

# **The Dark King**

## **Horus Heresy stories**

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Where before there had been light, now there was only darkness. The hot, urgent pulse of near death surged in his veins, the bitter flavour of betrayal fully expected, yet wholly unwelcome. This was what it would come to he knew, this was the inevitable result of naive belief in the goodness of the human heart. Death filled his senses, blood coating his teeth and the sharp reek of it thick in his nostrils.

As though it were yesterday, long buried memories of years spent on the night world of Nostramo emblazoned themselves on the forefront of his thoughts: haunted darkness punctured by stuttering lumen strips that fizzed in the shimmering, rain-slick streets and the stillness of a population kept quiescent with fear.

From out of this foetid darkness had come illumination and hope, the promise of a better future. But now that hope was dashed as the bright lance of the future seared itself into his thoughts...

... the death of a world and a great eye of black and gold watching it burn...

... Astartes fighting to the death beneath a red-lit sky...

... a golden eagle cast from the heavens...

He screamed in pain as images of destruction and the end of all things paraded before his mind's eye. Voices called out to him. He heard his name, the name his father had bestowed upon him and the one his people had given him, in the fearful watches of the dark.

He opened his eyes and let the visions fade from his mind as the sensations of the physical world returned to him. Blood and salty tears stung his eyes and he looked over to the sound of voices calling his name.

Horrified faces stared at him in fear, but that was nothing new. Babble spewed from their mouths, but he could make nothing of it, the sense of the words lost in the screaming white noise filling his skull.

What sight could be so terrible? What could evoke such horror?

He looked down as he realised he squatted atop another, living, breathing figure.

A giant in torn golden robes, his bone-white hair spattered with gleaming ruby droplets.

A mantle of red velvet trimmed with golden weave spread out beneath him like a bloodstain.

Tanned, iron flesh. Opened and bleeding.

He took in the destruction wrought on the body beneath him, raising his hands, balled into fists. Blood dripped from his fingertips and he could taste the warm richness of the genetic mastery encoded into every molecule upon his teeth.

He knew this giant.

His name was legendary, his stony heart and mastery of war unmatched.

His name was Rogal Dorn.

He looked up again as he heard his own name, given voice by a warrior in the golden plate armour of the Imperial Fists who bore the black and white heraldry of its First Captain.

He knew this warrior too...

„Curze!“ cried Sigismund. „What have you done?“

The emptiness of space shimmered in the glow of distant suns beyond the armoured glass, faraway planets and unknown systems turning in their prescribed arcs without thought for the dramas being played out on the stage of human endeavour. What did those who lived beneath these suns know of the Cheraut system and the blood that had been shed to pacify it in the name of the emergent Imperium of Mankind?

Curze stifled the anger such questions provoked, staring into his reflection with cold, obsidian eyes that resembled empty sockets in his pallid, sunken features. Lank hair hung to his neck like black ropes and spilled across his wide, powerful shoulders, he turned from his reflection, uncomfortable with the dreadful disappointment he saw there.

Glinting metal caught his sullen gaze: his armour, standing in a shadowed alcove on the far wall. He crossed the chamber and placed his hand on the skull-faced helmet. The gem-like facets of its lenses winked in the low light and the sweeping dark wings rose from its sides like the pinions of some avenging angel of night. The burnished plates were dark, as befitted the Primarch of the Night Lords, each one contoured perfectly to his form and worked with gold edging that caught the starlight.

Turning from his battle armour, he paced the hard, metallic floor of the gloomy, cavernous chamber that confined him. Thick steel columns supported a great vaulted ceiling, its upper reaches lost in shadow, and the hum of the mighty starfort's reactor beat like a pulse in the metal.

This aesthetic of functional austerity was typical of the Imperial Fists, whose artifice had constructed this mighty orbital fortress as a base of operations with which to begin the compliance of the Cheraut system.

The Emperor's Children had held their traditional victory feast before the first shot had been fired and together with Fulgrim's Legion and the Night Lords, Rogal Dorn's Imperial Fists had broken open the defences of the belligerent human coalition that resisted the coming of the Imperium. Within eight months of hard, bloody fighting, the eagle flew above the smoking ruins of the last bastion, but where Dorn lauded Fulgrim's Legion, the conduct of the Night Lords had earned only his ire.

Matters had finally come to a head amid the silver ruins of Osmium.

Pyres of the dead stained the skies black and Curze had watched his chaplains orchestrating the executions of defeated prisoners when Dorn marched into his camp, his lean face thunderous. „Curze!“

Never once had Rogal Dorn called him by his forename.

„Brother?“ he had replied.

„Throne! What are you doing here?“ demanded Dorn, his normal, affable tone swallowed in the depths of his outrage. A phalanx of gold-armoured warriors followed their lord and Curze had immediately sensed the tension in the air.

„Punishing the guilty,“ he had answered coolly. „Restoring order.“

The Primarch of the Imperial Fists shook his head. „This not order, Curze, it is murder. Order your warriors to stand down. My Imperial Fists will take over this sector.“

„Stand down?“ said Curze. „Are they not the enemy?“

„Not any more,“ said Dorn. „They are prisoners now, but soon they will be a compliant population and part of the Imperium. Have you forgotten the Emperor's purpose in declaring the Great Crusade?“

„To conquer,“ said Curze.

„No,“ said Dorn, placing a golden gauntlet on his shoulder guard. „We are liberators, not destroyers, brother. We bring the light of illumination, not death. We must govern with benevolence if these people are ever to recognise our authority in this galaxy.“

Curze flinched at the touch, resenting the easy friendship Dorn pretended. Bilious anger bubbled invisibly beneath his skin, but if Dorn was aware of it, he gave no sign.

„These people resisted us and must pay the penalty for that crime,“ said Curze. „Obedience to the Imperium will come from the fear of punishment, you know that as well as anyone, Dorn. Kill those that resisted and the others will learn the lesson that to oppose us is to die.“

Dorn shook his head, taking his aim to lead him away from the curious stares their heated discussion was attracting. „You are wrong, but we should speak of this in private.“

„No,“ said Curze, angrily shrugging off Dorn’s grip. „You think these people will bend the knee meekly to us because we show compassion? Mercy is for the weak and foolish. It will only breed corruption and eventual betrayal. Fear of reprisals will keep the rest of this planet in check, not benevolence.“

Dorn sighed. „And the hatred planted in those you leave alive will pass from one generation to the next until this world is engulfed in a war the cause of which none of those fighting will remember. It will never end, don’t you see that? Hate only breeds hate and the Imperium cannot be built upon such bloody foundations.“

„All empires are forged in blood,“ said Curze. „To pretend otherwise is naïve. The rule of law cannot be maintained by the blind hope that human nature is inherently good. Haven’t we seen enough to know that ultimately the mass of humanity must be forced to into compliance?“

„I cannot believe I am hearing this,“ said Dorn. „What has got into you, Curze?“

„Nothing that has not always been there, Dorn,“ said Curze, striding away from the mighty golden figure and hauling one of the few remaining prisoners upright in the front of his tunic. He scooped up a fallen bolter and thrust the heavy gun into the prisoner’s trembling hands.

Curze leaned down and said, „Go ahead. Kill me.“

The terrified man shook his head, the oversized weapon shaking in his hands as though his limbs were palsied.

„No?“ said Curze. „Why not?“

The prisoner tried to speak, but so awed by the terrifying proximity of the primarch that his words were unintelligible.

„Are you afraid you will be killed?“

The man nodded and Curze addressed his warriors, „No one harms this man. No matter what happens, he is not to be punished.“

Curze had turned and walked back towards Dorn with his arms stretched out to either side of him and presenting his back to the prisoner.

No sooner had he turned away from the armed man than the gun had been raised and the hard crack of a bolter shot split the air. Sparks flew as the explosive shell ricocheted from Curze’s armour and he spun on his heel to smash the prisoner’s skull to splinters with his fist.

The headless corpse swayed for a moment before dropping slowly to its knees and pitching onto its chest.

„You see,“ said Curze, his fingers dripping blood and bone fragments.

„And what was that supposed to prove?“ asked Dorn, his features curled in distaste.

„That any chance mortals get they will choose the path of dissent. When he thought he would be punished, he dared not shoot, but the moment he believed himself free from consequence, he acted.“

„That was an unworthy deed,“ said Dorn and Curze had turned away from him before he could elaborate, but the Imperial Fists’ primarch caught his arm. „Your warriors will stand down and withdraw, Curze. That is an order, not a request. Leave this planet. Now.“

Dorn's eyes were hard as granite and Curze knew enough of his brother's resolve to realise he had pushed him far enough. „When this campaign is won, you and I will have words, Curze. You have crossed the line and I will no longer countenance your barbarous methods of war. Your way is not the way of the Imperium.“

„I think you might be right...“ whispered Curze.

And he had led his warriors from the field of battle, their dark armour rendering them as shadows in the ruins.

He wondered what might have happened had he taken the debate to its logical conclusion.

Curze shied away from the violence inherent in such a line of reasoning and ran a hand through his dark hair, feeling like a caged animal as the door to his chamber—his prison—slid open and a warrior in gleaming, midnight-blue armour entered. Through the door, he could see the purple-armoured figures of Fulgrim's Phoenix Guard, their golden halberds and copper scale cloaks glittering in the wan light of the starfort.

Dorn and Fulgrim were taking no chances with his confinement.

The newcomer's head was shaven bald, pale and angular, with hooded eyes of jet beneath a prominent brown and pugnacious jawline.

Curze nodded in acknowledgement at the sight of his equerry, Captain Shang, and beckoned him in with an impatient wave of his hand.

„What news?“ asked Curze as Shang bowed curtly before him.

Shang said, „The Master of the Fists recovers, my lord. A lesser being than a primarch would be dead thrice over with the wounds you dealt him.“

Curze returned his gaze to the tracts of stars beyond the skin of the starfort, all too aware of the severity of Dorn's wounds, having clawed them with his bare hands and teeth.

„Then I must await the judgement of my peers, is that it?“

„With respect, my lord, you did draw the blood of a brother Primarch.“

„And for that they will demand blood in return, no doubt...“

He remembered Dorn coming to his chambers, enraged by the slaughters on Cheraut and incensed at what Fulgrim had told him—secrets Curze had told Fulgrim in confidence some days earlier. The fit had come upon Curze as the Phoenician had told him tales of Chemos, pitching him to the floor and wracking his mind with terrifying visions of a nightmare future of death and unremitting darkness.

Moved by Fulgrim's apparent concern, Curze had confided in his old tutor, telling him of the visions that had plagued him since his earliest days on Nostramo.

A galaxy at war.

Astartes turning on one another.

Death awaiting him at his father's hands...

Fulgrim's pale, aquiline features had remained stoic, but Curze had seen the unease that flickered in his eyes. He had hoped Fulgrim would keep his confession in confidence, but when Dorn had appeared at his door, he knew he was betrayed.

In truth he had little memory of what had occurred after Dorn's storming accusations of insult to the Emperor... the present had faded and the future had seized his mind with agonising visions of a galaxy locked in a cycle of unending war where the alien, the mutant and the rebel arose to feast on the rotting carcass of the Imperium.

This then was the future the Emperor was creating? This was the ultimate destiny of a galaxy where the fear of punishment was not the agent of control. This was the inevitable result of allowing weak men to craft the destiny of Mankind and Curze knew that, of all the primarchs, only one had the force of will required to mould the new Imperium from the soft clay of its present form.

„The time has come to forge our own path, Shang,“ said Curze.

„Then this is the moment you foresaw?“

„Yes. My brothers will seize this opportunity to be rid of us.“

„I believe you are correct,“ agreed Shang. „My sources tell me there is talk, and not idle talk, of recalling the legion to Terra to account for our methods of war.“

„I knew it. Since they cannot kill me, the cowards choose to strike at me through my Legion. You see, Shang? They have been waiting for this opportunity for decades. They are weak fools who have not the stomach to do what must be done, but I do, oh yes, I do indeed.“

„Then what is our course, my lord?“ asked Shang.

„Fulgrim and Dorn may have betrayed me, but we are not without friends amongst the other Legions,“ said Curze. „But first we must put our own house in order. Tell me, what news of Nostramo?“

„It is as we feared, my lord,“ said Shang. „The regime of Administrator-regent Balthius has failed. Corruption is rife, criminals govern from the ruined spires of Nostramo Quintus and lawlessness is endemic.“

„Then I have no time to waste while small minded fools decide my fate as though I am a lowly menial to be chastised.“

„What are your orders, my lord?“ asked Shang.

„Ready our ships, captain,“ said Curze. „We return to Nostramo.“

„But you have been ordered to remain in seclusion, my lord,“ pointed out Shang. „Lord Fulgrim's praetorians and Dorn's Templars guard your chambers.“

Curze grinned crookedly and said, „Leave them to me...“

Curze lifted the last piece of his armour from the shadowed alcove and raised it above his head. He turned towards the door of his chamber and lowered his helmet until the skull-faced visor connected to his gorget with a hiss of pressurisation. His vision shifted subtly and his perceptions broadened as he blended with the shadows of the dimly lit chamber.

He slowed his breathing and stretched out his senses, the darkness a second home to him after so many years spent in its embrace as a predator on the weak and guilty. He felt a moment's regret that it had come to this, but he quashed such notions viciously. Doubt, regret and hesitancy were weaknesses others might suffer from, but not Konrad Curze.

His breathing deepened and the tenebrous chamber came alive to him.

Curze felt power in the darkness; the cold intellect of hunters and creatures of the night that killed beneath its cloak. Lethal instincts honed on a thousand battlefields were now heightened to undreamed of levels and would now serve him equally well on this one.

He spread his arms wide and a ripple of psychic force pulsed like the blast wave of an explosion with Curze at its epicentre. The hanging glow strips filling the chamber exploded in quick succession, detonating one after another in showers of pellucid sparks. Broken glass tinkled musically to the steel deck in a glass rain.

Sputtering power cables swayed from the ceiling, hissing and fizzing like angry snakes as electric discharge strobed blue across the room.

Hostile red warning lights blinked. Cold light eased inside as the door opened and a handful of armoured warriors stood silhouetted.

Curze leapt straight up, gripping the open lattice structure of the nearest column and swinging himself up into the deeper darkness of the chamber before the light could reach him. His legs swung around the column and he climbed higher as the warriors spread out with their halberds extended before them.

He heard them call his name, their voices echoing in the darkness.

A twist of muscle and he was airborne, a glimmering shadow of dead stars and extinction. The warriors below would have the senses of their battle plate to penetrate the darkness, but they paled in comparison to those of the Night Lords' primarch. Where others saw only light and dark, Curze saw all the myriad hues and shades that were invisible to those who had not become one with its fuliginous depths,

One of the Phoenix Guard stood directly beneath him, scanning the chamber for its captive occupant, unaware that his doom lurked in the shadows above.

Curze spun around the column, looping lower with each revolution and holding his hand out like an axe blade. The warrior died with his head sliced cleanly from his shoulders, the iron flesh of the primarch smashing through his armoured gorget. No sooner was the blow delivered than Curze was in motion, swooping through the darkness like a shadow.

Cries of alarm echoed as his gaolers realised he was amongst them, stabbing beams of helmet lamps crisscrossing madly as they sought to pinpoint his location. With skill borne of decades spent as a murderous hunter of men, Curze ghosted invisibly between the beams of light.

Another warrior fell with his torso ripped open, blood squirting from torn arteries like ruptured pressure hoses. Gunfire split the darkness, starbursts of muzzle flashes, as the warriors opened fire on their unseen attacker. None came close, for wherever they fired, Curze was already far from harm's way, spinning through the air like a malignant phantom and twisting between the bolts and wildly slashing blades.

One of Dorn's Templars backed towards a pool of light and Curze slid through the darkness towards him, moving impossibly silently for an armoured warrior. A sensation unlike anything he had felt previously danced in his blood and Curze savoured it as he understood it for what it was.

Contrary to Guilliman's rash pronouncement, it seemed Astartes could know fear...

This fear—such as it was—was something to be treasured. Mortal fear was a rancid, sweaty thing, but this... this was caged lightning in the marrow.

Curze pounced towards the armoured Templar, one of Dorn's best and bravest.

Veteran or not, he died as any other man did—in blood and agony.

„Death haunts the darkness,“ shouted Curze. „And he knows your names.“

He could hear frantic calls for reinforcements, but the superior systems of his own armour easily jammed them as he took to the air once more and vaulted from shadow to shadow.

„No one is coming,“ he said. „You are going to die alone here.“

Spraying blasts of gunfire followed his pronouncements as the warriors sought to pinpoint his location in the darkness.

But Curze owned the darkness and no matter what light or senses these warriors depended upon, they were not nearly enough to stop him from killing them, he could see the survivors—a Templar and two of the Phoenix Guard—backing towards the door. They now realised this was a fight they could not win, but had made the mistake of thinking that a fight with Konrad Curze was one you could walk away from.

Laughing with the joy of the hunt, a pleasure he had forgotten without worthy prey to test him, he soared through the air and dropped into their midst like an assassin.

His fist punched through the armour of the first Phoenix Guard, and Curze wrenched his victim's spinal column out. Leaving the bloody curve of crushed bone protruding from the gaping wound, he snatched the dead warrior's halberd and dropped to the floor as the other warriors turned towards the agonised scream.

Before they could react, Curze swept the halberd out in a wide, circular arc, the blade twice the width of a handspan above the deck. The energised edge cut through battle plate, meal and bone with a searing, electric tang.

Both warriors fell to the deck, grunting in pain as they collapsed onto the bloody stumps of their legs. Curze hurled his stolen halberd aside and blocked a return strike from the fallen Phoenix Guard.

He snapped his enemy's weapon in two and jammed the splintered ends through his chest.

The Templar roared in anger, managing to get off a shot before Curze was upon him. He ripped the weapon from his victim's grip and planted one knee on his chest, the other on his left arm.

The pinned warrior reached up with his free arm to strike at him.

Curze caught the blow and ripped the arm from its socket.

Emergency lights began kicking in with a rising hum and thump of relays, and the chamber was suddenly illuminated with a harsh, white glow that dispelled the shadows and banished the darkness.

Where before there had been darkness, now there was only light.

And what had once been a place of imprisonment was now an abattoir.

Curling arcs of blood spray coated the walls and floor, and shattered, headless, limbless bodies lay strewn about like spilled surgical waste.

Curze smiled at the scene of slaughter and the persona he had worn like a disguise since he had first knelt before his father fell away like a discarded mask.

Now he was no longer Konrad Curze.

Now he was the Night Haunter.

Night Haunter turned over the last card and his jawline tightened as the familiar pattern emerged once more. The strategium of his flagship was kept dark, the faint blue light of consoles and hololithic displays islands of light in the darkness. The Primarch of the Night Lords paid no attention to his



surroundings, ignoring the pregnant pressure of anticipation that bristled from every member of his bridge crew.

A deck of worn cards sat on the softly glowing lectern before him, their edges scuffed and curled from decades of shuffling and dealing. Little more than a parlour game played by the indolent rich of Nostramo Quintus, he had since discovered that variations of these cards had been employed in the hives of Merica and by the tribes of the Franc as a means of divination in the time before Old Night had descended.

The cards apparently corresponded to the stratification of society at the time, with the various suits representing warriors, priests, merchants and workers. Ancient belief held that the future could be read in the patterns of cards known as the lesser Arcanoi, but such traditions were outmoded concepts in this colourless, secular galaxy...

Except that no matter how thoroughly he shuffled the cards and dealt them on the polished glass of the lectern, the pattern was always the same.

The Moon, the Martyr and the Monster lay in a triangular pattern. The King lay reversed at the feet of the Emperor on one side of the pattern, and on the other, also reversed, was the Dove—a card academics postulated was a symbol of hope. The card he had just dealt sat at the top of the pattern, a card that had changed little over the centuries and the meaning of which, though often misinterpreted, was unmistakable.

Death.

He heard footsteps and looked up to see Captain Shang approaching, clad in his battle plate and wrapped in his ceremonial black cape of gleaming patagium. His helmet's flaring wings framed a death mask of an alien skull, its tusked lower jaw thrust beyond his throat.

Behind his equerry, Night Hunter could see the gently rotating orb of Nostramo displayed on the viewscreen. Thick clouds of pollutants ringed the grey planet, shot through with emphysemic yellows and leprous browns. The radiation-blasted moon of Tenebor was just visible as a sickly orb emerging from the stained-lung corona of Nostramo's dying sun.

„What it is, captain?“ asked Night Hunter.

„Word from the Choir chambers, my lord.“

Night Hunter chuckled mirthlessly. „My brothers?“

„It would appear so, my lord,“ said Shang. „The astropaths sense a psychic bow-wave that appears to indicate a great many vessels approaching through the Empyrean.“

„Dorn,“ said Night Hunter, returning his attention to the cards before him.

„Undoubtedly. What are your orders, my lord?“

Looking once again at the world of his youth, Night Hunter felt the ever-present anger seething under his skin like hot magma beneath the fragile crust of a dying planet.

„Nostramo was once the very model of a pacified planet, Shang,“ said Night Hunter. „Its populace was kept compliant through fear of the harsh punishment I would mete out to any who broke my laws. Every citizen knew his place and to break the law was death.“

„I remember, my lord.“

„And now we return to this...“ said Night Hunter, sweeping the cards from the lectern to reveal a slowly scrolling list of text. „A murder every eleven seconds, a rape every nine seconds, violent crimes increasing exponentially

every month, suicide rates doubling every year. Within a decade, there will be nothing left of the ordered world I left behind.“

„Without fear of reprisal, humanity reverts to its basest instincts, my lord.“

Night Hunter nodded. „This is it, Shang, the ultimate proof that the Emperor’s belief in the goodness of mankind is folly of the worst kind.“

Shang hesitated before speaking again, „Then you intend to go through with the attack?“

„Of course,“ said Night Hunter, staring at the doomed planet. „Only the most extreme measures will serve as an example of our strength of will. Nostramo is dead to us now. We have come for you all...“

The primarch marched along the central walkway of the strategium to stand beneath the image of Nostramo. The moon was emerging more fully from behind the planet and reflected light glinted on the hulls of the Night Lords’ fleet—a half century of vessels arrayed in battle formation above the diseased, corrupt boil that was the labyrinthine, crime-ridden spires of Nostramo Quintus.

Far below was a great wound in the surface, a plunging chasm his fiery arrival had smashed in the planet’s crust. Since he had emerged from its hellish depths he had known pain and suffering the likes of which others could not even guess. He had borne the pain of his tortured growth and lived with the awful self-knowledge of his own death.

And his brothers wondered why he appeared moribund...

He heard a commotion beside him and even before the word went out, Night Hunter could feel the tearing pressure of scores of ships emerging from the gates of the Empyrean with senses beyond the five possessed by his minions.

„Too late, my brothers...“ he whispered. „I will be gone before you can stop me.“

Night Hunter took one last look at Nostramo and said, „All ships. Open fire.“

Incandescent spears of blinding white light leapt from the barrels of uncounted batteries, stabbing down at the world below. Converging and multiplying their energies, the power of a thousand caged stars coalesced into a pillar of light thicker than the widest spire of Nostramo Quintus.

The great beam dispelled the darkness that shrouded Nostramo, the skies bathed in light and fire blooming into life as the awful heat of the Night Lord’s bombardment ignited the air for kilometres in all directions.

The blinding lance of pure energy penetrated the impermeable adamantium crust of Nostramo through the ancient fault line torn by the primarch’s arrival. Unimaginable energies tore downwards through the planet’s layers until they reached the core in a cataclysmic explosion the likes of which the galaxy had rarely seen.

Night Hunter watched the death of Nostramo with calm detachment, feeling the enormity of the action he had just taken settle upon him like a dark shroud. Strangely, it was not the burden he had expected. As he watched tectonic plates split apart and the molten heart of the planet ooze up to swallow the landscape and away burn the atmosphere, the only sensation of which he was conscious was intense relief.

The past was dead and he had shown that the creed he lived by was more than just empty words. The shockwave of this terrifying act would reverberate around the Imperium and come to the attention of those who, like him, understood the sacrifices needed to preserve the galaxy for humanity.

Nostramo burned and Night Haunter said, „I take this burden of this evil upon myself and I will not fear it, for I am fear incarnate...”

