

THE HORUS HERESY™

THE DIVINE WORD

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'The Word of the Emperor must be Read and Heard with Diligence so that you may arrive to the Knowledge that is needful for you.'

- The Lectitio Divinatus, c.M31

The sky above the city flashed and cracked with arcs of lightning, starkly silhouetting the army retreating from the shattered outskirts. Thousands of men and women pulled back from Milvian, bloodied and despondent. The burnt shells of tanks and transports were left in their wake as the soldiers of the Therion Cohort responded swiftly and gratefully to the retreat order.

Shellfire and las-blasts followed them, further thinning their numbers, until covering barrages from hundreds of emplaced guns fell upon Milvian, stalling any pursuit. In the growing gloom of twilight, the Therions streamed towards their waiting comrades.

The display view faded to static as the recon-link was cut by the observation officers accompanying the assault. Marcus was relieved that he did not have to look at the downcast columns trudging back to the Imperial lines, the view replaced by a strategic schematic of lines and symbols and target designations that cast a clinical veneer over the depressing affair.

It was not the first setback Marcus Valerius had faced in his military career, but he wondered if it would be the last. The Therion vice-caesari pulled his attention away from the main screen on the command deck and returned his gaze to the small communications monitor in the panel beside him.

‘The batteries at Milvian must be silenced by midday at the latest. There can be no further delays. Our success depends upon it.’

Looking at the stern face of Commander Branne in the hololith display, Vice-Caesari Marcus Valerius knew that the Raven Guard captain was not employing hyperbole. If Branne said the campaign hinged on Valerius’s army seizing Milvian in the next eighteen hours, you could be sure that it was the truth.

Though Branne kept his tone even, free from accusation, Marcus was well aware that he deserved far harsher treatment. The initial attack on Milvian had stalled early on, and the Therion Cohort had been forced back in some disarray. It was a setback the vice-caesari was determined to rectify.

‘Everything is being prepared for a fresh assault at dawn,’ Marcus assured the Raven Guard commander. He had rushed the initial attack, perhaps out of overconfidence, or simply eagerness. More than seventeen hundred Therions had paid for the mistake with their lives. ‘I have determined a new attack approach that should see us break through to the batteries this time. We will engage with full force and nothing less. Your ships will be clear for low orbital attack.’

‘We are poised to strike a deadly blow,’ Branne continued, labouring a point he had made several times before. Marcus accepted the reminder in silence, head bowed. ‘Your advance on the second capital, Milvian, has sent much of the traitors’ higher command fleeing to a bunker complex thirty kilometres south of the city. They will not remain there for long. The Raven Guard will fall upon the renegade commanders with gunship and drop pod in eighteen hours’ time, providing that the Therions and their auxiliaries can

take Milvian and silence the defence lasers and other anti-orbital weapons guarding the city's surrounds.'

Branne did not need to reiterate what was at stake. With the taking of Milvian and the elimination of the traitor command, the world of Euesa would be returned to the Imperial fold and with it control of the Vandreggan sector.

'Yes, commander.' There was nothing Marcus could say that would not sound like excuses or argument to the Legiones Astartes officer. 'The Milvian batteries will fall.'

'Understood. Is there anything else?'

There was, but Valerius kept his thoughts to himself. There was the dream. The bustling command centre was no place to discuss a private matter between Valerius and Branne.

'Nothing, commander.'

'That is reassuring, Marcus. Fight well.'

The display shimmered and then disappeared. Marcus issued a few orders for forces to move forwards and cover the retreat. Assured that all was being done that could be done, the weary vice-caesari left the command deck and returned to his chambers.

A gentle cough attracted his attention and he stopped to look at Pelon, who was waiting expectantly by the closed curtains across the window. The youth was maturing into a slender but muscled young man, and bore his rank of sub-Tribune with pride. It was hard to reconcile the determined figure accompanying Marcus with the easily startled boy who had been assigned as his manservant ten years before.

'Yes?' said Marcus.

'Shall I let in some light, vice-caesari?'

Valerius waved a hand in ambivalent reply, dismissing the distraction as he started pacing, exhausted in body but his mind whirling with the implications of the defeat. Pelon took this as permission and drew on the cord that pulled back the heavy drapes. The last rays of bluish sunlight streamed through a trio of arched windows, revealing wooded hills and slate-grey clouds.

Marcus stopped, taken aback by the view. He had been so occupied with the attack he had not looked out at the hills of Euesa for several days. He strode to the window and watched as a tree-crowned hill slid past.

Of course, the hill was not moving; the massive Capitol Imperialis transport, serving as Marcus's headquarters, was. Eighty metres long and fifty high, the *Contemptuous* trundled relentlessly forwards at a brisk walking pace, carried on long tracks, its slab sides dotted with view ports and weapons sponsons. Five kilometres away was another lumbering Imperialis, the *Iron General*, commanded by Praefector Antonius, Marcus's younger brother.

Each of the super-heavy war engines carried two companies of the Therion Cohort – one hundred men and nine battle tanks – while a host of Mechanicum tech-priests, adepts and servitors tended the massive behemoth cannon and hundreds of secondary weapons.

Around the pair of transports the rest of the Therions advanced, on foot and in troop carriers, seven hundred thousand men in all. Amongst them strode the scout and battle Titans of the Legio Vindictus, supported by several thousand mechanically augmented skitarii, sagitarii, praetorians and herakli, along with dozens of strange war engines and service vehicles.

There were other super-heavy vehicles in the army – Baneblades and Shadowswords, Stormhammers and Leviathans of the Capricorn Thirteenth Suppression regiment – alongside hundreds of Leman Russ tanks, Chimera transports, Hydra anti-aircraft cannons and many other tanks and war engines. With them came Gryphons and siege bombards, Basilisk assault guns and mobile missile platforms.

In the two and a half years since the new Therion Cohort had been blooded at the Perfect Fortress of the Emperor's Children Marcus's army had grown strong indeed.

The route of the advance was being paved – in some places literally – by the men and machines of the Lothor

Pioneer Corps. Fifteen thousand men and as many engineering vehicles cut a swath through the woods, levelled hills and cut ramps down cliffs and escarpments to ease the passage of the following host. Rivers were dammed or bridged by cunningly designed machines. Swamps had been drained and roadways laid for hundreds of kilometres on end across the plains and foothills.

The only part of the force not represented were the Raven Guard themselves. The legion of Lord Corax was dispersed across Euesa and in orbit. It had been the Raven Guard that had heralded the arrival of the Emperor's forces, and the Raven Guard that had seized the space port at Carlingia to allow the Therions and their allies to land their immense war machines.

'The command council is in two hours,' said Marcus, turning away from the military spectacle. He crossed to the bunk made up in one corner of the chamber, the constant tremble of the massive transport's engines no longer a distraction. 'Wake me in one hour.'

He shrugged off his heavy coat into the waiting hands of Pelon. As Marcus sat on the edge of the bed and Pelon knelt to remove his boots, the vice-caesari noticed his attendant was pensive.

'Something is on your mind, Pelon. Speak it.'

The attendant hesitated, concentrating on his task. He did not meet his master's gaze as he spoke.

'You did not mention your dreams to Commander Branne, I assume.'

'I did not,' replied Marcus. With his boots removed, he swung his legs onto the bed and lay back, hands clasped across his chest. 'He made it clear after the debacle with the Raptors that I was not to speak of them again.'

'The last such dream saved the Raven Guard from annihilation, vice-caesari. Do you not think this latest experience might be pertinent to the campaign?'

'I am fortunate that Lord Corax appears to have dispensed with any curiosity over our timely arrival at Isstvan and

Branne would have it remain so. It is clear to me that the primarch did not send me the visions and I am not about to raise issues that lead to uncomfortable questions. We have seen some strange things in this war already. An Imperial Army commander who has dream-visions would not be tolerated.'

'But what if the dreams were sent by another, higher power than the primarch?' There was slight admonition in Pelon's tone.

'Nonsense,' said Marcus, sitting up. He looked at his attendant. 'There are no higher powers.'

'I can think of one,' Pelon suggested quietly. The valet delved into a pocket of his tunic and brought forth a sheaf of tattered papers and plas-prints. He became more animated. 'I was given these by one of the Lothorians, in respect to an entirely different concern. There is truth in these writings, deeper than anything I have read before. The Emperor has not abandoned us, but continues to watch and guide his followers. It is all in here.'

He proffered the bundle of sheets to Marcus, but the vice-caesari waved them away with a contemptuous snort.

'I expected better of you, Pelon. I thought you had been raised a Therion and taught the wisdom of logic and reason. Now you seek to peddle these superstitions as a deeper truth? Do you not think I have heard these prattlings of the divine before? It is an affront to the Imperial Truth and everything we have fought for.'

'Apologies, vice-caesari, I did not mean to offend,' said Pelon, hastily stuffing the texts back into his pocket.

'Wake me in one hour, and say no more about god-Emperors and divine guidance.'

Sleep had not come easily to Marcus for several days and today was no different. As soon as he started to slip into a slumber his thoughts were assailed with a frightening tableau. The vice-caesari stood on a grassy plain, storm

clouds gathering overhead. Around him the grass parted and rustled as something slithered close by.

Serpents rose up around him, their slick green scales shining, baring fangs as long as daggers. Marcus was surrounded, unable to flee as the snakes closed on him, sinking their teeth into his legs and arms, burying fangs in his chest and gut even as they snapped and worried at each other.

As he writhed in torment, Marcus saw the body of a beast heaving into view and discovered that the creatures that attacked him were but the multitudinous heads of a single monster. The creature subdued him with its venom and looped its coils about him as it withdrew its fangs, squeezing the life from him.

Marcus woke with a sweat dampening his brow. Through the windows he saw that the sky had darkened to night. Pelon sat on a stool by the dresser, hastily pushing something back into his pocket as he turned at his master's wakening. There was concern in the attendant's eyes, and something Marcus had not noticed before: wonder.

Whatever nonsense was written in those scraps of text had clearly made a profound impact on the young man, but Marcus had not the energy to berate Pelon. The vice-caesari dragged himself upright, his shirt and breeches moist with perspiration.

Pelon crossed to the curtained wardrobe and pulled forth a freshly pressed uniform. Marcus wordlessly nodded his thanks.

Situated behind the bridge of the Capitol Imperialis, the command chamber was a broad room twenty metres by thirty, dominated by the glowing hololith display at its centre. A line of communications panels manned by servitors and adjutants lit one wall while the opposite bulkhead was filled with a live-feed visual display from the transport's scanners and the strategic network.

The hololith was centred on Milvian, a sprawling city that had burst past its curtain wall decades ago, creating a mish-mash suburb of manufactories and habitation tenements encircling the perimeter defence towers and main garrison buildings. Large palaces of the planetary elite dominated the hill that rose inside the walls at the western edge, protected by four keeps overlooking the tilt bridge that spanned the river bisecting the city. Overflights by recon craft and orbital surveys had confirmed that all of the other crossings had been destroyed by the defenders.

Counter battery fire from macro cannons and wall batteries was falling only a few kilometres away, so that the command council was conducted to a backdrop of continual shelling against the earthworks and trench lines thrown up over the last days by the Pioneers and their engines.

As Marcus spoke, sub-Tribunes manipulated the display on the hololith, assigning formations and manoeuvres with blinking arrows and icons.

‘The plan has not changed,’ the vice-caesari told his command council. ‘The taking of the city comprises four phases. The first has been completed already; the establishment of a siege line two kilometres from the outskirts of the suburbs. Colonel Golade’s guns and rockets of the Capricorn Thirteenth have pounded the inner defensive line. The curtain of fire laid down has held the main force of the traitors inside the central city, leaving the outskirts vulnerable. Led by their praefectors, the men of Therion will seize the outer city, ready for an assault on the walls, clearing the streets and buildings for the tanks and Titans that will form a spearhead for the main attack.’

Marcus paused as a flashing blue dome appeared on the hololith.

‘All was well, we thought, but the earlier attack met something we have not encountered before. A force screen shields the approaches to the city wall, capable of turning aside shells and lasers, ripping into living flesh with great

sprays of energy. The men call it the 'lightning field' and it stopped them in their tracks.

'The lightning field is the greatest obstacle, but once it falls,' and Marcus was confident that it would fall once they located the generators and disabled them, 'the inner city districts on either side of the river form the final two objectives. The orbital defence weapons inside the hill keep will be silenced and the Raven Guard can launch their drop attack on the fortifications beyond the city.'

'Orbital support?'

The question was asked by general Kayhil of the Pioneers; a short, wiry man in his later years dressed in non-descript camouflage fatigues.

'Not until we silence the defences,' replied Marcus. 'We cannot risk any ships in low orbit and any other strikes would be too inaccurate. We need precision strikes to remove the lightning field. Once we have taken out the energy screen we will have air support, but the objective is to take the city, not level it.'

The vice-caesari waited to see if there were any other questions from the assembled officers. At the back of his mind he could still feel the hot breath of the beast on his skin and the sting of its fangs piercing his flesh. He tried to ignore the sensation but the latest dream had been more vivid than before, leaving Marcus in a state of deep unease. He reviewed the holo-schematic once more, seeking any area of vulnerability.

His gaze settled upon the small town of Lavlin, four kilometres to the west along the main axis of advance. It had been hit heavily by the Capricorn Thirteenth and an orbital attack in the previous days, and a sweep by the Pioneers had confirmed it was clear of enemies, but now Marcus's eye was drawn to it.

'We are sure that the flank at Lavlin is secure?' he asked Kayhil.

'No enemy troops there twelve hours ago,' the general said with a shrug. 'We could perform another

reconnaissance sweep into the ruins, but that would take time; I cannot spare men from the main attack.'

Marcus considered his options, stroking his freshly shaven chin. For all that the plan seemed to be secure – as secure as any plan could be – he could not rid himself of the doubts caused by his nightmare and the retreat earlier that day.

Again and again his eyes flickered back to Lavlin.

'I will detail ten companies to act as a reserve, in case the flank is threatened.' He turned his attention to one of the screens, showing the face of Princeps Senioris Niadansal of the Legio Vindictus, who had joined the council from the bridge of his Warlord Titan.

'Please assign two battle Titans to the reserve, princeps,' said Marcus.

'It seems a waste of resource,' the Titan commander replied brusquely, brow furrowing. 'Ten companies and two Titans might be sorely missed during the main assault.'

'We can breach the lightning field without them,' Marcus countered. 'They can move forwards and support the main attack once the flank is secure.'

'Do you have some intelligence we have not seen, vice-caesari?' asked Colonel Golade of the Capricorns. 'Why the sudden doubt over Lavlin?'

'No intelligence,' Marcus said quickly. He took a moment, calming himself. 'It is imperative that we advance on the city unmolested, that is all. Better to be sure than regretful.'

'Perhaps you are being overly cautious, vice-caesari,' suggested Golade. 'Casualties are an inevitable consequence of war.'

Valerius bit back a reply, thinking that the Capricorns were not in the assault force, safe behind siege lines located kilometres from the city. Instead, he simply grunted and shrugged.

'Cautious, yes, but not overly so, colonel,' Marcus said evenly, keeping his temper in check. Golade did not know what Marcus felt deep inside and could not be blamed for his doubts.

‘Who is to command the reserve?’ asked Antonius. Dressed in the colourful uniform of the Therions, complete with the red sash of office across his breastplate, the praefector reminded Marcus of himself a few years ago when he had been bringing planets to compliance; more than two years of war against the traitors had not marred Antonius’s optimism. Marcus envied his younger brother’s hopefulness, but after seeing what had happened at Isstvan and experiencing the treachery of Horus first-hand, Marcus had given up any thought of ultimate victory and simply accepted each battle as it came.

‘You will,’ Marcus replied. There was nobody he trusted more and the presence of the *Iron General* was not essential to the main assault. ‘I will send details of the detachment, six infantry companies, four armoured, before you take your shuttle back to the *Iron General*.’

Antonius accepted the responsibility with a nod, a curious look in his eyes. At first Marcus thought he saw suspicion in the expressions of the others, but realised it was his paranoia; the other officers were dubious of the sudden change of plan but nothing more.

‘Any other considerations we have not covered?’ Marcus asked, changing the subject. The assembled council offered no further comments or questions in the brief pause. ‘Good. Golade’s bombardment commences in thirty minutes. We attack in forty-five.’

The bridge of the *Contemptuous* buzzed with comm-net feeds and the vox-chatter of Marcus’s subordinates. Every minute or so the main cannon fired, causing the Capitol Imperialis to shudder, the deafening boom muffled by audio dampeners.

Marcus concentrated on the main display, which had been divided into seven sub-screens showing the battle-telemetry across the five-kilometre-long front. One display was hooked into a live-feed from the recon craft in the upper atmosphere above the city, showing the pulverised

defences below. The fire of the Capricorns continued to rain down, shells and missiles concentrating on the pillboxes and weapons batteries.

Five more were schematics of the Pioneers' and Therions' advance into the outskirts of Milvian. Infantry brigades moved swiftly from building to building, covered by Warhound Titans of the Legio Vindictus. Progress was swift, and it seemed the bulk of the enemy had been withdrawn to the wall as Marcus had expected. Even so, the attack was methodical and thorough, leaving nothing to fortune.

A kilometre behind the infantry came the tanks and assault guns of Therion and Capricorn. In long columns they crawled forwards along the main boulevards and avenues, accompanied by more infantry to ensure they were not ambushed.

The remaining screen was a pict-feed around the headquarters transport, the vista of smoke-shrouded streets slightly blurred by the six banks of void shields protecting the massive command vehicle. A flicker of las-fire, blossoms of explosions and columns of smoke painted the scene. The blur of artillery sped across the cloudy sky and plumes of dust from collapsing buildings billowed along streets. From across the comm, a constant background to innumerable reports and conversations, the chatter and whine of small-arms fire was punctuated by louder detonations. Men and women exchanged terse reports, swore and cursed, reeled off target grids and barked the names of subordinates.

It felt quite distant, a step removed from Marcus as he listened and watched. He would catch a snippet of a sergeant berating his squad for falling back and then the sonorous chant of a Mechanicum servitor churning out scan vectors, broken by the crackle of static and hiss of cipher dampening. There were shouts, cries of pain, and on the screens tiny symbols would flash or disappear as the battle ebbed and flowed. Minuscule markings wormed their way along back alleys and were baulked at enemy-held junctions. Arrows of projected advances, triangles of tertiary

objectives seized and circles denoting cannon fire zones covered the screens in a seemingly anarchic pattern.

Marcus did not try to comprehend it all; less than a tenth of what was going on filtered into his conscious thoughts. Now and then he would ask for clarification from one of his Tribunes, but it was not his part to manage every detail of the conflict. His eye was on the broad sweep, and in this regard all was progressing as he had hoped.

Now and then his attention was drawn to the last sub-screen, over which scrolled the casualty listing of the eighteen phalanxes of the Therions. Two thousand and thirty men had fallen in the first attack – not all of them dead – but the rate of loss had slowed as the army made progress past the outer line of defenders.

Four kilometres behind and three kilometres to the west, on the right flank of the advance, the *Iron General* and attending companies waited for the command to attack. The assault had begun an hour ago and there was no sign of threat from Lavlin, but Marcus was not yet ready to shake off his misgivings and commit the reserve.

The *Contemptuous* supported the main attack, ploughing along the main thoroughfare of Milvian towards the outer limits of the lightning field. The defensive screen had not been tested against the void shields of a Titan or Capitol Imperialis and Marcus had determined the super-fortress was the best means of destroying one of the generators. Once a breach was made in the field's coverage other forces would target the rest of the generators.

There was more to Marcus leading the attack than simple pragmatism. After the repulse of his earlier assault he wanted to prove to his men, and more importantly to Lord Corax, that he and his Therions could be relied upon. When they had been founded they had served the Emperor himself and the primarch of the Raven Guard deserved no lesser service.

The *Contemptuous* ground forwards, pulverising deserted groundcars and abandoned tanks that lay in the command fortress's path. The batteries on both flanks and the main cannon were unleashing their fire into the surrounding city blocks, levelling everything within a few hundred metres. The shells of the defenders detonated around the advancing behemoth. Now and then a direct hit would shimmer across the void shields, engulfing the *Contemptuous* in a blazing aura of purple and gold.

In the wake of the gargantuan engine, Therion tanks and infantry waited to pour forwards to exploit any breakthrough.

Marcus knew that the battle was at its hinge-point, with the success or failure of the entire invasion in the balance of the next hour. Though the advance through the outer city had been swift, the traitors had been wise to marshal their resources inside the lightning field and the attack had almost ground to a standstill. There were numerous requests from Marcus's subordinates to commit the reserve; the added firepower of the Titans and companies were in demand all across the front.

'Generator site within range, vice-Caesari,' reported one of the Tribunes.

'Target main weapon systems, fire for full effect.'

As the order left Marcus's lips another Tribune blurted out a warning from his position at the sensor panels.

'Enemy Warlord Titan, eight hundred metres, sector four, targeting us.' A sub-screen blurred and brought up an image of the traitor war engine, its outline hazy beyond its void shields. 'Shall we redirect fire?'

'Negative,' snapped Marcus. 'Concentrate all weapons on the field generator. Our void shields can weather the enemy fire. Our Titans will respond.'

The *Contemptuous* shook as it unleashed a full barrage from its cannons and heavy weapons. Half a kilometre ahead a building exploded into a storm as the lightning field

detonated, sending rockcrete and molten metal hundreds of metres into the air amongst arcing shafts of energy.

A triumphant shout across the command deck was silenced by a call from the sensorium Tribune.

‘Warp missile, vice-caesari!’

The sub-screen zoomed in on one of the traitor Titan’s carapace weapon hard points. A missile ten metres long launched in a plume of blue fire. It covered the first hundred metres in seconds before its miniature warp engine activated. The missile disappeared for a moment, leaving a contrail of wavering white-and-green warp energy. A second later it reappeared, just two hundred metres from the *Contemptuous*.

‘Brace for impact!’ roared Valerius as the incoming ordnance skipped into the warp again.

The vice-caesari grabbed hold of the command console as the warp missile appeared inside the Capitol Imperialis’s void shields and detonated. Marcus was flung to the deck as the *Contemptuous* rocked on its tracks, teetering for a few long moments before crashing back onto the road.

Warning sirens blared, deafening Marcus as he pushed himself to his feet. Blood streamed down his face from a cut on his brow. He wiped it away with the frocked sleeve of his shirt.

‘Damage control. Return fire. Is the field down yet?’

‘No, vice-caesari,’ said one of the Tribunes. ‘Wait... I think it’s... Yes, it’s down!’

‘Shall we commit the reserves?’ asked another.

Marcus was on the verge of complying, knowing that any significant delay risked the enemy recovering from the lightning field’s failure, delaying the assault on the anti-orbital guns. His men and their allies were dying in their hundreds to push on but their deaths would be for nothing if the batteries on the far side were not secured by midday.

He was about to contact Antonius when his personal comm-link beeped. To Marcus’s surprise, it was his brother.

‘Vice-caesari, we are detecting movement through the ruins of Lavlin. They are broadcasting Raven Guard identifiers and are requesting passage through the line.’

‘Are you sure, Antonius?’ Marcus could barely concentrate amongst the blaring of the klaxons, the barked reports of his tribunes and the throbbing from the wound on his face. ‘I have had no report from the primarch or his commanders that the Legion is operating in this area.’

‘Comm-checks and sensor sweeps confirm a sizeable force of warriors and vehicles moving on our position. Perhaps there has been a change of plan?’

Marcus was taken aback by the news. While it was possible more of the Raven Guard’s army auxiliaries were joining the battle – several were spread across the planet fighting independently in line with Corax’s strategy – it stretched credulity to think that he would not be informed of their presence on his battle front.

‘You are sure they are transmitting the appropriate call signs and codes?’

‘They are Raven Guard signals, vice-caesari. A few days old, but they clear our protocol servitors.’

The vision of the many-headed serpent fluttered through Marcus’s thoughts and his gut writhed. It was more than coincidence, it had to be.

‘The signals are false, Antonius. Open fire.’

‘Brother? You want us to fire on allies? Have you gone mad?’

Marcus considered the accusation for a moment, and drew no conclusion one way or the other. Perhaps he was mad, but perhaps not. If the arriving force were enemies they would have a clear attack into the rear of the Therions. The whole force would have to be pulled back to counter them. Though Marcus was not sure of his sanity, his instincts were screaming at him to be aware of deception. The primarch himself had given strict orders concerning comms security since the crisis at Ravendelve. Marcus was well within his authority.

‘Open fire on approaching forces. Traitors have breached our protocols. This is an enemy attack!’

‘Marcus...’

‘Open fire, or I will have you removed from command!’

The comm went silent. Marcus waited nervously, fidgeting with the red sash across his chest, yet there was no doubt in his mind he had done the right thing. He watched as the enemy Titan’s void shields flared and failed under the pounding of the main cannon and converging fire from friendly Titans arriving from all directions.

Nearly three minutes trickled past, during which Marcus was expecting to receive an irate communication from Branne, or perhaps even Lord Corax himself. He wiped the sweat from his face with the cuff of his jacket and stared at the screens, forcing himself to observe the ongoing battle.

‘Vice-caesari, reports of fighting on the western flank.’ One of the Tribunes delivered the message breathlessly, face reddened with shock. ‘Praefector Antonius has engaged an enemy force on the outskirts of Lavlin. Reserve Phalanx and Titans are moving forwards to engage.’

‘I understand.’ Marcus forced himself to remain calm. He let out a long breath and spoke in a measured tone. ‘Send word to all commanders. Focus on the assault. The threat is being dealt with. Any confirmation on the identity of the enemy?’

‘Nothing confirmed, vice-caesari, but initial visual reports indicate army units bearing the colours of the Alpha Legion.’

Marcus nodded, the news unsurprising. Ever since their attempt to destroy the Raven Guard gene-seed two years earlier, Alpha legion warriors and operatives had been dogging the primarch’s warriors, though he had not faced them directly.

‘Send word to Legion command. Inform them that security protocols have been compromised. Recommend immediate evaluation of all forces and plans.’

The comm beeped again in his ear.

‘By the Emperor, brother, why did you not tell us you suspected such an attack?’ asked Antonius.

What could Marcus say? None save for Pelon knew about the dream, and Marcus was not about to broadcast the fact to the entire army.

‘Simply prudence, brother, nothing more. Do you need additional forces?’

‘No, vice-caesari. The Titans and tanks are pushing them back already. Prudence be praised, eh?’

‘Something like that.’

Weary but victorious, Marcus flopped onto his bed. It was past midnight and there were still forces fighting in the city but he could leave the mopping-up to the others. He had received word from Branne that the drop on the enemy bunker complex had been a complete success. Four thousand enemy had been killed and a number of traitor commanders had been captured, including a single Alpha Legionnaire who had been coordinating the defence. The Raven Guard commander had been earnest in his praise of Marcus and the efforts of his army and had, thankfully, made no mention of Marcus’s interception of the treacherous attack.

‘Do you wish to undress, vice-caesari?’

Marcus had not noticed Pelon, who had been waiting patiently for his master’s return. The attendant stood by the bed, hands held out to take Marcus’s jacket. His arm was heavily bandaged and there were burns on his hands. Marcus had heard reports of Pelon’s heroic actions in saving several crewmen from a fire on the weapons decks, and had commended him in his reports to the primarch. He sat up and shrugged off his coat.

‘A moment, Pelon,’ he said as the manservant turned towards the wardrobe.

‘Master?’

‘Those scribblings you had... what did you do with them?’

'I still have them, vice-caesari.' Pelon looked crestfallen.
'Sorry, did you wish me to dispose of them?'

'No, not yet,' Marcus said quietly. He thought of the day's events and knew that he had to find hope from somewhere. He could not continue simply fighting each battle as it came. The emptiness inside would consume him even if the enemy did not kill him. The lightning field, the warp missile and, most of all, the Alpha Legion preyed on his thoughts.
'Let me see them.'

Pelon delved into his pocket and fished out the sheaf of texts, passing them to Marcus after a moment's pause. Fingers tugging at an earlobe, the vice-caesari started to read.

'Love the Emperor for He is the salvation of Mankind. Obey His words for He will lead you into the light of the future. Heed his wisdom for He will protect you from evil. Whisper his prayers with devotion for they will save your soul. Honour His servants for they speak in His voice. Tremble before His majesty for we all walk in His immortal shadow.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GAV THORPE is the New York Times bestselling author of 'The Lion', a novella in the collection The Primarchs. He has written many other Black Library books, including the Horus Heresy novel *Deliverance Lost* and audio drama *Raven's Flight* as well as fan-favourite Warhammer 40,000 novel *Angels of Darkness* and the epic Time of Legends trilogy, The Sundering. He is currently working on a new Dark Angels series, The Legacy of Caliban. Gav hails from Nottingham, where he shares his hideout with the evil genius that is Dennis, the mechanical hamster.



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