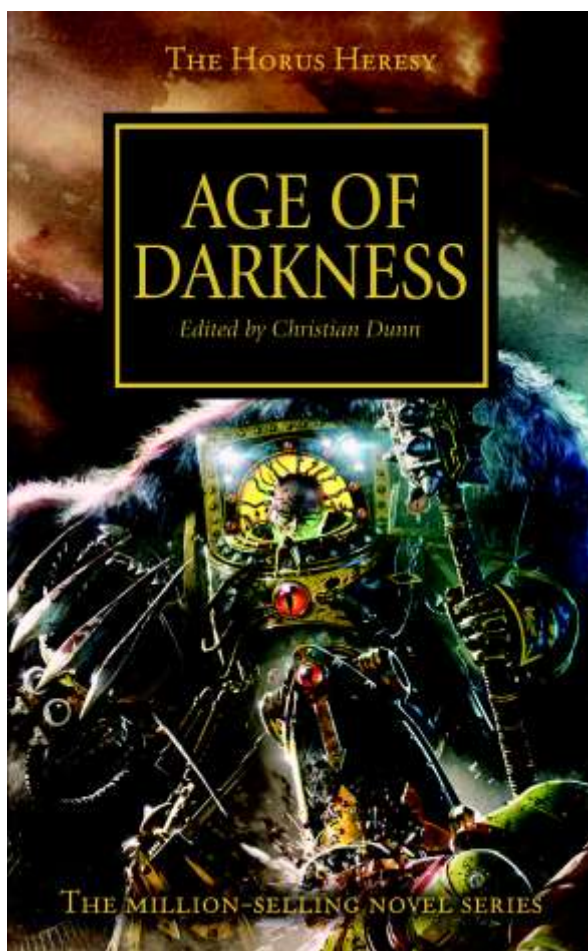




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# **AGE OF DARKNESS**

*A Horus Heresy anthology*

*Edited by Christian Dunn*

After the betrayal at Isstvan V, Horus begins his campaign against the Emperor, a galaxy-wide war that can lead only to Terra. But the road to the final confrontation between father and son is a long one – seven years filled with secrecy and silence, plans and foundations being formed across distant stars. An unknown history is about to be unveiled as light is shed on the darkest years of the Horus Heresy.

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### Taken from *The Iron Within* by Rob Sanders:

THE IRON WITHIN. The iron without. Iron everywhere. The galaxy laced with its cold promise. Did you know that Holy Terra is mostly iron? Our Olympian home world, also. Most habitable planets and moons are. The truth is we are an Imperium of iron. Dying stars burn hearts of iron; while the heavy metal cores of burgeoning worlds generate fields that shelter life – sometimes human life – from the blazing glare of such stellar ancients.

Empires are measured in more than just conquered dirt. Every Iron Warrior knows this. They're measured in hearts that beat in common purpose, thundering in unison across the void: measured in the blood that spills from our Legiones Astartes bodies, red with iron and defiance. This is the iron within and we can taste its metallic tang when an enemy blade or bullet finds us wanting. Then the iron within becomes the iron without, as it did on what we only now understand to be the first day of the Great Siege of Lesser Damantyne...

THE WARSMITH STEPPED out onto the observation platform, each of his power-armoured footfalls an assault on the heavy grille. The Iron Warrior's ceramite shoulders were hunched with responsibility, as though the Space Marine carried much more than the deadweight of his Mark-III plate. He crossed the platform with the determination of a demigod, but the fashion in which his studded gauntlets seized the exterior rail betrayed a belief that he might not make the expanse at

all. The juggernaut ground to an irresistible halt.

A rasping cough wracked the depths of his armoured chest, his form rising and falling with the exertion of each tortured, uncertain breath. Imperial Army sentries from the Ninth-Ward Angeloi Adamantiphraacts watched the Warsmith suffer, uncertain how to act. One even broke ranks and approached, the flared muzzle of his heavy carbine lowered and scalemail glove outstretched.

‘My lord,’ the masked soldier began, ‘can I send for your Apothecary or perhaps the Iron Palatine...’

Lord Barabas Dantioch stopped the Adamantiphraact with an outstretched gauntlet of his own. As the Warsmith fought the coughing fit and his convulsions, the armoured palm became a single finger.

Then, without even looking at the soldier, the huge Legiones Astartes managed: ‘As you were, wardsmen.’

The soldier retreated and a light breeze rippled through the Iron Warrior’s tattered cloak, the material a shredded mosaic of black and yellow chevrons. It whipped about the statuesque magnificence of his power armour, the dull lustre of his Legion’s plate pitted with rust and premature age, lending the suit a sepia sheen. He wore no helmet. Face and skull were enclosed in an iron mask, crafted by the Warsmith himself. The faceplate was a work of brutal beauty, an interpretation of the Legion’s mark, the iron mask symbol that adorned his shoulder. Lord Dantioch’s mask was a hangdog leer of leaden fortitude with a cage for a mouth and eyes of grim darkness. It was whispered in the arcades and on the battlements that the Warsmith was wearing the mask – pulled glowing from the forge – as he hammered it to shape around his shaven skull. He then plunged head and iron into ice water, fixing the beaten metal in place forever around his equally grim features.

Gripping the platform rail, Dantioch drew his eyeslits skywards between his hunched, massive shoulders and drank in the insane genius of his creation. The Schadenhold: an impregnable fortress of unique and deadly design, named in honour of the misery that Dantioch and his Iron Warriors might observe if ever an enemy force was foolish enough to assault the stronghold. During the process of Compliance, as part of the Emperor’s strategy and holy decree, thousands of bastions and citadels had been built on thousands of worlds, so that the architects of the Great Crusade might watch over their conquered domain and the new subjects of an ever expanding Imperium. Many of these galactic redoubts, castles

and forts had been designed and built by Dantioch's Iron Warrior brothers: the IV Legion was peerless in the art of siege warfare, both as besiegers and the besieged. The galaxy had seen nothing like the Schadenhold, however – of that Dantioch was sure.

Under his mask the Iron Warrior commander's pale lips mumbled the Unbreakable Litany. 'Lord Emperor, make me an instrument of your adurance. Where darkness is legion, bless our walls with cold disdain; where foolish foes are frail, have our ranks advance; where there is mortal doubt, let resolution reign...'

The Warsmith had blessed the Schadenhold with every modern structural fortification: concentric hornworks; bunkers; murder zones; drum keeps; artillery emplacements and kill-towers. The fortress was a monstrous study in 30th Millennium siegecraft. For Dantioch, however, location was everything. Without the natural advantages of material, elevation and environment, all other architectural concerns were mere flourish. A stronghold built in a strategically weak location was certain to fall, as many of Dantioch's kindred in the other Legions had discovered during the early trials of Compliance. Even the Imperial Fists had had their failures.

Dantioch had hated Lesser Damantyne from the moment he had set foot on the dread rock and had felt instantly that the planet hated him also. It was as though the world did not want him there and that appealed to the Warsmith's tactical sensibilities: he could use Damantyne's environmental hostilities to his advantage. The small planetoid was situated in a crowded debris field of spinning rock, metal and ice that made it seem unfinished and hazardous from the start. The cruisers of the 51st Expedition that had brought the Warsmith and his Iron Warriors there had negotiated the field with difficulty. Although the planet had tolerable gravity and low-lying oxygen that made an outpost possible, the surface was a swirling hellstorm of hurricane winds, lashing lightning and highly corrosive, acid cloud cover. Nothing lived there: nothing could live on the surface. The acidic atmosphere ate armour and ordnance like a hungry beast, rapidly stripping it away layer by layer in an effort to dissolve the flesh and soft tissue of the Legionnaires beneath. Even the most heavily armoured could only expect to survive mere minutes on the surface.

This made vertical, high-speed insertions by Stormbird the sole way down and that was only if the pilot was skilful enough to punch through the blinding cloud cover and down into one of the narrow,

bottomless sinkholes that punctuated the rocky surface. Through some natural perversity of Damantyne's early evolution, the planetary crust was riddled with air pockets, cavities and vast open spaces: a cavern system of staggering proportion and labyrinthine madness. Dantioch chose the very heart of this madness as the perfect location for his fortress, in a vaulted subterranean space so colossal it had its own primitive weather system.

'From iron cometh strength. From strength cometh will. From will cometh faith. From faith cometh honour. From honour cometh iron. This is the Unbreakable Litany. May it forever be so. *Dominum imperator ac ferrum aeternum.*'

The Iron Warriors were not the first to have made Lesser Damantyne their home. Below the surface, the lithic world was rich with life which had evolved in the deep and the dark. The only real threat to the Emperor's chosen were the megacephalopods: monsters that stalked the caverns with their sinuous tentacles and could collapse their rubbery bulk through the most torturous of cave tunnels, creating new entrances with their titanium beaks. The Legiones Astartes' first few years on Lesser Damantyne comprised a war of extermination on the xenos brutes, who seemed intent on tearing down any structures the IV Legion attempted to erect.

With the alien threat hunted to extinction, Dantioch began construction on his greatest work: the Schadenhold. While Iron Warriors had been battling chthonic monstrosities for planetary supremacy, Dantioch had had his Apothecaries and Adeptus Mechanicum advisors hard at work creating the muscle that would build his mega-fortress. Iron Warrior laboratories perfected genestock slave soldiers, colloquially known as the Sons of Dantioch. Although the Warsmith's face had been hidden for many years behind the iron of his impassive mask, it was plain to see on the gruesome hulks that had built the Schadenhold.

Taller and broader than a Space Marine, the genebreeds used the raw power of their monstrous bulk to mine, move and carve the stone from which the fortress was crafted. As well as physical prowess the slave soldiers had also inherited some of their genefather's cold, technical skill and the Schadenhold was more than a hastily constructed rock edifice: it was an enormous example of strategic art and siegecraft. With the fortress complete, the Sons of Dantioch found new roles in the maintenance and basic operation of the citadel and as close-quarters shock troops for the concentric kill zones that layered the stronghold. It pleased the ailing Warsmith

to be surrounded by brute examples of his own diminished youth and physical supremacy and, in turn, the slave soldiers honoured their gene-father with a simple, unshakable faith and loyalty: a fealty to the Emperor as father of the primarch and the primarch as father of their own.

‘I never tire of looking at it,’ a voice cut through the darkness behind. It was Zygmund Tarrasch, the Schadenhold’s Iron Palatine. Dantioch grunted, bringing an end to his mumbled devotions. Perhaps the Adamantiphract had sent for him; or perhaps the Iron Palatine had news.

The Space Marine joined his Warsmith at the rail and peered up at the magnificence of the fortress above. Although Dantioch was Warsmith and ranking Legiones Astartes among the thirty-strong Iron Warrior garrison left behind by the 51st Expeditionary Fleet, his condition had forced him to devolve responsibility for the fortress and its day-to-day defence to another. He’d chosen Tarrasch as Iron Palatine because he was a Space Marine of character and imagination. The cold logic of the IV Legion had served the Iron Warriors well but, even among their number, there were those whose contribution to Compliance was more than just a conqueror’s thirst – those who appreciated the beauty of human endeavour and achievement, not just the tactical satisfaction of victory and the hot delight of battle.

‘Reminds me of the night sky,’ Tarrasch told his Warsmith. The Iron Palatine nodded to himself. ‘I miss the sky.’

Dantioch had never really thought of the Schadenhold in that way before. It was certainly a spectacle to behold and the final facet in the Warsmith’s ingenious design, for the two Iron Warriors were standing on a circular observation platform, situated around the steeple-point of the tallest of the Schadenhold’s citadel towers. Only, the tower did not point towards the sky or even at the cavern ceiling: it pointed down at the cavern floor.

The Schadenhold had been hewn out of a gigantic, conical rock formation protruding from the roof of the cave. Dantioch had immediately appreciated the rock feature’s potential and committed his troops to the difficult and perilous task of carving out an inverse citadel. This hung upside-down, but all chambers, stairwells and interior architecture were oriented skywards. The communications spires and steeple-scanners at the very bottom of the fortress were hanging several thousand metres above a vast naturally-occurring lake of crude promethium, which bubbled up from the planet depths.



At the very top of the stronghold were the dungeons and oubliettes, situated high in the cavern roof.

As Dantioch cast his weary eyes up the architecture, he came to appreciate the comparison the Iron Palatine was making. In the bleak darkness of the gargantuan cavern, the bright glare of the fortress searchlamps and soft pinpricks of illumination escaping the embrasure murder holes appeared like a constellation in a deep night sky. This was accentuated further by the phosphorescent patches of bacteria that feasted on the feldspar in the cavern roof and the dull glints reflecting off the shiny, pitch surface of oozing promethium below: each giving the appearance of ever more distant stars and galaxies.

‘You have news?’ Dantioch put to Tarrasch.

‘Yes, Warsmith,’ the Iron Palatine reported. The Space Marine was also in full armour and Legion colours, bar gauntlets and helmet, which he clutched in one arm. The vigilance (or paranoia, as some of the other Legions believed) of the Iron Warriors was well known and the Schadenhold and its garrison maintained a constant state of battle readiness. Tarrasch ran a hand across the top of his bald head. His dark eyes and flesh were the primarch’s own, a blessing to his sons. As the Warsmith turned and the light of the observation platform penetrated the slits of his iron mask, Tarrasch caught a glimpse of sallow, bloodshot eyes and wrinkled skin, discoloured with age.

‘And?’ ‘The flagship *Benthos* hails us, my lord.’ ‘So, the 51st Expedition returns,’ Dantioch rasped.

‘We’ve had them on our relay scopes for days. Why the slow approach? Why no contact?’

‘They inform us that they’ve had difficulty traversing the debris field,’ the Iron Palatine reported.

‘And they hail us only now?’ Dantioch returned crabblily.

‘The *Benthos* accidentally struck one of our orbital mines,’ Tarrasch informed his master. Dantioch felt something like a smile curl behind the caged mouth of his faceplate.

‘An ominous beginning to their visit,’ the Warsmith said.

‘They’re holding station while they make repairs,’ the Iron Palatine added. ‘And they’re requesting coordinates for a high speed insertion.’

‘Who requests them?’ ‘Warsmith Krendl, my lord.’ ‘Warsmith Krendl?’ Tarrasch nodded: ‘So it would appear.’ ‘So Idriss Krendl now commands the 14th Grand

Company.’ ‘Even under your command,’ Tarrasch said, ‘he was little more than raw ambition in polished ceramite.’ ‘You might just get your night sky, my Iron Palatine.’ ‘You think we might be rejoining the Legion, sir?’ For the longest time, Dantioch did not speak – the Warsmith lost in memory and musing. ‘I sincerely hope not,’ the Warsmith replied.

The answer seemed to vex the Iron Palatine. Dantioch laid a gauntleted hand on Tarrasch’s shoulder. ‘Send the *Benthos* coordinates for the Orphic Gate and have two of our Stormbirds waiting near the surface to escort our guests in.’

‘The Orphic Gate, sir? Surely the—’

‘Let’s treat the new Warsmith to some of the more dramatic depths and cave systems,’ Dantioch said. ‘A scenic route, if you will.’

‘As you wish, my lord.’

‘In the meantime have Chaplain Zhnev, Colonel Kruishank, Venerable Vastopol and the cleric visiting from Greater Damantyne meet us in the Grand Reclusiam: we shall receive our guests there and hear from Olympian lips what our brothers have been doing in our absence...’

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