace back.

'Now!' shouts Sigismund.

Rann slams his shield forwards. The Word Bearer staggers for an instant, recovers and swings down. Sigismund's sword takes him in the gut. He feels the blade shiver as it punches through armour, flesh and bone. Rann's axe takes the Word Bearer's head in a single blow.

'You still know nothing about war, brother,' Rann calls, and Sigismund can hear the grin in his words. 'But you are learning.'

Sigismund feels the flat of the seneschal's axe-head clash against his shoulder. They drive forwards over the heaped corpses. Ahead of them Word Bearers are pulling back, firing as they move. Behind them high doors of brass and bone are closing over the mouth of a wide passage.

'Secure the doors,' Sigismund barks.

His brothers are moving to answer the order as soon as it leaves his lips. Five warriors, their shields held in a tight wall, sprint forwards. Bolt-rounds smack against them, spinning two back off their feet, but the remainder do not falter. They fire when the doors are almost closed, when the Word Bearers beyond can only be seen by their glowing eyes and muzzle flashes.

The meltaguns scream lines of thin, burning atmosphere at the closing doors. Plasteel and brass ripple like fat under flame. The graviton gun fires a second later, and the doors cascade from their frames in a ragged spill of white-hot metal. Sigismund is running again, Rann at his side, heat warnings chiming as glowing sparks splash around them.

And then they are through, into the passage beyond, molten slag scattering in their wake.

The killing rhythm flows through Sigismund. It feels different, detached, like a tableau moving before him, painted in blurred speed and the spray of blood.

He stops.

The passage is a wide darkness before him, now silent and empty. A false wind is gusting around him, as air sucks out through the breach in the outer chamber wall. Rann breaks away, pressing forwards, his shield bearers bracketing him in a tight wall.

For a second in the silence, Sigismund thinks he catches a distant voice that is just below hearing. He looks down at his sword. Blood has clotted in the links of the chain binding it to his wrist.

'This is only the beginning,' says Morn from the passage mouth. He looks up. She walks towards him, the pistols in her hands trailing heat haze and vapour from their barrels. Her two bodyguards walk a pace behind her, their rotor cannons cycling down. 'You are wondering why, after all your anger at the

betrayers, this now feels like nothing.’

Sigismund looks back through the doors. Blood-shrouded shapes cover the floor. There are bodies armoured in yellow amongst the crimson gloss. His eyes focus on a severed arm, still clutching a gladius in its gauntleted fingers.

‘You are thinking that you are a blood-killer now,’ she continues, ‘a slayer of your gene-kin.’

He looks up at her. There is no longer any laughter in her eyes.

She nods once. ‘You are, First Captain. That is exactly what you are.’

He turns without replying and moves to follow Rann. His sword feels heavy in his hand, and the chain binding it clinks against his wrist.

It has been less than two minutes since he killed the first Word Bearer.

### ***The duelling cages aboard the Conqueror***

**995.M30**

*Khârn grinned as the sword sliced towards his ribs. He was still grinning as he lashed the falax blade towards Sigismund’s throat. The blow was fast, fast enough that a human would barely have seen it, but Sigismund was already stepping back and slicing downwards.*

*The World Eater caught the descending strike between his paired blades, scissoring past the sword, and slashed out again. Sigismund met the cut with the flat of his sword, point down, guard high. Khârn’s blade slid past. Sigismund flicked his sword over and cut back.*

*Khârn froze. Sigismund watched the vein in the side of the World Eater’s neck beat once against the sword edge. A thick worm of blood crawled across the polished plasteel, clotting even as it ran down his bared chest.*

*Khârn snarled. The muscles of his neck bunched against the sword. The flesh around his eyes was twitching, and he was breathing hard, though not from fatigue.*

*Sigismund raised an eyebrow. Khârn spat, reversed his grip on his twin blades, and turned away. Beneath the waist, he wore simple black trews tied with a length of rope.*

*Sigismund whipped the sword blade through the air, blood drops shaking from it to scatter on the sand-covered floor. In contrast, he wore a simple robe of white crossed with black, cut so that the flesh of his arms was bare to the dull light.*

*Armour was customary for the fighting pits of the World Eaters, but not in this case. Not between these two.*

*The curved walls of the pit were raw iron, marked by gouges from weapons, and dappled with dried blood. Sigismund sniffed as he lifted his gaze to the ranked tiers above the lip of the pit. Silence and emptiness stared back at him. He looked to where Khârn hung his paired blades from a weapon rack. The World Eater's breath was still ragged, his scalp still twitching around the metal of his aggression implants – his Butcher's Nails.*

*'Again?' asked Sigismund.*

*Khârn's hands moved over the weapons on the rack, touching the haft of a long chainaxe, lingering on the coils of a meteor hammer. But he picked out a sword, the blade as wide as his arm. Golden wings spread above the quillons to form a cross-guard, and a single ruby blood drop looked out from between their pinions. Khârn tossed it from hand to hand as a human might with a knife, weighing it, judging it. 'I am always surprised that you like it here,' he murmured.*

*'I don't.'*

*'Yet, here we are again.'*

*Khârn let the weapon rest in his grip. He frowned down at the long blade, and shook his head. Then he turned to the rack, and slotted the sword back into place.*

*Sigismund watched the World Eater pick up each weapon in turn. He waited. He knew why Khârn did this, and he knew that it was nothing to do with which weapon the World Eater eventually chose. He appreciated the reason, even though the two of them had never spoken of it.*

*At last Khârn gripped the handle of an axe that was more cleaver than war weapon. He rolled his shoulders, muscles flowing smooth under skin. The twitching in his face faded to almost nothing, his breath barely a murmur between his teeth.*

*Sigismund held his sword low, its point almost touching the sand. The chains around his wrists clinked as he settled into stillness. Khârn's eyes flicked up to the plasteel links. He grinned, the light dancing in his eyes.*

*'Imitation is flattery, I suppose,' he said with a grin. 'What was it that Jubal did?'*

*'He cut them.'*

*'Ha! I always liked him.'*

*'He...'* Sigismund paused for a moment. *'He asked if I was afraid of dropping my sword.'*

*'Are you?'*

*'No. He said the chains were like a prison.'*

*Khârn's grin drained from his face. The skin of his scalp twitched around the Nails again, and a shiver ran through him. 'Shall we carry on with this foolishness?'*

*Sigismund nodded, and a thunder-clash of steel replaced the silence. Once again, they were two figures whirling and striking at one another.*

*Khârn's axe rang against the sword, swept away and lashed back again. He was breathing hard. Spittle foamed at the corner of his mouth. His eyes were wide, the pupils black wounds in bloodshot white. Sigismund took one step backwards, deflecting each blow as it came. Khârn pulled away, growled, and hammered in again.*

*Sigismund parried lightly, and the axe whistled past his shoulder. He slammed the pommel of his sword into Khârn's forearm, and then at his face. The World Eater ducked and came up, and crashed his skull into Sigismund's forehead.*

*The headbutt slammed home but, even as it did, Sigismund dropped and turned, Khârn's wrist caught between his sword hilt and arm.*

*Khârn's momentum flipped him over and into the air. He twisted as he fell and landed on his feet, tensing to lunge back. Sigismund nudged the sword tip against the back of Khârn's neck.*

*Khârn bared his teeth. He was trembling, face twitching. He took a long, slow breath, and then nodded, once. Sigismund raised his sword. Blood clotted on his face; a deep gash marked the cheek under his left eye, and his nose was a mashed ruin.*

*'Now at least it looks like you have been fighting,' said Khârn.*

*'That was a foolish move. You committed too much.'*

*'I heard it worked for that bastard Sevatar. Besides, it is our way – when we are losing we make sure the other side bleeds more than us.'*

*'You are holding back. You always do.'*

*Khârn shook his head, face still twitching, and gestured at the circle of sand beneath their feet. 'No, brother. I am just not very good at... this...'*

*'I have stood with you in battle, Khârn. I have seen how you fight. Or have you forgotten?'*

*'I have not forgotten. But this is not a battlefield.'*

*'Your brothers fight here as though it is.'*

*'No, they do not. And neither do you. True war is not control, brother. It is not bound by a fighting pit's walls. It is the whirl of chance and fury, where there is nothing for you to cling on to. You fight because you must, because certainty*

*drives you. Without that, what would you be?’*

*Sigismund stiffened. ‘I will forgive the implication of your words, brother.’*

*Khârn shrugged, though there was a brittle edge to his voice. ‘Always so sure. Always so much control, even in anger. But if the pillars of your world shook, if duty took you down a path where nothing was certain...’ Khârn reached up and ran his hand over the Butcher’s Nails bonded to his skull. ‘What then?’*

*‘I would be nothing,’ said Sigismund.*

*‘I will forgive the implication of your words, brother. And I don’t think you would be nothing without your chains of certainty. I think that, then, I truly would not want to face you. Even here.’*

*‘No?’*

*‘No, because then I really would have to try and kill you.’*

They advance down the corridor, armoured feet echoing in the still air.

‘They died too easily,’ says Morn. Sigismund does not need to look at her to see the contempt on her face. In truth, he agrees with her and the implication of what she says worries him, but the atmosphere inside the comet shrine worries him more. The air has become thicker. Static crackles along the bone-lined walls as though it were lightning earthed from a growing storm.

Then there are the shadows. Sometimes they seem to move. Sometimes Sigismund is sure that they grow when he looks away. It feels unnatural, like nothing he has felt before.

It concerns him. It concerns him very much.

Rann does not seem to notice. ‘What do you mean, “they died too easily”?’

Morn is about to reply, but Sigismund cuts her short.

‘They would have known that someone would come for them,’ he says. ‘The treachery of the Word Bearers must have been long in the making. Yet they met us in the outer halls with at least half their strength, died, and then melted away. Tell me, brother, does not that worry you?’

‘They resisted,’ Rann shrugs.

‘But not enough,’ says Morn.

‘Why would they do that?’

‘Sacrifice,’ she replies, after a heartbeat’s pause.

Sigismund feels something shiver across his skin. Morn’s word disturbs him, and he does not know why.

‘Sacrifice?’ asks Rann. ‘Like the followers of gods, before the coming of the Emperor’s truth? You can’t mean it.’

‘That is exactly what I mean.’

‘This is the Imperium. Even in rebellion those ways are long dead.’

‘This is no longer the age we thought it was, brother,’ Sigismund warns him. ‘Its truths are not the same, and neither are its weapons.’

‘But why?’

Sigismund raises his hand, his Templar brothers falling in silently behind him.

A set of doors lies ahead of them. Twice the height of a Space Marine, they gleam with bronze and polished bones. Sigismund blinks. There is a sudden and growing pressure behind his eyes as he looks at them. At the edge of his sight, the shadows seem to twitch again.

‘Because this is a trap,’ he replies. ‘A trap whose dimensions we cannot see or fully understand. That is what you are thinking is it not, Lady Morn?’

‘Yes.’

Morn steps closer to the doors, her bodyguards close in her wake. The plates of their armour hiss and click as they move. Rann follows, his fingers flexing on the haft of his axe.

‘Then what would you suggest we do?’ he asks.

Morn turns back to them. Behind the crystal of her visor, she is smiling. For a second, Sigismund almost smiles back.

‘Why, the same as you have been itching to do since you saw those doors, Seneschal Rann,’ she says. ‘Kick them open.’

She runs at the high doors, pneumatics shuddering across her exoskeleton as she moves. She moves faster than Sigismund thought she ever could. The pistols in her hands are glowing as they gather charge. He launches after her, sword flashing with lightning as its energy field ignites.

Rann lets out a bark of laughter and annoyance, then follows, Templars and shield bearers closing around them.

Morn hits the door. Fragments of bone inlay and bronze spin through the air. They buckle open, ringing like a struck gong. Then Morn is out and into the flame-lit space beyond, her bodyguards at her shoulders, armoured plate flaring as it flows with their strides. Sigismund and Rann are only two paces behind. This is madness, but now it has begun there is only one way, and that way is forwards.

Sigismund crosses the threshold of the chamber. Red threat markers boil across his helmet view, his momentum driving him into a flat sprint.

He sees it then, waiting behind the translucent target runes.

Dozens of Space Marines ring the central point of the chamber. They are

kneeling, heads bared and bowed. Each of them has a knife in his hands – spikes of black glass, iron or clouded crystal. At their centre a figure stands alone. His armour is black with crawling script. A casket of grey stone lies before him. Shadows and unclean light smoke from it. The air vibrates, pulsing to the drone of chanting voices.

The bodyguards' heavy cannons spin to firing speed. Morn strafes sideways, her clawed feet clacking on the stone flags. Fire spits from the spinning rotor cannons. Rann's axe is high above his head. Morn's pistols are keening, circles of red energy blooming around their barrels in each instant before they fire.

The closest Word Bearers explode where they are kneeling. Their blood fizzes as it hits the polished floor. Corposant dances in the eyes of the skulls that line the ceilings and walls. The air is darkening, crawling with shadows cast by no light, but Sigismund has his gaze fixed upon the lone, standing figure.

The gunfire stops.

The blackened warrior looks up. The words inked across his face coil around his eyes like snakes. His mouth opens and he speaks a single word.

*'Peace.'*

The sound rolls through the twisting air. As one, every Word Bearer plunges his dagger up under his chin.

The world freezes. Light becomes dark, and dark turns to blinding day.

A single high note echoes out, extending endlessly, growing and obliterating all other sound. There is a long moment, a sickening, *soft* instant stretched like a sinew.

Then the Word Bearers are rising from the floor. Blood and smoke spray from their mouths. They are juddering, standing as though pulled up by wires. Their armour splits. Shapes step out from the cracked ceramite. Their flesh is pale and blood-slicked. Eyes, mouths, and scales form and dissolve across their bodies as these unnatural things take their first, shuddering steps in reality.

This... This is like nothing Sigismund has ever seen, like nothing that *should* be seen.

Only the warrior at the centre remains unchanged. His eyes are sunken and cold. They are the eyes of sorrow, not triumph.

Sigismund feels voices rattling inside his skull, pulling at his thoughts. The air is thick. He can taste acid in his mouth. Time has fled.

He can feel thoughts, and doubts, and memories bubbling against the force of his will.

*He sees the face of his father, Rogal Dorn. The trust in his eyes.*

*He sees...*

He sees only the path ahead of him. There is only the sword in his hand, only the enemy before him. There is only one feeling that he will allow.

Pure and bright, like a torch kindled in the darkness.

*Fury.*

He blinks. The world snaps back into place.

He is running forwards, aware that the Imperial Fists shield wall has broken, aware that this battle is now a whirling storm of blades, gunfire and claws. In spite of himself, he thinks of Khârn, of the World Eater wading into battle with rage stabbing at the back of his skull.

The creatures leap at him, claws extending at the ends of their limbs. His sword strikes the top of a half-formed head. It bursts apart, blood and pus misting the air. He can smell offal and incense even through his helm. Gunfire is roaring close by. The creatures' howls rise as they spin and leap forwards.

He sees Rann throw his axe, sees it spin end over end, sees the still-active power field drag lightning in its wake. It strikes the nearest beast and the thing staggers, black cracks spreading across its flesh. It shrieks. Rann unslings his second axe and runs to meet it.

But the creature is not dying, and neither are those that swarm back at him, clawing his shield down even as he fights to keep it steady.

Sigismund sees a talon of bone flash out and split Rann's faceplate effortlessly. Blood, bright and sudden, flicks into the air. Rann staggers.

Sigismund is a blur as he slices towards his brother. Something has wrapped around Rann's axe arm, something that rolls and glistens like chewed meat. He is falling now. The creatures surge forwards, blood and acid drooling from distended jaws.

Sigismund cleaves through the last circle of creatures. The cut is backhanded, left to right, like a scythe reaping corn. He feels his blade tremble as it passes through flesh and bone. A space opens before him, and he is stepping into it, stepping over the fallen shape of Rann. He sweeps his sword back, and the creatures shriek at him again as they recoil.

He glances down. Rann is a ruin of streaked armour and clotted blood. Red bubbles are foaming from the split faceplate of his helm.

'Get up,' says Sigismund.

Rann pulls himself to his feet. His axe and shield are still in his hands. 'I deserved to die to that...' He sways for a moment, then shakes himself, scattering blood like a dog shaking water from its fur.

The creatures part before them, pulling back like a retreating tide of unwholesome flesh. The din of battle still sings in the air, but for a second it seems more distant.

The blackened Word Bearer stands before them. Smoke peels from him as he steps forwards, and the surrounding creatures chitter and moan like curbed animals.

The warrior's voice slides over the words like blood over broken glass. 'It was not supposed to be you, Sigismund, First Son of Dorn. You were not supposed to be here. Another death waited for you.' He pauses, turns, his hand extending towards the open stone casket on the dais.

'Be silent, traitor!' Rann spits, and lunges forwards, fresh blood scattering from his wounds as he charges. Sigismund begins to move an instant later.

Something is moving inside the casket, something that writhes like snakes in black oil. The Word Bearer's hand closes around it. Grey lightning whips up his arm, the marks upon his armour crawling as the edges of his body blur.

Rann raises his shield, and hacks down with his axe. Sigismund hears the grunt of effort, and sees the puff of blood on Rann's breath. The blow is not neat, not elegant. It is the oldest of the cuts of war – a killing stroke, swift and direct.

The Word Bearer turns, outline and shape blurring with speed. Something strikes Rann's shield.

But the shield does not break. It simply becomes *nothing*.

Rann slumps back with the force of its unmaking, folding like a cut rope. The dark warrior sweeps the weapon back – its form is changing, flowing between shapes, solidifying and dissolving. It hisses as the Word Bearer brings it up to deliver the death blow. Rann is motionless on the floor, wisps of darkness now seeping from his wounds.

Sigismund's sword blocks the cut. White light splinters the air. The two weapons grind against each other.

'The fire and wind spoke of your end, Templar,' hisses the Word Bearer.

Sigismund pulls away. The dark warrior drags his weapon back. Its shape congeals into a long serrated sword, blood weeping from its toothed edge.

'Your death was ordained. A grave of stars waited for you. But here you are.'

The jagged sword whips forwards. Sigismund steps past and the Word Bearer's cut follows him. He twists to avoid it, and sees that his opponent's guard is open.

He lunges. All his intent, all his being and years of training are carried in that thrust.

The Word Bearer blinks aside, his shape and form skipping between moments

as though he had not moved. A black silhouette remains where he was, fading in the air like a bruise.

He ripostes. The sword changes as it descends – it is a black mace now, heavy-headed and barbed, a frozen explosion of night, trailing fire after it.

Sigismund's sword catches the blow, but too late. The impact lifts him from his feet. He feels bones grinding in his sword arm as the shock reverberates through him. He lands on the floor, spinning quickly to rise.

Creatures skitter out of his way, cackling in countless voices. Damaged servos howl in his armour joints. Red warnings light his helmet display. Inside his head, he is fighting to hold on to his focus, to hold on to the shackled fury that is his fire.

The Word Bearer is less than five strides away, the mace held in his hands, the dark pits of his eyes unmoving. He rolls his neck and shoulders, slowly, casually. The movement reminds Sigismund of Khârn.

'Have you told your father?' the Word Bearer croons, and a chill flicks through Sigismund as he straightens, painfully. 'Have you confessed to him why you forsook your duty to return to Terra?'

The words echo through him. It has been months since he encountered Keeler on the *Phalanx*, since she had shown him what was to come – since he had demanded to return to Terra with Rogal Dorn.

And in all that time, her words have not left his thoughts.

But he has shared them with no one.

'There are no secrets in the warp,' says the Word Bearer. 'I see your heart, and I see your fate. I am shriven, and the gods have placed your ending in my hands. You will not leave this place alive. You will not live to see your primarch fail. You will not live to see this false Imperium fall. The witch lied to you, Templar. She lied.'

Sigismund feels cold winding through his limbs. He is stepping forwards, his sword rising, but it feels separate from him, like a dead limb chained to his hands. He hears Keeler's voice, distant, calm, speaking to him from the corridors of memory.

*'You must choose your future and the future of your Legion, Sigismund, First Captain of the Imperial Fists.'*

Sigismund feels the blood beat in his veins. The Word Bearer is moving, so fast that it seems unreal. Shadow and oily smoke drags again in his wake. The voices come then, thrown from the blank night of the past.

*'Duty. It binds us, it keeps us, it guides us.'*

*'A blade is freedom, son of Dorn. Chain it, and you chain yourself.'*

He remembers the question that he had asked Keeler on the *Phalanx*.

*What is the other path?*

Sigismund raises his sword, but the black mace crashes into his chest.

*'Death, Sigismund,'* Keeler had said. *'Death and sacrifice.'*

Blood, and darkness.

The world is crumbling around him – becoming small, becoming a pit of pain to drown in.

He cannot see, and the only sound is the thunder in his ears.

One of his hearts has stopped. The other beats on, slicing his life away with every slowing pulse. He cannot feel the sword in his hand, cannot feel the shattered plates of his armour.

*'We exist to serve.'*

*'And there is nothing more?'*

*'Nothing more.'*

*'No matter where it leads us, or to what end.'*

*'But is it true that he has never been defeated, never lost a duel, never failed?'*

*'Never.'*

*'But if the pillars of your world shook, if duty took you down a path where nothing was certain... What then?'*

And then the world roars at him in colour and sound, deafening, blindingly bright.

He can see.

A warrior stands above him, the black stains upon his armour crawling away into the air. The mace in his hands is flickering, jumping to other forms and then back. Creatures with flayed-beast faces sway and spin behind him. The strobing fire of battle lights a domed roof. The warrior's mouth cracks open, smoke breathing from between pale teeth. His lips are burning as he speaks.

*'Peace.'*

He swings the black mace above his head.

Sigismund's hand closes on the sword chained to it. Wounds are open across his body. Muscles shudder. His lone heart hammers in his chest. The mace howls as it rushes down to meet him.

In that moment, he stabs upwards.

The tip of the sword strikes the Word Bearer just beneath the breastplate. The blade shivers in Sigismund's grip as it slices through armour, flesh and bone, and

jabs into the power plant on the Word Bearer's back.

With sudden, explosive force, volatile chemicals and energy vent from severed cooling tubes and power conduits. Fire engulfs the Word Bearer's body, stealing away any cry of surprise or pain. Then his ribcage blows out.

The Word Bearer falls backwards, flames and sparks burning away his blood before it can even fall to the floor.

Sigismund rises, pulling the sword free, reverses his grip and stabs downwards. The point rams into the Word Bearer's mouth and through his skull, into the polished stone beneath.

He stands for a second, swaying, trying to focus through the blood and the pain. The battle is dissolving around him. The creatures are staggering, limbs and sinew quivering as though some vital link has been severed. An ethereal wind is spinning through the chamber, green flames flaring from the bodies of the collapsing creatures.

He can see his brother Templars now. Many lie bloody amongst the heaps of hacked flesh, but others are advancing towards him, firing and slicing the creatures even as they are pulled apart by the dying winds.

Morn is walking amongst the fallen, flanked by her bodyguards. Her exoskeleton is wheezing, and she limps with a clatter of broken gears. She pauses to snap a beam of energy at a twitching shape made of slick muscle and half-formed feathers.

The bodyguards move forwards, lifting the stone casket from the dais, and hurry to where Sigismund stands above the dead Word Bearer. The black weapon still rests in the warrior's hands, its malformed shape fuming like newly forged iron.

'Take the blade to the gunship,' Morn says to her bodyguards. 'Burn the rest.'

Sigismund is not listening. In his chest, his heart still beats out a rhythm in blood – a rhythm like the clash of swords. He looks to where Rann lies: unmoving, but groaning quietly, the axe still in his hand.

He *must* live. He must.

Sigismund pulls his sword from the Word Bearer's skull. It slides free, but the flesh around it is charring and powdering away to ash, which lifts on the unnatural breeze.

'Your duty is done, Templar,' says Morn from close beside him.

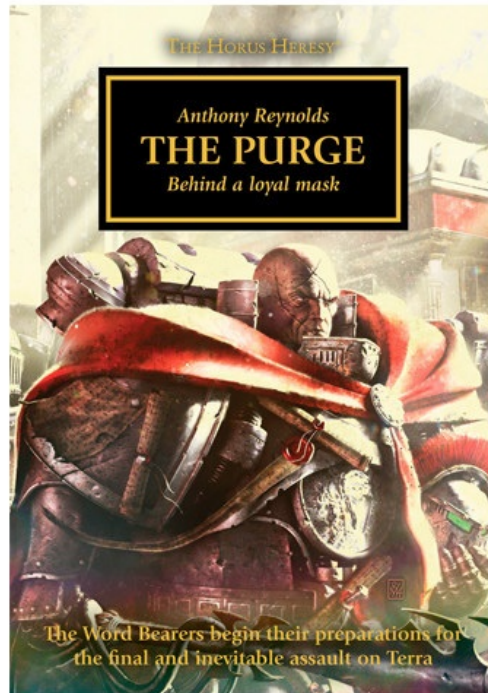
His bloodstained tabard stirs in the air. The chains about his wrist clink. Slowly, the joints of his armour creaking, he raises the sword. His oaths of moment are fulfilled, and he touches the blade to his forehead.

‘No,’ he says. ‘It is never done.’

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**John French** has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, the novel *Tallarn: Ironclad*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile*, *Ahriman: Sorcerer* and *Ahriman: Unchanged*, plus a number of related short stories collected in *Ahriman: Exodus*, including 'The Dead Oracle' and 'Hand of Dust'. Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella *Fateweaver*, plus many short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

Across Ultramar and on Terra itself, the Word Bearers spread their faith in the Dark Gods through acts of terror.



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