

THE HORUS HERESY

Gav Thorpe

DELIVERANCE
LOST

Ghosts of Terra

THE MILLION-SELLING NOVEL SERIES



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DELIVERANCE LOST

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As the Horus Heresy divides the Imperium, Corax and his few remaining Raven Guard escape the massacre at Istsvan V. Tending to their wounds, the bloodied Space Marines endeavour to replenish their numbers and return to the fray, taking the fight to the traitor Warmaster. Distraught at the crippling blow dealt to his Legion, Corax returns to Terra to seek the aid of his father – the Emperor of Mankind. Granted access to ancient secrets, Corax begins to rebuild the Raven Guard, planning his revenge against his treacherous brother primarchs. But not all his remaining warriors are who they appear to be... the mysterious Alpha Legion have infiltrated the survivors and plan to destroy the Raven Guard before they can rebuild and threaten Horus's plans.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gav Thorpe has been rampaging across the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 for many years as both an author and games developer. He hails from the den of scurvy outlaws called Nottingham and makes regular sorties to unleash bloodshed and mayhem. He shares his hideout with Dennis, a mechanical hamster sworn to enslave mankind. At the moment Dennis is under house arrest for attempting to use Skype to hack the world's nuclear arsenals. Gav's previous Black Library novels include fan-favourite *Angels of Darkness* and the epic Sundering trilogy, amongst many others. You can find his website at: www.gavthorpe.co.uk

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THE PREPARATIONS FOR Terra's defence became more evident as the *Avenger* moved in-system towards Terra. The Sol battlefleet, the largest single armada in the Imperium, was gathering in strength. Dozens of warships blockaded Mars, while hundreds of other vessels took station in orbital positions over the other planets, their sensors turned outwards in readiness for the arrival of Horus's fleet.

The communications networks were overloaded with activity, the strat-net frequencies used by the Legiones Astartes and Imperial Army sometimes so clogged with data that it took many hours for messages to be relayed. There was a tangible aura of desperation amidst the turmoil, as though any day would see the warp tearing apart with the arrival of hundreds of traitor ships.

As they neared their destination, the Raven Guard encountered increasing numbers of security screens. Warship patrols hailed them frequently, while massive star forts locked their guns upon the arriving vessel, keeping watch until it had passed out of range. Passing further and further into the heart of the Sol system, the *Avenger* was subjected to constant scrutiny, though its passage was never barred outright.

Gaining orbit over Terra was an expedition in itself, despite the assurances and assistance of Captain Noriz. After three days entangled in the security protocols of half a dozen different military jurisdictions and organisations, Corax finally lost patience. Dismissing the communications attendants from their posts, he keyed in a failsafe code for the most secure channel: an ultra-secret frequency used by only the primarchs and, before his self-seclusion on Terra, the Emperor himself.

There was no reply for half an hour, as Corax paced back and forth across the strategium. Finally the vox crackled into life, with a voice that was deep and thoughtful, every word carefully enunciated, every syllable spoken with crisp authority.

'Is that you, Corax? It is about time you contacted me, brother. I was wondering if the news that you were still alive had been yet another breakdown in communication.'

'Brother Rogal, yes it is Corax,' replied the primarch. 'If you do not find me an orbital station in the next five minutes, I'm going to use my weapons batteries to make a space for myself.'

There was a short but hearty laugh over the vox.

'That would not be a good idea!' said Rogal Dorn. 'I heard that you had arrived, but then I must admit that your whereabouts were washed away in all of the other clutter. Do you want to berth at a platform or take up an independent orbit?'

'We need to resupply,' said Corax. 'I'll shuttle down with an advance guard.'

'I will send you the coordinates of Beta-Styx platform. It has a fully-stocked victualling yard. You can come down to Lion's Gate port and I will despatch a delegation to meet you.'

'A delegation? Too busy to greet your brother in person?'

'Yes. I will be back at the Imperial Palace within the day.'

'Understood, brother. I wish our reunion was in much lighter times.'

'It is not for our kind to meet in peace, brother, you should know that. We will talk more tomorrow; I have something I must attend to urgently.'

With that, the frequency devolved into static once more. A data screen flickered into life, a list of spatial coordinates scrolling across it in yellow lettering and signed with the insignia

of the Imperial Fists.

'Prepare for docking manoeuvres,' Corax announced. 'And ready me a Stormbird. Agapito, choose a company to act as honour guard. Branne, you have command.'

A series of affirmatives chorused across the strategium as the primarch walked towards the doors. Corax stopped as they slid open and turned his head.

'Branne?'

The commander froze, halfway into the control throne. He stood and looked back at the primarch and saw a lopsided smile on Corax's face.

'Yes, lord?'

'As much as I appreciate your arrival at Isstvan, please stay where I put you this time.'

'Aye, lord. I will.'

AS THE AVENGER powered towards the orbital dock, preparations were made for Corax and a small entourage to descend to the surface of Terra. Branne found Agapito on the launch deck, with a company of his legionaries. The clatter of a heavy servitor's tracks echoed from the metal walls, blotting out the dormant whine of a Stormbird's engines. Branne thought he sensed some anxiety in his brother's demeanour.

'Relax, brother, this is not a combat mission,' said Branne.

'And all the more dangerous for it,' replied Agapito. 'Suspicion surrounds us like a cloud. You saw how Captain Noriz treated us. I expect no warm welcome on the surface.'

'So it will be up to you to assure our allies that we can be trusted,' said Branne.

Agapito hesitated, and glanced over Branne's shoulder. Corax entered the flight bay, nodded to the two commanders and strode up the Stormbird's boarding ramp without a word.

'I'm not the only one that feels it,' said Agapito, his gaze on the drop-ship, his thoughts clearly on the primarch now aboard. 'Now is not the time for rash displays of loyalty. I'm worried Lord Corax will promise more than we can currently deliver.'

'We can't afford to let the traitors make their preparations without pause,' said Branne. 'Would you want us simply to let them proceed as they wish?'

Leaning closer, Agapito's voice dropped to a whisper.

'We were nearly wiped out, brother,' he said. 'If we do not tread carefully, the execution Horus planned for us at Isstvan will be carried out at another place. You know that we lack the strength to fight at the moment.'

Concerned by his brother's words, Branne slapped a hand to Agapito's shoulder guard.

'What happened on Isstvan is over,' said Branne, guessing the source of Agapito's hesitance. 'We lost most of the Legion, but we survived.'

'"We" survived, brother? I don't remember you at the dropsite.'

'Through no fault of my own!' snapped Branne, snatching back his hand. He was infuriated that of all his comrades, it was Agapito who had given voice to the accusation Branne had suspected lingered in the minds of his battle-brothers. 'How can I be held responsible for the drawing of lots that left me as garrison commander?'

'You misunderstand me, brother,' said Agapito, with a sorrowful shake of the head. 'It is not personal, but you can never understand what it was like to be there. I don't begrudge your absence, I envy it.'

'You haven't talked about the dropsite at all, to me or the primarch,' said Branne, his anger punctured by Agapito's confession. 'Some of the others, they have found it helpful to discuss what they saw, to share their stories. Tell me, what happened to you at the dropsite?'

'No,' said Agapito, stepping away. He signalled to his warriors to begin boarding as the launch bay lights dimmed in readiness for the main doors to open. Overhead, klaxons sounded the five-minute warning. 'Some stories are best left untold. You do not want to

know what I did at the dropsite.'

Branne said nothing as his brother turned away, confused by the change he had seen in Agapito. His fellow commander had once been the first to swap war stories on the ship back to Deliverance, taking great delight in recounting his kills and close calls with death. Even as young boys, when they had fought for the liberty of Deliverance, before the Emperor had come and brought the Legion, Agapito would rouse the flagging spirits of the freedom fighters with tales of his daring and their victories over the Kiavahran enslavers.

He watched as Agapito stood at the bottom of the ramp, counting off the squads as they ran into the Stormbird amid the thunderous falls of boots on metal. As the last of the legionaries passed him, Branne noticed something on their shoulder guards, a small device painted under the Legion symbol. It was a grey skull, almost as dark as the black of their armour. Now that he noticed it, Branne saw it in the insignia of all the company's warriors. He waved aside one of the squad leaders as he jogged past.

'Sergeant Nestil, a word,' said the commander.

'Yes, captain,' said Nestil, coming to attention in front of Branne.

'What does this mean?' asked Branne, prodding a finger towards the small sigil.

'Isstvan veteran, captain,' replied the sergeant with no hint of reluctance. 'There was no official campaign badge or honours issued, captain. We thought it would be good to remember the fallen.'

'You have all taken this on?' said Branne.

'All of us that fought there, yes, captain, at least in the Talons,' said Nestil. He glanced towards Agapito, and Branne took his meaning.

'Whose idea was this?' asked Branne.

'I'm not sure, captain,' admitted Nestil. He looked away, glancing again at Agapito. 'It was just one of those ideas that seemed to catch on.'

'Sorry to delay you, sergeant,' said Branne, waving Nestil to carry on.

Not good, thought Branne as he watched Agapito follow Nestil up the ramp onto the Stormbird. A commander being close-lipped about what he had done and legionaries giving themselves honours. The dropsite massacre had caused serious damage to the Raven Guard, even more than the seventy-five thousand dead legionaries.

STRAPPED INTO HIS berth beside one of the viewing ports, Alpharius had a good view of Terra as the Stormbird dipped away from the *Avenger*. It had been a fortunate turn to be included in Corax's honour guard and would provide, he hoped, a good opportunity to see the defences being prepared to welcome Horus. Aside from whatever else he might be asked to do, his role in the Raven Guard was to gather intelligence for the final, inevitable assault on the Emperor's stronghold. Everything he could learn now would give the Warmaster and his allies a valuable warning of what to expect.

'What is that?' one of the legionaries asked from further down the compartment. Alpharius turned to see the other Raven Guard straining at their harnesses to look out of the starboard windows. 'It's bigger than a star fort!'

Alpharius could not see clearly from his position but glimpsed a massive vessel in low orbit. It seemed to stretch on and on, a gilded construction shaped like an eagle with outstretched wings, bedecked with fortified gun towers, lance batteries, missile tubes and bombardment cannons. So vast was the orbiting station, its faint shadow could be seen on the cloud layer wreathing Terra. The flicker of void shields surrounded the immense floating edifice, dappling the gold of its heavily-buttressed superstructure with purple and red. Smaller ships – some of them mighty battleships in their own right – were dwarfed by its presence, its turret-encrusted docks large enough for cruisers several kilometres long.

'That's *Phalanx*,' said Sergeant Nestil. 'Base ship of the Imperial Fists. Impressive, isn't it? Never

mind a battle-barge, that's what we should've taken to Isstvan.'

It certainly was impressive, but no surprise. Everyone had heard of *Phalanx* and its presence in the Sol system was to be expected. Horus was well aware of the star fortress's capabilities and defences already, and no doubt had devised a way to counter them. This was not the object of Alpharius's mission. Of more interest to the Alpha Legionnaire was a golden-hulled cruiser rising out of the dock neighbouring the Avenger. Though he was not sure, it looked like a vessel belonging to the Legio Custodes, the Emperor's elite protectors. He wondered where they were going, when all other effort was being directed towards the defence of the Master of Mankind.

And then everything outside turned white as the Stormbird dropped into the thickening Ter-ran atmosphere, enveloping the craft in bright flames. As they descended, the visibility momentarily cleared, revealing a vista that sent a thrill through Alpharius.

Large platforms could be half-seen amongst the dense cloud, drifting serenely through the air surrounded by swarms of shuttles and cargo-lifters. The closest floating city, its name unknown to Alpharius, was glimpsed between breaks in the whiteness, a mass of towering buildings, winding roadways and landing aprons. Sunlight glittered from coiling spires made of multicoloured glass and dazzled across the mirrored plates of photo-receptors and vapour condensers.

The splendour of graceful lines and arcing bridges was marred by blocky aberrations: gun towers and bunkers surrounded by scaffolding that was thick with workers. As the Stormbird banked onto its final course, Alpharius's augmented eyes could see flashes of yellow armour amongst the robes and overalls of the work teams: Imperial Fists supervising the construction of the defences.

The nose of the Stormbird dipped and cloud again swathed Alpharius's view, blotting out the vision of the hovering city. The engines whined as the craft slowed for its landing, and banked once more, circling over the Lion's Gate starport that spread darkly across the bare rock of Terra's surface in a vast maze of ferrocrete and plasteel. Alpharius had a glimpse of landing platforms that stretched for kilometres, shadowed beneath control towers and defence laser turrets.

The Alpha Legionnaire was glad that his arrival was in the guise of a friend and wondered if, at some point of the future, he would be returning here as a foe. He had made dozens of combat drops during his long years of service, but seeing the immense barrels of the orbital defence cannons and the flicker of power fields, he knew that whichever Legion ultimately had the task of securing Lion's Gate would suffer heavy casualties.

Even as he thought of the assault that was sure to come, Alpharius's mind was analysing the growing defences. Any insights he could glean from this opportunity to examine Dorn's fortifications first-hand might prove invaluable to Horus, and so in turn were of significant worth to the Alpha Legion. His eye caught the telltale capacitors and conduits of power field generators, while he calculated the zones of fire of the smaller rings of protective pillboxes and automated lascannon mounts.

With a thud and a hiss of hydraulics, the Stormbird extended its landing gear, breaking Alpharius's thoughts. So engrossed had he been in his intelligence-gathering, he had quite forgotten where he was. Alpharius took a deep breath as the Stormbird touched down, rocking slightly on its gear, clouds of smoke and plasma-wash billowing around the craft.

He was on Terra, the capital of the Imperium, home to the Emperor.