

THE HORUS HERESY

Dan Abnett

LEGION

Secrets and lies



The latest instalment in the best-selling
Horus Heresy series

Dan Abnett

LEGION

Secrets and lies

It is a time of legend.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Primarchs

ALPHARIUS , Primarch of the Alpha Legion

The Alpha Legion

INGO PECH, First Captain

(MA)THIAS HERZOG, Captain, 2nd Company

SHEED RANKO, Captain, Lernaean Terminator Squad

OMEGON, Lord, Effrit Stealth Squad

The 670th Imperial Expedition Fleet

JAN VAN AUNGER, Master of the Fleet

TENG NAMATJIRA, Lord Commander of the Army

Imperial Army

(Geno Five-Two Chiliad)

SRI VEDT, Uxor Primus of the Geno Five-Two

HONEN MU, Uxor

RUKHSANA SAID, Uxor

HURTADO BRONZI, Hetman

KAIDO PIUS, Hetman

DIMITER SHIBAN, Hetman

PETO SONEKA, Hetman

FRANCO BOONE, Genewhip

(Zanzibari Hort)

NITIN DEV MAJOR, General

KOLMEC, Bajolur

(Lucifer Blacks)

DINAS CHAYNE, Bajolur-Captain

EIMAN, Companion

BELLOC, Companion

(Crescent-Sind Sixth Torrent)

WILDE, Lord

(Outremars)

Khedive Ismail Sherard

(Legio Xerxes)

AMON JEVETH, Princeps

(Regnault Thorns)

GAN KARSH, General

Non-Imperial personae

THE CABAL

JOHN GRAMMATICUS

GAHET

SLAU DHA

G'LATRRO

'God has given you one face and you make yourself another.'

— attributed to the dramaturge Shakespeare, fl. M

'Of the fabulous hydra it is said, cut off one head and two will grow in its place.'

— antique prove

'No one is enough of a fool to choose war instead of peace. In peace sons bury fathers, but in war fathers bury sons.'

— attributed to the chronicler Herodotus, fl. M

'War is simply the galaxy's hygiene.'

— attributed to the Primarch Alpharion

MY NAME IS Hurtado Bronzi.

There, I've said it. I've said it and I can never take it back. The secret is out.

Ah. The rest? Well, if I must, sir. My name is Hurtado Bronzi, a hetman (which is to say, a senior captain) of the Geno Five-Two Chiliad, Imperial Army, glory of Terra, beloved of the Emperor. I am an Edessa-born man, proud of my liberty, Catheric by devotion, a brother to two sisters and a brother. My ears hear only the orders of my estimable Lord Commander Namatjira, my hands know only the purpose of the Emperor and the correct business of a carbine laser, my mouth... well, my mouth knows a great deal more, and knows when not to say it.

Because he has taught us to be scrupulously secretive. No, I will not be drawn to say his name. I said he has taught us to be scrupulously secretive. That is his way, and we love him for it. The greatest gift he has bestowed on us is to share his secret with us.

Why? Because we were there, I suppose, at Tel Utan and Mon Lo Harbour and now the Shivering Hills. If it hadn't been us, it would have been others.

Why are you whispering? I can hear you whispering. What don't you want me to hear? What secrets are you plotting?

Pain? Is that it? Is that all you have to offer me? Well, yes, it does open secrets. Some secrets, some mouths. What have you planned for me? Ah, I see. Well, if you must. I won't welcome it. What will be? Eyes? Genitals? The gaps between my toes and fingers? First, you should know—

Nnnhhhhh!

Oh. Merciful—

Mhh. Quite the expert, your little man. Quite the expert. He's done this before, hasn't he? No, wait—I—Nhhhhghhh!

Beloved Terra! Ahh. Shit. Nhh. That little bastard. Let me finish, please! Let me finish what I was saying. Please? Yes?

All right, then. This won't work. This simply won't work. Because I'm telling you it won't.

I will not tell you anything. It doesn't matter what you do to me, really it doesn't. Burn me all you like, my mouth is shut.

Because that's all he asks of us. The only thing. I can tell you who I am, and who I was, but I can't—won't—betray his confidence.

Gnnhhhhhhh!

Oh shit! Holy fire! Bastard!

Mhhhh...

What? What? Ask what you like. Burn me again, if you must.

My name is Hurtado Bronzi.

That's all you're getting.

REPTILE SUMMER

Tel Utan, Nurth, two years before the Heresy

THE NURTHENE UTTERED some of the usual gibberish before he died. He pointed at his enemies with his dust-caked fingers and jabbered, spitting out curses on their families and dependants, and particularly miserable dooms on the heads of their children, far away. A soldier learns how to ignore insults, but there was something about the Nurthene way of cursing that made Soneka blanch.

The Nurthene lay on his back on a slope of dry, red sand, where the blast had thrown him. His purple silk robes were stiffening in places where his blood was drying rapidly in the late afternoon sun. His silver breastplate, with its engraving of stylised reeds and entwined crocodilia, winked like a mirror. His legs lay in a limp position that suggested his spine was no longer properly connected.

Soneka trudged up the dry bed of the wadi to inspect him. A terribly dark, terribly blue sky met the red horizon. The sinking sun picked out the facing edges of rocks and boulders with a bright orange sheen.

Soneka was wearing glare-shields, but took them off out of courtesy so that the Nurthene could see his eyes. He knelt down, the small gold box around his neck swinging like a pendulum.

‘Enough with your curses, all right?’ he said.

The troop stood around him on the slope, watching, their weapons ready in their hands. The desert wind brushed their embroidered, waist-length coats and made them flutter. Lon, one of Soneka’s bashaws, had already snapped the Nurthene’s falx with his liqnite, and flung the broken stump away over the rim of the wadi.

Soneka could still smell traces of the liqnite spray in the warm air.

‘It’s over,’ he told his enemy. ‘Will you speak to me?’

Looking up at him, grains of sand stuck to his face, the Nurthene murmured something. Bubbles of blood formed at the corners of his lips.

‘How many?’ Soneka asked. ‘How many more of you are there in this sink?’

‘You...’ the Nurthene began.

‘Yes?’

‘You... you are carnal with your own mother.’

At Soneka’s shoulder, Lon raised his carbine sharply.

‘Relax, I’ve heard worse,’ Soneka told him.

‘But your mother is a fine woman,’ said Lon.

‘Oh, now you lust for her too?’ asked Soneka. Some of the men laughed. Lon shook his head and lowered his carbine.

‘Last chance,’ said Peto Soneka to the dying man. ‘How many more?’

‘How many more of you?’ replied the Nurthene in a dry whisper. His accent was strong, but there was no denying that the Nurthene had mastered the Imperial language. ‘How many more? You come from the stars, in your droves, and you do nothing.’

‘Nothing?’

‘Nothing, except prove the universal presence of evil.’

‘Is that what you think of us?’ Soneka asked.

The Nurthene stared up at him. His eyes had gone glassy, like the sky at dawn. He burped, and blood welled up out of his mouth like water from a borehole.

‘He’s dead,’ observed Lon.

‘Well spotted,’ said Soneka, rising to his feet. He looked back at the men gathered on the slope.

behind him. Beyond them, two Nurthene armoured vehicles were burning, sweating soot and smoke into the blue sky. From the other side of the wadi, Soneka could hear sporadic las-shots.

‘Let’s dance,’ Soneka said.

FROM THE RIM of the wadi, looking west, it was possible to see Tel Utan itself, a jumble of terracotta blocks and walls capping a long, loaf-shaped hill ten kilometres away. The intervening landscape was a broken tract of ridges and ancient basins and, in the sidelong evening light, the basins had filled with shadows so black they looked like pools of ink. Soneka felt a comparable blackness in his heart: Tel Utan was proving to be their nemesis. For eight months, it had held them at bay, through a combination of terrain, tactics, stoicism and plain bad luck.

The Geno Five-Two Chiliad was one of the oldest brigades in the Imperial Army. An elite force of one thousand companies, it had a martial tradition that stretched back through the time of the Great Crusade and into the era of the Unification Wars that had preceded it. The geno was a proud member of the Old Hundred, the Strife Epoch regiments that the Emperor, in his grace, had maintained after Unification, provided they pledged loyalty to him. Many thousands of others had been forced to disband, or had been actively purged and neutered, depending on their level of resistance to the new order.

Peto Soneka had been born in Feodosiya, and had served, in his youth, in the local army, but he had petitioned eagerly for transfer into the Geno Five-Two, because of their illustrious reputation. He had been with the geno for twenty-three years, achieving the rank of hetman. In that time, they hadn’t met a nut they couldn’t crack.

There had been tough dances along the way, of course there had. Off the top of his head, Soneka could mention Foechion, where they had slogged toe to toe for six weeks with the greenskins in the lightless, frozen latitudes, and Zantium, where the Dragonoid cadres had almost bested them in a series of running battles and ambushades.

But Nurth, Tel Utan in particular, was as stubborn as anything they’d ever met. Word was the Lord Commander was getting edgy, and no one wanted to be around Namatjira when that happened.

Soneka pulled his glare-shields back on. He was a lithe, slender man of forty-two years standard, though he could pass for twenty-five. He had a striking, angular head, with hard cheek and jaw lines, a pointed chin and a generous, full-lipped mouth full of gleaming white teeth that women found especially attractive. Like all of them, his skin had bronzed in the Nurthene light. He made a signal and his bashaws brought the troops in along the rim of the wadi and down into the dry basins beyond. The Geno armour followed them, bounding along on their treads, and spuming wakes of red dust behind them as they churned out across the basin floor. Soneka’s Centaur was waiting, its engine revving, but he waved it on. This was a time for walking.

There was half an hour of daylight left. Night, they had learned to their cost, belonged to the Nurthene. Soneka hoped to run his troop as far as the forward command post at CR23 before they lost the light. The last tangle with the Nurthene had slowed their advance considerably. Dislodging them from this country was like pulling out splinters.

Soneka’s troops looked very fine as they strode forwards. The geno uniform was a bulky, tight-fitting buckled bodyglove of studded leather and armour links, with a waist-length cape of yellow merdax made of a Terran silk, much rougher and more hard-wearing than the pink silks of the Nurthene. The ornate leather armour was marked with devices and trimmed with fur, and the backs of their capes were richly embroidered with company emblems and motifs. They carried lightweight packs, munitions slings, long sword bayonets, and the bottles of their double water rations, which clinked against the liquefied cylinders they had all been issued with. Standard weapons were laser carbines and RPG sowers, but some men lugged fire poles or support cannons. They were all big men, all genic bred and selected

for muscle. Soneka was slight compared to most. Their headgear was spiked helmets, either silver steel or glossy orange, often edged with brims of fur or neck veils of beaded laces. The glare shields were goggle-eyed: bulbous, paired hemispheres of orange metal with black slits across them.

Soneka's troop was coded the Dancers, a name that they'd owned for almost eight hundred years. In those last few minutes of daylight, the Dancers were going to take the worst beating they had ever known.

'SO, WHO'S THAT?' asked Bronzi quietly. 'Do you know?'

Bashaw Tche, busy with the wrapper of a ration, shrugged. 'Some kind of something,' he grunted.

'You're a world of use, you know that?' Bronzi replied, punching Tche in the arm. The bashaw, of the regimental uterine stock and considerably bigger in all measurements than Bronzi, gave his hetman a tired look.

'Some kind of specialist, they said,' he volunteered.

'Who said?'

'The Uxor's aides.'

The Jokers had reached the CR23 forward command post about an hour earlier, and had been billeted in the eastern wing of the old, brick-built fort. Chart Referent 23 was a Nurthene outpost captured two weeks before, and lay just eight kilometres from the Tel. It formed part of the 'noose' that Lord Commander Namatjira was tightening around the enemy city.

Hurtado Bronzi, a sixty-year veteran possessed of boundless charisma and a stocky body going to seed, leaned out of the billet doorway and took another deliberate stare along the red brick passageway. At the far end, where it opened out into a central courtyard, he could see the newcomer standing in conversation with Honen Mu and some of her aides. The newcomer was a big fellow, really big, a giant dressed in a dust-grey mail sleeve and a head shawl, with a soot-dulled bolter slung over his shoulder.

'He's a sizeable fegger, though,' said Bronzi, idly toying with the small gold box dangling on the chain around his neck.

'Don't stare so,' Tche advised, gnawing on his bar.

'I'm just saying. Bigger than you, even.'

'Stop staring.'

'He's only where I happen to be aiming my eyes, Tche,' Bronzi said.

Something was going on. Bronzi had a feeling in his water. Something had been going on for the last few days. Uxor Honen was unusually tight-lipped, and had been unavailable on several occasions.

The man was big. He towered over Honen, though everyone towered over her. Even so, he had to be two twenty, two twenty-five maybe. That was gene-build big, *Astartes* big even. Honen was looking up at him, craning up, nodding once in a while at a conversation Bronzi couldn't catch. Despite the fact that she was conferring with a giant, Honen's posture was as tenacious as ever: spiky and fierce, like a fighting cock, full of vigour and attitude. Bronzi had long suspected Uxor Honen's body language was a compensation for her doll-like physique.

Bronzi looked back into the billet hall. His Jokers were busy sacking out, drinking and eating, playing bones. Some of them were cleaning off weapons or polishing armour scutes, wiping away the red dust that had slowly caked on during the long day in the field.

'Think I might go for a little stroll,' Bronzi told Tche. The bashaw, munching, simply stared down at the hetman's feet. Bronzi was still fully armoured, but he'd taken off his boots when they'd arrived. His thick, dirty toes splayed out through the holes in his woollen socks.

'Not cutting a dash?' Bronzi asked. Tche shrugged.

'Well, fug it.' Bronzi pulled off his embroidered cape, his webbing and his weapon belt, and dumped

them on the baked earth floor. He kept hold of his water bottles. 'I just need a refill,' he said.

~~Bronzi padded out into the passageway, his water bottles dangling from his pudgy fingers. He was~~ disappointed to see that the giant had vanished. The Uxor and her aides were heading away across the courtyard, talking together.

Honen turned as Bronzi wandered into the yard. The air was still warm and the day's heat was radiating out of the shadowed brick. Evening had washed the sky overhead a dark, resinous purple.

'Hetman Bronzi? Was there something you wanted?' she called. The words came pinging out of her mouth like tiny chips of ice.

Bronzi smiled back amiably, and waggled the empty water bottles. 'Going to the pump,' he said.

Uxor Honen pushed through her waiting aides and came towards him. She was such a tiny thing, built like a girl-child, compact and slight. She wore a black bodyglove and a grey wrap, and walked on high-heeled slippers, which served only to emphasise her lack of stature. Her face was oval, her pursed mouth small, and her skin so very black. Her eyes seemed huge. At twenty-three, she was exceptionally young, given her level of responsibility, but that was often the way with uxors. Bronzi had a bit of a thing for her: so perfect, so delicate, so much power emanating from her tiny frame.

'Going to the pump?' she asked, switching from Low Gothic to Edessan. She often did that. She had made a habit of speaking to the men, one on one, in their native tongues. Bronzi supposed the displays of linguistic skill were meant to seem cordial while emphasising her formidable intelligence. Where Bronzi came from – Edessa – funnily enough, that was called showing off.

He switched with her. 'For water. I'm out.'

'Water rationing was done earlier, hetman,' she said. 'I think that's just an excuse to be nousey.'

Bronzi made what he hoped was a loveable shrug. 'You know me,' he said.

'That's why I think you're being nousey,' Honen said.

They stared at one another. Her enormous eyes slowly travelled down to his stockinged feet. He saw her fighting a smile. The trick with Flonen was to appeal to her sense of humour. That was why he had left his boots off. Bronzi tried to hold his stomach in and still look natural.

'Hard, isn't it?' she smirked.

What's that now?'

'Holding that gut of yours in?'

'I don't know what you mean, uxor,' he replied.

Honen nodded. 'And I don't know why we keep you around, Hetman Bronzi,' she remarked. 'Isn't there a mandatory fitness requirement any more?'

'Or a weight threshold?' suggested one of her aides: four blonde, teenage girls, who gathered around Honen with wry smiles on their faces.

'Oh, you may mock me,' Bronzi said.

'We may,' agreed one of the aides.

'I'm still the best field officer you've got.'

Honen frowned. 'There's some truth in that. Don't be nousey, Hurtado. You'll be told what you need to know soon enough.'

'A specialist?'

Honen shot a questioning glance sidelong at her aides. She reached out to them with her 'cept. They all looked away, recoiling from the touch of the scolding 'cept, concentrating on other things.

'Someone's been talking,' Honen announced.

'A specialist, then?' Bronzi pressed.

'As I said,' Honen answered, turning her attention back to him.

'Yeah, yeah, I know,' said Bronzi, rattling his water bottles together as he gestured. 'I'll know when I know.'

‘Get your men settled,’ she told him, and turned to go.

‘Are the Dancers in?’ he asked.

‘The Dancers?’

‘They should be in by now. Peto owes me a payout on a wager. Are they here yet?’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘No, Hurtado, not yet. We’re expecting them soon.’

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘then I request permission to take a foray team out, on a ramble, to find out what’s keeping them.’

‘Your loyalty to your friend does you credit, Hurtado, but permission is not granted.’

‘It’ll be dark soon.’

‘It will. That’s why I don’t want you rambling around out there.’

Bronzi nodded.

‘Are we clear on that? No clever or ingenious misinterpretations of that order forming in your mind at this time?’

Bronzi shook his head. As if.

‘There’d better not be. Goodnight, hetman.’

‘Goodnight, uxor.’

Honen clicked away on her heels, sending out a command with her ’cept. Her aides paused for a moment, scowling at Bronzi, and then followed her.

‘Yeah, stare at me all you like, you blonde bitches,’ Bronzi murmured.

He padded back to the billet. ‘Tche?’

‘Yes, het?’

‘Get a foray team up and ready in ten minutes.’ Tche sighed at him. ‘Is this sanctioned, het?’ he asked.

‘Absolutely. The uxor told me personally that she doesn’t want some fug-fingered ramble blundering around out there, so tell the boys it’s going to have to be sharp and professional, which will make a change for them.’

‘Not a ramble?’

‘I never ramble. Sharp, Tche, and professional. Got it?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Bronzi pulled on his boots and redressed his weapon belt. He realised he needed to take a leak. ‘Five minutes,’ he told the bashaw.

He found the latrine, a stinking cement pit down the hall, unbuckled his armour and sighed as his bladder emptied. Nearby, men were showering in the communal air baths, and he could hear singing from one of the other troop billets.

‘You’ll stay put tonight,’ said a voice from behind him.

Bronzi tensed. The voice was quiet and hard, small yet powerful, like the super-gravity coal of a dead sun.

‘I think I’ll finish what I’m doing, actually,’ he replied, deliberately not looking around, and deliberately keeping a tone of levity in his voice.

‘You will stay put tonight. No fun and games. No bending the rules. Are we clear?’

Bronzi buckled up, and turned.

The specialist stood behind him. Bronzi slowly adjusted his stance until he was looking up at the man’s face. Terra, he was huge, a monster of a man. The specialist’s features were hidden in the shadows of his dust shawl.

‘Is that a threat?’ Bronzi asked.

‘Does someone like me *need* to threaten someone like you?’ the specialist replied.

Bronzi narrowed his eyes. He was a lot of things, but timid wasn’t one of them. ‘Come on then, if you

want some.'

The specialist chuckled. 'I really admire your balls, hetman.'

'They were only out because I was taking a leak,' said Bronzi.

'Bronzi, right? I've heard about you. More barefaced cheek in you than all the arses in the Imperium Army.'

Bronzi couldn't help but grin, though his pulse was racing. 'I could mess you up, son, I really could.'

'You could try,' said the specialist.

'I would, you know?'

'Yes, I have a feeling you might. Don't. I'd hate to damage a friend. Let me be clear. There are things going on tonight that you must not mess with. Don't let me down by pissing around. Don't get involved. You'll understand soon enough. For now, right now, hetman, take my word on this.'

Bronzi kept his stare going. 'I might. I might trust you, if I could see your face or know your name.'

The specialist paused. For a moment, Bronzi thought he was actually going to pull down his shawl and show his face.

'I'll tell you my name,' he said.

'Yeah?'

'My name is Alpharius.'

Bronzi blinked. His mouth went dry. He felt his heart pounding so fast it trembled his torso.

'Liar. You liar! That's a pile of crap!'

A sudden, brilliant flash made the chamber blink white for a second. A deep, reverberative boom reached them.

Bronzi ran to one of the slit windows. Outside, in the dark, he could see the flashes and light bloom of a major battle flaring behind the ridge. The percussive crump and slap of explosions rolled in. Or hell of a firefight had just kicked off along the wadi rim less than ten kilometres away from the position. It was concussive, bending the air, bending sound.

Behind Bronzi, men were rushing up, scrabbling around the windows to see out. There was chatter and agitation. Everyone wanted a look.

'Peto...' Hurtado Bronzi murmured. He turned away from the window slit and the rippling light show, pushing his way back through the mob of men to find the specialist.

But the specialist had already vanished.

THE WORLD HAD come off its hinges. For the first few seconds, Peto Soneka thought his company had been caught up in some sort of freak hail-storm. Thousands of luminous projectiles were raining down out of the twilight into the basin, like spits of fire or a cloudburst of little shooting stars. Every one exploded in a searing fireball as it impacted. The overpressure was knocking men to the ground. Soneka reeled as fiery detonations went off all around him like grenades. The bang of the first few impacts had deafened him.

He saw men thrown, burning, into the air by blooming flashes. He saw three of his company's tanks quiver and then explode in whickering storms of shrapnel fragments as the sizzling pyrophoric deluge struck them.

It wasn't a freak hail-storm. Despite the Dancer's scouts and recon, despite their auspex and modads despite their careful deployment and marching cover, despite the omniscient monitoring of the expedition fleet in high orbit, the Nurthene had surprised them.

The Nurthene were of a tech level several points down the scale from the Imperium. They possessed guns and tanks, but still favoured blades. They should have been easy to overrun.

But from the opening actions of the expedition war, it had become clear that the Nurthene had something else, something the Imperium entirely lacked.

Lord Commander Teng Namatjira had described it, in a moment of infuriation, as *air magick*. The name had, perhaps unfortunately, stuck. Air magick was why Nurth had held off the might of an Imperial Army expedition for eight months. Air magick was why a Titan cohort had been decimated at Tel Khortek. Air magick was why a Sixth Torrent division had disappeared into the desert sink at Gomanzi and never returned. Air magick was why nothing flew above Tel Utan, why every attempt to destroy the place with air strikes, missiles, orbital bombardments and troop drops had failed, and why they were being forced to assault the place on foot.

It was Peto Soneka's first direct taste of air magick. All the horror stories that had leaked back from regiment to regiment and company to company were true. The Nurthene had lore beyond the Terra range. The elements obeyed them. They were casters-in of devils.

A shockwave threw Soneka over on his face. He had blood in his mouth and sand up his nose. He rose on his hands and saw a geno trooper curled up beside him, blackened by heat, smouldering. In the rapid strobe light of multiple explosions, he saw other corpses scattered around him. The sand was burning.

Bashaw Lon came running out of the flashing air. He was yelling at Soneka. Soneka could see Lon's mouth working, but heard nothing.

Lon hauled Soneka to his feet. Sound was coming back, but only in short bursts.

'Get... to... the... we... impossible!' Lon yelled.

'What? What?'

'...much... of... to... the... fugging idiots!'

The hail suddenly ceased. Blinking around at the devastation, Soneka heard snippets of the abrupt quiet too: blurts of crackling fire and the screams of men, cut up and mixed with baffling, numbing seconds of profound deafness.

'Oh fug!' Lon cried, suddenly, awfully audible.

The Nurthene were on them.

Nurthene infantry – called 'echvehnurth' – swarmed out of the shadows and pits of the enclosure at night, and poured into the firelight. Their swirling pink robes and silver armour shone in the flames. Their falxes whirled. Several of them carried aloft kite-tailed banners showing the water-reed and river reptile badge of the Nurthene royalty.

The falx was an astonishingly proficient and barbarous weapon. Two and a half metres long, it was essentially a hybrid spear, a scythe straightened out. Half its length was a straight handgrip, the other half a long blade with a slight bias hook, the inside curve of which was razor sharp. Spinning and sweeping a falx like a flail, an expert echvehnurth could lop off limbs and heads, and even bisect torsos. The blades went through almost any metal. Only liqnite could break the blades, but it was impossible to use it in combat. Liqnite canisters came out when the fight was done, to neuter the fallen weapons of the enemy. A spray of liquid nitrogen froze the metal brittle so that it could be shattered under foot.

Echvehnurth rushed at them from the ditches of the sink. The first Dancers they met were scythed down by the long, whirling blades like tall corn. Arms and heads flipped into the air. Arterial blood squirted. Truncated bodies fell like sacks. A few carbines fired, but it was hardly a proper reply.

Soneka started running forwards. 'Wake up! Wake up!' he howled. 'Gun them down. Use your guns. Don't let them in!'

They were in already. The night sand was littered with geno corpses and body parts. There was a fine haze of blood in the warm air. Soneka could taste it. His hearing was back, and his ears were filled with the hiss and chop of butchery, and the screams of his men.

He kept running. He fired his carbine one-handed, drawing his sword bayonet in the other. An echvehnurth ran at him and Soneka blew his face off. The man cartwheeled backwards. A falx swirled

and Soneka sidestepped, kicking its owner's feet out from under him so that he fell on his back. Soneka ran the Nurthene through with his bayonet.

He dropped on one knee, raised the carbine to his shoulder, its barrel resting on the fork of his black grip, and picked off two more of the charging enemy with aimed shots. Their pink robes trailed out as they crashed backwards. Lon was beside Soneka, along with three other men, firing in sustained bursts. Their shots made bright darts in the air. Echvehnurth toppled and fell, one on fire, another with his ribcage blown wide.

'Dancers, Dancers! This is the Dancers!' Soneka yelled as he fired. 'CR19! We need help here. Immediate. Major incursion!'

'Stand by, Dancers,' he heard an uxor's voice reply. 'We are aware. Retasking units to your position.'

'Now!' Soneka yelled. 'Now. We're being slaughtered!'

One of the men beside him suddenly fell sideways, split in two from shoulder to groin. Pressurized blood escaped in all directions at once. Soneka wheeled and saw an echvehnurth spinning his falx back from the blow to strike again. Soneka slashed with his sword bayonet in an attempt to block.

The long blade of the falx, just a blur of blue metal in the violet twilight, went through Soneka's hand in a line across the base of the thumb, severing his fingers, his thumb and the upper half of his palm, and snapping the grip of his sword bayonet. The blow was so clean that there was no pain at first. Soneka staggered backwards, watching the thin sprays of blood jetting out of his ruined hand.

The falx circled again, tracing a glitter in the air.

It did not land.

Another falx blocked it. Blade struck blade, and the attacking falx shivered away. A dark figure slid into view and killed the echvehnurth with a single, explosive shot.

The newcomer was a huge brute done up in a dark mail sleeve, his head and shoulders swathed in a shawl. He carried a falx in one hand and a boltgun in the other.

He looked down at Soneka. 'Courage,' he said.

'Who are you?' Soneka whispered.

Lon had run to Soneka's side. 'Get this man's hand bound,' the big man told the bashaw. He turned back to the fight, rotating the falx expertly in his left hand like a baton.

He wasn't alone. As Lon wrapped his hand, Soneka saw that a dozen anonymous men had entered the fight, coming out of the darkness like phantoms. Each one of them was inhumanly large, his face hooded in a desert shawl. Each one carried a bolter and a falx.

They moved with a speed that was not human, and struck each blow with a force that was not human. In a matter of minutes, they had carved the heart out of the echvehnurth attack. Their boltguns roared and pumped like thunder, blowing pink silk and silver into blood-caked pieces.

'Astartes,' Soneka gasped.

'Stay with me, het, stay with me,' Lon whispered.

'They're Astartes,' Soneka said.

'You've lost a lot of blood. Don't go to sleep on me!'

'I won't,' Soneka promised. 'Those men... those things... they're Astartes.'

Lon didn't answer. He was staring at the horizon. 'Holy Terra,' he whispered. Tel Utan had caught fire.

HONEN MU WATCHED the city burn from an upper window of the CR23 post. Every once in a while, a building cooked off and blew out in a streamer of fire. Rising smoke hazed the clear night sky. Her aides winced and *oohed* at every snap of flame. She could feel their responses through her 'cept.

She nodded, finally. 'May I inform the Lord Commander?'

'You may,' said the specialist, waiting behind her. 'I will make a report to him personally, of course.'

but you should have the pleasure of transmitting this news to him first.'

Honen turned from the window. 'Thank you. And thank you for your work.'

'Nurth isn't done yet. There is much to do,' the specialist told her.

'I understand.'

The specialist hesitated, as if he slightly doubted this.

'Our paths may not cross again, Uxor Honen Mu,' the specialist said. 'There are two things I want to say. *The Emperor protects* is one of them. The other is a word of admiration for the Geno Five-Two. You have bred good soldiers, in the finest genetic tradition. You ought to know that the old genetic legacy of the Chiliads was an inspiration the Emperor acknowledged in creating us.'

'I didn't know that,' said Honen, surprised.

'Ancient history, pre-Unification,' said the specialist. 'There's no reason you should. I must go now. It has been a pleasure making war with you, Uxor Honen Mu.'

'And with you... though I still don't know your name.'

'I am Alpha Legion, lady. Given your 'ceptive powers, I think you can guess it.'

THE SPECIALIST LEFT the post through the back halls, walking through shadow. He moved silently and quickly. Near the north gate, he stopped in his tracks, and turned slowly.

'Hello again,' said Hurtado Bronzi, stepping out of the darkness with his carbine aimed at the specialist's chest.

'Het. My compliments. That was a genuine feat of stealth.'

Bronzi shrugged. 'I do what I do.'

'Can I help you?'

'I do hope so,' said Bronzi.

'Does that thing have to be aimed at me?'

'Well, I don't know. I feel a lot more comfortable like this. I want some answers. I have a feeling the only gunpoint is going to get them for me.'

'Gunpoint will simply get you killed, het. All you need to do is ask.'

Bronzi bit his lip. 'You've taken the Tel, I see.'

'Yes.'

'Fancy work. Kudos to you. Did it have to cost so many lives?'

'Meaning?' asked the specialist.

'I heard the Dancers got cut to ribbons tonight. Was that part of your plan?'

'Yes, it was.'

Bronzi shook his head. 'Fug, you admit it. You used my friends as cannon fodder and—'

'No, het. I used them as bait.'

'What?' Bronzi's hands shook on the grip of the carbine. His finger tightened on the trigger until he found the biting point.

'Don't look so shocked. Life is all about secrets, and I'm prepared to share one with you. Honesty is the only really valuable currency. I'll tell you this truth, on the understanding that you trust me.'

'I can do that,' said Bronzi.

'The Nurthene are quite toxic in their power. No conventional assault was going to break them. They are possessed by Chaos, though I don't expect you to know what that word really means. My men needed to get into Tel Utan, and that meant forcing the Nurthene into a distraction. I regret that your friends, the Dancers, were the ideal choice, tactically speaking. They drew the main force of the Nurthene aside so we could enter Tel Utan. I did ask my men to spare and protect as many of the Dancers as possible.'

'That's honest, I suppose. Brutal. Callous.'

~~'We live in a brutal, callous galaxy, het. Like for like is the only way we can deal with it. We must make sacrifices. And no matter what others say, sacrifices always hurt.'~~

Bronzi sighed and lowered his weapon a little. Suddenly, it wasn't in his hands any more. It was bouncing off the far wall, broken in two.

'Never aim a weapon at me again,' said the specialist, suddenly in Bronzi's face, pinning him against the wall.

'I w-wont!'

'Good.'

'Are you really Alpharius?' Bronzi gasped, aware that his feet were swinging in the air.

With his free hand, the specialist pulled back his shawl and allowed Bronzi to look upon his face.

'What do you think?' he asked.

WHEN SONEKA WOKE up, flocks of casevac fliers were dropping into the flame-lit ruin of the basilica, wing lamps flashing. The whole night was lit up by the burning doom of Tel Utan.

Soneka looked around, blearily. His hand hurt like a bitch. Air crews were bundling the walking wounded and the stretcher casualties up the ramps of the waiting ships.

Soneka looked up at Lon. 'How many?' he asked. 'Too many,' said a voice.

Three dark figures stood nearby, like a tragic chorus. They were silhouettes in the firelight, their bolters slung across their bodies, their shawls drawn up.

'Too many, het,' said one.

'We regret their loss,' said the second.

'War requires sacrifices. A victory has been achieved, but we take no pleasure in your losses,' said the third.

'You... you're Astartes, aren't you?' Soneka asked, allowing Lon to help him to his feet.

'Yes,' said one.

'Do you have names?' Soneka asked. 'I am Alpharius,' said the first. Soneka inhaled hard and dropped quickly to one knee, along with Lon and the other geno men. 'Lord, I—'

'I am Alpharius,' said the second figure.

'We are all Alpharius,' said the third. 'We are Alpha Legion, and we are all one.'

They turned, and walked away into the billowing smoke.

Visages, Nurth, five weeks later

THEY RETIRED, AND spent the last of the summer at Visages, playing bones and other games, sitting out in the heat. Some of the men rode servitors off into the veldt and hunted big game, while others broke the local livestock, and raced them up and down in the dust.

Visages was simply their name for it. Officially called CR345, or Tel Khat in the local dialect, it was a cluster of dwellings in a northern wadi where the ground was littered with broken diorite heads. Some were as large as tank wheels, others as small as beads. No one knew who had carved the faces, or why they had done so in so many contrasting scales, or why the sculptures had been smashed and the heads alone scattered as spoil.

Nor did anyone care.

There was wine, sent as a reward for their pains by Namatjira, and peck in bountiful quantities in courtesy of the same source.

They diced and raced and gambled, played sphairis-tike, laughed out their pain, and swam in the warm blue pools hidden in the cliff-face caves.

Soneka's hand healed. Field surgeons had cut back the wound, and packed it with basal sensors and motor plugs so that it could later accept a machine graft. He flexed it every day, and sensed fingers that had been and would be again, interim, phantom fingers.

There was a rumour that the Nurth War was ending and they would soon make shift for a new zone. Soneka didn't believe it. He sat around in the Visages billet with Dimitar Shiban, a Trinacrian-born hunter who had been injured the same week as Peto. The flesh of Shiban's chest and neck was swollen and knotty with buried shrapnel. Like Soneka, he owned a deep hatred of the Nurthene's weaponised magick.

'I have been dreaming lately,' he said one day, as they sat around on an awning-covered terrace. 'In my dreams, I hear a verse.'

They had each sniffed a pinch of peck from the gold boxes around their necks, and Soneka was pouring wine from a gombroonware ewer.

'A verse, huh?' asked Soneka.

'I'll tell you how it goes, shall I?'

'You remember it, then?'

'Don't you remember your dreams word for word?' Shiban asked.

Soneka thought about it, then shook his head with a smile. 'Never,' he said.

Shiban shrugged. 'Fancy that,' he said.

'This verse?' Soneka prompted, sitting back to sip his wine.

'That? Oh, it goes—'

From the hagg and hungrie goblin

That into raggs would rend ye,

And the spirit that stands by the naked man,

In the Book of Moones defend ye!'

Shiban broke into laughter as soon as he had finished his rendition.

Soneka looked at him. 'I know that,' he said.

'You do?' chuckled Shiban. 'Really?'

'My mother used to sing it to me when I was a boy. She called it the Bedlame Song. There were other verses that I now forget.'

‘Really? What does it mean?’

Soneka shrugged. ‘I have no idea.’

SHIBAN’S COMPANY WAS coded the Clowns, and their banner was a howling skull clad in white and rouge vaudevillian greasepaint. Shibban had been hurt by a Nurthene splinter bomb during a wadi fight east of Tel Utan, and he’d been obliged to leave the Clowns under the field command of his head bashaw, a man Soneka came to know as ‘Fugging Strabo’.

As in, ‘I hope that fugging Strabo is keeping his head’, and ‘Beloved Terra, let fugging Strabo not be getting my poor boys killed.’

‘You worry too much, Dimi,’ Soneka told him.

‘Oh, so you’d be happy leaving your troop in the hands of your bashaws would you?’

Soneka empathised. Due to the bad mauling the Dancers had taken, the entire company had been retired to Visages, injured and healthy alike. Shibban, however, had been sent north with thirty or so wounded of his Clowns, the rest of the company deemed intact enough to continue operations. Soneka wondered how he would have felt if he’d been forced to leave the Dancers with Lon. He trusted Lon with his life, Shah and Attix too, all the Dancer bashaws. Still, he appreciated Shibban’s edginess.

They were sitting, feet up, under the awning in the late sun of an endless afternoon. They were playing the head game, a pastime of their own devising.

A man ran up the dusty slope towards them, a Clown, stripped to the waist, red-faced and sweating from too much exertion in the sun.

He saluted in front of the two reclining officers.

‘Sirs!’

‘Hello, Jed,’ said Shibban. ‘Let’s see it.’

The Clown, Jed, held out a diorite head. It was chipped and incomplete, about the size of a grapefruit. Soneka really missed grapefruit.

Shibban looked at Soneka. Soneka raised a considering eyebrow.

‘Put it in place, Jed,’ Shibban invited.

The Clown walked across the hot sand in front of the awning, panting hard, and bent down over the line of heads laid out in the sun. They were arranged in graduating size, seed- and pea-sized at one end, fist- and apple-sized at the other. The head Jed had brought was clearly the largest. He set it down triumphantly at the end of the row.

‘Point, Clowns,’ said Shibban.

Soneka nodded graciously.

‘Get a cup, Jed,’ said Shibban, and the Clown ran off eagerly to help himself to the cold wine on the stand behind them.

Shibban took a pinch from his gold box, sniffed, and sat back. He sighed. ‘The lho’s good,’ he said. ‘but I miss the combat fix.’

Soneka nodded.

Shibban had a face like a monkey, with a long brow, a long upper lip and a button nose. His tanned forehead was high, and his long white hair poured down off the back of his head like a cascade. The shrapnel bumps covering his throat and chest were the sort of thing a man couldn’t ignore. The war mass was quite fascinating. The medics had drained and lanced some of them, but the rest, they had advised, would work out in time. He looked like he had a goitre of blisters.

As he had told it to Soneka, Shibban had surprised a Nurthene war party in the business of planting bombs. During the firefight that had resulted, the Nurthene had set the bombs off, killing themselves and wounding Shibban and his men. Some of that shrapnel was organic. Some of it was Nurthene bone.

‘I hear there’s fighting at Mon Lo,’ Shibban said.

‘I heard that too,’ said Soneka.

~~Another man ran up. It was Olmed, a Dancer. He held out the head he was carrying.~~

‘Place it,’ said Soneka.

Olmed took it to the line. His diorite head was bigger than any of them, except the one the Clown had just placed.

‘Adjudication!’ Shibban called.

The Munitorum aide emerged from the cool gloom of the doorway in the terracotta building behind them, a long-suffering look on his face. The hetmen had been calling him outside all afternoon. The time he brought the digital measure without being told.

‘Again with this, sirs?’ he asked.

Shiban wagged his fingers at the row of heads. ‘My dear friend, we value your impartial judgement.’ The aide trudged out into the sunlight and applied the measure to the heads while Olmed stood breathing hard, watching, his torso gleaming with sweat.

The aide straightened up and turned to face the hetmen, reclining side by side in the shade.

‘Oh, don’t keep us in suspense,’ Soneka said.

‘The head is smaller by eight microns than the head at the line end,’ the aide sighed, ‘but it is larger by two microns than the one behind it.’

Olmed punched the air and did a little victory dance. Shibban tutted. Soneka grinned.

‘Point, Dancers,’ he said. ‘Olmed? Do the honours.’

Olmed nestled his diorite head into position at the head of the line, picked up the head Jed had brought, and threw it with all his strength out into the open field below them, where it was immediately lost again amongst millions of its kind.

‘Help yourself to a cup,’ Soneka told Olmed. He glanced at Shibban. ‘Sundown in, what? Eight minutes?’

‘Everything still to play for,’ Shibban replied, confidently.

‘I think,’ said a voice from behind them, ‘you have far too much time on your hands.’

Soneka leapt up from his canvas recliner. Hurtado Bronzi stood in the shadow of the awning, smiling at him.

‘Hurt, you old bastard!’ Soneka cried, embracing his friend. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘A matter of twenty crowns and interest growing,’ Bronzi replied, grinning.

‘This is Dimi Shibban,’ Soneka laughed, gesturing across at his companion, who was rising to his feet.

‘I know Dimi Shibban,’ Bronzi said, embracing the Clown het and slapping his back. ‘Zantium, eh?’

‘I seem to recall you being there,’ said Shibban. ‘How’re you doing, you fat fuggger?’

‘Well, well.’

‘Have some wine,’ Soneka offered.

‘Oh, all right,’ Bronzi replied. His armour was caked in dust. He yanked off his cape and his webbing, and sat down.

‘So, this game? It has rules?’

‘Many, many rules,’ said Shibban.

‘And there’s money at stake?’

‘Money and wine,’ said Soneka, pouring a glass for his old friend.

‘Two teams,’ said Shibban, ‘Clowns and Dancers, five men each side. They scour the fields and bring back heads. The heads go in a line, by size. Retrievers win a cup of wine for each head. Incentive, you see? Sundown ends the game. Team with the largest head in the row wins.’

‘So just get your boys to roll in one of those big buggers,’ Bronzi said, pointing at the boulder-sized heads resting in the sand a hundred metres away. ‘Game over.’

‘Ah, but this is a game of finesse,’ Soneka said.

‘Really?’ Bronzi smiled, sipping from his wine cup.

Shiban nodded. ‘If a team brings in a head that is demonstrably smaller than the largest, but larger than the next in line, the larger head gets thrown out.’

Avery broad grin spread across Bronzi’s face. ‘A game of finesse indeed. Who’s winning?’

‘I am,’ said Soneka.

Bronzi took out his purse. ‘Four crowns on Shiban by sundown,’ he said.

SONEKA WON THAT day’s head game in the very last minutes before dark, when Bashaw Lon casually wandered in with a head that displaced the Clowns’ latest triumph. Lon bent his back and cast the Clowns’ usurped head back out into the field where it had been found. Bronzi lost his four crowns. According to the rules of the game, Shiban bought wine for both teams.

‘So what are you really doing here, Hurt?’ Soneka asked, later on.

‘Let me see that hand of yours,’ Bronzi replied, and studied Soneka’s wound as it was displayed. ‘Hnh. You’ll be good.’

‘Hurtado? I asked you a question.’

‘I got a furlough,’ Bronzi said, sitting back in the still of the evening. The air went cold very suddenly after dark on Nurth, closing in like lapping black water. They huddled in around the lamps and the peat-fired heaters. ‘Five-day pass, signed by Uxor Honen herself. Just wanted to come check on you.’

‘That’s not it,’ said Soneka.

‘Why is that not it?’

Soneka smiled, and waved to Lon to bring them a fresh bottle. ‘Since when did Hurtado Bronzi need to have a secret agenda, huh?’

‘You wound me, Peto, you wound me. Can’t I come here selflessly to look up an old friend and enquire of his welfare?’

Soneka stared at him, a wry smile on his face, waiting for the punch line.

‘All right,’ Bronzi admitted, ‘there *was* something else.’

‘Excuse me, het?’ a voice cut in. They looked up. A Munitorum aide, the very same aide whose timidity and patience they had abused so thoroughly during the afternoon’s game, was standing beside them.

‘Yes?’ asked Soneka.

‘The staff medicae apologises for this interruption. Sir, there is a dead Dancer she would like you to identify.’

CASEVAC HAD BROUGHT the corpse to the cold store at the far end of the Visages camp. The cold store was a long, mud brick building throbbing with refrigeration units. Soneka and Bronzi wandered up the chilly dark, aware of the stars draping overhead like dust on a desert shawl.

The frozen, stiff bodies of geno dead were piled up inside like firewood. Each one was wrapped in plastek shroud. Pairs of bare, pallid feet stuck out of the ends of the stacked shrouds, decorated with toe-tag labels. The hets walked in past them, ignoring the gross stink of embalming chemicals.

The corpse in question was waiting for them in the next room. Not yet preserved, it was laid out on a stainless steel gurney, with drip-trays slotted in to catch the noxious seep. It had been dead in the desert for several weeks, and it had bloated. The face was lost in one raw, black graze, the uniform frayed and faded, the torso limp and slack where gut gas had previously bloated it.

Soneka and Bronzi stood in the chilly light, and shivered as they regarded it.

‘That’s no Dancer I know,’ said Soneka. His words made smoke in the sub-zero air.

‘Oh, but he’s certainly one of yours, het,’ the staff medicae insisted. Medicae Ida was a tall woman wearing a long surgical gown, the apron front of which was smeared with stains. She’d been a combat

uxor in her youth, but age and experience had seen her graduate to the medicae branch as her perceptive skills dulled. Bronzi wondered if Ida missed her uxorhood, missed her command of gentlemen. It seemed so, from her tone.

‘He’s not,’ Soneka insisted, peering down at the corpse.

‘Well, I don’t know how you can tell that, sir,’ Ida said. ‘His face is missing.’

‘He’d know,’ said Bronzi.

‘Where was he found?’ Soneka asked, placing a hand on the corpse’s wax-cold shoulder. A surgical cloth had been spread over the abdomen to obscure the ravages of the autopsy.

‘The Tel Utan wadi,’ Medicae Ida replied.

Soneka shook his head. ‘He’s not one of mine. I’m not missing anyone. The lists were in weeks ago.’

‘But he is wearing Dancer insignia,’ Ida insisted. ‘Here, the collar pins, and here, the brooch.’ She pointed. ‘He is dressed as a Dancer.’

‘Have you tissue-mapped him?’ Soneka asked.

‘Not yet,’ Ida admitted.

‘Then you’ll see the truth. This isn’t one of my men.’

Senior Medicae Ida sighed. ‘I know that, het. I just wanted you to confirm it, before I—’

‘Before you what?’ Bronzi demanded.

‘Before I alert the Chiliad uxors. Hetman Soneka, is there any reason you can think of why one of your men would have no heart?’

‘What?’

‘No heart?’ Ida repeated emphatically. ‘What the fug did he have in there then?’ Bronzi asked, nodding at the corpse’s covered chest.

‘A cadmium centrifuge,’ replied Senior Medicae Ida gently. ‘The subject has undergone some extreme and non-standard organ modification. His liver was... well, I’ve never seen anything like it.’

‘What is going on here?’ asked Soneka.

‘I don’t know,’ Ida replied. ‘I was hoping you might.’

‘There’s something else,’ she added. She pulled back the surgical cloth.

For a moment, all they could see was the scissor-snapped sternum and the splayed ribs, caked black with blood.

‘Here,’ she said, pointing.

On the dead flesh of the corpse’s hip there was a small brand, partially obliterated by a shrapnel puncture.

‘What is that?’ asked Soneka, squinting at it. ‘Is that a snake?’

‘Maybe,’ said Bronzi, bending down to look for himself. ‘A snake... or some kind of reptile.’

SONEKA TOLD THE medicae to place a guard on the corpse and send someone to wake up the poet commander. He went back outside with Bronzi.

‘Insurgent?’ Soneka asked.

Bronzi nodded. ‘Has to be. That mark.’

Soneka didn’t reply. Crocodilia and other forms of aggressive reptile were the most persistent recurring of all Nurthene emblems.

‘Have they the art to change a man inside like that?’ Bronzi asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Soneka replied, ‘but since that night outside Tel Utan, I could believe them capable of anything.’

Bronzi wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘Listen, Peto, the reason I came here today, it’s about that night. I wanted you to know that I didn’t hang you out to dry.’

‘I never thought you did, Hurt.’

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