

# TALES FROM THE ARCHIVE

HAMMER AND BOLTER EDITION

# WE ARE ONE

JOHN FRENCH

AN ALPHA LEGION SHORT STORY

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

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# WE ARE ONE

**John French**

*‘Victory and defeat are a matter of definition’*

– from the *Axioms of War*, *Tactica Imperialis*

I have grown tired in this war. It has eaten me, consuming everything I might have done or been. I have chased my enemy across the stars and through the decades of my failing life. We are one, the enemy and I, the hunter and the hunted. The end is close now. My enemy will die, and at that moment I will become something less, a shadow fading in the brightness of the past. This is the price of victory.

My fist hits the iron door with a crack of thunder. The impact shatters the emerald scales of the hydra that rears across their width. Inside my Terminator armour, enfolded in adamantium and ceramite, I feel the blow jolt through my thin flesh. Lightning crackles around my fist as I pull it back, the armour giving me strength. I bring my fist down and the metre-thick doors fall in a shower of splintered metal. I walk through their shattered remains, my feet crushing the scattered ruby eyes of the hydra to red dust on the stone floor.

The light glints from my armour, staining its pearl-white surface with fire and glinting from eagle feathers and laurels. The chamber beyond the doors is silent and creeps with shifting shadows. Burning torches flicker from brackets on jade pillars, the domed ceiling above coiling with smoke. Targeting runes and threat augurs swarm across my vision, sniffing for threats, finding only one. The shackled power in my fist twitches like a thunderbolt grasped in a god’s hand.

He sits at the centre of the chamber on a throne of beaten copper. Void blue armour mottled with the ghost pattern of scales, swathed in spilling cloaks of shimmering silk, face hidden behind the blank face plate and glowing green eyes

of a horned helm. He sits still, one hand resting on the pommel of a silver-bladed sword, head turning slowly to follow me as I advance.

‘Phocron of the Alpha Legion,’ I shout, my voice echoing through the shadow-filled silence. ‘I call you to justice at the hands of the Imperium you betrayed.’ The formulaic phrase of accusation fades to silence as Phocron stands, his sword in his hand. This will be no simple duel. To fight the Alpha Legion is to fight on a shifting layer of deception and trickery, where every weakness can hide strength and every apparent advantage may be revealed as a trap. Lies are their weapons and they are their masters. I am old, but time has armoured me against those weapons.

He moves and cuts, his blow so quick and sudden that I have no chance to dodge. I raise my fist, feeling the armour synchronise with the movements of my aging muscles, and meet the first strike of this last battle in a blaze of light.

### **Ninety-eight years ago - The Year of the Ephisian Atrocity**

Knowledge can make you blind, some say, but ignorance is simply an invitation to be deceived. I can still see the times when I knew little of the Alpha Legion beside a few dry facts and half-understood fears. I look back at those times and I shudder at what was to come.

The death of my ignorance began on the mustering fields of Ephisia.

Millions of troops stood on the dust plains in the shadow of soot-covered hives, rank upon rank of men and woman in uniforms from dozens of worlds. Battle tanks and ground transporters coughed exhaust fumes into the cold air. Munitorum officers moved through the throng shouting orders above the noise, their breath forming brief white clouds. Above it all transport barges hung in the clear sky, their void pitted hulls glinting in the sunlight, waiting to swallow the gathering mass of human flesh and war machines. It was the mustering of an army to break the cluster of renegade worlds that had declared their secession from the Imperium. It was a gathering of might intended to break that act of folly into splinters and return a dozen worlds to the domain of the God Emperor. That was the intention, though perhaps ours was the folly.

‘Move!’ I bellowed as I charged through the crowd, shoving aside men and women in newly issued battle gear. Helena came with me, pushing people aside with her will. Grunts and oaths followed us, dying to silence as they saw the tri-barred ‘I’ engraved on my breast plate and the hissing muzzle of the inferno pistol in my hand. My storm cloak flapped behind me as I ran, the burnished iron

of my segmented armour bright under the sun. Anyone looking at me knew that they were looking at an Inquisitor, the left hand of the God Emperor, who had the power to judge and execute any beneath the Golden Throne. The crowd parted before me like cattle scattering in front of a wolf.

‘There,’ shouted Helena from two feet to my left. I twisted my head to see the dun-colour of our quarry’s uniform vanish into a knot of troops. She was already moving before I had changed direction, confused-looking troops twitching out of her path as she ran through the parting crowd. I could feel the back eddies of the telepathic bow wave that she projected in front of her as she ran, hard muscles flowing under flexing armour plates, dark hair spilling behind.

I saw our quarry a second after Helena. A thin man in an ill-fitting dun uniform of an Ephesian trooper, his skin pale from bad nutrition and lack of daylight. He looked like so many of the rest gathered on that day, another coin of flesh for the Imperium to spend. But this man was no raw recruit for the Imperial Guard; he was an agent of rebellion sent to seed destruction at this gathering. We had been tracking him for days, knowing that there were others and that our only chance to stop them all was to let one run until he led us to the others. That had been the plan, my plan. But there was no more time. Whatever atrocity they intended was so close I could feel the cold fear of it in my guts.

‘Take him down,’ I shouted. Helena was raising her needle pistol when the man jerked to one side with the agility of a predator. He rolled and came up into a shooting crouch, lasgun at his shoulder. Helena dived to the ground as the lasgun spat a burst of energy in a wide arc around where she had been. People dropped in the crowd around us, shouts of pain spreading like a tide. Dead and dying troops lay on the ground around us while their comrades formed a blind herd without direction or order.

Our man was already up and moving, weaving amongst the panicked troops, using the tide of confusion he had created as cover. I felt a twinge of admiration at the man’s ingenuity. He was good, I had to give him that: determined, ruthless and well trained.

I came level with Helena as she pulled herself off the ground.

‘Wait,’ she said. ‘We will not outrun him. I will handle this, master.’ She bit off the last word. I looked at her. She had a face that was too thin and pale to be pretty, and a Scholastica Psykana brand surrounded her left eye with a blunt letter ‘I’ and a halo of wings. She gave me a humourless smile. Helena was my interrogator, my apprentice in the duties of the Inquisition. We did not like each other. In fact, I was sure she hated me on some level. But she was a fine

interrogator and a devoted servant of the Imperium. She was also a pysker, and a lethally powerful one at that.

I nodded in reply. She looked away closing her eyes and I felt the air around us take on a heavy burnt sugar texture as she drew power to her. Our quarry had already vanished into the shifting forest of human bodies around us. Hundreds of troops jostled like frightened cattle and I heard officers shouting for order and situation reports in the distance. There was a frozen moment, a sliver of time that for an instant was quiet and still. I saw a young trooper no more than a pace from me, his face frozen in puzzlement, his tan-coloured uniform still creased from storage. I whispered a prayer for forgiveness in that moment.

An invisible shock wave tore out from Helena, ripping bodies from the ground and tossing them into the air like debris in a cyclone's path. Bodies fell, broken, screaming as the telekinetic storm followed our quarry. It reached him, fifty paces from us, and flicked him off his feet. He hit the ground with a crack of bones. When I got to him he was sucking air in wet gasps, mashed fingers scrabbling at the lasgun just beyond his reach. I raised my inferno pistol and burned his reaching hand to a charred and blistered stump.

I did not bother to ask him how many other saboteurs were hidden in the mustering, or what their target was. I knew he would not give me an answer. It did not matter. He would give me the answers anyway.

'Take it from him.' I flicked my pistol at the broken man on the ground. 'We need to know how many of them there are and what targets they are intending to bomb.' Helena took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a second before looking down at the man who twitched and gurgled at our feet. He went still and I could feel the cold witch-touch on my skin. Helena's eyes were closed but as I looked at her she spoke.

'I have him, but...' her voice quivered and I saw she was trembling 'There is something wrong.'

'Get the information,' I snarled. 'We are running out of time. How many have infiltrated the muster? Where are the bombs?'

'They-' she began but was cut off by a laugh that bubbled up from the man on the ground. I looked down. He was staring back at me with corpse-white eyes. In that moment I knew I had made a mistake. We are cautioned that assumptions are worse than ignorance, and looking at the man I knew that my assumptions would see me dead. This was no saboteur ring bent on a mundane atrocity. This was something more, something far more. Cold fear ran through me.

'We are many, Inquisitor,' he said, his voice a racking gurgle of blood and

shattered ribs. Beside me Helena began to spasm, blood running from her mouth and eyes. Her mouth was working, try to form words.

‘Witches. They are witches...’ she gasped, her hand reached to grip my arm, as the psychic storm built around us. ‘I can feel their minds. There are more, many more.’ I could feel a greasy charge lick my skin, a stink of burnt blood on the air. The broken man laughed again, his skin crawling with lurid warp light.

‘We are many,’ he screamed, and he was still screaming as I vaporised his head. The sound did not end, but filled my head, getting louder and louder. I looked up from the dead man and saw the extent of my mistake.

Across the plane, figures rose into the air on pillars of ghost light, their limbs pinned to the air, arcs of lightning whipping from one to another, connecting them in a growing web. Dark clouds the colour of bile and dried blood spilled into the sky. Across the mustering fields, hundreds of thousands fell to their knees, moaning, clawing at their skin, blood dribbling from their eyes. Some, with stronger will, had been able to arm their weapons and fire at the witch chorus. Some found their mark and sent pyskers to their death. But there were many, and the witch storm rose in power with every heartbeat. I could feel the unclean power crawling over me like insects and the witches’ voices pulling my thoughts apart. All I could hold onto was anger, anger that I had failed, that an enemy had fooled me. And all the while their voices grew louder and louder, spiralling around each other as a single word emerged from the telepathic cacophony.

*Phocron.*

Dozens of minds screamed the name and the storm broke in an inferno that washed across the mustering fields. It turned flesh to ash and scattered it on a superheated wind. Hundreds of thousands died in a single instant, an army to conquer worlds reduced to twisted metal and dust. I watched the fire come for me, and felt something enfold me like a cloak of ice. I realised that Helena still gripped my arm as I fell into darkness.

I woke on a plane covered in ashes. Helena was next to me, her exposed skin burnt and blistered, her breathing so shallow I thought she was dead until I saw her eyes twitch open. The energy needed to shield me still lingered on my skin as a cold shroud. I know now that she had saved us both, but at a price. The power she had channelled to shield us had almost burnt her psychic talent out. She lived, but she was a shadow of what she had been and never became an inquisitor. Amongst an overwhelming tragedy, her sacrifice still lives in my memory like the ghost touch of a lost life.

All around us there was nothing but an echoing desolation beneath a bruised sky. It was quiet, but in my head the name that had created this atrocity echoed in my mind.

### **Eighty-four years ago**

We came out of the iron-grey sky on streaks of blood-red fire. Staccato lines of flak and the bright blooms of defence lasers rose from the fallen city like the claws of a dying god raking the sky. Landing craft and assault carriers were punched from the air. Burning wreckage fell in oily cascades of smoke amongst the cities glittering domes and spires. The air rang with shells fired from orbit and the howl of attack craft engines. The wrath and might of the Imperium fell on the city, and it screamed as it burned.

In the gloom of my valkyrie's crew compartment, we felt the ferocity of the invasion as shuddering blows that shook the frame around us. It was close inside the assault carrier, the air tinted red by the compartment's tactical lights and spiced with the smell of sweat. Even in such a confined space, my storm trooper detail kept its distance, even if that distance was only a few inches. I knew each of them by name, had fought beside all of them and personally selected them as my guard during this invasion. We had bled and struggled side by side, but I stood apart from them. To feel the power of the Emperor in your hand is to know what it is to be alone. It is a fact that I had long ago accepted.

'Lord?' The voice was raised against the thunder sound of the battle outside. I looked up from the holographic map to see Sergeant Dreag looking down at me, his face framed by oil-black armour. 'Theatre command wishes to know where you intend to make your landing.' I smiled, letting careless humour wash over my face.

'Do they indeed?' I asked. Dreag grinned back at me.

'Yes, Lord. They say it is so that they can coordinate to properly support your operations.' I nodded, pursing my lips in mock consideration. I am not given to humour, but to lead people to death, you must wear many masks. Something exploded close by and the valkyrie bucked. I felt my back pressed against the hard metal of the flight bench as the pilot banked hard.

'Little late in the day, for a coordinated strike, don't you think Draeg?' I gave a small shake of my head. 'Tell them I will update them shortly.'

'Yes, lord,' nodded Draeg. 'And our actual target?' I looked back to the holo-display, coloured runes winking in clusters over a plan view of the city, shifting

with objectives and tactical intelligence. The city was called Hespacia, a glittering jewel that had fallen to greed and lies and pulled the rest of its planet with it. The ruling guilds had overturned Imperial rule and given their souls, and those of their people, to the Dark Gods. This, though, was not why I had come to see it fall beneath the hammer of Imperial retribution. I had come not because of Hespacia's heresy but because of the cause.

'The Onyx Palace,' I handed the sergeant my holoslate. 'Assault position marked.' I watched the thinnest cloud of fear pass over the sergeant's blunt features. We were heading into the heart of the corruption, and we were doing it alone, without support.

'Very good, my lord,' said the Draeg and began to bark a briefing to the other storm troopers. I checked my own weapons: a blunt nosed plasma pistol holstered on the thigh of my burnished battle plate, and an eagle headed hammer that lay across my knees.

The valkyrie bucked again, shaking to invisible blows. We were close. I did not need to see the tactical data to know it; I could feel it in shaking metal around me. In the decade after the burning of the Ephesian mustering I had changed much and learnt more. Suspicion is the armour of the Inquisition, and I had learnt its value in the preceding years. Rebellion had spread, pulling a dozen worlds into heresy and corruption, and with it had come a name, a name I already knew: Phocron. Arch-heretic and puppet master of betrayal, his agents and traitors spread through our own forces like a contagion. Even with the might of crusade at our backs, we bought every victory with blood. Ambushes, sabotage and assassination ate our strength even as we advanced step by bleeding step. So I came to this damned city to cut off the rebellion's head, I came to kill the enemy I had never seen, I came to kill Phocron.

The side doors of the valkyrie peeled back, and the burnt stink and howl of battle flooded over us. Beneath us, burning buildings flicked past, so close that I could see the pattern work on the blue-green tiles that covered so many of their domed roofs. In the streets, figures moved from cover to cover, the sound of their small battles lost amongst the roar as fire fell from the sky in an unending rain.

Above the burning city sat a tiered mountain of pale stone the colour of dirty ice. A series of ascending domes and balconies, it glowed under the luminous haze of void shields that flickered and sparked with the impact of munitions and energy blasts. This was the Onyx Palace, seat of governorship on this world and the heart of its betrayal. Phocron was there and the Onyx Palace was his bastion.

The layered shields sheltered him from the bombardment, but they would not deny us.

The valkyrie hit the void shield envelope, sparks arcing across its fuselage and an electric tang filling the air. The tiered balconies of the palace rose before us, studded with dark weapon turrets that spat glowing lines of fire. We banked and tipped, rounds hammering into the armoured airframe. The engines howled as they thrust us towards the palace summit. Others came behind us, delta-shaped wings of vulture gunships and more assault craft. The air shuddered with the rolling scream of launching rockets and the bellow of explosions. Domes and statue-lined bridges flicked past. I could see figures, some crouched behind sandbags, others already running from the explosions that walked up the flank of the palace in our wake.

We crested the highest dome and I saw Phocron for the first time, a figure in dark armour with a single black clad companion, and a cluster of cowering figures in billowing silk robes. He stood close to the edge of the balcony as if he had been watching the ruin that he had forced the Imperium to bring to this world.

The valkyrie pivoted, its engines screaming as it skimmed the stone slabs of the platform. My storm troopers were already dropping out of the door, hitting the ground one after another. Draeg gave me a grin, hurled himself out, and then it was me tumbling the few metres to hit the tiled platform. The world spun for a second and I was up on my feet, training and instincts doing the work of thought. My armour responded to my movements, thrusting me forward faster than muscle. Behind me, more storm troopers spilled onto the platform.

The robed figures clustered around Phocron died, the hellgun blasts burning through their silk finery. A few ran, swathes of coloured fabric spilling behind them, bare feet slapping on the marble. Phocron stood impassively, his hands empty, the sword at his waist undrawn. Behind him, a figure in a black storm coat and silver domino mask stood equally unmoved. I fired, plasma hissing from my pistol. Others were firing too. Bolts of energy converged on the two figures, but splashed against a shimmering dome of energy.

Draeg and his squad were in front of me, sprinting towards Phocron and his aide.

‘Try and keep up in that armour, lord.’ I heard the sergeant’s grin over the vox. I spat back a very unlordly oath.

As the first shots hit Phocron’s energy field, Draeg drew his sword. Lightning sheathed it with a crackle.

‘Close assault, get inside the shield dome,’ the sergeant spat over the vox. The hammer in my hand sprung to life, its generator making it vibrate with straining power. Draeg was the first through the shield dome, raising his sword for a backhanded cut, muscles ready to unfold the momentum of his charge into an armour cracking blow. Phocron moved at the last instant before the blow struck.

I have fought a lifetime of wars and met many enemies blade to blade. I have studied the business of killing, the workmanlike cut, the parry and riposte of a duel, the nicety of a perfectly timed blow. I have watched men kill each other in countless ways. The art of death holds no mystery to me. Yet I swear I never saw death dealt with more malign genius than at that moment.

Phocron’s sword was in his hand. It was a long, its double edged blade damasked in a scale pattern. A saurian head snarled from its crossguard. It met Draeg’s sword in a thunder crack of converging power fields. Draeg was fast, and conditioned from years of war to react to such a counter, but in this moment those instincts killed him. He shifted his weight to let the Space Marine’s blow flow past and open his enemy to another cut. He did not expect Phocron to drop his sword.

With no resistance, Draeg’s sword sliced down and cut air. Phocron turned around the sergeant’s sword, so close their armour brushed. The gauntleted hand slammed into Draeg’s armour at the throat. I saw the sergeant’s head snap back, his body rag-loose as he fell to the ground.

The rest of Draeg’s squad had not been far behind him and they opened up as they came through the shield dome. Phocron was already moving towards them at a flat run. The first died as he squeezed the trigger. Phocron’s hand closed over the hellgun, crushing the storm trooper’s fingers into the trigger guard. The man screamed. Phocron pivoted, the gun still spewing a stitched line of energy. The hellgun’s fire hit the next two storm troopers at point blank range, burning through flesh and armour. With swift delicacy, the Space Marine looped an arm around the screaming man and gripped the webbing belt of grenades across his chest.

I was a pace from the edge of the shield dome when I realised what was about to happen. Phocron turned and threw the screaming man at the rest of the storm trooper squad. The force of the throw broke the man’s back with a sharp crack. I could see the pins of the grenades glinting in Phocron’s fingers. The dead man hit the platform in front of his comrades and exploded.

The blast sheared through the rest of the squad in an expanding sphere of shrapnel. Fragments of metal, flesh and bone pattered off my armour. I could see

Phocron and his storm coated henchman through the pall of smoke and dust. They were running.

‘Target is moving,’ I shouted across the vox. ‘Close and eliminate.’

I fired, plasma burning ionised trails through the dust cloud. I ran after the two figures. Behind me, the rest of the strike force advanced. I reached the edge of the dust cloud. The fleeing pair were at the edge of the platform. Behind them, the city burned. They turned and looked back at the force running past the bloody remains of Draeg and his squad. They ran without looking at Phocron’s sword, left forgotten on the ground.

The plasma charge concealed in the blade detonated, unfolding into a glowing sphere of sun-hot energy. I felt the heat through the skin of my armour as the blast tossed me into the air and slammed me into the paving. Warning chimes sounded in my ears as the armour systems sensed damage. Something wet moved in my chest as I sucked in a breath and found I was alive. For a few seconds, I could see nothing. I tried to raise my head and found that my vision was smeared with blood. I blinked until I could see. Bright light shone from behind me where the sphere of plasma still burned. Phocron stood, his blue armour black in the glare of the plasma bloom.

I pulled myself to my feet with a flare of pain and a grind of servos from inside my armour. My hammer was gone, scattered across the platform by the explosion. Two storm troopers that had been close beside me began to haul themselves up. Phocron shot them before they could stand, the guttural bark of the bolt pistol almost lost in the sound of the battle raging in the city. I was standing, my plasma pistol whining in my hand as it focused its power. The muzzle of Phocron’s pistol pointed directly at me, a dark circle ready to breathe fire.

A valkyrie crested the edge of the platform with a wash of downdraft. Its hull was painted in the storm grey of Battlefleet Hecuba. I could see the worn kill marks and unit tags under the cockpit. For an instant, I expected it to open up with its chin weapon, for it to rake Phocron and his companion with fire. Then it spun, drifting down until its open side doors were level with the platform. A crewman in an Imperial Navy uniform reached down to help the storm coated figure into the side door. Phocron vaulted after and the valkyrie swooped away. I fancied that the Alpha Legionary was looking at me with his emerald eyes until the craft was lost amongst the hundreds of aircraft that swarmed above the dying city.

I breathed, letting pain and frustrated anger spill out. Something did not fit. It

had seemed as if Phocron had anticipated our attack, waiting for it to come so that he could slaughter us. No, it was not just a slaughter. It was a demonstration of superiority. I can defeat you in a thousand ways, I can kill you as I choose, it had said. Then this sudden retreat, it did not fit. His forces were being overwhelmed, the city filling with thousands of Imperial troops, but then why not withdraw as soon as this became clear. Unless...

I suddenly felt cold, as if ice had formed inside my armour. I thumbed my vox-link, breaking through clearance ciphers until the voice of the invasion's commanding officer spoke into my ear. General Berrickade had a thick voice that spoke of his ample waist and heavy jowls. He was no fool though.

'Lord inquisitor,' he said, his voice chopped by static.

'General, all troops are to be withdrawn from the city immediately.' There was a pause, and I could imagine Berrickade staring at the vox-speaker in the strategium aboard an orbiting battleship.

'Lord,' he began speaking carefully. 'If I may ask...' He never finished because at that moment Phocron answered the unspoken question. At the same instant, the city's plasma reactors, promethium stores and chemical refineries exploded.

Across the city, glowing clouds rose into the sky, their tops broadening and flattening as they met the upper air currents. The shockwaves broke buildings into razor fragments and clouds of dust. An instant later, concentric waves of fire and burning gas swept through the streets. The sound and shockwave reached me a second later, flipping me through the air with a bellow of noise. I must have hit the ground, but I never felt it. The blast wave had already pulled me down into darkness.

Later, while I healed, I was told that tens of thousands of Imperial troops had been killed, hundreds of thousands more renegades and millions of civilians had burnt to nothing or crushed under rubble. The rebellion died, but the Imperium had taken a great wound and nothing was left but charred ruins. But the Onyx Palace had survived. Its plasma reactors had not been overloaded, and that had saved my life. When I was told this my first thought was that Phocron had wanted someone to survive to witness him rip another bloody chunk from the flesh of the Imperium. Then I thought again of the dark mouth of Phocron's bolt pistol and the death that he had withheld. No, I thought, he did not want just anyone to witness his victory: he had chosen *me* to witness it. To this day I do not know why.

## A year ago

The ship drifted closer. Through the polished crystal of the view port, I could see its crippled engines bleed glowing vapour into the vacuum. It was a small ship, barely large enough to be warp capable, and typical of the cutters used by traders and smugglers who existed on the fringes of the Imperium. The ship I stood on was massive by comparison, layered with armour and weapon bastions. It was a predator leviathan closing on a minnow. The *Unbreakable Might* was an Armageddon-class battlecruiser and mounted enough fire power to break other warships into glowing debris. Against the nameless clipper, it had barely needed to use a fraction of its might. A single precise lance strike had burnt the smaller ship's plasma engines to ruin and left it to coast on unpowered.

I turned from the view with a clicking purr of augmetics. My eyes focused on Admiral Velkarrin from beneath the cowl of my crimson robe. He was rake-thin, the metal flexes of command augmentation hanging from his grey-skinned skull in a tangled spill down the back of his gold-frogged uniform.

'Launch a boarding party, admiral,' I said. Velkarrin pursed his colourless lips but nodded.

'As you wish, my lord.' He turned to give an order to a hovering officer.

'And, admiral... ' He turned back. 'They are to observe maximum caution.'

'Yes, my lord,' he gave a short bow. I could tell he resented my commandeering his command and his fleet. Hunting smuggler vessels and pirates while war washed across star systems must have galled him. Part of me was faintly amused by watching his pride war with fear of the Inquisition. The rest of me cared nothing for what he felt.

'I will meet the boarding team personally upon their return.' Velkarrin gave another curt bow in acknowledgement and stalked away, hissing orders at subordinates.

I turned back to watch our latest prey draw closer, my eyes whirring as they focused. They had rebuilt me after Hespacia. My eyes and face were gone, replaced by blue-lensed augmetics and a mask of twisted scar tissue fused onto a ceramic woven skull. My left leg and a portion of my torso had been so mangled that they had been replaced. Ceramite plating, organ grafting and a leg of brass mechanics meant that I still lived and walked, even if it was with a bent back and stutter of gears and pistons. For a while after the disaster of the Hespacia attack, I thought of my injuries as a penance for my lack of foresight, a price for ignorance written forever into my body.

Since that lesson I had done much to address my failing. The war against the rebel worlds had grown many times over, sucking in armies and resources from across many star systems. The Imperium was no longer fighting a war of containment but a crusade of retribution. Under my authority, and that of the Adeptus Terra, it was named the Ephisian Persecution. I had watched our forces struggle for decades as more and more worlds had fallen to rebellion and the influence of the Dark Gods. It was a war we were losing because we were fighting an enemy for whom lies were both a weapon and a shield. Understanding that enemy had been my work in the decades since Hespacia burned.

I had expended great energy in tracking down information on the Alpha Legion. From the sealed reports of Inquisitor Girreaux to half-understood accounts from the dawn of the Imperium, I had reviewed them all. I knew my enemy. I knew their nature, their preferred forms of warfare, and their weaknesses. Sometimes, I thought I knew them better than I knew myself.

Their symbol was the hydra, a many-headed beast from legends born in mankind's earliest days. It was both a mark of their warrior brotherhood and a statement of methodology. To fight the Alpha Legion is to fight a many-headed beast that will twist in your grasp. As soon as you think you have a part pinned, another unseen part will strike. When you cut off one head, two grow to replace it. They weave secrets and lies about themselves, hoping to baffle and confuse their enemies. Subterfuge, espionage, ambush and the untameable tangle of guerrilla warfare were their specialities. These specialities they wielded through networks of corrupted followers, infiltrators, spies and, on occasion, their own martial skill. They were wrapped in the corruption of Chaos, steeped in betrayal and bitterness since their primarch and Legion betrayed mankind ten millennia before.

The enemy I faced now was a single scion of that heretic brood, but no less formidable for that. Phocron was a name that now ran through the Ephisian Persecution like a coiling serpent. I knew that even before we knew his name he had seeded a dozen worlds with insurgent ideologies and built up control over witch cults and heretic sects. Now he moved from warzone to warzone, plunging worlds into rebellion, corrupting our forces and punishing the Imperium for every victory. The Ephisian Atrocity and the burning of Hespacia were just two amongst the subtle and devastating attacks he had made on the Imperium. Through his coiling dance of destruction, he had stayed out of my grasp, a shadow opponent locked in a dual with me across dozens of worlds.

Beyond the reflective layer of armour glass a shuttle boosted towards the crippled ship on trails of orange flame. Rather than follow Phocron's trail I had decided to attack him where he was most vulnerable, his mobility. He had no fleet of warships, he did not take planets by orbital invasion or the threat of bombardment. He took worlds from within, moving from one to another unseen. As far as I could tell he had no warships under his control. That implied that he moved using pirate and smuggler craft: small ships that could pass unnoticed and unremarked through the wild borderland of the subsector. A scattered task force of Imperial ships had tracked and boarded nineteen vessels so far with no result. The ship I watched would be the twentieth.

Two hours later, I stood amidst the promethium stink and the semi-ordered chaos of one of the *Unbreakable Might's* main landing bays. Bright light flooded the cathedral-like space, gleaming off the hulls of lighters, shuttles and landing craft. Figures moved over them, working on the mechanical guts exposed under servicing plates.

I stood with Velkarrin and a guard of twenty armsmen, their bronzed void armour reflecting the bright light. The admiral stood a few paces away, consulting with two of his attending officers. The away team had reported that the vessel appeared to be nothing but a smuggler, crewed by deserters and outlanders. They had found a cargo of illegal ore destined for some pirate haven out in the Halo Margins. The lexmechanic who had accompanied them had drained the smuggler ship's data reservoirs for later analysis. As on the nineteen previous occasions no connection with Phocron or his shadow network existed. Still, I wanted to meet the boarding party on their return to search their accounts for details that they might have failed to report. Once that was done, the smuggler ship would be blasted into molten slag.

The armoured shuttle glided into the dock, its passive antigravity field filling the air with an ionised tang. It settled onto the deck with a hiss of hydraulics and a creak of ice-cold metal. The shuttle was a blunt block of grey armour the size of a mass ground hauler, its surface pitted and scored by atmospheric translation. Blast shields covered the armaglass of the cock pit. I heard the echoes of vox-chatter between the pilots and the deck crew as they moved in to attach power lines and data cables. The ramp under the chin of the shuttle hinged open, revealing a dark space inside. Velkarrin and the armsmen looked towards it, expecting the boarding team to appear from the gloom.

Something was wrong. I reached for the plasma pistol at my waist, my hand closing on the worn metal of the grip at the same moment that the docking bay

went dark. Complete blackness enfolded us. For an instant, there was silence, and then voices rose in confusion. The pistol was in my hand, its charge coils glowing as it built power with a piercing whine. In the direction of the shuttle, two eyes glowed suddenly green. There was a motorised growl as a chain weapon gunned to life and then the shooting started. Our armsmen guard opened up, shotgun muzzles flaring as they fired into the dark. The noise was like a ragged, rolling bellow. In the jagged light of muzzle flare I saw my enemy standing on the ramp of the shuttle. His armour was dark, mottled by patterns of scales. In one hand he held a toothed axe, in the other a bolt pistol. He stood still for an instant as the shot rattled from his warplate, looking at us with glowing green eyes. Behind him stood a figure in a silver mask and storm coat. In that brief moment I thought that the empty eyes in the silver face were looking into mine.

The armsmen had closed ranks around Velkarrin and I, forming a deep circle of bronze armour. I aimed and fired, but Phocron was already gone, moving through muzzle flash, a whirlwind of slaughter caught through blinked instants.

He hit the first armsmen with a downwards blow. I heard the scream of motorised teeth meeting metal and flesh.

He was two strides nearer, an arc of dismembered dead at his feet. I heard a yelp of fear close by, recognising the admiral's voice by its tone.

The bolt pistol flared and roared, three armsmen dying in an oily flash of light. He was three strides away. There was a smell of offal and meat in my nose. Beside me, I heard Velkarrin turn to run and thud to the deck as his feet slipped on something slick and soft. The plasma pistol whined in my hand.

I raised my pistol, lightning dancing across its charge coils. Phocron was above me, chain axe raised, scale-patterned armour glistening with blood. He brought the axe down in a diagonal cut. I pulled the trigger and plasma flared from the barrel of my pistol.

I missed, but the shot saved my life. Jerking aside to avoid my shot, Phocron missed his target. The teeth of the chain axe met my gun arm just below the elbow, the back swing slicing through Velkarrin as he tried to stand.

The lights came on as shock hit me. Blood was spilling from the chewed stump of my arm. I staggered a step and my legs gave way, collapsing to the floor in a clicking whirl of gears. People moved, shouting. I was aware of a lot of weapons surrounding me very quickly.

I looked around, trying to focus through a pale fog that seemed to be floating across my vision. Blood glistened under the bright light. The ramp of the shuttle

was still open. Later, I would find out that none of its crew or the boarding party had returned from the smuggler ship, the voices in the vox-chatter and reports had been perfect mimicry. Of Phocron and the man in the silver mask, there was no sign.

### **One month ago**

The war council overseeing the Ephisian Persecution gathered on board the *Unbreakable Might*. Generals, war savants, vice-admirals, magos, bishops militant, palatines, commissar lords and captains of the Adeptus Astartes: all came to my call. The strategium of the battlecruiser was a two hundred paces-wide circular chamber of raked seats carved from granite. I waited at the centre, under the eyes of the gathering worthies, and watched.

They came in small groups, looking for faces they knew, judging where it was their right to sit, who they had to avoid and who they had to greet. It was like watching the shifting gears of Imperial politics and power play out in miniature. There a Sparcin war chief in burnished half plate and white fur cloak, trailed by a clutch of tactical advisors. Here a psykana lord, a withered white face within a hood of cables, sat next to a spindle limbed woman in carmine robes, the cog-skull of the Adeptus Mechanicus etched on the brass of her domino mask. Servo skulls moved above the assembling throng, scanning, recording, sniffing the air for threats and spreading incense in thick breaths.

Amongst the crowd I saw some of my own kind, inquisitors or their representatives, moving amongst the rest like imperious masters, or remaining still and silent on the edges. I had invited none of them but they came anyway, my reputation enough to bring them. Some even called me 'lord inquisitor'. Rank within the Inquisition is a complex matter. No formal structure exists amongst this shadow hand of the Imperium that answers to none but the will of the Emperor. Lordship is a matter of respect, a title of acknowledgement granted by peers to one who has earned it by the power of their deeds. My war against Phocron had pulled respect and renown to me like a flame gathers insects. As the greatest masters of war in this volume of space gathered at my call, I could see why some might call me lord.

I sat on a high-backed chair at the centre of the chamber. A symbolic hammer rested beneath my left hand, my right on the black iron of the chair's arm, fingers of polished chrome clicking softly on the dark metal. It had been a year since I had lost my right arm in the ambush that had killed Admiral Velkarrin

and nearly claimed my life. The bionic replacement still ached with phantom pain.

In that year, I had not been idle. Following his attempt on my life, Phocron had simply vanished. No trace of him could be found on the ship or on the smuggler vessel. This, and the sudden loss of light at the moment of attack, could only mean that his network of traitors extended deeper and higher in our forces than I had considered possible. Trusted acolytes and agents of my own had gone to work, and now I gathered together the leaders of the Persecution to share what I had found. A few knew what was about to happen, most did not.

I watched as black-visored troopers sealed the doors to the chamber and waited for the grumble of conversation to fade. When it had, I stood.

‘There is much to speak of,’ I said, my voice carrying up the tiered seats. I saw some shift at the lack of formal greeting or acknowledgement of the honour and position of those gathered here. I let myself smile at the thought. ‘But first there is a matter that must be dealt with.’ I gave a slight nod as if to emphasise the point, and those waiting for that signal acted as one.

Even though I was prepared for it, the psychic shockwave made me stagger. On the tiered seats, a dozen figures convulsed as the telepathic and telekinetic power enfolded them in a vice-like grip. I felt an oily static charge play over my skin. There was a sound like wind rustling through high grass. The needle slivers hit the convulsing men and women, and one by one they went still as the sedatives overrode nerve impulses. There was an instant of shocked silence.

‘Do not move,’ I shouted as the black-visored troopers moved through the crowd. They clustered around each of the stricken figures. Null collars and monowire bindings slipped over necks and limbs and the bound figures were dragged across the stone floor like sacks of grain. The shock in the rest of the crowd was palpable; they had just seen a dozen of their senior peers, men and women of power and distinction, overcome and dragged away. You could almost feel the thought forming in all their minds: *traitors in our midst*. The pale faced psykana lord nodded to me and I favoured him with a low bow of thanks. A murmur of anger and fear began to build in the chamber.

‘Our enemy is among us.’ I raised my hammer up and brought its adamantite head down on the granite floor. Silence gathered in the wake of the fading hammer blow. ‘It walks amongst us, wearing faces of loyalty.’ My voice was soft but it carried in the still air. ‘Our enemy has used our strength against us, directed us into traps, mired us in blood and shackled our strength with lies. A year ago, on this ship, that enemy came close to ending my life with his own

hand. That such a thing was possible is a testament to his ability and audacity.’ I paused, looking around at the faces watching me, waiting to see what would come next. ‘But I survived, and in that attempt he exposed the extent of the treachery within our forces.’ I pointed to the dozen spaces on the tiered seats. ‘Today I have removed the heads of the hydra from among us.’ I paused as murmurs ran through the audience.

The traitors had been difficult to find without arousing their suspicion. It had been delicate work to find them, and more delicate still to prepare to remove them in a single instant. The twelve taken in the chamber had been the most senior, the most highly placed of Phocron’s agents and puppets. Some, no doubt, had not known what end they served, others, I was sure, were willing traitors. There had been generals amongst them, senior Munitorum staff, an astropath, confessor and even an interrogator. At the moment they had been taken, parallel operations had gone into action throughout the Persecution’s forces, cutting the corruption out from among us. Most of the infiltrators would be killed, but many would be taken and broken until their secrets flowed from them like blood from a vein.

‘The enemy has blinded us and led us by the hand like children. But at this moment he has also handed us weapons with which to destroy him. Knowledge is our weapon, and from the traitors that walked among us we will gain knowledge.’ I stood and picked the hammer up, its head at my feet, the pommel resting under my hands. ‘And with that knowledge, this Persecution will cut the ground from under the feet of our enemy. We will wound and hound him until he crawls to his last refuge. And when he is crippled and bleeding, I shall take the last head of this hydra.’

### **Twelve hours ago**

A hundred warships came to bear witness to our victory. They ringed the jagged space fortress, their guns flaring as they hammered it with fire. The *Hydra’s Eye* turned in its orbit around the dead world like a prize fighter too dazed to avoid the blows mashing his face to bloody pulp and splintered bone.

In the end, it had been the words of a traitor that had betrayed Phocron’s refuge. One of those taken from the strategium of the *Unbreakable Might* had known of another agent in naval command. That agent had been taken in turn, and his secrets ripped from his mind by a psyker. That information had been added to fragments gleaned from others, winding together to make a thread that

had led to the system of dead planets in which the *Hydra's Eye* hid. That it was the current refuge for Phocron was implied and confirmed by many sources once we knew where to look. Once I had the location of Phocron's base, I ordered an immediate attack.

The *Hydra's Eye* was truly vast, an irregular star of fused void debris over fifteen kilometres across at its widest point. Its hull was a patchwork skin of metal that wept glowing fluid as macro shells and lance strikes reduced its defences to molten slag. There had been enemy ships clustering around the irregular mass of the space fortress like lesser fish beside a deep sea leviathan. Most had been pirate vessels, wolf packs of small lightly-armed craft. All died within minutes, their deaths scattering light across the jagged bulk of the *Hydra's Eye*. Our guns went silent as a cloud of assault boats and attack craft swarmed towards the wounded fortress. I had not watched as Phocron's last means of escape died in fire. This was the end of my war and I was ready to strike its last blow myself. When the first wave of attack craft swarmed towards the space fortress I was there, my old body wrapped in armour forged by the finest artisans of Mars.

An animal is at its most dangerous when wounded and cornered. Phocron's followers did not fail to hammer this lesson home. The forces on the *Hydra's Eye* were a mixture of piratical scum and renegades inducted into Phocron's inner circle. They spent their lives without thought, their only care being to make us pay many times over for each of them that we killed. I could see Phocron's vile genius in their every tactic. Some hid in ceiling ducting or side passages, waiting for our forces to pass before attacking from behind. Others pulled guardsmen quietly into the dark, strangling them before taking their uniforms and equipment. Dressed as friends, the renegades would join our forces, waiting until the most advantageous moment to turn on the men beside them. The structure of the fortress itself spoke of a twisted foresight. Dead ends and hidden passages riddled the structure. Passages and junctions seemed to split and channel us, portioning our forces so that they became divided. We had bodies enough to choke every passage. We would win, that was without doubt, but every inch cost blood. Those bloody steps had led me here to this chamber and this final battle.

Yes every step had cost blood; every step for a hundred years, from the mustering fields of Ephisia, through the burning of Hespacia to here where I will face my enemy for the last time. I am alone, the rest of the Imperial force lost behind me in the bloody tangle of the *Hydra's Eye*. So I will face my enemy alone, but perhaps that is as it should be.

Phocron moves and cuts, his blow so quick and sudden that I have no chance to dodge. I raise my arm, feeling the armour synchronise with the movements of my aging muscles. My fist meets his strike in a blaze of light. For a second, it is his strength against mine, the energies of weapons grinding against each other. I am looking into his face, so close that I can see the pattern of finer and finer scales on his face plate. The deadlock lasts an eye blink. I fire my storm bolter a fraction of a second before he moves. The burst hits him in the chest at point blank range and spins him onto the floor with the sound of cracking ceramite. I spray his struggling form with explosive rounds as he tries to rise.

I take a step closer – a mistake. He is on his feet faster than I can blink, spinning past me. The tip of his sword glides over my left elbow as he moves. The power field sheathing my fist vanishes, the power feeds severed with surgical care. I turn to follow him. His sword flicks out again, low and snake-strike fast. The tip stabs through the back of my left knee. Pain shoots up my leg an instant before it collapses under me. Tiles shatter under the impact. He is gone, moving into blind space behind me. I try to twist around, my targeting systems searching. He is going to kill me, one cut at a time. Despite the pain, I smile to myself. The Alpha Legion do not simply kill, they bleed you one bite at a time until you have no doubt of their superiority. But that pride is their weakness.

A cut splits the elbow of my right arm. I do not even see where it comes from. Blood is running down my alabaster-white armour and dribbling across the crushed tiles. My right arm is hanging loose at my side, but I hold onto my storm bolter through the pain.

He walks into my view. There is a casual slowness to his movements. He has stripped me of my strength, crippled me and now he wants to look into my eyes as he kills me. He stops two paces from me and looks down at me with green eyes. The tip of the blade rises level with my eye. His weight shifts as he prepares to ram the sword into my eye. This is the death stroke, and it is the chance I have been waiting for.

I bring my left arm around in a swing that hits him behind the right knee. The fist has no power field, but it is still a gauntlet of armour propelled by a layer of artificial muscles. It hits with a dry crack of fractured armour and bone.

Phocron falls, the hand gripping the knife splayed out to the side. I pull myself to my feet, gripping my storm bolter with the last of my strength. It does not take much. All I need to do is squeeze the trigger. Fired at point blank range, the explosive rounds shred his arm. Before he can react, I move and squeeze the

remainder of the storm bolter's clip into his left arm.

He flounders in a pool of blood and armour fragments. I put my knee on his chest and grip the horns of his helmet with my left fist. Seals squeal and snap as I wrench the helmet from his head. For an instant, I expect to see the face of a monster, a monster that created me, that drove me to become what I am. But the face under the helm is that of a Space Marine, unscarred, dark eyes looking up at me from sharp features. He has a small tattoo of an eagle under his left eye, the ink faded to a dull green.

I reach up and take my own helmet off. The air smells of weapons fire and blood.

'Phocron,' I say. 'For your crimes and heresies against the Imperium of mankind, I sentence you to death.'

He smiles.

'Yes, you have won. Phocron will die this day.' There is movement of the edge of my sight.

I look up. There are figures watching me from the edges of the room. They wear blue armour, some blank and unadorned, some etched with serpentine symbols, others hung with sigils of false gods. They look at me with green glowing eyes. Amongst them is a normal-sized man wrapped in a storm cloak, his face hidden by a silver mask. The image of a figure in a mask stood against the burning backdrop of Hespacia, and caught in muzzle flash on the *Unbreakable Might* flicks through my memory.

The man steps forward. His right hand is augmetic and holds a slender-barrelled needle pistol. There is a clicking purr of gears and pneumatics as the masked man walks towards me. I start to rise. The masked man reaches up with his left hand and pulls the silver mask away. I look at him.

He has my face.

The needle dart hits the inquisitor in his left eye and the toxin kills him before he can gasp. He collapses slowly, the bulk of his armour hitting the tiled floor with a crash.

We move quickly. We have only a few moments to secure our objective, and we can make no mistakes. The inquisitor's armour is stripped from his body, piece by piece, the injuries he sustained noted as they are revealed. As the dead man is peeled from the armour I remove my own gear and equipment, stripping down until there are two near identical men, one dead and bleeding on the floor, the other standing while his half-brothers finish their work. My augmetics and

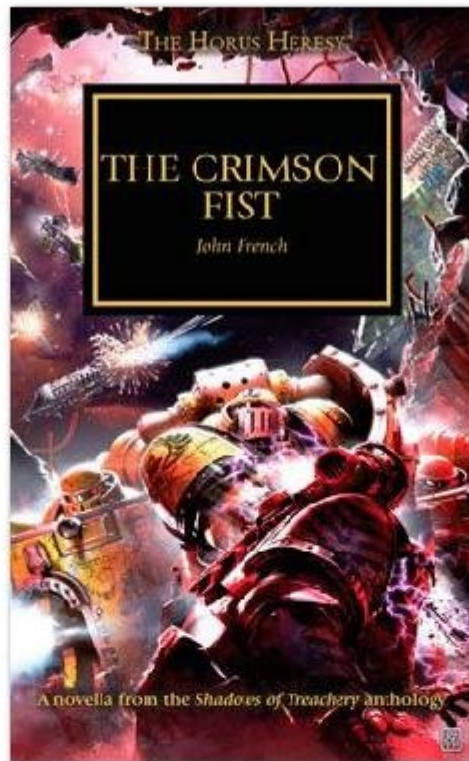
every detail of my resculpted flesh match the man who lies dead on the floor. Years of subtle flesh craft and conditioning mean that my voice is his voice, my every habit and movement are his. There is only the matter of the wounds that were carefully inflicted to injure, but not kill. I do not cry out as my Legion brothers cut me, though the pain is nothing less than it was for him, the dead man whose face I wear. The wounds are the last details, and as the blood-slick Terminator armour covers my skin, all differences between the dead inquisitor and I end. We are one, he and I.

They take the inquisitor's body away. It will burn in a plasma furnace to erase the last trace of this victory. For it is a victory. They take away our crippled brother who was the last to play the role of Phocron. A corpse is brought to take his place, its blue armour chewed by bolter rounds and crumpled by the blows of a power fist. A horned helmet hides his face and a shimmering cloak hangs from his shoulders. This corpse is the final proof that the Imperium will require to believe they have won this day: Phocron, dead, killed by his nemesis. Killed by me. The Imperium will see this day as their victory, but it is a lie.

Phocron never existed, his name and legend only extant in the mind of the Imperium and the obsession of the man whose place I take. Phocron existed only to create this last meeting. Many of the Legion were Phocron, playing the role to create a legend that was a lie. I will walk from this chamber in victory and my legend will grow, my influence and power will spread further. Decades of cultivation and provocation have led to this one moment of transformation, the moment we give the Imperium a victory and transform it into a lie. This is our truth, the core of our soul, the essence of our craft. We are warriors unbound by the constraints of truth, assumption, or dogma. We are the reflection in the eternal mirror of war, ever changing, unfixed, and invincible. We serve lies and are their masters. We are their slaves and they are our weapons, weapons which can defeat any foe, break any fortress, and grant one warrior victory against ten thousand. I am the one who stands against many. I am Alpha Legion, and we are one.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN FRENCH is a writer and freelance games designer from Nottingham. His work for Black Library includes a number of short stories, the novellas *Fateweaver* and *The Crimson Fist* and the novel *Ahriman: Exile*. He also works on the Warhammer 40,000 role playing games. When he is not thinking of ways that dark and corrupting beings can destroy reality and space, John enjoys making it so with his own Traitor Legions on the gaming table.



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