

# The Lightning Tower

**Horus Heresy stories**

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What are you afraid of? What are you really afraid of?

There was once a fine palace, and it sat like a crown of light upon the top of the world. This was in the latter days, when mankind left his birth rock for the second time, to chase a destiny denied him in a previous epoch.

The artisan masters of the many rival Masonic guilds had raised the palace up, block by gilded block, to be a statement of unity, regal and unequivocal. After a dreary, lightless Age of Strife, the warring tribes and creeds of Terra had been alloyed under one rule, and the palace was intended to symbolise that staggering achievement. All the petty dynasts and ethnarchs, all the clan-nations and gene-septs, all the despots and pan-continental tyrants, had been quelled or crushed, overthrown or annexed. Some, the smartest and most prescient, had offered terms and been embraced to the bosom of the new rule. Better fealty than the wrath of the warriors in thunder armour.

Better submission than the enmity of the world's new master.

It was said that once you had seen him, or heard him speak, you were never in doubt again. He was the one, and had always been the one. He had been the Emperor long before there was any such office to take. No one knew his birth name, because he had always, naturally, been the Emperor.

Even the artisan masters of the Masonic guilds, famous for their sanctimonious craft wars and vainglorious quarrels, shut up and, in conceit, built the palace for him.

It was monumental. It was not so much an edifice as a handcrafted land-mass. The artisan masters built it upon Terra's greatest mountain range, and transformed the monstrous peaks into its bulwarks. It towered above a world laid to waste by centuries of war and perdition, and though that world was being rebuilt, with wondrous cities and architectural marvels blooming in the new age of Unity, nothing could match its magnificence.

For it was beautiful, a euphoric vision of gold and silver. It was said that, when they had finished their task, the artisan masters of the Masonic guilds set down their tools and wept.

By the time it was complete, it was the largest single man-made structure in known space. Its footings sank deep into the planet's mantle, its towers probed the airless limits of the atmosphere. It owned the words „the palace“ wholly, without any need for qualification, as if no other palaces existed.

He had blemished that glory. He had raised dark curtain walls around the golden halls, and cased the soaring towers in skins of armour ten metres thick. He had stripped away the jewelled facades and the crystelephantine ornamentation, the delicate minarets and the burnished cupolas, and in their places he had implanted uncountable turrets and ordnance emplacements. He had dug mighty earthworks out of the surrounding lowlands, and fortified them with a million batteries. He had yoked platforms into synchronous orbits to guard from above, their weapon banks armed and trained, day and night. He had put his men upon the walls, armoured in gold and set for the coming war.

His name was Dorn, and he was not proud of his work.

Vadok Singh, the warmason, had a habit of stroking architectural plans as he laid them out, as if they were a beloved pet.

„Necessity,“ he said, his favourite word, stroking out the revised schemata of the Dhawalagiri elevation.

„It's ugly,“ said Dorn. He stood away from the table, leaning against one of the planning chamber's thick columns, his arms folded across his broad chest.

„Ugly is what they will do if they find the Annapurna Gate weak and flimsy,“ Singh replied, lie stood back and lit his boc pipe from a taper, allowing his flock of slaves to finish laying out the designs and adjusting the brass armature of the viewing lenses that would magnify details and project them onto the chamber wall for closer examination.

Dorn shrugged. „It's still ugly. The orbis and lazulite work encrusting that gate took Menzo of Travert thirty years to complete. Pilgrims flock here simply to see it. They say it surpasses even the Eternity Gate in its aesthetic.“

„Aesthetic, now?“ Singh smiled. He began to pace, trailing blue smoke from the bowl of his long-stemmed pipe. His slaves followed him up and down the chamber, like a timorous litter of young following their mother. Singh was a tall man, taller than the primarch, but skeletally thin. His guild gene-bred their bloodline to favour height for purposes of surveying and overseeing.

„I do so love our conversations, Rogal. They are quite contrary. You, the warrior, and me, the craftsman, and you lecture me on aesthetics.“

„I'm not lecturing,“ Dorn replied. He was aware of Sigismund and Archamus in the corner of the great room, stiffening at the warmason's use of his forename. Dorn would hear about „proper respect and protocol“ again later.

„Of course you're not,“ said Singh, „but it is a necessity. How many Legions does the Upstart have with him now?“

Dorn heard Sigismund rise to his feet. He turned and stared at the first captain of the Imperial Fists. Sigismund glowered back for a second, then left the chamber.

Dorn glanced back at the warmason. „Too many,“ he said Singh held out a long, spindly arm in the direction of the schemata. „So?“

„Begin work tomorrow at sunrise. Dismantle the gate with care, and store the dismantled elements in the vaults. We will put the work back when this is done.“

Singh nodded.

We will put everything back, thought Dorn. When this is done, we will put everything back the way it was.

A katabatic wind was coming in off the lower bulwarks that night. The palace was so immense, the precipice walls bred their own microclimate. Greasy stars swam in the heat ripple of the palace's new reactors. The void shields were being tested again.

Not a palace. Not the palace anymore, a fortress.

Some of those sullen stars were orbital platforms, catching the last backscatter of the sunlight as Terra turned. Dorn put on a fur-edged robe that had been in his possession since his adolescence on Inwit, and went out to walk the parapets of the Dhawalagiri prospect, to dwell upon its beauty one last time. It was one of the last sections of the palace that remained untouched. Adamantium armour plates, drab prestressed rockcrete and auto-turrets had yet to blight its ethereal lines.

Soon, though. From the wall, Dorn could see the half a million campfires of the Masonic host, the labour army that would invade the prospect come sunrise with their mallets and chisels and cranes.

The robe had been his grandfather's, though Dorn had long since understood that no ties or blood linked him to the Inwit ice caste that had raised him. He had been created from another genetic line, that most singular line, in a sterile vault deep beneath him in the buried core of the palace.

Not a palace. Not the palace anymore, a fortress.

Dorn had been built to rule, built to assist in his father's tireless ambitions, built to make the hard decisions. He had been made as a primarch, one of only twenty in the galaxy, engineered by the master architect of mankind, the arch-mason of genetic code.

The Imperium needs many things, but foremost it needs the ability to protect itself, to attack when necessary. That's why I gave it twenty strong teeth in its mouth.

Attacking was a remarkably easy thing to do. Dorn's physical prowess humbled all but twenty human beings in creation, and those twenty were his father and his nineteen brothers. In Dorn's opinion, the real art was knowing when not to attack. His grandfather, the old Inwit sire, patriarch of the ice-hive clan, had taught him that.

Dorn had been the seventh lost son to be reclaimed. By the time his father's forces found him, he had become a system warlord in his own right, ruling the Inwit Cluster as the head of the House of Dorn. His grandfather had been dead forty winters, but still the warlord had slept with the fur-edged robe across his body at night. His people had called him „emperor“ until the true meaning of that title had been demonstrated by a thousand warships in the Inwit sky. Dorn had gone out to meet his father aboard Phalanx, one ship against thousands, but what a ship: a fortress. His father had been impressed. Dorn had always excelled in the construction of fortresses.

That was why Dorn had returned to Terra with his gene-sire. Out of love, out of devotion, out of obedience, yes, but most of all, out of necessity, damn Singh. The stars had turned over, and Chaos had spilled out from under them. The brightest of all had fallen and the unthinkable, the heretical, had become fact.

The Imperium was attacking itself. The Warmaster, for reasons Dorn was quite at a loss to fathom, had turned upon their father, and was committing his forces to all-out war. That war would come to Terra. There was no question.

It would come. Terra needed to be ready. The palace needed to be ready. His father had asked him, as a personal boon, to return to Terra and fortify it for war.

No better man for the task. No better master of defences. Dorn and his Fists, appointed the Emperor's praetorians, could fend off any attack.

Below him, the halls of Terra were silent, and the walls deep. The only sound was the distant, eternal hum of the Astronomican. The Palace Dorn had armoured and defaced sat like a dark crown on the top of the world.

Royal Dorn had built many of the finest strongholds in creation: the city fortresses on Zavamunda, the pylon spire of Gallant, the donjons along the Ruthan Marches. Impregnable bastions all, palaces for governor lords to rule from. None of them had been so essential as this fortification. None of them had been as painful to accomplish. It had been like blotting out the light or draining a sea. The bright glory of his father's triumph, the enduring monument to Unity, had been entombed inside a crude shell of utilitarian defence.

All because of Horus, because of the brightest bastard son, the bringer of new strife.

Dorn heard stone splinter. He looked down, he had punched his fist, his Imperial fist, through a block of stone in the parapet. He had barely registered the impact. The block was pulverised.

„My lord, is everything all right?“

Archamus had shadowed him from the planning chamber. Never so volatile as Sigismund, Archamus was the master of Dorn's huscarl retinue.

There was a worried look on Archamus's face.

„Just venting my emotions,“ Dorn said.

Archamus regarded the splintered block. „Making work for Singh's artisans, then?“

„Something like that.“

Archamus nodded. He hesitated, and looked out over the high walls towards the distant earthworks of the Mahabarat. „You have wrought a wonder, you know.“

„I have ruined one.“

„I know you hate it, but it had to be so. And no one could have done it better.“

Dorn sighed. „You're kind, old friend, but my heart is lead. This should never have been necessary. I search the limits of my imagination, and still I can conceive of nothing that begins to explain this war. Pride and ambition, insult, jealousy? They are not enough, not nearly enough, not for a primarch. They are too petty and mortal to drive a primarch to such extremity. They might provoke an argument, a feud at the worst. They would not split the galaxy in half.“ Dorn looked up at the night sky. „And yet, against all reason, he comes.“

„Guilliman will stop him.“

„Roboute is far away.“

„Russ, then. The Lion. The Khan.“

Dorn shook his head. „I don't think they'll stop him either. I think he'll roll on until he reaches us.“

„Then we'll stop him,“ said Archamus. „Won't we, sir?“

„Of course we will. I just wish—“

„What?“

„Nothing.“

„You wish what, sir?“ Archamus asked.

„Nothing.“

The wind suddenly pulled at Dorn's fur-edged robe. Above them, the shields went out and then test fired again.

„Can I ask you a question, sir?“ asked Archamus.

„Of course.“

„Who are you really afraid of?“

Consider the question, Rogal Dorn. The first axiom of defence is to understand what you defend against. What are you afraid of? Who are you afraid of?

Dorn paced the halls of the Kath Mandau Precinct where the organs of the Adeptus Terra did their work. The Precinct, an entire city contained within the terraced compounds of the inner palace, never slept. Robed clerks and burnished servitors bustled along the broad concourses. Ministers and ambassadors conducted business beneath the kilometre-high roof of the Hegemon. The great mechanism of the Imperium whirled about him, its relentless function like a licking timepiece. This was what Unity had brought, this and the near measureless expanse of worlds and dominions that it guided and administered.

For two hundred years, the Emperor and his primarchs had fought to create the Imperium. They had waged the Great Crusade from star to star, to forge the empire of man, an epic undertaking they had all made without hesitation, because they believed, with utter conviction, in the bright destiny it would shape for their species. They had all believed. All of them.

What was he afraid of? Who was he afraid of? Angron? Not him. Dorn would split his head without compunction if they came face to face. Lorgar? Magnus? There had always been a foetid whiff of sorcery about those two, but Dorn felt nothing towards them he could describe as fear. Fulgrim? No. The Phoenician was a singular foe, but not an object of terror. Perturabo? Well now, their rivalry was old, the spiteful scrapping of two brothers who fought for a father's attention,

Dorn smiled despite his mood. His years of exchanged insults with Perturabo seemed almost comical compared to this. They were too much alike, too jealous of one another's oh-so-similar abilities. Dorn knew it was a weakness for him to

have risen to the Iron Warrior's baiting. But competition had always been a motivating force amongst the primarch brothers. It had been encouraged as a factor to drive them on to greater and yet greater accomplishments.

No, he was not afraid of Perturabo.

Horus-Lupercal, then?

Dorn's aimless wanderings had taken him to the Investiary. In that broad space, an amphitheatre open to the night sky, statues of the twenty stood on ouslite plinths in a silent ring.

There was no one around. Even the Custodian Guard was absent. Lumen orbs glowed on black iron poles. The Investiary was two kilometres in diameter. Under the glittering stars, it felt like an arena, where twenty warriors had gathered to make their combat.

The second and eleventh plinths had been vacant for a long time. No one ever spoke of those two absent brothers. Their separate tragedies had seemed like aberrations. Had they, in fact, been warnings that no one had heeded?

Sigismund had urged that the effigies of the traitors also be removed from the Investiary. He had offered to do the work himself. This, Dorn recalled, had made the Emperor laugh.

For the time being, the traitors had been shrouded. Their towering, draped forms seemed like phantoms in the blue darkness.

Horus, then? Was it Horus?

Perhaps. Dorn knew that Horus was the greatest of them, which made him the gravest foe. Could any one of them hope to best Lupercal on the field of war?

Martial prowess was hardly the point. Dorn had never feared an adversary in his life because of how strong he was or how hard he fought. Combat was only ever a test.

What mattered, what engendered fear, was why an adversary fought. What made him fight.

Oh, now we have it. Now the truth dawns, he felt the hairs on his skin rise. I'm not afraid of Horus. I'm afraid of finding out why he has turned against us. I cannot conceive of any justification for this schism, but Horus must have his reasons. I am afraid that when I know them, when they are explained to my baffled mind, I might... agree.

„Would you tear them all down?“

Dorn turned at the sound of the voice. For a moment, it had sounded like the soft growl of his father.

But it was just a man, a cloaked and cowed man scarcely half Dorn's height. His robes were those of a simple palace administrator.

„What did you say?“ asked Dorn.

The man walked out into the circle of the Investiary to face Dorn. He greeted him with the old salute of Unity rather than the sign of the aquila. „You were staring at the statues of your kin,“ he observed. „I asked... would you tear them all down?“

„The statues or my kin, Sigillite?“ Dorn replied.

„Both. Either.“

„The statues, perhaps. I believe Horus is doing a fine job with the men themselves.“

Malcador smiled and looked up at Dorn. Like Dorn's, his hair was white. Unlike Dorn's, it was long like a mane. Malcador was an exceptional being. He

had been with the Emperor from the inception of the Unification Wars, serving as aide, confidant and advisor. He had risen to become the master of the Council of Terra. The Emperor and the primarchs were genetically advantaged post-humans, but Malcador was just a man, and that was what made him exceptional. He stood on a par with the post human masters of the Imperium, and he was just a man. „Will you walk with me, Rogal Dorn?“

„Are there not matters of state that require your attention, even at this hour, sir? The Council will bemoan your absence from the debating table.“

„The Council can manage for a while without me,“ Malcador replied. „I like to take the air at this time of night. The Imperium never rests, but at night, up here in the thin air of the old Himalazia, I find there is at least an illusion of rest, a time to think and free the mind. I walk. I close my eyes. The stars do not go out because I am not looking at them.“

„Not yet,“ said Dorn.

Malcador laughed. „No, not yet.“

They said little at first. They left the Investiary and walked along the beige stones of the Precinct's highest terraces, between the weeping fountains. They walked as far as Lion's Gate, onto the platforms that overlooked the docking rings and landing fields of the Brahmaputra Plateau. The Gate had once been a thing of magnificence, two gilded beasts rising up to lock claws in a feral dispute. Dorn's order of works had replaced them with giant grey donjons stippled with casemates and macro gun ports. A curtain wall of bleak rockcrete encircled the gate, its edge fletched with void field vanes like the spines of some prehistoric reptile.

They stood and considered it for a long time.

„I am not a subtle man,“ Malcador said, at length.

Dorn raised his eyebrows.

„Oh, all right,“ said Malcador, „perhaps I am. Guile comes easily to a politician. I know I am considered cunning.“

„An old word, with no more meaning than *wise*,“ Dorn replied.

„Indeed. I will accept that as a compliment. All I meant to say was, I will not attempt to be subtle now.“

„No?“

„The Emperor has expressed his concerns.“

„Meaning?“ Dorn asked.

Malcador answered with a slight sigh. „He understands you are filled with misgivings.“

„Only natural, I would think, given the circumstances,“ said Dorn.

The Sigillite nodded. „He trusts you to undertake the defence. He counts on you. Terra must not fall, no matter what Horus brings. This palace must not fall. If it is to end here, then it must end in our triumph. But he knows, and I know, and you know, that any defence is only as strong as its weakest part: faith, belief, trust.“

„What are you telling me?“

„If there is doubt in your heart, then that is our weakness.“

Dorn looked away. „My heart is sad because of what I have been made to do to this place. That's all it is.“

„Is it? I don't think so. What are you really afraid of?“

Malcador raised his hand and the lights in his chambers came on. Dorn looked around, he had never entered the Sigillite's private apartments before.

Ancient images hung on the walls: flaking, fragile things of wood, canvas and decomposing pigments, preserved in thin, blue fields of stasis; the smoke pale portrait of a woman with the most curious smile; garish yellow flowers rendered in thick paint; the unflinching, rheumy gaze of an old fleshy man, cast in shadow, tobacco brown,

Along another wall hung old tattered banners showing the thunderbolt and lightning strike sigil of the Pre-Unity armies. Suits of armour—perfect, glinting thunder armour—were mounted in shimmering suspension zones.

Malcador offered Dorn wine, which he refused, and a seat, which he accepted.

„I have made a certain peace with myself,“ Dorn said. „I understand what I am afraid of.“

Malcador nodded. He had pulled back his cowl and the light shone on his long white hair. He sipped from his glass. „Enlighten me.“

„I do not fear anyone. Not Horus, not Fulgrim, none of them. I fear the cause. I fear the root of their enmity.“

„You fear what you don’t understand.“

„Exactly. I am at a loss to know what drives the Warmaster and his cohorts. It is an alien thing to me, quite defying translation. A strong defence relies on knowing what you are defending against. I can raise all the bulwarks and curtain walls and cannon-bastions I like, and I still won’t know what it is I’m fighting.“

„Perceptive,“ said Malcador, „and true of us all. I fancy even the Emperor doesn’t fully understand what it is that drives Horus against us so furiously. Do you know what I think?“

„Tell me.“

Malcador shrugged. „I believe it is better that we don’t know. To understand it would be to understand insanity. Horus is quite mad. Chaos is inside him.“

„You say that as if Chaos is a... thing.“

„It is. Does that surprise you? You’ve known the warp and seen its corrupting touch, that’s Chaos. It has touched humanity now, twisted our brightest and best. All we can do is remain true to ourselves and fend it off, deny it. Trying to understand it is a fool’s errand. It would claim us too.“

„I see.“

„Don’t see, Rogal Dorn, and you will live longer. All you can do is acknowledge your fear. That’s all any of us can do. Recognise it for what it is: your pure, human sanity rocked by the sight of the warp’s infecting, suffocating madness.“

„Is this what the Emperor believes?“ asked Dorn.

„It’s what he knows. It’s what he knows he doesn’t know. Sometimes, my friend, there is salvation in ignorance.“

Dorn sat still for a while. Malcador watched him, occasionally sipping from his glass.

„Well, I thank you for your time, sir,“ said Dorn eventually. „Your candour too. I should—“

„There is one other thing,“ said Malcador, setting his glass down and rising to his feet. „Something I want to show you.“

Malcador crossed the chamber, and took something from a drawer in an old bureau. He walked back to Dorn, and spread that something out on the low table between them.



Dorn opened his mouth but no sound issued. Fear gripped him.

„You recognise these, of course.“

Old cards, worn and fraying, discoloured and liver-spotted with time. One by one, Malcador laid them out.

The Lesser Arcanoi, just gaming trinkets, really, but used widely before the coming of Old Night for divination. „This deck was made on Nostramo Quintus.“

„He used them,“ Dorn breathed.

„Yes, he did. He relied on them. He believed in cartomancy. He dealt his fate out, night after haunted night, and watched how the cards fell.“

„Oh Holy Terra...“

„Are you all right, sir?“ Malcador asked, looking up. „You are quite pale.“

Dorn nodded. „Curze.“

„Yes, Curze. Had you forgotten him, or simply blocked him out? You have bickered and sparred with many of your brothers over the years, but only Konrad Curze ever hurt you.“

„Yes.“

„He nearly killed you.“

„Yes.“

„On Cheraut, long ago.“

„I remember it well enough!“

Malcador looked up at Dorn. The primarch had risen to his feet. „Then sit back down and tell me, because I wasn't there.“

Dorn sat. „This is so long ago or like another life. We had brought the Cheraut system to compliance. It was hard fought. The Emperor's Children, the Night Lords and my Fists, we affected compliance. But Curze didn't know when to stop. He never knew when to stop.“

„And you rebuked him?“

„He was an animal. Yes, I rebuked him. Then Fulgrim told me.“

„Told you what?“

Dorn closed his eyes. 'The Phoenician told me what Curze had told him: the fits, the seizures that had plagued Curze since his childhood on Nostramo, the visions. Curze said he had seen the galaxy in flames, the Emperor's legacy overthrown, Astartes turning on Astartes. It was all lies, an insult to our creed!“

„You confronted Curze?“

„And he attacked me. He would have killed me, I think. He is insane. That's why we drove him out, sick of his bloodletting. That's why he burned his home world and took his Night Lords off into the darkest parts of the stars.“

Malcador nodded, and continued to deal the cards. „Rogal, he is what you are truly afraid of, because he is fear incarnate. No other primarch uses terror as a weapon like Curze does. You are not afraid of Horus and his sallow heretics. You are afraid of the fear that sides with him, the night terror that advances alongside the traitors.“

Dorn sat back and breathed out. „He has haunted me, I confess. All this time, he has haunted me.“

„Because he was right. His visions were true. He saw this Heresy coming in his visions. That is the truth you fear. You wish you had listened.“

Dorn looked down at the cards laid out on the table before him. „Do you believe in this divination, Sigillite?“

„Let's see,“ said Malcador, turning the cards over one by one: the Moon, the Martyr and the Monster, the Dark King askew across the Emperor.

One other card, the Lightning Tower.

Dorn groaned. „A bastion, blown out by lightning. A palace brought to ruin by fire. I've seen enough.“

„The card has many meanings,“ said Malcador. „Like the Death card, it is not as obvious as it seems. In the hives of Nord Merica, it symbolised a change in fortune, an overturning of fate. To the tribes of Franc and Tali, it signified knowledge or achievement obtained through sacrifice. A flash of inspiration, if you will, one that tumbles the world you know down, but leaves you with a greater gift.“

„The Dark King lies across the Emperor,“ said Dorn, pointing.

Malcador sniffed. „It's not exactly a science, my friend.“

They had blown their way through the massive earthwork defences at Haldwani and Xigaze. The sky at the top of the world was on fire. Despite the bombardments of the orbital platforms and the constant sorties of the Stormbirds and the Ilawkwings, the Traitor legions advanced, up through the Brahamputra, along the delta of the Karnali. Continental firestorms raged across Gangetic Plain.

As they entered the rampart outworks of the palace, the streaming, screaming multitudes and the striding war machines were greeted by monsoons of firepower. Every emplacement along the Dhawalagiri prospect committed its weapons. Las reached out in neon slashes, annihilating everything it touched. Shells fell like sleet. Titans exploded, caught fire, collapsed on their faces and crushed the warriors swarming around their heels. Still they came. Lancing beams struck the armour-reinforced walls like lightning, like lightning smiting a tower.

The walls fell. They collapsed like slumping glaciers, Gold-cased bodies spilled out, tumbling down in the deluge.

The palace began to burn. Primus Gate fell; Lion's Gate, subjected to attack from the north; Annapurna Gate. At the Ultimate Gate, the Traitors finally sliced into the palace, slaughtering everyone they found inside. Around every broken gate, the corpses of Titans piled up in vast, jumbled heaps where they had fallen over each other in their desire to break in. The heretic host clambered across their carcasses, pouring into the palace, yelling out the name of their—

„End simulation,“ said Dorn.

He gazed down at the hololithic table. At his command, the forces of the enemy withdrew, unit by unit, and the palace rebuilt itself. The smoke cleared.

„Reset parameters to Horus, Perturabo, Angron and Curze.“

„Opposition?“ the table queried.

„Imperial Fists, Blood Angels, White Scars, Resume and replay scenario.“

The map flickered. Armies advanced. The palace began to burn again.

„Play it out, simulation after simulation, if you like,“ said the voice behind him. „Simulations are just simulations. I know you won't fail me when the time comes.“

Dorn turned. „I would never knowingly fail you, Father,“ he said.

„Then don't be afraid. Don't let fear get in your way.“

What are you afraid of? What are you really afraid of?

The Lightning Tower, thought Rogal Dorn. I understand its meaning: achievement obtained through sacrifice. I'm just afraid of what that sacrifice might be.

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