

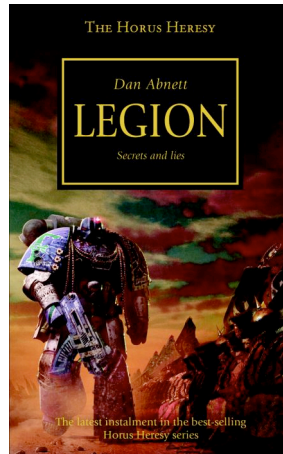
LEGION

A Horus Heresy novel

By Dan Abnett

A Great War is coming, and it will engulf the Imperium of Man. The Space Marines of the Alpha Legion, the last and most secretive of all the Astartes brotherhoods, arrive on a heathen world to support the Imperial Army in a pacification campaign against strange and uncanny forces. But what drives the Alpha Legion? Can they be trusted, and what side will they choose when the Great War begins?

Loyalties are put to the test, and the cunning schemes of an alien intelligence revealed in this latest instalment of the ground-breaking SF series, as the fate of mankind hangs in the balance.



About the Author

Dan Abnett lives and works in Maidstone, Kent, in England. Well known for his comic work, he has written everything from the Mr Men to the X-Men in the last decade. His work for the Black Library includes the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, the Inquisitor Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies, the Horus Heresy novel Horus Rising. Together with author Mike Lee, he has also worked on the Malus Darkblade series.

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FROM THE RIM OF the wadi, looking west, it was possible to see Tel Utan itself, a jumble of terracotta blocks and walls capping a long, loaf-shaped hill ten kilometres away. The intervening landscape was a broken tract of ridges and ancient basins and, in the sidelong evening light, the basins had filled with shadows so black they looked like pools of ink. Soneka felt a comparable blackness in his heart: Tel Utan was proving to be their nemesis. For eight months, it had held them at bay, through a combination of terrain, tactics, stoicism and plain bad luck.

The Geno Five-Two Chiliad was one of the oldest brigades in the Imperial Army. An elite force of one thousand companies, it had a martial tradition that stretched back through the time of the Great Crusade and into the era of the Unification Wars that had preceded

it. The geno was a proud member of the Old Hundred, the Strife Epoch regiments that the Emperor, in his grace, had maintained after Unification, provided they pledged loyalty to him. Many thousands of others had been forced to disband, or had been actively purged and neutered, depending on their level of resistance to the new order.

Peto Soneka had been born in Feodosiya, and had served, in his youth, in the local army, but he had petitioned eagerly for transfer into the Geno Five-Two, because of their illustrious reputation. He'd been with the geno for twenty-three years, achieving the rank of hetman. In that time, they hadn't met a nut they couldn't crack.

There had been tough dances along the way, of course there had. Off the top of his head, Soneka could mention Foechion, where they had slogged toe to toe for six weeks with the greenskins in lightless, frozen latitudes, and Zantium, where the Dragonoid cadres had almost bested them in a series of running battles and ambushes.

But Nurth, Tel Utan in particular, was as stubborn as anything they'd ever met. Word was the Lord Commander was getting edgy, and no one wanted to be around Namatjira when that happened.

Soneka pulled his glare-shields back on. He was a lithe, slender man of forty-two years standard, though he could pass for twenty-five. He had a striking, angular head, with hard cheek and jaw lines, a pointed chin and a generous, full-lipped mouth full of gleaming white teeth that women found especially attractive. Like all of them, his skin had bronzed in the Nurthene light. He made a signal, and his bashaws brought the troops in along the rim of the wadi and down into the dry basins beyond. Geno armour followed them, bounding along on their treads, and spuming wakes of red dust behind them as they churned out across the basin floor. Soneka's Centaur was waiting, its engine revving, but he waved it on. This was a time for walking.

There was half an hour of daylight left. Night, they had learned to their cost, belonged to the Nurthene. Soneka hoped to run his troop as far as the forward command post at CR23 before they lost the light. The last tangle with the Nurthene had slowed their advance

considerably. Dislodging them from this country was like pulling out splinters.

Soneka's troops looked very fine as they strode forwards. The geno uniform was a bulky, tight-buckled bodyglove of studded leather and armour links, with a waist-length cape of yellow merdacaxi, a Terran silk, much rougher and more hard-wearing than the pink silks of the Nurthene. The ornate leather armour was marked with devices and trimmed with fur, and the backs of their capes were richly embroidered with company emblems and motifs. They carried lightweight packs, munition slings, long sword bayonets, and the bottles of their double water rations, which clinked against the liqnite cylinders they had all been issued with. Standard weapons were laser carbines and RPG sowers, but some men lugged fire poles or support cannons. They were all big men, all genic bred and selected for muscle. Soneka was slight compared to most. Their headgear was spiked helmets, either silvered steel or glossy orange, often edged with brims of fur or neck veils of beaded laces. The glare shields were goggle-eyed: bulbous, paired hemispheres of orange metal with black slits across them.

Soneka's troop was coded the Dancers, a name that they'd owned for almost eight hundred years. In those last few minutes of daylight, the Dancers were going to take the worst beating they had ever known.

'SO, WHO'S THAT?' asked Bronzi quietly. 'Do you know?'

Bashaw Tche, busy with the wrapper of a ration, shrugged. 'Some kind of something,' he grunted.

'You're a world of use, you know that?' Bronzi replied, punching Tche in the arm. The bashaw, of the regimental uterine stock and considerably bigger in all measurements than Bronzi, gave his hetman a tired look.

'Some kind of specialist, they said,' he volunteered.

'Who said?'

'The Uxor's aides.'

The Jokers had reached the CR23 forward command post about an hour earlier, and had been billeted in the eastern wing of the old, brick-built fort. Chart Referent 23 was a Nurthene outpost captured two weeks before, and lay just eight kilometres from the Tel. It formed part of the 'noose' that Lord Commander Namatjira was tightening around the enemy city.

Hurtado Bronzi, a sixty-year veteran possessed of boundless charisma and a stocky body going to seed, leaned out of the billet doorway and took another deliberate stare along the red brick passageway. At the far end, where it opened out into a central courtyard, he could see the newcomer standing in conversation with Honen Mu and some of her aides. The newcomer was a big fellow, really big, a giant dressed in a dust-grey mail sleeve and a head shawl, with a soot-dulled bolter slung over his shoulder.

'He's a sizeable fugger, though,' said Bronzi, idly toying with the small gold box dangling on the chain around his neck.

'Don't stare so,' Tche advised, gnawing on his bar.

'I'm just saying. Bigger than you, even.'

'Stop staring.'

'He's only where I happen to be aiming my eyes, Tche,' Bronzi said.

Something was going on. Bronzi had a feeling in his water. Something had been going on for the last few days. Uxor Honen was unusually tight-lipped, and had been unavailable on several occasions.

The man was big. He towered over Honen, though everyone towered over her. Even so, he had to be two twenty, two twenty-five maybe. That was gene-build big, Astartes big even. Honen was looking up at him, craning up, nodding once in a while at a conversation Bronzi couldn't catch. Despite the fact that she was conferring with a giant, Honen's posture was as tenacious as ever: spiky and fierce, like a fighting cock, full of vigour and attitude. Bronzi had long suspected Uxor Honen's body language was a compensation for her doll-like physique.

Bronzi looked back into the billet hall. His Jokers were busy sacking out, drinking and eating, playing bones. Some of them were cleaning off weapons or polishing armour scutes, wiping away the red dust that had slowly caked on during the long day in the field.

‘Think I might go for a little stroll,’ Bronzi told Tche. The bashaw, munching, simply stared down at the hetman’s feet. Bronzi was still fully armoured, but he’d taken off his boots when they’d arrived. His thick, dirty toes splayed out through the holes in his woollen socks.

‘Not cutting a dash?’ Bronzi asked.

Tche shrugged.

‘Well, fug it.’ Bronzi pulled off his embroidered cape, his webbing and his weapon belt, and dumped them on the baked earth floor. He kept hold of his water bottles. ‘I just need a refill,’ he said.

Bronzi padded out into the passageway, his water bottles dangling from his pudgy fingers. He was disappointed to see that the giant had vanished. The Uxor and her aides were heading away across the courtyard, talking together.

Honen turned as Bronzi wandered into the yard. The air was still warm and the day’s heat was radiating out of the shadowed brick. Evening had washed the sky overhead a dark, resinous purple.

‘Hetman Bronzi? Was there something you wanted?’ she called. The words came ping-pong out of her mouth like tiny chips of ice.

Bronzi smiled back amiably, and wagged the empty water bottles. ‘Going to the pump,’ he said.

Uxor Honen pushed through her waiting aides and came towards him. She was such a tiny thing, built like a girl-child, compact and slight. She wore a black body-glove and a grey wrap, and walked on heeled slippers, which served only to emphasise her lack of stature. Her face was oval, her pursed mouth small, and her skin so very black. Her eyes seemed huge. At twenty-three, she was exceptionally young, given her level of responsibility, but that was often the way with uxors. Bronzi had a bit of a thing for her: so perfect, so delicate, so much power emanating from her tiny frame.

‘Going to the pump?’ she asked, switching from Low Gothic to Edessan. She often did that. She made a habit of speaking to the men, one on one, in their native tongues. Bronzi supposed these displays of linguistic skill were meant to seem cordial while emphasising her formidable intelligence. Where Bronzi came from – Edessa – funnily enough, that was called showing off.

He switched with her. ‘For water. I’m out.’

‘Water rationing was done earlier, hetman,’ she said. ‘I think that’s just an excuse to be nosey.’

Bronzi made what he hoped was a loveable shrug. ‘You know me,’ he said.

‘That’s why I think you’re being nosey,’ Honen said.

They stared at one another. Her enormous eyes slowly travelled down to his stockinged feet. He saw her fighting a smile. The trick with Honen was to appeal to her sense of humour. That was why he’d left his boots off. Bronzi tried to hold his stomach in and still look natural.

‘Hard, isn’t it?’ she smirked.

‘What’s that now?’

‘Holding that gut of yours in?’

‘I don’t know what you mean, uxor,’ he replied.

Honen nodded. ‘And I don’t know why we keep you around, Hetman Bronzi,’ she remarked. ‘Isn’t there a mandatory fitness requirement any more?’

‘Or a weight threshold?’ suggested one of her aides: four blonde, teenage girls, who gathered around Honen with wry smiles on their faces.

‘Oh, you may mock me,’ Bronzi said.

‘We may,’ agreed one of the aides.

‘I’m still the best field officer you’ve got.’

Honen frowned. ‘There’s some truth in that. Don’t be nosey, Hurtado. You’ll be told what you need to know soon enough.’

‘A specialist?’

Honen shot a questioning glance sidelong at her aides. She reached out to them with her ’cept too. They all looked away,

recoiling from the touch of the scolding 'cept, concentrating on other things. 'Someone's been talking,' Honen announced.

'A specialist, then?' Bronzi pressed.

'As I said,' Honen answered, turning her attention back to him.

'Yeah, yeah, I know,' said Bronzi, rattling his water bottles together as he gestured. 'I'll know when I know.'

'Get your men settled,' she told him, and turned to go.

'Are the Dancers in?' he asked.

'The Dancers?'

'They should be in by now. Peto owes me a payout on a wager. Are they here yet?'

Her eyes narrowed. 'No, Hurtado, not yet. We're expecting them soon.'

'Oh,' he said, 'then I request permission to take a foray team out, on a ramble, to find out what's keeping them.'

'Your loyalty to your friend does you credit, Hurtado, but permission is not granted.'

'It'll be dark soon.'

'It will. That's why I don't want you rambling around out there.'

Bronzi nodded.

'Are we clear on that? No clever or ingenious misinterpretations of that order forming in your mind this time?'

Bronzi shook his head. As if.

'There'd better not be. Goodnight, hetman.'

'Goodnight, uxor.'

Honen clicked away on her heels, sending out a command with her 'cept. Her aides paused for a moment, scowling at Bronzi, and then followed her.

'Yeah, stare at me all you like, you blonde bitches,' Bronzi murmured.

He padded back to the billet. 'Tche?'

'Yes, het?'

'Get a foray team up and ready in ten minutes.'

Tche sighed at him. 'Is this sanctioned, het?' he asked.

‘Absolutely. The uxor told me personally that she doesn’t want some fug-fingered ramble blundering around out there, so tell the boys it’s going to have to be sharp and professional, which will make a change for them.’

‘Not a ramble?’

‘I never ramble. Sharp, Tche, and professional. Got it?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Bronzi pulled on his boots and redressed his weapon belt. He realised he needed to take a leak. ‘Five minutes,’ he told the bashaw.

He found the latrine, a stinking cement pit down the hall, unbuckled his armour and sighed as his bladder emptied. Nearby, men were showering in the communal air baths, and he could hear singing from one of the other troop billets.

‘You’ll stay put tonight,’ said a voice from behind him.

Bronzi tensed. The voice was quiet and hard, small yet powerful, like the super-gravity coal of a dead sun.

‘I think I’ll finish what I’m doing, actually,’ he replied, deliberately not looking around, and deliberately keeping a tone of levity in his voice.

‘You will stay put tonight. No fun and games. No bending the rules. Are we clear?’

Bronzi buckled up, and turned.

The specialist stood behind him. Bronzi slowly adjusted his stance until he was looking up at the man’s face. Terra, he was huge, a monster of a man. The specialist’s features were hidden in the shadows of his dust shawl.

‘Is that a threat?’ Bronzi asked.

‘Does someone like me need to threaten someone like you?’ the specialist replied.

Bronzi narrowed his eyes. He was a lot of things, but timid wasn’t one of them. ‘Come on then, if you want some.’

The specialist chuckled. ‘I really admire your balls, hetman.’

‘They were only out because I was taking a leak,’ said Bronzi.

‘Bronzi, right? I’ve heard about you. More bare-faced cheek in you than all the arses in the Imperial Army.’

Bronzi couldn't help but grin, though his pulse was racing. 'I could mess you up, son, I really could.'

'You could try,' said the specialist.

'I would, you know?'

'Yes, I have a feeling you might. Don't. I'd hate to damage a friend. Let me be clear. There are things going on tonight that you must not mess with. Don't let me down by pissing around. Don't get involved. You'll understand soon enough. For now, right now, hetman, take my word on this.'

Bronzi kept his stare going. 'I might. I might trust you, if I could see your face or know your name.'

The specialist paused. For a moment, Bronzi thought he was actually going to pull down his shawl and show his face.

'I'll tell you my name,' he said.

'Yeah?'

'My name is Alpharius.'

Bronzi blinked. His mouth went dry. He felt his heart pounding so fast it trembled his torso.

'Liar. You liar! That's a pile of crap!'

A sudden, brilliant flash made the chamber blink white for a second. A deep, reverberative boom reached them.

Bronzi ran to one of the slit windows. Outside, in the dark, he could see the flashes and light blooms of a major battle flaring behind the ridge. The percussive crump and slap of explosions rolled in. One hell of a firefight had just kicked off along the wadi rim less than ten kilometres away from the post. It was concussive, bending the air, bending sound.

Behind Bronzi, men were rushing up, scrabbling around the windows to see out. There was chatter and agitation. Everyone wanted a look.

'Peto...' Hurtado Bronzi murmured. He turned away from the window slit and the rippling light show, pushing his way back through the mob of men to find the specialist.

But the specialist had already vanished.

The world had come off its hinges. For the first few seconds, Peto Soneka thought his company had been caught up in some sort of freak hail-storm. Thousands of luminous projectiles were raining down out of the twilight into the basin, like spits of fire or a cloudburst of little shooting stars. Every one exploded in a searing fireball as it impacted. The overpressure was knocking men to the ground. Soneka reeled as fiery detonations went off all around him like grenades. The bang of the first few impacts had deafened him.

He saw men thrown, burning, into the air by blooming flashes. He saw three of his company's tanks quiver and then explode in whickering storms of shrapnel fragments as the sizzling pyrophoric deluge struck them.

It wasn't a freak hail-storm. Despite the Dancer's scouts and recon, despite their auspex and modar, despite their careful deployment and marching cover, despite the omniscient monitoring of the expedition fleet in high orbit, the Nurthene had surprised them.

The Nurthene were of a tech level several points down the scale from the Imperium. They possessed guns and tanks, but still favoured blades. They should have been easy to overrun.

But from the opening actions of the expedition war, it had become clear that the Nurthene had something else, something the Imperium entirely lacked.

Lord Commander Teng Namatjira had described it, in a moment of infuriation, as air magick. The name had, perhaps unfortunately, stuck. Air magick was why Nurth had held off the might of an Imperial Army expedition for eight months. Air magick was why a Titan cohort had been decimated at Tel Khortek. Air magick was why a Sixth Torrent division had disappeared into the desert sink at Gomanzi and never returned. Air magick was why nothing flew above Tel Utan, why every attempt to destroy the place with air strikes, missiles, orbital bombardments and troop drops had failed, and why they were being forced to assault the place on foot.

It was Peto Soneka's first direct taste of air magick. All the horror stories that had leaked back from regiment to regiment and

company to company were true. The Nurthene had lore beyond the Terran range. The elements obeyed them. They were casters-in of devils.

A shockwave threw Soneka over on his face. He had blood in his mouth and sand up his nose. He rose on his hands and saw a geno trooper curled up beside him, blackened by heat, smouldering. In the rapid strobe light of multiple explosions, he saw other corpses scattered around him. The sand was burning.

Bashaw Lon came running out of the flashing air. He was yelling at Soneka. Soneka could see Lon's mouth working, but heard nothing.

Lon hauled Soneka to his feet. Sound was coming back, but only in short bursts.

'Get... to... the... we... impossible!' Lon yelled.

'What? What?'

'...much... of... to... the... fugging idiots!'

The hail suddenly ceased. Blinking around at the devastation, Soneka heard snippets of the abrupt quiet too: blurts of crackling fire and the screams of men, cut up and mixed with baffling, numb seconds of profound deafness.

'Oh fug!' Lon cried, suddenly, awfully audible.

The Nurthene were on them.

Nurthene infantry – called 'echvehnurth' – swarmed out of the shadows and pits of the enclosing night, and poured into the firelight. Their swirling pink robes and silver armour shone in the flames. Their falxes whirled. Several of them carried aloft kite-tailed banners showing the water-reed and river reptile badge of the Nurthene royalty.

The falx was an astonishingly proficient and barbarous weapon. Two and a half metres long, it was essentially a hybrid spear, a scythe straightened out. Half its length was a straight handgrip, the other half a long blade with a slight bias hook, the inside curve of which was razor sharp. Spinning and sweeping a falx like a flail, an expert echvehnurth could lop off limbs and heads, and even bisect torsos. The blades went through almost any metal. Only liqnite

could break the blades, but it was impossible to use it in combat. Lignite canisters came out when the fight was done, to neuter the fallen weapons of the enemy. A spray of liquid nitrogen froze the metal brittle so that it could be shattered under foot.

Echvehnurth rushed at them from the ditches of the sink. The first Dancers they met were scythed down by the long, whirling blades like tall corn. Arms and heads flipped into the air. Arterial blood squirted. Truncated bodies fell like sacks. A few carbines fired, but it was hardly a proper reply.

Soneka started running forwards. 'Wake up! Wake up!' he howled. 'Gun them down. Use your guns. Don't let them in!'

They were in already. The night sand was littered with geno corpses and body parts. There was a fine haze of blood in the warm air. Soneka could taste it. His hearing was back, and his ears were filled with the hiss and chop of butchery, and the screams of his men.

He kept running. He fired his carbine one-handed, drawing his sword bayonet in the other. An echvehnurth ran at him and Soneka blew his face off. The man cartwheeled backwards. A falx swung and Soneka sidestepped, kicking its owner's feet out from under him so that he fell on his back. Soneka ran the Nurthene through with his bayonet.

He dropped on one knee, raised the carbine to his shoulder, its barrel resting on the fork of his blade grip, and picked off two more of the charging enemy with aimed shots. Their pink robes trailed out as they crashed backwards. Lon was beside Soneka, along with three other men, firing in sustained bursts. Their shots made bright darts in the air. Echvehnurth toppled and fell, one on fire, another with his ribcage blown wide.

'Dancers, Dancers! This is the Dancers!' Soneka yelled as he fired. 'CR19! We need help here. Immediate. Major incursion!'

'Stand by, Dancers,' he heard an uxor's voice reply. 'We are aware. Retasking units to your position.'

'Now!' Soneka yelled. 'Now. We're being slaughtered!'

One of the men beside him suddenly fell sideways, split in two from shoulder to groin. Pressurised blood escaped in all directions at once. Soneka wheeled and saw an echvehnurth spinning his falx back from the blow to strike again. Soneka slashed with his sword bayonet in an attempt to block.

The long blade of the falx, just a blur of blue metal in the violet twilight, went through Soneka's hand in a line across the base of the thumb, severing his fingers, his thumb and the upper half of his palm, and snapping the grip of his sword bayonet. The blow was so clean that there was no pain at first. Soneka staggered backwards, watching the thin sprays of blood jetting out of his ruined hand.

The falx circled again, tracing a glitter in the air.

It did not land.

Another falx blocked it. Blade struck blade, and the attacking falx shivered away. A dark figure slid into view and killed the echvehnurth with a single, explosive shot.

The newcomer was a huge brute done up in a dark mail sleeve, his head and shoulders swathed in a shawl. He carried a falx in one hand and a boltgun in the other.

He looked down at Soneka. 'Courage,' he said.

'Who are you?' Soneka whispered.

Lon had run to Soneka's side. 'Get this man's hand bound,' the big man told the bashaw. He turned back to the fight, rotating the falx expertly in his left hand like a baton.

He wasn't alone. As Lon wrapped his hand, Soneka saw that a dozen anonymous men had entered the fight, coming out of the darkness like phantoms. Each one of them was inhumanly large, his face hooded in a desert shawl. Each one carried a bolter and a falx.

They moved with a speed that was not human, and struck each blow with a force that was not human. In a matter of minutes, they had carved the heart out of the echvehnurth attack. Their boltguns roared and pumped like thunder, blowing pink silk and silver into blood-caked pieces.

'Astartes,' Soneka gasped.

'Stay with me, het, stay with me,' Lon whispered.

‘They’re Astartes,’ Soneka said.

‘You’ve lost a lot of blood. Don’t go to sleep on me!’

‘I won’t,’ Soneka promised. ‘Those men... those things... they’re Astartes.’

Lon didn’t answer. He was staring at the horizon.

‘Holy Terra,’ he whispered.

Tel Utan had caught fire.

HONEN MU WATCHED the city burn from an upper window of the CR23 post. Every once in a while, a building cooked off and blew out in a streamer of fire. Rising smoke hazed the clear night sky. Her aides winced and oohed at every snap of flame. She could feel their responses through her ’cept.

She nodded, finally. ‘May I inform the Lord Commander?’

‘You may,’ said the specialist, waiting behind her. ‘I will make a report to him personally, of course, but you should have the pleasure of transmitting this news to him first.’

Honen turned from the window. ‘Thank you. And thank you for your work.’

‘Nurth isn’t done yet. There is much to do,’ the specialist told her.

‘I understand.’

The specialist hesitated, as if he slightly doubted this.

‘Our paths may not cross again, Uxor Honen Mu,’ the specialist said. ‘There are two things I want to say. The Emperor protects is one of them. The other is a word of admiration for the Geno Five-Two. You have bred good soldiers, in the finest genetic tradition. You ought to know that the old genic legacy of the Chiliads was an inspiration the Emperor acknowledged in creating us.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ said Honen, surprised.

‘Ancient history, pre-Unification,’ said the specialist. ‘There’s no reason you should. I must go now. It has been a pleasure making war with you, Uxor Honen Mu.’

‘And with you... though I still don’t know your name.’

‘I am Alpha Legion, lady. Given your ’ceptive powers, I think you can guess it.’

THE SPECIALIST LEFT THE post through the back halls, walking through shadow. He moved silently and quickly. Near the north gate, he stopped in his tracks, and turned slowly.

‘Hello again,’ said Hurtado Bronzi, stepping out of the darkness with his carbine aimed at the specialist’s chest.

‘Het. My compliments. That was a genuine feat of stealth.’

Bronzi shrugged. ‘I do what I do.’

‘Can I help you?’

‘I do hope so,’ said Bronzi.

‘Does that thing have to be aimed at me?’

‘Well, I don’t know. I feel a lot more comfortable like this. I want some answers. I have a feeling only gunpoint is going to get them for me.’

‘Gunpoint will simply get you killed, het. All you need to do is ask.’

Bronzi bit his lip. ‘You’ve taken the Tel, I see.’

‘Yes.’

‘Fancy work. Kudos to you. Did it have to cost so many lives?’

‘Meaning?’ asked the specialist.

‘I heard the Dancers got cut to ribbons tonight. Was that part of your plan?’

‘Yes, it was.’

Bronzi shook his head. ‘Fug, you admit it. You used my friends as cannon fodder and—’

‘No, het. I used them as bait.’

‘What?’ Bronzi’s hands shook on the grip of the carbine. His finger tightened on the trigger until it found the biting point.

‘Don’t look so shocked. Life is all about secrets, and I’m prepared to share one with you. Honesty is the only really valuable currency. I’ll tell you this truth, on the understanding that you trust me.’

‘I can do that,’ said Bronzi.

‘The Nurthene are quite toxic in their power. No conventional assault was going to break them. They are possessed by Chaos, though I don’t expect you to know what that word really means. My men needed to get into Tel Utan, and that meant forcing the Nurthene into a distraction. I regret that your friends, the Dancers, were the ideal choice, tactically speaking. They drew the main force of the Nurthene aside so we could enter Tel Utan. I did ask my men to spare and protect as many of the Dancers as possible.’

‘That’s honest, I suppose. Brutal. Callous.’

‘We live in a brutal, callous galaxy, het. Like for like is the only way we can deal with it. We must make sacrifices. And no matter what others say, sacrifices always hurt.’

Bronzi sighed and lowered his weapon a little. Suddenly, it wasn’t in his hands any more. It was bouncing off the far wall, broken in two.

‘Never aim a weapon at me again,’ said the specialist, suddenly in Bronzi’s face, pinning him against the wall.

‘I w-wont!’

‘Good.’

‘Are you really Alpharius?’ Bronzi gasped, aware that his feet were swinging in the air.

With his free hand, the specialist pulled back his shawl and allowed Bronzi to look upon his face.

‘What do you think?’ he asked.

WHEN SONEKA WOKE up, flocks of casevac fliers were dropping into the flame-lit ruin of the basin, wing lamps flashing. The whole night was lit up by the burning doom of Tel Utan.

Soneka looked around, blearily. His hand hurt like a bitch. Air crews were bundling the walking wounded and the stretcher casualties up the ramps of the waiting ships.

Soneka looked up at Lon. ‘How many?’ he asked.

‘Too many,’ said a voice.

Three dark figures stood nearby, like a tragic chorus. They were silhouettes in the firelight, their bolters slung across their bodies, their shawls drawn up.

‘Too many, het,’ said one.

‘We regret their loss,’ said the second.

‘War requires sacrifices. A victory has been achieved, but we take no pleasure in your losses,’ said the third.

‘You... you’re Astartes, aren’t you?’ Soneka asked, allowing Lon to help him to his feet.

‘Yes,’ said one.

‘Do you have names?’ Soneka asked.

‘I am Alpharius,’ said the first.

Soneka inhaled hard and dropped quickly to one knee, along with Lon and the other geno men.

‘Lord, I—’

‘I am Alpharius,’ said the second figure.

‘We are all Alpharius,’ said the third. ‘We are Alpha Legion, and we are all one.’

They turned, and walked away into the billowing smoke.

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