

ONE
FRATERNITY

The Vengeful Spirit
Four days after Istvaan V

EIGHT OF HIS brothers were present, though only half of them truly stood in the room. The absent four were nothing more than projections: three of them manifested around the table in the forms of flickering grey hololithic simulacrum, formed of stuttering light and white noise. The fourth of them appeared as a brighter image comprised of silver radiance, its features and limbs dripping spiral lashes of corposant witchfire. This last projection, Magnus, inclined its head in greeting.

Hail, Lorgar, his brother bred the words within his mind.

Lorgar nodded in return. 'How far away are you, Magnus?'

The Crimson King's psychic projection showed no emotion. A tall man, his head crested by a sculpted crown, Magnus the Red refused to make contact with his one remaining eye.

Very far. I lick my wounds on a distant world. It has no name but that which I brought to it.

Lorgar nodded, not blind to the nuances of hesitation in his brother's silent tones. Now was not the time for such talk.

The others acknowledged him one by one. Curze – a cadaverous, pulsing hololithic avatar of himself, gave the barest suggestion of a nod. Mortarion, an emaciated wraith even in the flesh, was hardly improved by this electronic etherealness. His image faded in and out of focus, occasionally dividing in the bizarre mitosis of distance distortion. He lowered the blade of his Manreaper scythe in greeting, which was in itself a warmer hail than Lorgar had been expecting.

Alpharius was the last of those present through long-range sending. He stood helmed, while all others were bareheaded, and his hololithic image was stable while each of the others suffered corruption from the vast ranges between their fleets. Alpharius, almost a head shorter than his brothers, stood scaled in crocodilian resplendence, his reptile-skin armour plating glinting in the false light of his manifestation. His salute was the sign of the Aquila, the Emperor's own symbol, made with both hands across his breastplate.

Lorgar snorted. How quaint.

'You're late,' one of his brothers interrupted. 'We've been waiting.' The voice was a graceless avalanche of syllables.

Angron. Lorgar turned to him, dispensing with any attempt at a conciliatory smile. His warrior brother stood hunched in the threatening lean that characterised his body language, the back of his skull malformed from the brutal neural implants hammered into the bone and wired into the soft tissue of his brain stem. Angron's bloodshot eyes narrowed as another pulse of pain ransacked through his nervous system – a legacy of the aggression enhancers surgically imposed upon him by his former masters. While the other primarchs had risen to rule the worlds they'd been cast down upon, only Angron had languished in captivity, a slave to techno-primitives on some forsaken backwater world that never deserved a name.

Angron's past still ran through his blood, nerve pain sparking in his muscles with every misfired synapse.

'I was delayed,' Lorgar admitted. He didn't like to look at his brother for too long at a time. It was one of the things that made Angron twitch; like an animal, the lord of the World Eaters couldn't abide being stared at, and could never hold eye contact for more than a few moments. Lorgar had no desire to provoke him.

Kor Phaeron had once made mention that World Eater's face was a sneering mask made of clenched knuckles, but Lorgar found no humour in it. To his eyes, his brother was a cracked statue: features that should have been composed and handsome were wrenched into a jagged, snarling expression, and flawed by muscle twinges that bordered on spasms. It was easy to see why others believed Angron always looked on the edge of fury. In truth, he looked like a man struggling to concentrate through epileptic agony. Lorgar hated the bleak, crude bastard, but it was hard not to admire his unbreakable endurance.

Angron grunted something wordless and dismissive, looking back at the others.

'It has been nine days, and we know our tasks,' he growled. 'We are already spread across the void. Why did you gather us?'

Horus, Warmaster of the cleaved Imperium, didn't answer immediately. He gestured for Lorgar to take his place around the table, at Horus's own right hand. Unlike his Legion's sea-green ceramite, Horus stood clad in layered, dense armour of charcoal black, adorned with the glaring cadmium Eye of Terra on his breastplate. This last sigil, the symbol of his authority as master of the Imperium's armies, had its black core refashioned into a slitted serpent's pupil. Lorgar wondered, as he met Horus's pale, elegant smirk, just what secrets Erebus had been whispering into the Warmaster's ears in recent months.

Lorgar took his place between Horus and Perturabo. The former presided at the head of the table, all pretence of equality done with in the aftermath of Istvaan. The latter stood in his burnished, riveted war plate, leaning on the haft of an immense hammer with an admirable air of casual disregard.

'Lorgar,' Perturabo murmured in greeting. Two dozen power cables of various thicknesses plugged directly into the Iron Warrior's bare head, even at the jawline and temples, linking him to the internal processes of his gunmetal grey armour. Chains draped over the tiered plating rattled as he gave a cursory nod.

Lorgar returned it, but said nothing. His dark eyes drifted across the others, seeking his last brother.

'So.' Horus's indulgent smile was all teeth. 'We have gathered again, at last.'

All eyes fell upon him, except for Lorgar's. The seventeenth son's distraction went unmarked as Horus continued.

'This gathering is the first of its kind. Here, now, we unite in one another's presences for the first time.'

'We gathered on Istvaan,' Angron grunted.

'Not all of us,' Alpharius's colourless hololithic image still hadn't turned its helmeted face. The projection's voice held little in the way of corruption-crackle, and just as little emotion.

The Nine Legions had scattered after Istvaan. With a galaxy to conquer and great armies to raise on the long road to Terra, the Legions loyal to Warmaster Horus broke apart into the void, boosting away from a world left dead in their wake.

Angron narrowed his eyes, as if fighting to remember. He nodded agreement a moment later. 'True. Lorgar refused to come. He was *praying*.'

Horus, his handsome features lit from the low glow of his gorget, offered a smile. 'He was meditating on his place in our great plan. There is a difference, brother.'

Angron nodded again without really committing to agreement. He seemed to care for nothing but shrugging the conversation from his shoulders and moving on to other matters. Horus spoke up again.

'We all know the costs of the coming campaign, and our destinies within it. Our fleets are underway. But after the, shall we say, unpleasantness of Istvaan, this is the first time we have gathered as a full fraternity.' Horus gestured with an open palm to his golden-skinned brother. Intentionally or not, the movement was threatening when made with the massive clawed Mechanicum talon sheathing his right hand. 'I hope your meditations were worthwhile, Lorgar.'

Lorgar was still staring at his final brother. He'd not taken his eyes off the last figure since he'd looked away from Perturabo.

'Lorgar?' Horus almost growled now. 'I am growing evermore weary of your inability to adhere to established planning.'

Curze's chuckle was a vulture's caw. Even Angron smiled, his scarred lips peeling back from several replacement iron teeth.

Lorgar slowly, slowly reached for the ornate crozius mace on his back. As he drew the weapon in the company of his closest kin, his eyes remained locked on one of them, and all physically present felt the deepening chill of psychic frost riming along their armour.

The Word Bearer's voice left his lips in an awed, vicious whisper.

'You. *You are not Fulgrim*.'