

# ***HORUS RISING***

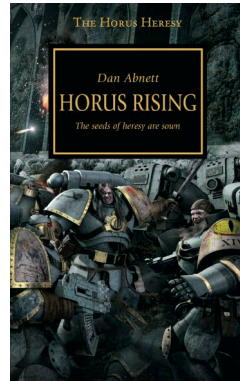
*The first Horus Heresy novel*

*By Dan Abnett*

*It is the 31st millennium. Under the benevolent leadership of the Immortal Emperor the Imperium of Man has stretched out across the galaxy. It is a golden age of discovery and conquest.*

*But now, on the eve of victory, the Emperor leaves the front lines, entrusting the great crusade to his favourite son, Horus. Promoted to Warmaster, can the idealistic Horus carry out the Emperor's grand plan, or will this promotion sow the seeds of heresy amongst his brothers?*

*Horus Rising is the first chapter in the epic tale of the Horus Heresy, a galactic civil war that threatened to bring about the extinction of humanity.*



## **About the Author**

Dan Abnett is a novelist and an award-winning comic book writer. He has written twenty-five novels for the Black Library, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies, and, with Mike Lee, the Darkblade cycle. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

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The following is an excerpt from *Horus Rising* by Dan Abnett. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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‘I was there,’ he would say afterwards, until afterwards became a time quite devoid of laughter. ‘I was there, the day Horus slew the Emperor.’ It was a delicious conceit, and his comrades would chuckle at the sheer treason of it.

The story was a good one. Torgaddon would usually be the one to cajole him into telling it, for Torgaddon was the joker, a man of mighty laughter and idiot tricks. And Loken would tell it again, a tale rehearsed through so many retellings, it almost told itself.

Loken was always careful to make sure his audience properly understood the irony in his story. It was likely that he felt some shame about his complicity in the matter itself, for it was a case of blood spilled from misunderstanding. There was a great tragedy implicit in the tale of the Emperor’s murder, a tragedy that Loken always wanted his listeners to appreciate. But the death of Sejanus was usually all that fixed their attentions.

That, and the punchline.

It had been, as far as the warp-dilated horologs could attest, the two hundred and third year of the Great Crusade. Loken always set his story in its proper time and place. The commander had been Warmaster for about a year, since the triumphant conclusion of the Ullanor campaign, and he was anxious to prove his new-found status, particularly in the eyes of his brothers.

Warmaster. Such a title. The fit was still new and unnatural, not yet worn in.

It was a strange time to be abroad amongst stars. They had been doing what they had been doing for two centuries, but now it felt unfamiliar. It was a start of things. And an ending too.

The ships of the 63rd Expedition came upon the Imperium by chance. A sudden etheric storm, later declared providential by Maloghurst, forced a route alteration, and they translated into the edges of a system comprising nine worlds.

Nine worlds, circling a yellow sun.

Detecting the shoal of rugged expedition warships on station at the out-system edges, the Emperor first demanded to know their occupation and agenda. Then he painstakingly corrected what he saw as the multifarious errors in their response.

Then he demanded fealty.

He was, he explained, the Emperor of Mankind. He had stoically shepherded his people through the miserable epoch of warp storms, through the Age of Strife, staunchly maintaining the rule and law of man. This had been expected of him, he declared. He had kept the flame of human culture alight through the aching isolation of Old Night. He had sustained this precious, vital fragment, and kept it intact, until such time as the scattered diaspora of humanity re-established contact. He rejoiced that such a time was now at hand. His soul leapt to see the orphan ships returning to the heart of the Imperium. Everything was ready and waiting. Everything had been preserved. The orphans would be embraced to his bosom, and then the Great Scheme of rebuilding would begin, and the Imperium of Mankind would stretch itself out again across the stars, as was its birthright.

As soon as they showed him proper fealty. As Emperor. Of mankind.

The commander, quite entertained by all accounts, sent Hastur Sejanus to meet with the Emperor and deliver greeting.

Sejanus was the commander's favourite. Not as proud or irascible as Abaddon, nor as ruthless as Sedirae, nor even as solid and venerable as Iacton Qruze, Sejanus was the perfect captain, tempered evenly in all respects. A warrior and a diplomat in equal

measure, Sejanus's martial record, second only to Abaddon's, was easily forgotten when in company with the man himself. A beautiful man, Loken would say, building his tale, a beautiful man adored by all. 'No finer figure in Mark IV plate than Hastur Sejanus. That he is remembered, and his deeds celebrated, even here amongst us, speaks of Sejanus's qualities. The noblest hero of the Great Crusade.' That was how Loken would describe him to the eager listeners. 'In future times, he will be recalled with such fondness that men will name their sons after him.'

Sejanus, with a squad of his finest warriors from the Fourth Company, travelled in-system in a gilded barge, and was received for audience by the Emperor at his palace on the third planet.

And killed.

Murdered. Hacked down on the onyx floor of the palace even as he stood before the Emperor's golden throne. Sejanus and his glory squad – Dymos, Malsandar, Gorthoi and the rest – all slaughtered by the Emperor's elite guard, the so-called Invisibles.

Apparently, Sejanus had not offered the correct fealty. Indelicately, he had suggested there might actually be another Emperor.

The commander's grief was absolute. He had loved Sejanus like a son. They had warred side by side to affect compliance on a hundred worlds. But the commander, always sanguine and wise in such matters, told his signal men to offer the Emperor another chance. The commander detested resorting to war, and always sought alternative paths away from violence, where such were workable. This was a mistake, he reasoned, a terrible, terrible mistake. Peace could be salvaged. This 'Emperor' could be made to understand.

It was about then, Loken liked to add, that a suggestion of quote marks began to appear around the 'Emperor's' name.

It was determined that a second embassy would be despatched. Maloghurst volunteered at once. The commander agreed, but ordered the speartip forwards into assault range. The intent was clear: one hand extended open, in peace, the other held ready as a

fist. If the second embassy failed, or was similarly met with violence, then the fist would already be in position to strike. That sombre day, Loken said, the honour of the speartip had fallen, by the customary drawing of lots, to the strengths of Abaddon, Torgaddon, 'Little Horus' Aximand. And Loken himself.

At the order, battle musters began. The ships of the speartip slipped forward, running under obscurity. On board, stormbirds were hauled onto their launch carriages. Weapons were issued and certified. Oaths of moment were sworn and witnessed. Armour was machined into place around the anointed bodies of the chosen.

In silence, tensed and ready to be unleashed, the speartip watched as the shuttle convoy bearing Maloghurst and his envoys arced down towards the third planet. Surface batteries smashed them out of the heavens. As the burning scads of debris from Maloghurst's flotilla billowed away into the atmosphere, the 'Emperor's' fleet elements rose up out of the oceans, out of the high cloud, out of the gravity wells of nearby moons. Six hundred warships, revealed and armed for war.

Abaddon broke obscurity and made a final, personal plea to the 'Emperor', beseeching him to see sense. The warships began to fire on Abaddon's speartip.

'My commander,' Abaddon relayed to the heart of the waiting fleet, 'there is no dealing here. This fool imposter will not listen.'

And the commander replied, 'Illuminate him, my son, but spare all you can. That order notwithstanding, avenge the blood of my noble Sejanus. Decimate this "Emperor's" elite murderers, and bring the imposter to me.'

'And so,' Loken would sigh, 'we made war upon our brethren, so lost in ignorance.'

It was late evening, but the sky was saturated with light. The phototropic towers of the High City, built to turn and follow the sun with their windows during the day, shifted uneasily at the pulsating radiance in the heavens. Spectral shapes swam high in the upper

atmosphere: ships engaging in a swirling mass, charting brief, nonsensical zodiacs with the beams of their battery weapons.

At ground level, around the wide, basalt platforms that formed the skirts of the palace, gunfire streamed through the air like horizontal rain, hosing coils of tracer fire that dipped and slithered heavily like snakes, die-straight zips of energy that vanished as fast as they appeared, and flurries of bolt shells like blizzarding hail. Downed stormbirds, many of them crippled and burning, littered twenty square kilometres of the landscape.

Black, humanoid figures paced slowly in across the limits of the palace sprawl. They were shaped like armoured men, and they trudged like men, but they were giants, each one hundred and forty metres tall. The Mechanicum had deployed a half-dozen of its Titan war engines. Around the Titans' soot-black ankles, troops flooded forward in a breaking wave three kilometres wide.

The Luna Wolves surged like the surf of the wave, thousands of gleaming white figures bobbing and running forward across the skirt platforms, detonations bursting amongst them, lifting rippling fireballs and trees of dark brown smoke. Each blast juddered the ground with a gritty thump, and showered down dirt as an after-curse. Assault craft swept in over their heads, low, between the shambling frames of the wide-spaced Titans, fanning the slowly lifting smoke clouds into sudden, energetic vortices.

Every Astartes helmet was filled with vox-chatter: snapping voices, chopping back and forth, their tonal edges roughened by the transmission quality.

It was Loken's first taste of mass war since Ullanor. Tenth Company's first taste too. There had been skirmishes and scraps, but nothing testing. Loken was glad to see that his cohort hadn't grown rusty. The unapologetic regimen of live drills and punishing exercises he'd maintained had kept them whetted as sharp and serious as the terms of the oaths of moment they had taken just hours before.

Ullanor had been glorious, a hard, unstinting slog to dislodge and overthrow a bestial empire. The greenskin had been a pernicious and

resilient foe, but they had broken his back and kicked over the embers of his revel fires. The commander had won the field through the employment of his favourite, practiced strategy: the speartip thrust to tear out the throat. Ignoring the greenskin masses, which had outnumbered the crusaders five to one, the commander had struck directly at the Overlord and his command coterie, leaving the enemy headless and without direction.

The same philosophy operated here. Tear out the throat and let the body spasm and die. Loken and his men, and the war engines that supported them, were the edge of the blade unsheathed for that purpose.

But this was not like Ullanor at all. No thickets of mud and clay-built ramparts, no ramshackle fortresses of bare metal and wire, no black powder air bursts or howling ogre-foes. This was not a barbaric brawl determined by blades and upper body strength.

This was modern warfare in a civilised place. This was man against man, inside the monolithic precincts of a cultured people. The enemy possessed ordnance and firearms every bit the technological match of the Legio forces, and the skill and training to use them. Through the green imaging of his visor, Loken saw armoured men with energy weapons ranged against them in the lower courses of the palace. He saw tracked weapon carriages, automated artillery; nests of four or even eight automatic cannons shackled together on cart platforms that lumbered forward on hydraulic legs.

Not like Ullanor at all. That had been an ordeal. This would be a test. Equal against equal. Like against like.

Except that for all its martial technologies, the enemy lacked one essential quality, and that quality was locked within each and every case of Mark IV power armour: the genetically enhanced flesh and blood of the Imperial Astartes. Modified, refined, post-human, the Astartes were superior to anything they had met or would ever meet. No fighting force in the galaxy could ever hope to match the Legions, unless the stars went out, and madness ruled, and lawful sense turned upside down. For, as Sedirae had once said, 'The only



thing that can beat an Astartes is another Astartes', and they had all laughed at that. The impossible was nothing to be scared of.

The enemy – their armour a polished magenta trimmed in silver, as Loken later discovered when he viewed them with his helmet off – firmly held the induction gates into the inner palace. They were big men, tall, thick through the chest and shoulders, and at the peak of fitness. Not one of them, not even the tallest, came up to the chin of one of the Luna Wolves. It was like fighting children.

Well-armed children, it had to be said.

Through the billowing smoke and the jarring detonations, Loken led the veteran First Squad up the steps at a run, the plasteel soles of their boots grating on the stone: First Squad, Tenth Company, Hellebore Tactical Squad, gleaming giants in pearl-white armour, the wolf head insignia stark black on their auto-responsive shoulder plates. Crossfire zig-zagged around them from the defended gates ahead. The night air shimmered with the heat distortion of weapons discharge. Some kind of upright, automated mortar was casting a sluggish, flaccid stream of fat munition charges over their heads.

'Kill it!' Loken heard Brother-sergeant Jubal instruct over the link. Jubal's order was given in the curt argot of Cthonia, their derivation world, a language that the Luna Wolves had preserved as their battle-tongue.

The battle-brother carrying the squad's plasma cannon obeyed without hesitation. For a dazzling half-second, a twenty-metre ribbon of light linked the muzzle of his weapon to the auto-mortar, and then the device engulfed the facade of the palace in a roasting wash of yellow flame.

Dozens of enemy soldiers were cast down by the blast. Several were thrown up into the air, landing crumpled and boneless on the flight of steps.

'Into them!' Jubal barked.

Wildfire chipped and pattered off their armour. Loken felt the distant sting of it. Brother Calends stumbled and fell, but righted himself again, almost at once.

Loken saw the enemy scatter away from their charge. He swung his bolter up. His weapon had a gash in the metal of the foregrip, the legacy of a greenskin's axe during Ullanor, a cosmetic mark Loken had told the armourers not to finish out. He began to fire, not on burst, but on single shot, feeling the weapon buck and kick against his palms. Bolter rounds were explosive penetrators. The men he hit popped like blisters, or shredded like bursting fruit. Pink mist fumed off every ruptured figure as it fell.

'Tenth Company!' Loken shouted. 'For the Warmaster!'

The warcry was still unfamiliar, just another aspect of the newness. It was the first time Loken had declaimed it in war, the first chance he'd had since the honour had been bestowed by the Emperor after Ullanor.

By the Emperor. The true Emperor.

'Lupercal! Lupercal!' the Wolves yelled back as they streamed in, choosing to answer with the old cry, the Legion's pet-name for their beloved commander. The warhorns of the Titans boomed.

They stormed the palace. Loken paused by one of the induction gates, urging his frontrunners in, carefully reviewing the advance of his company main force. Hellish fire continued to rake them from the upper balconies and towers. In the far distance, a brilliant dome of light suddenly lifted into the sky, astonishingly bright and vivid. Loken's visor automatically dimmed. The ground trembled and a noise like a thunderclap reached him. A capital ship of some size, stricken and ablaze, had fallen out of the sky and impacted in the outskirts of the High City. Drawn by the flash, the phototropic towers above him fidgeted and rotated.

Reports flooded in. Aximand's force, Fifth Company, had secured the Regency and the pavilions on the ornamental lakes to the west of the High City. Torgaddon's men were driving up through the lower town, slaying the armour sent to block them.

Loken looked east. Three kilometres away, across the flat plain of the basalt platforms, across the tide of charging men and striding Titans and stitching fire, Abaddon's company, First Company, was crossing the bulwarks into the far flank of the palace. Loken

magnified his view, resolving hundreds of white-armoured figures pouring through the smoke and chop-fire. At the front of them, the dark figures of First Company's foremost Terminator squad, the Justaerin. They wore polished black armour, dark as night, as if they belonged to some other, black Legion.

'Loken to First,' he sent. 'Tenth has entry.'

There was a pause, a brief distort, then Abaddon's voice answered. 'Loken, Loken... are you trying to shame me with your diligence?'

'Not for a moment, first captain,' Loken replied. There was a strict hierarchy of respect within the Legion, and though he was a senior officer, Loken regarded the peerless first captain with awe. All of the Mournival, in fact, though Torgaddon had always favoured Loken with genuine shows of friendship.

Now Sejanus was gone, Loken thought. The aspect of the Mournival would soon change.

'I'm playing with you, Loken,' Abaddon sent, his voice so deep that some vowel sounds were blurred by the vox. 'I'll meet you at the feet of this false Emperor. First one there gets to illuminate him.'

Loken fought back a smile. Ezekyle Abaddon had seldom sported with him before. He felt blessed, elevated. To be a chosen man was enough, but to be in with the favoured elite, that was every captain's dream.

Reloading, Loken entered the palace through the induction gate, stepping over the tangled corpses of the enemy dead. The plaster facings of the inner walls had been cracked and blown down, and loose crumbs, like dry sand, crunched under his feet. The air was full of smoke, and his visor display kept jumping from one register to another as it attempted to compensate and get a clean reading.

He moved down the inner hall, hearing the echo of gunfire from deeper in the palace compound. The body of a brother lay slumped in a doorway to his left, the large, white-armoured corpse odd and out of place amongst the smaller enemy bodies. Marjex, one of the Legion's apothecaries, was bending over him. He glanced up as Loken approached, and shook his head.

‘Who is it?’ Loken asked.

‘Tibor, of Second Squad,’ Marjex replied. Loken frowned as he saw the devastating head wound that had stopped Tibor.

‘The Emperor knows his name,’ Loken said.

Marjex nodded, and reached into his narthecium to get the reductor tool. He was about to remove Tibor’s precious gene-seed, so that it might be returned to the Legion banks.

Loken left the apothecary to his work, and pushed on down the hall. In a wide colonnade ahead, the towering walls were decorated with frescoes, showing familiar scenes of a haloed Emperor upon a golden throne. How blind these people are, Loken thought, how sad this is. One day, one single day with the iterators, and they would understand. We are not the enemy. We are the same, and we bring with us a glorious message of redemption. Old Night is done. Man walks the stars again, and the might of the Astartes walks at his side to keep him safe.

In a broad, sloping tunnel of etched silver, Loken caught up with elements of Third Squad. Of all the units in his company, Third Squad – Locasta Tactical Squad – was his favourite and his favoured. Its commander, Brother-sergeant Nero Vipus, was his oldest and truest friend.

‘How’s your humour, captain?’ Vipus asked. His pearl-white plate was smudged with soot and streaked with blood.

‘Phlegmatic, Nero. You?’

‘Choleric. Red-raged, in fact. I’ve just lost a man, and two more of mine are injured. There’s something covering the junction ahead. Something heavy. Rate of fire like you wouldn’t believe.’

‘Tried fragging it?’

‘Two or three grenades. No effect. And there’s nothing to see. Garvi, we’ve all heard about these so-called Invisibles. The ones that butchered Sejanus. I was wondering–’

‘Leave the wondering to me,’ Loken said. ‘Who’s down?’

Vipus shrugged. He was a little taller than Loken, and his shrug made the heavy ribbing and plates of his armour clunk together.

‘Zakias.’

‘Zakias? No...’

‘Torn into shreds before my very eyes. Oh, I feel the hand of the ship on me, Garvi.’

The hand of the ship. An old saying. The commander’s flagship was called the Vengeful Spirit, and in times of duress or loss, the Wolves liked to draw upon all that implied as a charm, a totem of retribution.

‘In Zakias’s name,’ Vipus growled, ‘I’ll find this bastard Invisible and—’

‘Sooth your choler, brother. I’ve no use for it,’ Loken said. ‘See to your wounded while I take a look.’

Vipus nodded and redirected his men. Loken pushed up past them to the disputed junction.

It was a vault-roofed crossways where four hallways met. The area read cold and still to his imaging. Fading smoke wisped up into the rafters. The outlite floor had been chewed and peppered with thousands of impact craters. Brother Zakias, his body as yet unretrieved, lay in pieces at the centre of the crossway, a steaming pile of shattered white plasteel and bloody meat.

Vipus had been right. There was no sign of an enemy present. No heat-trace, not even a flicker of movement. But studying the area, Loken saw a heap of empty shell cases, glittering brass, that had spilled out from behind a bulkhead across from him. Was that where the killer was hiding?

Loken bent down and picked up a chunk of fallen plasterwork. He lobbed it into the open. There was a click, and then a hammering deluge of autofire raked across the junction. It lasted five seconds, and in that time over a thousand rounds were expended. Loken saw the fuming shell cases spitting out from behind the bulkhead as they were ejected.

The firing stopped. Fycelene vapour fogged the junction. The gunfire had scored a mottled gouge across the stone floor, pummelling Zakias’s corpse in the process. Spots of blood and scraps of tissue had been spattered out.

Loken waited. He heard a whine and the metallic clunk of an autoloader system. He read weapon heat, fading, but no body warmth.

‘Won a medal yet?’ Vipus asked, approaching.

‘It’s just an automatic sentry gun,’ Loken replied.

‘Well, that’s a small relief at least,’ Vipus said. ‘After the grenades we’ve pitched in that direction, I was beginning to wonder if these vaunted Invisibles might be “Invulnerables” too. I’ll call up Devastator support to—’

‘Just give me a light flare,’ Loken said.

Vipus stripped one off his leg plate and handed it to his captain. Loken ignited it with a twist of his hand, and threw it down the hallway opposite. It bounced, fizzling, glaring white hot, past the hidden killer.

There was a grind of servos. The implacable gunfire began to roar down the corridor at the flare, kicking it and bouncing it, ripping into the floor.

‘Garvi—’ Vipus began.

Loken was running. He crossed the junction, thumped his back against the bulkhead. The gun was still blazing. He wheeled round the bulkhead and saw the sentry gun, built into an alcove. A squat machine, set on four pad feet and heavily plated, it had turned its short, fat, pumping cannons away from him to fire on the distant, flickering flare.

Loken reached over and tore out a handful of its servo flexes. The guns stuttered and died.

‘We’re clear!’ Loken called out. Locasta moved up.

‘That’s generally called showing off,’ Vipus remarked.

Loken led Locasta up the corridor, and they entered a fine state apartment. Other apartment chambers, similarly regal, beckoned beyond. It was oddly still and quiet.

‘Which way now?’ Vipus asked.

‘We go find this “Emperor”,’ Loken said.

Vipus snorted. ‘Just like that?’

‘The first captain bet me I couldn’t reach him first.’

‘The first captain, eh? Since when was Garviel Loken on pally terms with him?’

‘Since Tenth breached the palace ahead of First. Don’t worry, Nero, I’ll remember you little people when I’m famous.’

Nero Vipus laughed, the sound snuffling out of his helmet mask like the cough of a consumptive bull.

What happened next didn’t make either of them laugh at all.

‘Captain Loken?’

He looked up from his work. ‘That’s me.’

‘Forgive me for interrupting,’ she said. ‘You’re busy.’

Loken set aside the segment of armour he had been polishing and rose to his feet. He was almost a metre taller than her, and naked but for a loin cloth. She sighed inwardly at the splendour of his physique. The knotted muscles, the old ridge-scars. He was handsome too, this one, fair hair almost silver, cut short, his pale skin slightly freckled, his eyes grey like rain. What a waste, she thought.

Though there was no disguising his inhumanity, especially in this bared form. Apart from the sheer mass of him, there was the overgrown gigantism of the face, that particular characteristic of the Astartes, almost equine, plus the hard, taut shell of his rib-less torso, like stretched canvas.

‘I don’t know who you are,’ he said, dropping a nub of polishing fibre into a little pot, and wiping his fingers.

She held out her hand. ‘Mersadie Oliton, official remembrancer,’ she said. He looked at her tiny hand and then shook it, making it seem even more tiny in comparison with his own giant fist.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, laughing, ‘I keep forgetting you don’t do that out here. Shaking hands, I mean. Such a parochial, Terran custom.’

‘I don’t mind it. Have you come from Terra?’

‘I left there a year ago, despatched to the crusade by permit of the Council.’

‘You’re a remembrancer?’

‘You know what that means?’

‘I’m not stupid,’ Loken said.

‘Of course not,’ she said, hurriedly. ‘I meant no offence.’

‘None taken.’ He eyed her. Small and frail, though possibly beautiful. Loken had very little experience of women. Perhaps they were all frail and beautiful. He knew enough to know that few were as black as her. Her skin was like burnished coal. He wondered if it were some kind of dye.

He wondered too about her skull. Her head was bald, but not shaved. It seemed polished and smooth as if it had never known hair. The cranium was enhanced somehow, extending back in a streamlined sweep that formed a broad ovoid behind her nape. It was like she had been crowned, as if her simple humanity had been made more regal.

‘How can I help you?’ he asked.

‘I understand you have a story, a particularly entertaining one. I’d like to remember it, for posterity.’

‘Which story?’

‘Horus killing the Emperor.’

He stiffened. He didn’t like it when non-Astartes humans called the Warmaster by his true name.

‘That happened months ago,’ he said dismissively. ‘I’m sure I won’t remember the details particularly well.’

‘Actually,’ she said, ‘I have it on good authority you can be persuaded to tell the tale quite expertly. I’ve been told it’s very popular amongst your battle-brothers.’

Loken frowned. Annoyingly, the woman was correct. Since the taking of the High City, he’d been required – forced would not be too strong a word – to retell his first-hand account of the events in the palace tower on dozens of occasions. He presumed it was because of Sejanus’s death. The Luna Wolves needed catharsis. They needed to hear how Sejanus had been so singularly avenged.

‘Someone put you up to this, Mistress Oliton?’ he asked.

She shrugged. ‘Captain Torgaddon, actually.’

Loken nodded. It was usually him. ‘What do you want to know?’



‘I understand the general situation, for I have heard it from others, but I’d love to have your personal observations. What was it like? When you got inside the palace itself, what did you find?’

Loken sighed, and looked round at the rack where his power armour was displayed. He’d only just started cleaning it. His private arming chamber was a small, shadowy vault adjoining the off-limits embarkation deck, the metal walls lacquered pale green. A cluster of glow-globes lit the room, and an Imperial eagle had been stencilled on one wall plate, beneath which copies of Loken’s various oaths of moment had been pinned. The close air smelled of oils and lapping powder. It was a tranquil, introspective place, and she had invaded that tranquility.

Becoming aware of her trespass, she suggested, ‘I could come back later, at a better time.’

‘No, now’s fine.’ He sat back down on the metal stool where he had been perching when she’d entered. ‘Let me see... When we got inside the palace, what we found was the Invisibles.’

‘Why were they called that?’ she asked.

‘Because we couldn’t see them,’ he replied.

The Invisibles were waiting for them, and they well deserved their sobriquet.

Just ten paces into the splendid apartments, the first brother died. There was an odd, hard bang, so hard it was painful to feel and hear, and Brother Edrius fell to his knees, then folded onto his side. He had been struck in the face by some form of energy weapon. The white plasteel/ceramite alloy of his visor and breastplate had actually deformed into a rippled crater, like heated wax that had flowed and then set again. A second bang, a quick concussive vibration of air, obliterated an ornamental table beside Nero Vipus. A third bang dropped Brother Muriad, his left leg shattered and snapped off like a reed stalk.

The science adepts of the false Imperium had mastered and harnessed some rare and wonderful form of field technology, and armed their elite guard with it. They cloaked their bodies with a

passive application, twisting light to render themselves invisible. And they were able to project it in a merciless, active form that struck with mutilating force.

Despite the fact that they had been advancing combat-ready and wary, Loken and the others were taken completely off guard. The Invisibles were even hidden to their visor arrays. Several had simply been standing in the chamber, waiting to strike.

Loken began to fire, and Vipus's men did likewise. Raking the area ahead of him, splintering furniture, Loken hit something. He saw pink mist kiss the air, and something fell down with enough force to overturn a chair. Vipus scored a hit too, but not before Brother Tarregus had been struck with such power that his head was punched clean off his shoulders.

The cloak technology evidently hid its users best if they remained still. As they moved, they became semi-visible, heat-haze suggestions of men surging to attack. Loken adapted quickly, firing at each blemish of air. He adjusted his visor gain to full contrast, almost black and white, and saw them better: hard outlines against the fuzzy background. He killed three more. In death, several lost their cloaks. Loken saw the Invisibles revealed as bloody corpses. Their armour was silver, ornately composed and machined with a remarkable detail of patterning and symbols. Tall, swathed in mantles of red silk, the Invisibles reminded Loken of the mighty Custodian Guard that warded the Imperial Palace on Terra. This was the bodyguard corps which had executed Sejanus and his glory squad at a mere nod from their master.

Nero Vipus was raging, offended by the cost to his squad. The hand of the ship was truly upon him.

He led the way, cutting a path into a towering room beyond the scene of the ambush. His fury gave Locasta the opening it needed, but it cost him his right hand, crushed by an Invisible's blast. Loken felt choler too. Like Nero, the men of Locasta were his friends. Rituals of mourning awaited him. Even in the darkness of Ullanor, victory had not been so dearly bought.

Charging past Vipus, who was down on his knees, groaning in pain as he tried to pluck the mangled gauntlet off his ruined hand, Loken entered a side chamber, shooting at the air blemishes that attempted to block him. A jolt of force tore his bolter from his hands, so he reached over his hip and drew his chainsword from its scabbard. It whined as it kicked into life. He hacked at the faint outlines jostling around him and felt the toothed blade meet resistance. There was a shrill scream. Gore drizzled out of nowhere and plastered the chamber walls and the front of Loken's suit.

'Lupercal!' he grunted, and put the full force of both arms behind his strokes. Servos and mimetic polymers, layered between his skin and his suit's outer plating to form the musculature of his power armour, bunched and flexed. He landed a trio of two-handed blows. More blood showered into view. There was a warbled shriek as loops of pink, wet viscera suddenly became visible. A moment later, the field screening the soldier flickered and failed, and revealed his disembowelled form, stumbling away down the length of the chamber, trying to hold his guts in with both hands.

Invisible force stabbed at Loken again, scrunching the edge of his left shoulder guard and almost knocking him off his feet. He rounded and swung the chainsword. The blade struck something, and shards of metal flew out. The shape of a human figure, just out of joint with the space it occupied, as if it had been cut out of the air and nudged slightly to the left, suddenly filled in. One of the Invisibles, his charged field sparking and crackling around him as it died, became visible and swung his long, bladed lance at Loken.

The blade rebounded off Loken's helm. Loken struck low with his chainsword, ripping the lance out of the Invisible's silver gauntlets and buckling its haft. At the same time, Loken lunged, shoulder barging the warrior against the chamber wall so hard that the friable plaster of the ancient frescoes crackled and fell out.

Loken stepped back. Winded, his lungs and ribcage almost crushed flat, the Invisible made a gagging, sucking noise and fell down on his knees, his head lolling forward. Loken sawed his

chainsword down and sharply up again in one fluid, practiced mercy stroke, and the Invisible's detached head bounced away.

Loken circled slowly, the humming blade raised ready in his right hand. The chamber floor was slick with blood and black scraps of meat. Shots rang out from nearby rooms. Loken walked across the chamber and retrieved his bolter, hoisting it in his left fist with a clatter.

Two Luna Wolves entered the chamber behind him, and Loken briskly pointed them off into the left-hand colonnade with a gesture of his sword.

'Form up and advance,' he snapped into his link. Voices answered him.

'Nero?'

'I'm behind you, twenty metres.'

'How's the hand?'

'I left it behind. It was getting in the way.'

Loken prowled forward. At the end of the chamber, past the crumpled, leaking body of the Invisible he had disembowelled, sixteen broad marble steps led up to a stone doorway. The splendid stone frame was carved with complex linenfold motifs.

Loken ascended the steps slowly. Mottled washes of light cast spastic flickers through the open doorway. There was a remarkable stillness. Even the din of the fight engulfing the palace all around seemed to recede. Loken could hear the tiny taps made by the blood dripping off his outstretched chainsword onto the steps, a trail of red beads up the white marble.

He stepped through the doorway.

The inner walls of the tower rose up around him. He had evidently stepped through into one of the tallest and most massive of the palace's spires. A hundred metres in diameter, a kilometre tall.

No, more than that. He'd come out on a wide, onyx platform that encircled the tower, one of several ring platforms arranged at intervals up the height of the structure, but there were more below. Peering over, Loken saw as much tower drop away into the depths of the earth as stood proud above him.

He circled slowly, gazing around. Great windows of glass or some other transparent substance glazed the tower from top to bottom between the ring platforms, and through them the light and fury of the war outside flared and flashed. No noise, just the flickering glow, the sudden bursts of radiance.

He followed the platform round until he found a sweep of curved stairs, flush with the tower wall, that led up to the next level. He began to ascend, platform to platform, scanning for any blurs of light that might betray the presence of more Invisibles.

Nothing. No sound, no life, no movement except the shimmer of light from outside the windows as he passed them. Five floors now, six.

Loken suddenly felt foolish. The tower was probably empty. This search and purge should have been left to others while he marshalled Tenth Company's main force.

Except... its ground-level approach had been so furiously protected. He looked up, pushing his sensors hard. A third of a kilometre above him, he fancied he caught a brief sign of movement, a partial heat-lock.

'Nero?'

A pause. 'Captain.'

'Where are you?'

'Base of a tower. Heavy fighting. We-' There was a jumble of noises, the distorted sounds of gunfire and shouting. 'Captain? Are you still there?'

'Report!'

'Heavy resistance. We're locked here! Where are-'

The link broke. Loken hadn't been about to give away his position anyway. There was something in this tower with him. At the very top, something was waiting.

The penultimate deck. From above came a soft creaking and grinding, like the sails of a giant windmill. Loken paused. At this height, through the wide panes of glass, he was afforded a view out across the palace and the High City. A sea of luminous smoke, underlit by widespread firestorms. Some buildings glowed pink,

reflecting the light of the inferno. Weapons flashed, and energy beams danced and jumped in the dark. Overhead, the sky was full of fire too, a mirror of the ground. The speartip had visited murderous destruction upon the city of the 'Emperor'.

But had it found the throat?

He mounted the last flight of steps, his grip on the weapons tight.

The uppermost ring platform formed the base of the tower's top section, a vast cupola of crystal-glass petals, ribbed together with steel spars that curved up to form a finial mast at the apex high above. The entire structure creaked and slid, turning slightly one way then another as it responded phototropically to the blooms of light outside in the night. On one side of the platform, its back to the great windows, sat a golden throne. It was a massive object, a heavy plinth of three golden steps rising to a vast gilt chair with a high back and coiled arm rests.

The throne was empty.

Loken lowered his weapons. He saw that the tower top turned so that the throne was always facing the light. Disappointed, Loken took a step towards the throne, and then halted when he realised he wasn't alone after all.

A solitary figure stood away to his left, hands clasped behind its back, staring out at the spectacle of war.

The figure turned. It was an elderly man, dressed in a floor-length mauve robe. His hair was thin and white, his face thinner still. He stared at Loken with glittering, miserable eyes.

'I defy you,' he said, his accent thick and antique. 'I defy you, invader.'

'Your defiance is noted,' Loken replied, 'but this fight is over. I can see you've been watching its progress from up here. You must know that.'

'The Imperium of Man will triumph over all its enemies,' the man replied.

'Yes,' said Loken. 'Absolutely, it will. You have my promise.'

The man faltered, as if he did not quite understand.

‘Am I addressing the so-called “Emperor”?’ Loken asked. He had switched off and sheathed his sword, but he kept his bolter up to cover the robed figure.

‘So-called?’ the man echoed. ‘So-called? You cheerfully blaspheme in this royal place. The Emperor is the Emperor Undisputed, saviour and protector of the race of man. You are some imposter, some evil daemon—’

‘I am a man like you.’

The other scoffed. ‘You are an imposter. Made like a giant, malformed and ugly. No man would wage war upon his fellow man like this.’ He gestured disparagingly at the scene outside.

‘Your hostility started this,’ Loken said calmly. ‘You would not listen to us or believe us. You murdered our ambassadors. You brought this upon yourself. We are charged with the reunification of mankind, throughout the stars, in the name of the Emperor. We seek to establish compliance amongst all the fragmentary and disparate strands. Most greet us like the lost brothers we are. You resisted.’

‘You came to us with lies!’

‘We came with the truth.’

‘Your truth is obscenity!’

‘Sir, the truth itself is amoral. It saddens me that we believe the same words, the very same ones, but value them so differently. That difference has led directly to this bloodshed.’

The elderly man sagged, deflated. ‘You could have left us alone.’

‘What?’ Loken asked.

‘If our philosophies are so much at odds, you could have passed us by and left us to our lives, unviolated. Yet you did not. Why? Why did you insist on bringing us to ruin? Are we such a threat to you?’

‘Because the truth—’ Loken began.

‘—is amoral. So you said, but in serving your fine truth, invader, you make yourself immoral.’

Loken was surprised to find he didn’t know quite how to answer. He took a step forward and said, ‘I request you surrender to me, sir.’

‘You are the commander, I take it?’ the elderly man asked.

‘I command Tenth Company.’

‘You are not the overall commander, then? I assumed you were, as you entered this place ahead of your troops. I was waiting for the overall commander. I will submit to him, and to him alone.’

‘The terms of your surrender are not negotiable.’

‘Will you not even do that for me? Will you not even do me that honour? I would stay here, until your lord and master comes in person to accept my submission. Fetch him.’

Before Loken could reply, a dull wail echoed up into the tower top, gradually increasing in volume. The elderly man took a step or two backwards, fear upon his face.

The black figures rose up out of the tower’s depths, ascending slowly, vertically, up through the open centre of the ring platform. Ten Astartes warriors, the blue heat of their whining jump pack burners shimmering the air behind them. Their power armour was black, trimmed with white. Catulan Reaver Squad, First Company’s veteran assault pack. First in, last out.

One by one, they came in to land on the edge of the ring platform, deactivating their jump packs.

Kalus Ekaddon, Catulan’s captain, glanced sidelong at Loken.

‘The first captain’s compliments, Captain Loken. You beat us to it after all.’

‘Where is the first captain?’ Loken asked.

‘Below, mopping up,’ Ekaddon replied. He set his vox to transmit. ‘This is Ekaddon, Catulan. We have secured the false emperor—’

‘No,’ said Loken firmly.

Ekaddon looked at him again. His visor lenses were stern and unreflective jet glass set in the black metal of his helmet mask. He bowed slightly. ‘My apologies, captain,’ he said, archly. ‘The prisoner and the honour are yours, of course.’

‘That’s not what I meant,’ Loken replied. ‘This man demands the right to surrender in person to our commander-in-chief.’



Ekaddon snorted, and several of his men laughed. 'This bastard can demand all he likes, captain,' Ekaddon said, 'but he's going to be cruelly disappointed.'

'We are dismantling an ancient empire, Captain Ekaddon,' Loken said firmly. 'Might we not display some measure of gracious respect in the execution of that act? Or are we just barbarians?'

'He murdered Sejanus!' spat one of Ekaddon's men.

'He did,' Loken agreed. 'So should we just murder him in response? Didn't the Emperor, praise be his name, teach us always to be magnanimous in victory?'

'The Emperor, praise be his name, is not with us,' Ekaddon replied.

'If he's not with us in spirit, captain,' Loken replied, 'then I pity the future of this crusade.'

Ekaddon stared at Loken for a moment, then ordered his second to transmit a signal to the fleet. Loken was quite sure Ekaddon had not backed down because he'd been convinced by any argument or fine principle. Though Ekaddon, as Captain of First Company's assault elite, had glory and favour on his side, Loken, a company captain, had superiority of rank.

'A signal has been sent to the Warmaster,' Loken told the elderly man.

'Is he coming here? Now?' the man asked eagerly.

'Arrangements will be made for you to meet him,' Ekaddon snapped.

They waited for a minute or two for a signal response. Astartes attack ships, their engines glowing, streaked past the windows. The light from huge detonations sheeted the southern skies and slowly died away. Loken watched the criss-cross shadows play across the ring platform in the dying light.

He started. He suddenly realised why the elderly man had insisted so furiously that the commander should come in person to this place. He clamped his bolter to his side and began to stride towards the empty throne.

'What are you doing?' the elderly man asked.

‘Where is he?’ Loken cried. ‘Where is he really? Is he invisible too?’

‘Get back!’ the elderly man cried out, leaping forward to grapple with Loken.

There was a loud bang. The elderly man’s ribcage blew out, splattering blood, tufts of burned silk and shreds of meat in all directions. He swayed, his robes shredded and on fire, and pitched over the edge of the platform.

Limbs limp, his torn garments flapping, he fell away like a stone down the open drop of the palace tower.

Ekaddon lowered his bolt pistol. ‘I’ve never killed an emperor before,’ he laughed.

‘That wasn’t the Emperor,’ Loken yelled. ‘You moron! The Emperor’s been here all the time.’ He was close to the empty throne now, reaching out a hand to grab at one of the golden armrests. A blemish of light, almost perfect, but not so perfect that shadows behaved correctly around it, recoiled in the seat.

This is a trap. Those four words were the next that Loken was going to utter. He never got the chance.

The golden throne trembled and broadcast a shockwave of invisible force. It was a power like that which the elite guard had wielded, but a hundred times more potent. It slammed out in all directions, casting Loken and all the Catulan off their feet like corn sheaves in a hurricane. The windows of the tower top shattered outwards in a multicoloured blizzard of glass fragments.

Most of Catulan Reaver Squad simply vanished, blown out of the tower, arms flailing, on the bow-wave of energy. One struck a steel spar on his way out. Back snapped, his body tumbled away into the night like a broken doll. Ekaddon managed to grab hold of another spar as he was launched backwards. He clung on, plasteel digits sinking into the metal for purchase, legs trailing out behind him horizontally as air and glass and gravitic energy assaulted him.

Loken, too close to the foot of the throne to be caught by the full force of the shockwave, was knocked flat. He slid across the ring platform towards the open fall, his white armour shrieking as it left

deep grooves in the onyx surface. He went over the edge, over the sheer drop, but the wall of force carried him on like a leaf across the hole and slammed him hard against the far lip of the ring. He grabbed on, his arms over the lip, his legs dangling, held in place as much by the shock pressure as by the strength of his own, desperate arms.

Almost blacking out from the relentless force, he fought to hold on.

Inchoate light, green and dazzling, sputtered into being on the platform in front of his clawing hands. The teleport flare became too bright to behold, and then died, revealing a god standing on the edge of the platform.

The god was a true giant, as large again to any Astartes warrior as an Astartes was to a normal man. His armour was white gold, like the sunlight at dawn, the work of master artificers. Many symbols covered its surfaces, the chief of which was the motif of a single, staring eye fashioned across the breastplate. Robes of white cloth fluttered out behind the terrible, haloed figure.

Above the breastplate, the face was bare, grimacing, perfect in every dimension and detail, suffused in radiance. So beautiful. So very beautiful.

For a moment, the god stood there, unflinching, beset by the gale of force, but unmoving, facing it down. Then he raised the storm bolter in his right hand and fired into the tumult.

One shot.

The echo of the detonation rolled around the tower. There was a choking scream, half lost in the uproar, and then the uproar itself stilled abruptly.

The wall of force died away. The hurricane faded. Splinters of glass tinkled as they rained back down onto the platform.

No longer impelled, Ekaddon crashed back down against the blown-out sill of the window frame. His grip was secure. He clawed his way back inside and got to his feet.

‘My lord!’ he exclaimed, and dropped to one knee, his head bowed.

With the pressure lapsed, Loken found he could no longer support himself. Hands grappling, he began to slide back over the lip where he had been hanging. He couldn't get any purchase on the gleaming onyx.

He slipped off the edge. A strong hand grabbed him around the wrist and hauled him up onto the platform.

Loken rolled over, shaking. He looked back across the ring at the golden throne. It was a smoking ruin, its secret mechanisms exploded from within. Amidst the twisted, ruptured plates and broken workings, a smouldering corpse sat upright, teeth grinning from a blackened skull, charred, skeletal arms still braced along the throne's coiled rests.

'So will I deal with all tyrants and deceivers,' rumbled a deep voice.

Loken looked up at the god standing over him. 'Lupercal...' he murmured.

The god smiled. 'Not so formal, please, captain,' whispered Horus.

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