

THE HORUS HERESY

DEATH AND DEFIANCE

The Traitor's Gambit



Featuring Nick Kyme, Aaron Dembski-Bowden, Guy Haley,
Andy Smillie and James Swallow

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THE HORUS HERESY™

An Anthology

DEATH AND
DEFIANCE

The Traitor's Gambit



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THE HORUS HERESY

IT IS A TIME OF LEGEND.

THE GALAXY IS IN FLAMES. THE EMPEROR'S GLORIOUS VISION FOR HUMANITY IS IN RUINS. HIS FAVOURED SON, HORUS, HAS TURNED FROM HIS FATHER'S LIGHT AND EMBRACED CHAOS.

HIS ARMIES, THE MIGHTY AND REDOUBTABLE SPACE MARINES, ARE LOCKED IN A BRUTAL CIVIL WAR. ONCE, THESE ULTIMATE WARRIORS FOUGHT SIDE BY SIDE AS BROTHERS, PROTECTING THE GALAXY AND BRINGING MANKIND BACK INTO THE EMPEROR'S LIGHT. NOW THEY ARE DIVIDED

SOME REMAIN LOYAL TO THE EMPEROR, WHILST OTHERS HAVE SIDED WITH THE WARMASTER. PRE-EMINENT AMONGST THEM, THE LEADERS OF THEIR THOUSANDS-STRONG LEGIONS ARE THE PRIMARCHS. MAGNIFICENT, SUPERHUMAN BEINGS, THEY ARE THE CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT OF THE EMPEROR'S GENETIC SCIENCE. THRUST INTO BATTLE AGAINST ONE ANOTHER, VICTORY IS UNCERTAIN FOR EITHER SIDE.

WORLDS ARE BURNING. AT ISSTVAN V, HORUS DEALT A VICIOUS BLOW AND THREE LOYAL LEGIONS WERE ALL BUT DESTROYED. WAR WAS BEGUN, A CONFLICT THAT WILL ENGULF ALL MANKIND IN FIRE. TREACHERY AND BETRAYAL HAVE USURPED HONOUR AND NOBILITY. ASSASSINS LURK IN EVERY SHADOW. ARMIES ARE GATHERING. ALL MUST CHOOSE A SIDE OR DIE.

HORUS MUSTERS HIS ARMADA, TERRA ITSELF THE OBJECT OF HIS WRATH. SEATED UPON THE GOLDEN THRONE, THE EMPEROR WAITS FOR HIS WAYWARD SON TO RETURN. BUT HIS TRUE ENEMY IS CHAOS, A PRIMORDIAL FORCE THAT SEEKS TO ENSLAVE MANKIND TO ITS CAPRICIOUS WHIMS.

THE SCREAMS OF THE INNOCENT, THE PLEAS OF THE RIGHTEOUS RESOUND TO THE CRUEL LAUGHTER OF DARK GODS. SUFFERING AND DAMNATION AWAIT ALL SHOULD THE EMPEROR FAIL AND THE WAR BE LOST.

AS THE FLAMES OF WAR SPREAD THROUGH THE IMPERIUM, MANKIND'S CHAMPIONS WILL ALL BE PUT TO THE ULTIMATE TEST.

THE AGE OF KNOWLEDGE AND ENLIGHTENMENT HAS ENDED.

THE AGE OF DARKNESS HAS BEGUN.

IMPERFECT

Nick Kyme

TWO EMBATTLED ARMIES, their forces scattered, glared unblinking at one another across a white and ebon field. They had begun arrayed in perfect formation, their ranks orderly, their pennants standing stiff against a shallow breeze and the faces of their front rank fighters as hard as rock. Raised up on their circular plinths, their lords and spiritual leaders had looked on imperiously - Emperor and Empress standing side by side, displaying to all the strength of their rule and commitment to victory.

But as was so often the case in war, even with the loftiest of strategic minds, order broke down and chaos took the reins. For if one thing was certain about conflict, it was that it always ended in the reign of chaos.

War now blighted this hard, unyielding plain. It could only end in defeat for one side or the other. With the clarions of battle not yet faded on the air, much blood was spilled before one of their generals spoke.

'Do you imagine yourself as the Emperor or the Tetrarch, brother?' asked Fulgrim.

The Phoenician was leaning back and staring at Ferrus across the finely carved game pieces. He narrowed his keen eyes, easing himself forward so that he was level with his brother, who had sunk down amongst the pieces to contemplate his next move.

Unlike his more serious sibling, Fulgrim wore loose-fitting robes of pearlescent violet and his silver hair hung loose about his neck and shoulders. An ivory goblet inscribed with curious sigils sat near the tapered fingers of his right hand, adjacent to the gaming table. Fulgrim took a sip of the draught within - it seemed to invigorate him - before saying, 'I think you see yourself as the Tetrarch. Am I right?'

He toyed with the piece that represented the Divinitarch. She was a robed and blind seer clutching her staff of office, an iconic depiction of an iris within the letter 'I'. Or, in ancient Grekan, the iota.

Intent on his playing pieces, Ferrus did not look up. 'Are you trying to distract me, brother?' he asked, good-naturedly.

His tone didn't match his appearance. Ferrus was clad in his Medusan war-plate. Black as a funerary shroud, it looked thick and unyielding. His hair was shorn close to the scalp and his face might as well have been hewn from stone for all the emotion it betrayed.

Fulgrim leaned back, the light from the single phosphor globe above catching the porcelain cast to the skin of his face and neck. His long, lustrous hair flashed

brightly in the lambent glow.

Beyond the light, there was only darkness. It made discerning the exact size of the chamber that they were playing in difficult. A low hiss did resonate on the cool air, though, suggesting at least a sizeable hall or gallery.

'Not at all,' he said, the slightest curl of his lip betraying both a nascent smile and the lie in his words. 'I merely pose the question - Emperor or Tetrarch?'

'Why not Primarch?' Ferrus answered, looking up from his deliberations at last to fix Fulgrim with hard eyes reminiscent of knapped flint or obsidian fire-ice. 'For that is what we are, is it not?'

Ferrus made his move, a cunning outflank with his last remaining Ecclesiarch. He sat back, arms folded, looking pleased with himself.

Fulgrim laughed, a genuine expression of warm bonhomie that he seldom felt except for when he was with his brother.

'You should really mask your intentions better, Ferrus.'

'Should I?' The flicker of a smile manifested but was buried quickly under the crags of Ferrus' stern features. 'Who has a better mask than the Gorgon, brother?' he asked. 'Tell me that.'

'Now who's using distraction?'

Ferrus didn't answer, but merely gestured to the board with a gauntleted hand.

Fulgrim's face darkened a little as he noticed the armoured glove, but he recovered quickly. Who wears armour to a gentle game of strategy, he thought, though the shadows around them seemed to shift uncomfortably at the ire implicit in Fulgrim's unspoken tone. And the gauntlets? Amateurish.

'Does it bother you,' he said aloud, addressing Ferrus, 'being called that? Gorgon. An ugly creature, a monster of Grekan myth, so loathsome it could petrify a man by merely looking at him.'

Ferrus gave a short laugh.

'I see it as a compliment. Besides, I am ugly.'

They laughed together at Ferrus' mild self-deprecation. He only did it in Fulgrim's presence, the closeness of their fraternal bond evident in his apparent ease.

Even so, Ferrus still had to rationalise comment. It was his nature.

'My enemies held rigid with fear just at the sight of my stern countenance,' he said, sighing. 'Would that all battles were fought and won so easily.'

'Yes...!' Fulgrim replied wistfully, his attention only half upon the board. 'Would that they were.'

He leaned forwards again, going to take a sip from his goblet but finding to his

dissatisfaction that he had already drained it.

'We are friends, you and I?' he asked.

Ferrus frowned, slightly incredulous at Fulgrim's remark. 'Did I not forge your sword for you, brother?'

'Is that what friendship is, the forging of swords?'

'I can think of no more tangible a bond of trust than that,' Ferrus answered, his raw honesty difficult for Fulgrim to see. 'As warriors, we need to be sure of our weapons in battle. I would not let just anyone forge something I rely upon so keenly.'

'And so does that mean you trusted me then?'

Ferrus' brow furrowed in confusion. 'Trusted?'

'Trust. That you trust me.'

'You are my brother, Fulgrim. Of course I trust you.'

'And do you trust all of your brothers?'

Now the Gorgon showed his true face, a stern slab of rock that seemed to darken the light with the sudden severity of its expression. 'You know I don't.'

Fulgrim recalled the names. Curze, Magnus, Jaghatai...

'Then ours is a deeper bond,' he said, relaxing.

'Rare as the ore of Medusa.'

Fulgrim smiled warmly, forgetting for a moment where he was.

'How do you think two men like us became such firm friends when our humours are so very different?'

'We are far from mortal men, Fulgrim.'

Ferrus had always revelled in that. The idea that he was greater, more than just ordinary. *Perhaps my own demeanour is not so different?*

'Well, you know what I mean.'

Ferrus bowed his head apologetically. 'Are our humours so dissimilar?'

You're right, they're not. I am the master of mine and you... well...

'And does similarity really promote such a strong bond? Both Vulkan and I are blacksmiths of one creed or another. I respect his craft, but I do not wish he was sitting here in your place.'

Fulgrim leaned back again, seemingly satisfied. 'You are noble, Ferrus. I want you to know that.'

Ferrus smiled, his dark mood lifting.

'And you are still procrastinating, brother.'

'Just playing up to your pride.'

Fulgrim made his next move, opting to place one of his Citizens in a

vulnerable position. It was an obvious strategy, and one Ferrus should see coming. But it veiled a second threat, concealed by the hooded board.

Their battlefield was circular - not an uncommon configuration - and divided into segments, each of which were made up of nexuses conjoined by the curved lines that gave the board its shape. Six spokes jutted from the main nexus, the core. Both primarch's pieces were currently arrayed around it, though not all were visible. The 'hooded' board meant that several of their pieces, predetermined before the commencement of the game, were held in reserve. When deployed, such pieces would remain hidden, represented as lowly Citizens, until such time as they turned or killed another piece.

The only other way to reveal the identity of hooded pieces was to use a Divinitarch. Ferrus had sacrificed his early on, deeming it tactically more valuable to manoeuvre his Tetrarch into a favourable position.

The armoured warrior piece, its sword held up in salute against its visored faceplate, had much in kind with its wielder's demeanour.

As Fulgrim released the Citizen, Ferrus gave a snort of admonition.

'I won't be goaded so easily.'

His thin, serpentine lips pursed. Fulgrim considered his brother's words but left the obvious rejoinder unspoken. Instead, he returned to the question. 'You still haven't answered. Emperor or Tetrarch?'

Ferrus smiled, engrossed in the board and the game.

It is good to see him at such ease.

Fulgrim studied him.

The angular cheekbones. The sweep of his heavy brow, each line above it like a fissure in the sharp crags of his face. The muscular jawline, peppered with dark stubble. The trunk-like neck. A pugilist's ears - ugly, small and misshapen. The mild discolouration of his skin from hours spent toiling in the forge. His piercing eyes, ever judging. Every hair, every stalwart tooth, every crease and scar...

'Blind Man's Fate is a strategy to use against novices, brother,' said Ferrus in his familiar rumbling baritone. Again, he moved his Tetrarch.

'Novices, or the arrogant pedagogue...' Fulgrim murmured.

'And which am I?'

Both. Neither.

'Let us see, shall we?'

Fulgrim brought his Divinitarch into contact with a hooded Citizen, and Ferrus was forced to reveal its true identity.

'A Fortress, brother? How intriguing.'

'Is it?'

'Only that, whenever we have played this game, you always favour an attacking strategy.'

Paying no heed and absorbed in the game, Ferrus took his Fortress down the board towards the core nexus.

'Aggressive...' Fulgrim nodded approvingly, then made his own move.

Taking less and less time to deliberate each move, Ferrus swept aside the Ecdesiarch that Fulgrim had just offered him in a killing move that sent a flash of anticipatory triumph across the Gorgon's face.

Fulgrim tapped the edge of the table with his thin, sinuous fingers. His fallen Ecdesiarch had apparently dented his preferred strategy. The seconds lapsed, and he did nothing.

'Do you know why they call this game "Regicide"?' he asked, caressing the ivory stem of his white Empress, she with all the potency but none of the actual power.

'I care not,' snapped Ferrus. 'Cease this pathetic stalling and make your move.'

'Patience, brother,' Fulgrim chided him. 'Was Narodnya really so long ago that you've forgotten how to be patient?'

Ferrus looked about to snap again when he relaxed, plaintively holding up both gauntleted hands. Again, Fulgrim noticed them and had to stifle a tremor of rage beneath his right eye. A sibilant undertone cut the frigid air.

'What was that?' Ferrus asked, reacting to the sound.

'Nothing. Just atmospheric recirculation protocols.'

For the first time since the game began, Fulgrim looked up from the table and into the darkness beyond. He preferred it this way, especially when playing, as it tended to focus the mind. A hazy spotlight flushed the table and its players in sickly yellow. Just beyond this faint corona of illumination, penumbral figures could be seen in silhouette watching the contest unfold. They were still, rapt with attention as the test reached its most crucial phase.

'Death of a monarch,' answered Ferrus, his voice drawing Fulgrim's attention back to him. 'That's what it means.'

'It also refers to the death of an emperor,' the Phoenician countered, finding his confidence again as he marshalled his Empress into position. 'Not only that, brother, but the just and lawful execution of said monarch or emperor, following trial.' He licked his lips and the susurrations from the atmospheric recirculation briefly intensified. 'I find it an intriguing notion.'

'Indeed,' said Ferrus, his attention back again on the board.

A trap was forming, his awareness of it evident in his tense facial expression. It also revealed that he could not discern the nature of the trap - only that one existed.

Still so blind...

By moving his Empress, Fulgrim had left his Emperor open to attack.

'Yes,' he continued. 'Intriguing that an emperor can be considered subject to the same laws and strictures that bind ordinary men. That any act of harm put to such a being can be considered lawful and just.'

You believe it should not be so?'

'I believe it suggests that a leader, or even a father, can be flawed.'

'All men have flaws, it's what makes them men. The ability to see and mitigate one's own flaws is a measure of a man's greatness. Only good leaders possess such self-awareness.'

How ironic, Fulgrim wanted to say, but instead he said, 'Now who's stalling, brother?' deliberately turning Ferrus' earlier words against him in the hope of gaining a psychological advantage.

'I am not stalling.' Some of the anger returned, visible in the Gorgon's clenching and unclenching of his fists.

'Then act.'

'You are trying to hurry me into a mistake.'

No goading is required, dear brother.

Ferrus' gauntleted hand poised over the Tetrarch. One angular move, and he could kill the identical piece in Fulgrim's army. It was a move called 'the Swordbreaker' and in this version of Regicide it would turn Ferrus' conquering Tetrarch into a Primarch, a piece of much greater manoeuvrability and, therefore, power.

'You're hiding something,' he said, still wavering.

'And you're behaving distinctly out of character, brother.' Fulgrim snarled, baring his teeth.

Ferrus seemed not to notice. Instead, he stared at the board, wracked by indecision.

'Do I kill him?'

How many times did I ask myself that very question?

After making his move, Ferrus would have to withstand whatever attack Fulgrim crafted next, but with another Primarch at his side. He scrutinised the board, but saw no potential danger.

'You have nothing...' he muttered, smiling. 'As ever, you opt for obfuscation

instead of a solid strategy.'

'Then show me yours,' invited Fulgrim. 'But before you do, answer my question. Are you the Tetrarch or the Emperor?'

Ferrus looked up, his face a mask of defiant belligerence.

'No one can be Emperor, save the Emperor himself,' he declared and thrust his Tetrarch forwards, killing the opposing piece and substituting for his new Primarch. 'As I play, I imagine myself as the Tetrarch.'

And there's the brother I know.

'Without pretension to rule, only to serve,' said Fulgrim.

'Just so.'

'And now Primarch.'

'Again, yes. It's your move, brother.'

'Becoming what you appear to be.'

'Is there not honour in that?' asked Ferrus, but his pride bled through in the words.

'Much. Dissembling is for less obvious minds than yours, dear brother.'

That was a mistake. Fulgrim hadn't meant to say that out loud. Perhaps he was not as in control of the situation - and himself - as he thought?

Ferrus scowled, annoyed. 'What is that supposed to mean?'

Words could not be unsaid, so Fulgrim went with them. With an open hand, he gestured to the board and the game in progress. There was a faint undercurrent of sadness to the Phoenician's tone as he made his final move.

'That you fail to see what is in front of you.'

The Citizen he had positioned earlier came adjacent to Ferrus' new Primarch and revealed itself to be an Ecclesiarch. Both of Fulgrim's

Divinitarchs and his second Ecclesiarch were also adjacent. None could take the Primarch, for their specific permitted moves across the board combined with their relative positions did not afford this opportunity. They did, however, allow for something else.

Ferrus' eyes widened as he finally saw the trap. 'Too late,' he murmured, 'too late...'

You were, both of you. And too weak...

Fulgrim started for a moment, unsure as to where the thought had come from, but quickly recovered.

'This,' he said, tapping the place over his chest beneath which his heart was beating fast, 'was your downfall. Too rash, too eager. Undone by your anger, your arrogance. Are you so impatient, Ferrus? You speak of flaws, of the traits of

great men. Are we not great men? So then, are we so aware of our own inherent flaws? Are you?'

Ferrus had no answer. He could only stare mutely, grasping for comprehension.

That was the second fault.

Fulgrim simmered with displeasure, but had to play this out.

'Why did you not heed me, brother?' he asked. 'We were bonded you and I, beneath the slopes of Mount Narodnya. You with Fire-blade and I with Forgebreaker. Now, what has become of those noble weapons and the ideals we craved as we forged them?'

Ferrus looked up from the table, a frozen fist around his heart.

'The Traitor's Gambit?' he asked, not because he didn't recognise the strategy but more out of disbelief that Fulgrim had used it against him.

Anger. This was something that the Ferrus before Fulgrim could understand.

'You sound annoyed, brother,' the Phoenician hissed.

'Because you try to turn me!'

'I have turned you, Ferrus. You have fought and bled, wrought a piece with significant power for your efforts, and now I have taken it for my own.'

Ferrus shoved the table back so it jabbed Fulgrim in the stomach, and rose to his feet.

'Brother!' Fulgrim shifted backwards himself and tried to look shocked.

He is unravelling again, just like before.

'You dare...' accused Ferrus. He slammed his fist down on the board, scattering the pieces.

'I dare what? We are merely playing a friendly game.'

'You dare this?' Ferrus clenched his jaw. Fulgrim could hear his brother's teeth grinding hatefully, but he stayed where he was for now.

'How have I insulted you? Please sit down.' He gestured to Ferrus' stool, but it was upended and rolling away from the board now. 'Return to the game.'

'Your game,' Ferrus snarled. 'One in which you try to turn my hand. I am a loyal son of the Emperor. As were you.'

He reached for a weapon, but there was no scabbard at his hip and no hammer at his back.

'Perturabo has Forgebreaker now,' Fulgrim said with resignation. 'His anger towards me eclipses your own, brother, as hard as I'm sure that is for you to believe.'

Seismic cracks appeared in the Gorgon's stolid countenance as he struggled to

comprehend everything that Fulgrim was saying.

'Where is Perturabo?' Ferrus demanded. 'Where is my hammer? Tell me!'

The ruse is over, said the voice in Fulgrim's head that had hijacked his most recent thoughts. 'I agree...' Fulgrim muttered sadly.

'With what?' snapped Ferrus.

'That this is done.' Fulgrim glanced to the shadows and the silhouette standing there. 'I am very disappointed in you,' he murmured, then turned his ophidian gaze back to Ferrus, 'And as for you...'

Ferrus seemed not to understand. 'Explain yourself.'

Fulgrim did as Ferrus requested, five words that drained away the Gorgon's wrath and left him stunned.

'You are not my brother.'

Savagely, Fulgrim gripped the Regicide table in both hands and threw it aside. The pieces clattered noisily to the floor, Emperors and Citizens alike toppled and slain in seconds. The game was over, and Fulgrim was revealed in all of his infernal beauty.

Ferrus backed away as the other primarch rose to his full height, dwarfing him. He gasped, 'Monster...'

Fulgrim's reply was sibilant and insidious. 'I prefer exalted.'

Where Ferrus had known him as a being of immortal perfection, a handsome warrior-king of Chemos, the creature that Fulgrim had become scarcely echoed that former ideal.

A purplish hue affected the pallor of his skin now, and there were ridges of scale in kind with Fulgrim's serpentine body. His upper torso and face still remained much as it once had been, though the eyes looked distinctly reptilian and sharp, needle-like fangs filled a mouth that seemed, at times, oddly distended. His legs were no more, his dancing swordsman's gait surrendered in preference to the coiled agility of a viper's tail, the two limbs conjoined by some terrible alchemy.

Fulgrim knew his appearance well. He had often studied it narcissistically in one of his many mirrors. He had beheld it in the shimmering blood of his enemies. Seen it reflected in the eyes of those he was about to kill.

It was murderous. It was beautiful.

It was perfection.

Unlike this wretched specimen.

Ferrus was overcoming his revulsion, and bunched his fists.

'That won't be necessary...' uttered Fulgrim flatly, and sprang at him.

Ferrus roared as Fulgrim clamped his maw around the Gorgon's neck and bit deep. In a panic, those strong, gauntleted hands wrapped around his upper and lower jaws and tried to pull them open.

Fulgrim was spitting blood as Ferrus' carotid artery gushed even more vigorously. The Gorgon's grip was firm, his face a mask of pained hatred. Fulgrim raked him with his talons, tearing deep rents in his armour, but Ferrus clung on desperately.

Like a beast tamer wrestling his charge, Ferrus used the power in his hips to fling Fulgrim onto his back where the monster writhed and hissed.

'I remember now...' he snarled, blazing Medusan anger to meet his cold, iron hatred. 'Your betrayal.'

He slowly prised open Fulgrim's jaws like they were a vice.

'You coward!'

Fulgrim thrashed, unable to speak, seized by the very real possibility that significant harm might yet come to him. He twisted, trying to free himself, but Ferrus would not let him go.

'I should have killed you at Isstvan,' Ferrus said, 'I should have-'

He does remember. Everything, just as Fabius had promised he would.

'I...' Ferrus stumbled, losing his grip as he stared down dumbly at the thing that his brother had willingly become.

He remembered too much.

'You tried,' said Fulgrim, grief-stricken and slurring the words.

With a ferocious twist of his serpentine body, Fulgrim threw Ferrus off. He staggered, going down on one knee, but didn't move far. His trailing hand, supporting his body, scraped against an armoured boot. In confusion, Ferrus looked down behind him into the shadows.

He saw a figure there. Recognising its physiognomy, he looked back to his brother.

'What is this?' he asked, struggling with his ambivalent emotions.

Fulgrim righted himself and stabbed his dumbstruck brother through the heart with his barbed tail, piercing the weak spot he had raked earlier with his talons.

'I think it's closure,' Fulgrim answered with quiet resignation. 'Or sometimes torture.'

And so Ferrus Manus, the Gorgon and Primarch of the Iron Hands, died.
Again.

Fulgrim glared at the corpse, unable to hide his disgust.

'He was imperfect. How many times now is it that you have failed me,

Fabius?'

The silhouette watching from the shadows shifted uncomfortably.

'My lord,' began a rasping, obsequious voice.

'Don't answer, I can see for myself.'

Lumen globes fixed in alcoves and the domed ceiling above flared into life in perfect unison. Revealed starkly in their glow were bodies. Huge, armoured, primarch bodies. Corpses. The coppery stench of their spilled and cooling blood was almost overwhelming. Fulgrim had ordered nullifying agents pumped into the chamber to mask the smell, but seeing it seemed to bring it back.

Ferrus Manus lay dead. His imperfect clones littered the chamber floor in their dozens, a silent and broken audience. Fulgrim regarded them disappointedly.

Apothecary Fabius's hololithic image flickered nearby, but cast no light that he might observe without disturbing his primarch. Even with practised indifference disguising much of the emotion of his wizened face, Fabius looked relieved that he was not actually in Fulgrim's presence.

The flesh-maker was in his usual garb. A shawl of rough, leathern skin draped purple and gold armour and a necrotic-looking armature sprouted from his back. The surgeon's limbs were folded, though the many surgical instruments, diffusers and injection-philtres were still visible.

'It is not easy, my lord,' he tried again, peering through tangles of dirty white hair, taking advantage of the primarch's distraction. 'And corrupt samples yield imperfect results.' He paused to lick those dry, cadaverous lips. 'As you can see, cloning a being like a primarch -well, it is a process that borders on requiring the Emperor's own scientific genius to perfect.'

A marble table, with a Regicide board carefully arranged upon it, stood alone and unmolested some metres away. The last one. Fulgrim eased his immense serpent body down next to it, taking his position as he had many times before.

Repetition was important, Fabius had informed him. It was the only way to control the many variables. Subtle changes would garner more conclusive results.

'I can hear your pride from several systems away, Fabius.'

Fabius bowed. 'It is complex, but not impossible.'

'Then what about his hands?' Fulgrim snapped. 'They were like flowing mercury, not gauntleted. He must be perfect! I need this Fabius. I need it. When Ferrus died I was a prisoner in my own flesh. I have to speak to him. I have to tell him...' he trailed off.

'Replication is not easy,' said the Apothecary, filling the brief silence with his

squirming excuses. 'As I said, a corrupt sample-'

'The blood from my blade shall have to suffice!'

'Yes, my lord, but the problem I am trying to-'

'Shut up. I'm bored.' Fulgrim sneered at the hololith. 'You are an unpleasant creature, Fabius. So full of bile.'

'As you wish, my lord. Are you ready to try again?'

Fulgrim nodded curtly and the lights dimmed once more, a single globe staying lit over the Regicide table as the rest of the chamber was drowned in darkness. From below there came the sound of gears and servos, a great mechanism at work. A hatch slid open, large enough to admit a hulking figure in black war-plate sitting upon a simple stool.

As the clone reached the chamber, the platform filled the hatchway and Ferrus opened his eyes.

'Brother,' it said warmly, awareness lighting up its face. 'Are you ready to play?'

I am ready... hissed the voice in Fulgrim's head.

Have I not silenced you?

You can no more silence me than you can silence yourself, dear host.

You are subservient to me.

For now...

Fulgrim clenched a fist, but the daemon would have to wait. He wasn't surprised that it had resurfaced. This had as much to do with it as it did Fulgrim and his brother.

Ferrus seemed not to notice the delay, his awareness held in mental stasis until Fulgrim gestured to the board. The Phoenician smiled as Ferrus looked down to consider his move.

'Do you consider yourself the Tetrarch or the Emperor?' asked Fulgrim, and the game began.

Again.

UNLIKE MOST OF his brethren, Fabius preferred isolation to the company of others. He had always regarded his pathology as unique amongst the Emperor's Children - whenever he flayed a subject or pinned back its flesh to reveal the complex anatomy of its internal organs, there was an end in mind. Knowledge, reason. It separated him from his more... self-indulgent siblings.

Fabius desired sensation. He wanted to experience all of it, but he wanted to do that forever. He also knew that his great work would take time. Millennia,

perhaps, despite the fact he had already made significant progress.

By returning to the *Pride of the Emperor*, he had to sacrifice certain 'freedoms' to experiment, proscriptions he had not been bound by on the *Andronius*, but it was a large ship and Fulgrim had much to occupy him already. If this latest fascination with the Gorgon was anything to gauge by, Fabius could operate more or less with impunity.

If he was careful.

In the antechamber where he currently toiled, secrecy was of prime importance. A gene-coded key was required to access it, something Fabius altered every few cycles. It was also hidden deep in the bowels of the ship and would not appear on any schematics or auspex scans. It was, for all intents and purposes, a dead zone.

The irony of that particular nomenclature amused the Apothecary. He smiled, seeing himself reflected grimly in the outer glass on the caskets he had under observation.

In one, a mutated freak with tiny winged appendages of gristle and wasted flesh. It mewled in the briny solution of the casket, blind and forever drowning. Another bore its organs on the outside, a ruddy scum collecting at the bottom of its casket as it raged impotently with its shrivelled fists against the glass. The samples numbered in the dozens, each in varying stages of evolution and genetic success.

Ferrus had not been the first, though he was advanced. Nor would he be the last.

Strolling the length of the labororium, the caskets reminded Fabius of some insidious processional. He paused at the last in the line.

Within was an infant child, curled up, sleeping warm and safe within its amniotic stew. A Cthonian birthmark was visible on the small of the child's tiny back.

'Sleep,' hissed Fabius, a grim nursemaid to the slumbering infant, 'for when you wake, the galaxy shall be a very different place.'

HOWL OF THE HEARTH WORLD

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

HIS NAME WAS Thirteen Stars Falling. He was the one to spit upon the ground before the Lord of Winter and War.

'There's your answer, Russ.'

The Lord of Winter and War was a king without a throne. When he gathered the *Einherjar* blood-sworn, he did so without ceremony, holding a warriors' court on the bare earth. Every soul stood equal to his kinsmen, and every warrior present knew that the day would end with the fall of an executioner's axe.

All eyes lay upon the six souls awaiting judgement beneath the weeping storm. They stood without any attempt at formation, though instinct had each of them standing with enough room to draw and swing a blade. Rain drenched the brothers as they stood before their master, soaking their wolf pelts and polishing their grey ceramite to a greasy sheen.

The wind still carried the chemical reek of burned fuel, a legacy of the Legion's recent planetfall. No warriors' court would ever convene in the void; tradition was tradition, and not even the Lord of Winter and War could decree otherwise. Fenrisians and Terrans alike had a right to die with their boots upon honest earth.

Jarls and thegns from other companies formed a ring around the accused. Armed and armoured for battle, these chieftains murmured amongst themselves, their voices as deep and low as rousing bears. Talismans and charms were exchanged in place of meaningless coins as they gambled without shame on the lives of their kinsmen.

At last, Russ spoke. Outsiders often likened his voice to a canine's snarl, yet here amongst his sons he was but one of many with a feral edge to his words.

'That's the last refusal I will hear from Howl of the Hearthworld.'

Thirteen Stars Falling nodded. 'Then don't ask us again.'

The high king smiled, a thing of bared teeth and flashing eyes. He was ageless in the way that only godlings are ageless, and scarred in ways that a coward would never be scarred. Two wolves prowled by his side, loyal and hunter-keen. The Lord of Winter and War idly ran gloved fingers through the nearest beast's fur.

'I offer you honour,' he said, 'and you return it with defiance.'

'You have offered us banishment, my king. We refuse it. We will stay and hunt. We will fight with the Legion, as we were born to do.'

'I see.' The Imperium might know the primarch by a wealth of names and titles, but to his warriors he was the Lord of Winter and War, or more recently

"the Russ" - first and most noble son of the old Russ Tribe.

And in the face of his son's defiance, Leman of the Russ was still smiling. Morbid merriment twisted the scars on his weathered features. Privately he wondered, as he often did in these moments, if the weeping sky was an omen. If so, it seemed an unsubtle one.

'You know I'm within the rights of the blood-sworn to take your skulls for this. Is Howl of the Hearthworld so keen to surrender its heads to my sword's edge?'

Thirteen Stars Falling stepped forward, proud in his war-mauled Crusade plate, prouder still of the brown fur cloak now turned sodden-black by the rising storm. By the reckoning of his people, Thirteen Stars Falling was an old man: one of the very first Wolves to sail from Fenris at his primarch's side, scarred but still breathing despite all that the galaxy had thrown at him. Many of the first Fenrisian generation were gone into ash and memory, fallen amongst the thousands of battles fought by the Vika Fen-ryka across the emergent Imperium. Most of the survivors were long since promoted out of the first packs, assigned with all honour to roles within the life-sworn Wolf Guard, or given the right to lead whole companies.

Thirteen Stars Falling had fought hard, not in order to rise but in order to remain where he was. He was a hunter, a stalker, a tracker, a killer - let the logistics of marching armies and sailing fleets fall to other men. His place was with his pack, leading Howl of the Hearthworld through the blood and smoke, an axe in his hand and a roar in his throat.

He scratched his chin through his braided beard, his fingers meeting the ivory rings fastened there. To him, it might seem only yesterday that his beard had been black with flecks of white; now it was white with streaks of grey. A warrior could fight everything but time and fate.

Before he spoke, Thirteen Stars Falling curled his lip to show his long fangs: the gesture of an elder sharing wisdom with a whelp.

'It is not honour, my king. It is banishment. No matter how much you swear this is a hero's duty, exile is still exile.'

The Russ turned a toothy smile upon the other warchiefs. 'The Sigillite asked this of us, kinsmen. Answer me in truth, here in the warriors' court - do you see no honour in this? The Regent of Terra himself beseeches us to watch the Lords of the Legions.'

A few of the thegns banged fists to breastplates, while others gave a low cheer not far from a murmur. The Russ laughed at their lukewarm display. He was well aware that this was a duty desired by none of them, and loved his sons for their

honesty in saying so. But duty was duty.

Thirteen Stars Falling was unmoved. His cragged features, weathered and darkened by countless wars beneath countless suns, stared flatly towards his king.

'If Malcador asks for watchers, then send watchers. We are warriors, Russ.'

'And yet every other pack has agreed without this stench of rebellion.'

'It is not our place!' Thirteen Stars Falling bared his teeth in a snarl, saliva spraying from his clenched jaws. 'We have spoken with Shadow of the Low Moon, as well as Night's Voice. You send them towards battle, even if it means serving with the other Legions. Yet you send us away from all hope of war. The other packs offered no defiance because they aren't being chained up in a cargo hold and shipped to Terra. You offer them new battlefields. You offer us only exile.'

Russ was no longer smiling. Proud he might be, but patient he was not.

'The time for spit and spite is past, and the time for responsibility is upon us. Malcador asked this of me, and I will provide him what he requires.'

Thirteen Stars Falling shook his head, defeat creeping up his spine. There was no hiding the rage in his eyes, but it was the rage of a beaten beast.

'We are not his thralls to order here and there at a whim. Rogal Dorn needs no watch-pack trailing at his heels - and if he does, then the Imperium is already lost. There's no honour in this exile to Terra, Russ. How are we to take pride in the bloodless, warless fate of peasants and traders and farmers?' He said the last word as a foul-tasting curse.

'I care little for what pride you take in this purpose, kinsmen. I've enjoyed your defiance and I commend you for the fire in your hearts. But press on with it, and Sixth Legion archives will forever record you as the first and only pack to refuse the orders of its primarch. Is that the legacy you wish for Howl of the Hearthworld?'

Silence reigned, sudden and sharp. No one was willing to speak, not even Thirteen Stars Falling.

'I thought as much,' Russ said at last. 'I will grant you the *Damarchus* for your journey to Terra. Be ready to leave within twelve hours'

Howl of the Hearthworld stood motionless, going nowhere, saying nothing.

Instead it was Laughing Jaurnag who stepped forward, taking the place of Thirteen Stars Falling. As warchief of Cry of the Grieving Dragon, jarl of Tolv and master of many packs, he had the right to speak for any of them at a warriors' court.

And speak he would.

'My king,' he said, looking up at Russ with eyes the same grey as the storm above.

'Your king listens, Laughing Jaurmag.'

'Russ,' the chief said in his stern and unsmiling manner, 'it cannot be this way. I cannot send warriors of my company to do a task that I would refuse myself. If you send Howl of the Hearthworld to Terra against their will, I will journey with them.'

He gripped the bronze tore around his throat, one armoured hand holding tight to the thick, tarnished metal ring. Leman of the Russ had bent that tore around Laughing Jaurmag's neck himself, when the warrior first ascended to command.

For the first time since the court was convened, the primarch hesitated.

Rare were the nights when his sons could surprise him, and yet here was one of the Legion's great warlords ready to tear the tore of rank from his neck, abandoning his forces to serve with a single wayward pack. The air felt colder, and not from the wind's chill. Cry of the Grieving Dragon was a significant force within Tolv Company. Losing one of their packs was nearly meaningless, but losing their leader would be a different tale.

'A noble sentiment. Yet who would lead the Cry of the Grieving Dragon in your absence?'

'I care not. My successors will fight for the tore.'

Russ let the possibilities play out behind his eyes, liking none of them. But the warriors' court had passed the point where it might end well. He went with his instinct, as he did in all things. Intuition always served him well.

'Be it so. You will go with Howl of the Hearthworld.'

Laughing Jaurmag pulled the tore open with a quiet whine of straining metal, and cast the ring to the ground before his primarch's boots. Silence reigned for another few heartbeats.

'This isn't exile,' Russ said once more. 'You say this is no honour, and here at this warriors' council we will speak the truth. You are right, kinsmen - it's no honour at all. It's nothing more than a gesture of the Sigillite's diplomacy. He cannot have watch-packs following only some of the primarchs. It must be all, or none.'

'Then it should be none,' Laughing Jaurmag dared to say. Many of the gathered jarls nodded at his words. The Allfather would not wish for us to do this. It is not our-'

'The Allfather toils in the Terran catacombs.' Russ's voice became a grindstone

growl. 'The Regent governs in my father's absence. Let that be the end of your refusals.'

He softened his tone, fighting back the first touch of true anger. 'The Sigillite's wariness will pass in time. A handful of years on Terra, standing at my brother Dorn's side. That is all I ask of you.'

'Good, sire, because that's all we're giving you.' Thirteen Stars Falling tilted his head back for a moment, baring his throat in subtle submission. His pack-brothers did the same. None of them took any pleasure from the primarch's words, but as loyal sons they accepted them. 'Call us back to war soon, my king. Don't let us die peaceful deaths on Terra.'

ONE OF THE Regent's emissaries awaited them aboard the warship *Damarchus*. Prelate Quilym Yei was a small and slight man, robed in black and marked out immediately by Malcador's stylised sigil worn as a gold amulet around his thin neck. His voice was toneless to the point of monotony, which amused and disgusted Howl of the Hearthworld in equal measure. He showed no fear of them, which would at least be understandable. Instead, he displayed little more than bland focus, considering it best not to antagonise the barbarians any more than necessary.

It was his duty, he informed the Wolves, to record the minutiae of their rolls of honour to date, for detailed entry into the Terran archives. The Throne received full accountings from every one of the Imperium's expeditionary fleets - including Legiones Astartes citations and casualty lists - but the flow of information was slow and unreliable at best, given the distances involved and the vast reams of data being transferred from one side of the galaxy to the other. For an actual return to the Solar System, with Legion warriors standing on precious Terran soil, a more immediate accounting was required.

This was how he greeted them in one of the ship's briefing chambers, shortly after they came aboard. In response, one of the pack spat onto the deck before him. Rather than feel any insult, Quilym was faintly charmed by the disrespectful gesture. He had studied the VI Legion and their primitive home world for many years, and knew many of the Fenrisian rituals and traditions carried through the Space Wolves' ranks. Spitting wasn't merely a dirty habit to them - to some tribes it was an old superstition to ward off ill-luck. To others, it was a way of showing displeasure, refusing to heed another's words. In this case, Quilym suspected it might be a little of both.

'How very hostile,' he noted with nothing less than perfect politeness. 'Am I to

assume you would rather be sailing to Prospero with your Legion, than making this journey to Terra?'

The Wolf that had spat now shook his head. 'Already you show your ignorance, scribe. The Einherjar goes to hear the Warmaster first. Horus Lupercal wishes to speak with the Lord of Winter and War. Only then will the Rout sail onward to the court of the Crimson King.'

Interesting, thought the prelate. Malcador would find that very interesting indeed.

'Of course,' replied Quilym, still absolutely neutral. 'Forgive my dated information. Now, as to my duty, if you would list your names and ranks, we can get under way. I realise it seems a chore but the entirety of the Seventh Legion underwent the same rigorous-'

'Shut your mouth,' said one of the other Wolves, 'or I shall kill you.'

The prelate hesitated. The cybernetic stylus in place of his left index finger hovered above the scratched surface of his worn data-slate. He observed them, these towering, hulking, unwashed warriors with iron rings bound into their braided beards and their faces marked by jagged, runic tattoos. They stank of sweat, of weapon oils, of old furs left out in the rain.

He drew a breath to reply, then exhaled it softly as every pair of grey-blue eyes in the chamber stared into him with bladed intensity. Slowly, calmly, he put the data-slate down upon the central table. The Wolves ignored him at once, sharing bitter smiles and snarled words in their guttural fracas of a language.

Quilym endured the indignity of being ignored for several minutes. He cleared his throat during what he hoped was a lapse in their growled and toothy 'conversation'.

'You're still here,' said one of the Wolves. This one had an axe over his shoulder - a weapon as long as Quilym was tall. 'Why is that?'

But the prelate had not risen to his admittedly modest rank by being easily cowed. He admired order above all, and his duty was to leave order in his wake, no matter where he went. He was, in his own way, just as responsible for bringing peace and stability to the galaxy as these ceramite-clad barbarians, and Malcador had not chosen him for this journey on a whim. The Sigillite trusted him, trusted his efficiency.

'I require the details of your rolls of honour,' he said, keeping his tone calm, the way one might speak softly to an untamed beast for fear of igniting its temper. 'If you want me gone from your presence then cooperate with me, and I will leave with significantly more haste. Let's begin with your names and ranks,

if you please.'

THE FIRST TO speak was Laughing Jaurmag. He was a scarred old greybeard, his armour encrusted with bronze runes in one of the several dozen regional tongues of his hearthworld Fenris.

He was warlord of Cry of the Grieving Dragon, respected jarl of Tolv, and once this foolish exile was a thing of the past he would fight for his place once again. He had been given his Fenrisian deed-name by smiling kinsmen who believed that his humour was as bleak and cold as the frost that clung to the Aett's battlements. Before this day, he led six hundred men to war beneath alien suns and alien moons, shedding oceans of foeblood for the Russ and the Allfather. Now he stood with Howl of the Hearthworld, oath-sworn to them during the banishment they now shared.

But he said none of this. These weren't things for outlanders to hear.

Instead, he gave a name and a rank that meant almost nothing to anyone within his Legion.

'My name is Jaurmag,' he said. 'Chapter Master of the Grieving Dragon and commander of the Twelfth Great Company.'

Prelate Quilym Yei licked his thin lips as he wrote the words down. He evidently missed the mocking smiles that the Wolves shared with one another.

The next to speak was a whitebeard, where Laughing Jaurmag was merely greying. His beard was braided all the way down his breastplate, and his face was the leathery tan of old hide.

He was Thirteen Stars Falling, thegn of Howl of the Hearthworld. He had been named for the night he first drew foeblood in his tenth winter, when the sky rained fire upon his tribe's lands. He had been a boy in the Russ Tribe when Lemar rose to rule, and he sailed with the primarch into the stars when the Allfather beckoned them to conquer all of creation at his side.

But, like Laughing Jaurmag, he said none of this.

'I am Kargir,' he told the prelate. 'Sergeant of Nineteenth Squad.'

And on it went. One by one, Howl of the Hearthworld gave the names they had carried as children, keeping their true names away from the ears - and the quill - of this outsider.

The next to speak wore wolf pelts of dirty white, marked with filthy pinkish patches where blood had fallen, settled into the fur, and been scraped away far too late to ever look clean again.

He was Echo of Three Heroes, named by his grandmatron, the elder of the

Vakreyr Tribe, to honour the ancestors he so resembled. He heard the ghost-whispers of his forefathers when foeblood hissed on the melting snow.

'I am Vaegr,' he said. 'I serve in the squad of Sergeant Kargir.'

'And you?' the prelate asked the next warrior in line.

This Wolf's hair was short, an unruly thatch of dull brown atop his head. His beard was cut short, but uneven, as though the warrior had done a barber's work alone with a knife and no mirror.

He was Kin to the Night, named for the blackness that sired him and the darkness that bore him. He hunted unseen. He killed unseen. He was the shadow that his brothers cast. He was the blade that guarded their backs. He was the knife beneath the shieldwall.

'Ordun,' he said. 'I serve in the squad of Sergeant Kargir.'

'And you?'

The next Wolf bore more savage facial tattoos than the others. Runic lettering ran from the corners of his eyes like tears, telling a tale in a language too foreign for the prelate to read.

He was Storm's Son, named for the tempest that raged above his tribe's wooden ships on the night his mother pushed him from her womb. He gave his first cry to the thundering heavens as his mother used her own sword to cut the life-cord that bound the baby to her body. No darker omen existed than to come into the world upon a stormy sea, and yet he had prospered in battle and in life. The rune-tears that ran down his cheeks were sha-manic blessings to ward off the ill-luck of his birth. They had never failed him.

'Brandwyn,' he said with a liar's smile. 'I serve in the squad of Sergeant Kargir.'

'And you?' Quilym asked the next - the one that had threatened to kill him. Practically cowed in thick pelts and festooned with grenade bandoliers, the warrior grinned with metal teeth set in an augmented jaw.

He was Iron Song, named for his voice, so flawed in speech because of the injuries to his face, yet flawless in fireside songs and saga-tellings. His reconstructed jaw was a living lesson in taking care when headbutting a helmeted enemy.

'Herek,' he said. 'I serve in the squad of Sergeant Kargir.'

'And you?'

The Wolf was black-haired, his long mane dragged back from his face and bound into a hunter's sweep. His eyes were an emotionless, soulless blue, as pale as a summer sky. He was using a whetstone to sharpen the teeth of a chainaxe that didn't need sharpening, and spoke in a voice softer than any of his kinsmen.

'I am No Foes Remain.'

The prelate looked up from his data-slate, his brow furrowing. 'That isn't a name.'

No Foes Remain didn't blink as he stared back, neither angry nor calm, simply distant.

'It is a name,' he said. 'It is my name.'

'And how does one come by a name like... that?'

'One fights,' the warrior replied, 'until no foes remain.'

Quilym licked his lips once more, unaware how openly he betrayed his irritated nerves with that particular tic.

'Rykath,' Thirteen Stars Falling interrupted. 'His name is Rykath. He serves in my squad.'

No Foes Remain turned his dead eyes towards his pack leader but said nothing. The prelate recorded the information, such as it was.

'And you?' Quilym asked the last of them.

The warrior's head was shaved but for twin long, thick braids by his temples, while the back of his head was enclosed in the cradling protection of an armoured, psychically sensitive hood. His wolf pelts were black - all others were grey, brown, or white.

He was Fights the Final Winter, spirit-speaker and war-priest of the Runes, the Wind, the Frost, and the Bones. He was named for his first vision quest, when he dream-saw the end of all things in a future age when the Allfather's triumph had turned to ash. He would die before he allowed that fate to come to pass.

'Naukrim,' he said. 'I am what you would call a Librarian.' A sense of stillness took form in the chamber in the wake of those words. 'I notice you don't write those words down like the others, little man. Is there a problem?'

Quilym met the Wolf's eyes, unflinching, unblinking. 'The Edict of Nikea...'

'Ah.' Fights the Final Winter gave a slight bow, seemingly of respect. 'Perhaps I should say I was a Librarian. Now I stand with my brothers, using nothing but bolter and blade. Is that answer more to your satisfaction?'

The prelate touched his stylus to the data-slate's surface, yet still made no mark. 'You wear the wargear of one who still uses his powers.'

'My shamans' crown?' Fights the Final Winter reached back to tap his armoured fingertips against the psychic hood. 'To remove it would disrespect the spirit of my armour. It serves no other purpose.'

Quilym swallowed and, with surprising dignity, he stood up straighter. 'I will not be lied to.'

The Wolves drew closer. Not in an armoured tide, not with weapons howling, but with the subtle leer of warriors who dearly wish to do what they do best. The servo-rich joints of their armour purred and snarled and growled.

Laughing Jaurmag was the one to speak. 'You've had all the truth we intend to give, scribe. Write it down and be gone from our sight.'

Quilym narrowed his eyes, and for a moment it seemed he might hesitate.

'Very well,' he said at last. 'I think that will do for now.'

IRON SONG KEYED in the code to lock the bulkhead once Malcador's preening little scribe was on the other side of it. He exhaled through his metal teeth, huffing a breath with canine irritation.

'Three months,' he said to his kinsmen. 'Three months to Terra, and that's only if the tides are fair. Three months of that entertaining little rodent.'

Thirteen Stars Falling watched the sealed door as if he could stare a hole right through the plasteel. His thoughts were of the prelate, and those thoughts were troubled and dark.

'He was lying to us even as we lied to him. He's no mere scribe.

Our runt of a prelate has the stink of Malcador's inner circle about him. If he's not a bonded part of it, he still walks in the same chambers as those who are. Be cautious around him, all of you.'

Nods of assent answered his order.

'Three months,' Iron Song said again. 'Three months, while the Einherjar sail to arrest Magnus One-Eye without us. What a story that would make. What a tale... and I am to miss it, to be chained up and shipped off in this worthless waste of time. Please, let this all be nothing more than a bad jest.'

Kin to the Night was tossing a knife up and down, catching it perfectly at the end of each falling spin.

'And I fear a cold welcome awaits us yet on Terra, kinsmen. Lord Dorn of the noble Seventh is going to be about as pleased to see us as we are to see him.'

There seemed no immediate answer to that unwelcome truth. Storm's Son looked to the sealed door, then back to his kinsmen. A slow grin dawned through his beard.

'No Foes Remain,' he said, his rough and oaken voice lifting in a fair impression of the prelate's airy tones. 'That's not a name.'

The pack, joined by their warchief, shared their first laugh since the Lord of Winter and War had first told them that they were to be banished to Terra. Even Laughing Jaurmag smiled - though true to his name, it was but the briefest of

things.

A SAFE AND
SHADOWED PLACE

Guy Haley

GENDOR SKRAIVOK, THE Painted Count, Claw-Master of the 45th Company, stood motionlessly on the command deck of the *Umber Prince*. He ignored the bustle of the ship's bridge crew and stared out through the last armourglass portal still intact. Ramrod straight, as if inspecting a flypast, he looked not upon a Legion fleet, but upon the remains of one - a filigreed junkyard of broken vessels drifting purposelessly against the raw, polychromatic fury of the aetheric storm shrouding Ultramar, framing it in twists of superstructure as delicate as ice patterns on glass.

It was a wholly depressing sight. Beautiful in its own way, he supposed, but Skraivok had never been one for beauty. Though the opacity of the window was turned almost to maximum, the light of the warp-born disturbance pained his sensitive eyes. Without moving, he shifted his gaze to look out past the twisting tendrils of the storm, into the deep night beyond the borders of Roboute Guilliman's pompous little kingdom.

What few healthy ships had made it to this place had long since departed. He did not blame them. There was an anomaly at the edge of the Sothan System, a midnight blind spot out past the Mandev-ille point, framed against the corona of the distant Saphir Cluster. It had long been a favoured rendezvous for the Night Lords, who took delight in plotting their murderous business under the nose of the Ultramarines. That odd, shadowy blackness remained.

But Sotha had changed.

No longer a backwater, it practically swarmed with Guilliman's miserable sons. As soon as the more functional VIII Legion vessels coming into the shadow caught sight of the streams of ships making their way to and from the planet - and the new orbital platform, and the babble of noospheric traffic - they had turned tail and fled back into the empyrean. The rest had departed one by one, limping away as soon as sufficient repairs had been made to their ravaged hulls.

Those that remained were the hopeless cases. The *Umber Prince*, Skraivok reluctantly supposed, was one of them.

He had spent many sleepless nights anticipating the wail of proximity alarms, but the XIII had not come. He had become as bored of waiting for them as he had of everything else here. But Gendor Skraivok reckoned he had a good idea, now, what the cause of all this increased activity was - and that it had something to do with the regular energy pulses coming from Sotha. Luckily for him, these emanations had made the Ultramarines, if anything, *more* blind to the enemy

lurking beyond the reach of their sensors.

For now at least, this remained a safe and shadowed place.

Of the nine remaining vessels, only the *Umber Prince*, *Dotminus Noctem* and *Shadow Blow* bore signs of activity. The rest were entirely dark, their reactors dead, legionaries evacuated. All lights out, they had become slab-sided shadows thwarting the stars.

Skraivok wondered what terrors now played out within those cold hulls. What petty princelings ruled over the serfs, now that their masters had removed themselves, in the dark of the broken decks? Did they hoard dwindling supplies of food, air and water to support their impermanent thrones? He was sure that it must be so. If there was one thing Skraivok had learned in his decades of service, it was that humans always reverted to type, and that type was ugly.

Considering the irony of these half a dozen Nostramos-in-miniature gave him a certain amusement. It helped stave off the boredom, at least.

Lacking attitudinal control, the damned vessels were sliding into one another, their mass attraction pulling them slowly across the millpond-calm of space where, very soon, they would meet their final ends as an agglomerated mess of broken spars and mashed hull plating. He quite liked that idea. The collision was something else to look forward to.

He had been there for seven months. He checked the chrono count in his lens displays, as he had come to do almost obsessively, counting the hours of every day off with increasing annoyance. *Yes*, he thought. *Seven months of skulking in the shadows, licking my wounds. Marvellous.*

The *Umber Prince* had fared only slightly better than the dark ships, coming so close to destruction that it was no longer funny, and Skraivok was a legionary who found a lot of unpleasant things funny. His serfs had laboured incessantly to heal it. It had been an unconscionably long wait, and today was the day that would prove their efforts insufficient.

The *Dominus Noctem* and *Shadow Blow* were leaving.

He pondered then, with a twinge of unease, upon Lord Curze's fate. Before his own ship had torn itself away from the battle against the Dark Angels, he had heard that Curze had boarded the *Invincible Reason*. A good number of the Atramentar had followed. Skraivok was more concerned with glory than some of his kin, but that had been a suicidal kind of glory that he wished to have no part of, and the *Umber Prince* had ripped into the warp with its hull aflame.

And so, instead of the pyres of the guilty, he saw the plasma torches of repair crews as they went about their tedious business.

I have only myself to blame, he thought wryly. Out past the storm, the stars were a scattering of fractured diamonds against deepest black, and the ruined fleet hung under their unblinking glare. His hands tensed within his midnight-blue gloves, immaculate again; he had little else to do but polish his wargear. Arc-projected lightning skittered across their gleaming surfaces.

Nothing, he thought. *I can do nothing at all.*

Skraivok thought back to the boltholes he had favoured in his youth, running with the gangs. Hidden places where a fugitive might rest a while, until the search passed them by, though a lot of them turned just as easily into traps.

A cough brought him out of the slum-stink and the greasy wet of foundry-tainted rain - back to the bridge, back from one hole and into another. He honestly couldn't decide which was worse.

'My lord?'

Irritation prickling his scalp, Skraivok turned away from the hopeless view outside to take in the equally hopeless mortal addressing him.

Hrantax was old, and bald, and very, very tired. His black Nostraman eyes were surrounded by deep rings in his pale skin - in the half-light of the command deck, blemished skin and eyes blended together, to make them seem impossibly huge. His uniform was loose upon his body, a consequence of surviving on half-rations. The command interface he wore at the back of his skull was crowded with bunched skin. His insignia had been poorly amended - he looked like a sickly boy playing dress-up, a caricature of a man.

'Lieutenant Hrantax. I suppose you've another damage report for me?' said Skraivok.

'It is *Shipmaster* Hrantax now, my lord.'

'It's whatever I say it is, Hrantax.'

Undaunted, Hrantax continued. One did not survive in Nostraman society by displaying weakness. 'Your conference with Lords Klandr and Vost is due to take place soon.'

'Yes, yes,' Skraivok said impatiently. 'So get on with it.'

'Very well. If I may?'

Hrantax waited for no reply, and pinched the haptics embedded in his fingertips to cast a hololithic representation of the *Umber Prince* onto a nearby display. The graphic wavered uncertainly in the air before taking something approaching a stable form. A good number of the projecting lenses were broken, and as the image rotated sections of it blinked out of existence sequentially.

'We estimate that it will be three more days before the main power links to the

Geller fields will be fully operational, my lord.'

Skraivok sighed loudly. 'This is getting tedious. I'm pretty sure I told you - by which you know I mean I am absolutely sure I told you - that you had until today.'

Hrantax looked the giant warrior steadily in his red eye lenses. 'Tedious it might be, my lord, but the progress we have delivered far exceeds our best estimates. I said fifteen days - it will be done in nine.'

'Fear drives men well.'

'Fear only goes so far. They have performed well only because of my oversight and planning.'

Skraivok stared at Hrantax. 'I should kill you. I could kill you.'

'Perhaps so, but you won't,' said Hrantax.

'Are you, then, immune to fear?'

Hrantax's eye twitched, his suppressed terror seeping out of him. Skraivok savoured it. The little man tried so hard, and it was a joy to torment him.

'Of course not. But you will not kill me if you want this ship approaching anything like void-worthiness within the next few days,' he replied, then added, 'My lord.', with just enough insolence that Skraivok laughed. It growled out of his helm speakers sinisterly.

'So soon!' said the legionary. 'I should embrace you tightly instead. Or maybe now, after so many months in this pit, I am past caring and will crush your head just to alleviate the endless boredom...!' He raised his voice up to a shout, '...of being here!'

The noise on the bridge, a bare fraction of the hubbub that had once filled the place, quietened for a moment. The surviving crew, all of them as hollow-eyed and exhausted looking as Hrantax, glanced nervously at the Space Marine.

Hrantax ignored his commander's posturing.

'Nothing on this ship was untouched, my lord.' The shipmaster waved his hand along the battered flank of the craft. The outline of the *Umber Prince* as it had been was sketched in a soft green wireframe, while what actually remained of the ship was painted in soft reds - pulpy marrow in a shattered bone.

'Thirteen per cent loss in overall mass, seventy per cent crew mortality. Sixty-three of three hundred decks are open to the void. Eighty per cent reduction in weapons output. We have come close to reactor death on six separate occasions. And yet we are still here, mainly because of my efforts. If your time has been boring, my lord, mine has been anything but.'

'I am so glad for you, lieutenant.'

'I am master of this vessel, Captain Skraivok.'

'Only on my sufferance.'

'And your sufferance is predicated on my competence, so if you want to rot here forevermore, I would advise you to finish me now.'

Gendor Skraivok laughed, but only once. It was both a concession to Hrantax's point and a threat. 'Three days? That is good news, I suppose.' He paused a moment, before adding grudgingly, 'Well done. But too late.'

An insistent chime sounded in his helm. A communications officer approached, fear sweating from her every pore. She lacked Hrantax's mettle and did her best to ignore the Space Marine, speaking only to her shipmaster.

'Lords Klandr and Vost are requesting channels.'

'Fantastic. Everything's broken but I can still talk to those bastards,' Skraivok said to her. 'Fine. Put them through, full encryption. I don't want any of this getting out and alerting the bloody Thirteenth Legion.'

The woman swallowed - close to collapse, Skraivok could see. And well she should be. Fie imagined skinning her, and the thought piqued his interest. She looked like a screamer. But then, they all screamed on the skinning frames...

'Yes, my lord.'

Two faces appeared in the hololith, displacing the *Umber Prince* into a fuzz of collapsing light.

Captain Klandr, known as Quickblade in the 23rd Company, spoke first. *'We are ready to depart as agreed, Skraivok. Will you be joining us?'*

'Nice to see you too, "brother",' said Skraivok acidly. 'And you, Red Wing.'

'*Skraivok!*' Vost acknowledged him.

'*Are you ready?*' repeated Klandr dolefully. His long face always looked utterly miserable, although there was a touch more contempt to it than usual.

'Three more days, or so my loyal shipmaster tells me.'

'*Then we must leave without you!*'

'Seventy-two hours. Can you not delay? Three vessels are more potent than two.'

Klandr and Vost looked away from him. He supposed that they were exchanging glances, silently asking each other which of them would deliver the blow, although their projections looked past each other from his perspective. *Good news never follows such a glance*, he thought.

'*This war is done for us,*' said Vost. *'We have no primarch, no orders and no purpose. If we remain here, we will be destroyed. The Thirteenth will notice us soon, and there are a great many of them around Sotha. I have no desire to face*

them on such unfavourable terms'.

'They will not see us - this place has served our Legion well for a long time before now.'

'*Sotha is not what it was, brother;*' said Vost. He was less stern in character than Klandr, and closer personally to Skraivok, if such a thing could be said of any Night Lord. His sneer was polluted by the weakness of remorse - hardly apparent, but still there.

'Such confraternity humbles me! Might I remind you that you cursed the others for leaving us behind?' asked Skraivok.

The ghost of a smile quirked the corner of Klandr's perpetually downturned mouth. '*That was them, and this is us. The Legion is finished, Skraivok. Perhaps, if we are fortunate, we might aid the Warmaster in some other, small way*'.

'But generally, it's every bastard for himself?'

'*It is the Nostraman way*', said Klandr. '*We were foolish ever to forget that. We await the next pulse from Sotha to cover our departure*'.

'And that... the storm. You'll brave that, will you? I don't much like the look of it.'

'*A good job, as you are staying here*', said Klandr. '*I feel our passage will be safe enough back through it.*'

'I'm glad you're so certain.' Skraivok shifted tack, his tone became more conciliatory, an entirely transparent sham. 'I don't suppose you'd consider taking me and my men with you?'

Klandr snorted. '*And have you usurped me, knifing me in the back on the command throne? You never were one to take orders kindly from others. There is only room enough for one captain aboard this vessel, and that captain is I, Klandr Quickblade.*'

'I'll take that as a no, then.'

The two officers' outlines flickered, a sure sign of their reactors powering up to full yield. Klandr gave him one last withering glare, and ended his transmission.

'*For what it's worth, Skraivok, I'm sorry. We can't stay here any longer;*' said Vost.

'It's worth nothing,' said Skraivok coldly. 'Nothing at all.'

'*No, I suppose it isn't!*' Vost agreed. '*Goodbye, Skraivok!*'

The hololith cut out.

Skraivok ordered all hands to battle stations, in case his erstwhile brothers decided to raid his vessel for supplies, although evidently thirty-one Claws of Space Marines were enough to put them off. Nor did they open fire, almost

certainly to avoid alerting their ignorant hosts at Sotha than from any sense of loyalty. With silent power, the *Dominus* and the *Shadow* ignited their engine stacks and pushed off from the graveyard.

THE XIII LEGION were punctilious in everything. Right on cue, just over half an hour later, they did whatever they were doing on Sotha again, and the predictable pulse of energy washed out from the world.

It overwhelmed vox channels and astropaths both, just as it had every other time. Sparks rained down from poorly repaired systems. The dim bridge lumens on the *Umber Prince* flickered. A burning wash of light rushed over the Night Lords' hiding place - Skraivok's lenses dimmed, and the armourglass portal dimmed further, but it was not enough. He shut his eyes. The light seared afterimages across his vision, and he did not see Klandr and Vost's ships clawing their escape into the warp.

At least they had the decency to proceed to a safe distance beyond his own vessel.

'And then there was one,' he breathed. Only the *Prince*, and the dark ships bleeding their last into the void.

His eyes watered from the energy pulse. He lacked the energy to unclasp his helmet and wipe them dry. 'Recall everyone. I want this ship ready to leave as soon as we have the engines back online. Send armsmen out to the other ships. Restock our vessel with full crew. We're going it alone.'

'My lord.'

'And get me Kellendvar,' said Skraivok.

Hrantax hesitated. 'Nobody knows where he is, my lord.'

'Why not?'

'An error of judgement.'

'You know,' Skraivok jabbed an armoured finger at Hrantax, 'if you weren't the highest ranking officer left on this ship, I would kill you. You know that, right?'

'I am certain of it, my lord.'

Damn him, thought Skraivok, *for his impertinence. Damn him and Kellendvar both.*

'Just find the Headsman. Get him here now.'

KELLENDVAR PUSHED DEEPER into the man's ruined face. The wretch gave out a moan of pain, as blood and gelatinous matter wept down his cheek. Kellendvar's other hand gripped the man's shoulder so tightly that his collar bone cracked.

Kellendvar looked him up and down. So weak, so fragile. 'It is good that you stop struggling. You accept your fate. This is wise.'

'Please, my lord... please...' said the man, his voice a pained whisper. 'I have served the Legion faithfully all my life.'

'No doubt you think this is not fair?' Kellendvar's face was close to the man's. He smelled blood, the humours of the ruptured eye, dirt and fear. He moved his finger just a fraction, the man gurgled in fresh agony. 'It is not fair. But there is no fairness in all the universe. Do you not agree?'

The man's only response was to choke out a phlegmy sob.

'So tell me where my brother is, and I will give you a swift release from the sins of this life.' Kellendvar's tone made it absolutely certain what the alternative would be.

'Which brother, my lord?' gasped the man.

Kellendvar contrived to look puzzled. 'My brother. I have only one.'

'I have not seen any other legionaries since... since... Please, I beg you, release me!'

'No. I already said - not a brother, my brother.'

The man screamed. 'My lord, please! Please! He said he would flay me alive if we told!'

'I do not think that is of much concern now, do you?'

'Please, no more! He is in the Great Vault! Please, my lord!'

'Now, that wasn't so hard, was it? Be thankful, I will grant you mercy.'

Kellendvar pushed harder, hitting the back of the eye socket, which gave under the metal of his gauntlet like an eggshell. The man shuddered and died, his brains parting before Kellendvar's thumb.

He dropped the serf to the floor, wiped his hand on the dead man's roughly spun robes, and pulled him into the centre of the corridor. Unclamping the great axe he wore across his backpack, he set its energy field ablaze. A banging strike left a smoking gash in the deck plating and he plucked the man's head free to regard it. Kellendvar searched about for somewhere to display it and pushed it onto a broken lumen bracket before striding off into the dark of the dead ship.

Old habits died hard.

The *Nycton* had been the largest ship in the fleeing rabble that had made the Sotha rendezvous. It had burst back into reality and barely managed to bring itself to a halt. The reactor flickered out not long afterwards, and the ship had descended into chaos. Elements of two companies, the Impossible Dawn and the Deepest Dark, had been present. Rivalry turned into outright warfare, and nigh

on a hundred Night Lords were killed in the fighting before some semblance of order had been restored, and then only because of the subsequent arrival of other vessels at the rendezvous. The Nycton was subsequently abandoned to darkness, along with its surviving serf crewmen.

But it took a long time for a ship to truly die. The organs might fail, the brain go dark, but life lingered long in the corpse before every cell perished - the stranded survivors digested their host as bacteria in the gut slowly digested a dead man. The great artificial star at the vessel's heart was extinguished, but power lingered still, running from auxiliary stations that would burn for a thousand years. There were many, many lesser machines that survived the death of the whole, enough to sustain a debased form of human life. Men and women might live on within the Nycton for generations, gradually forgetting about the galaxy outside.

Kellendvar heard the serfs rather than seeing them. Every so often, scuttling footsteps ran away from him, like rats in the walls. He made no attempt to go quietly, nor any attempt to pursue them.

'I could catch you if I wanted to, little rats!' he shouted. 'You know it!'

His voice echoed through empty halls and chambers, chasing down distant corridors where there were only the dead to listen. He laughed, and walked on.

Whole areas of the ship were inaccessible, and Kellendvar was forced to backtrack many times. Only twice did he don his helmet and force his way out into the void; the immeasurable, dark expanse of the cosmos always made him feel something close to fear. He was a child of narrow alleyways. He had never enjoyed the sight of open space.

Within the hull, the air was laced with complex chemical aromas brought on by its burning. His neuroglottis processed it all, feeding him the delicious aftertaste of a thousand deaths. He walked corridors choked by blackened corpses, their twisted limbs and screaming faces carbonised into one, angular mass, so it appeared as though some multi-limbed monster had met its end there.

In the third concourse of the major throughway, he found the corpses of his battle-brothers, their armour cracked by each other's mass reactive shells. He looked them over with disinterest, seeking any he knew, but the companies aboard the Nycton were not ones he had ever fought alongside. Their markings and kill-trophies were unfamiliar.

In one great atrium, ruptured pipes sent cascades of water, coolant and human waste rushing down. In some places the artificial gravity had gone, forcing him to plod along with ungainly mag-locked steps, while in others the cold of deep

space seeped into the deck, coating metalwork and dead flesh alike in thin layers of frost.

He went aft, now more than two kilometres from where Skraivok's salvage teams were hacking at the corpse of the *Nycton* like sea-scavengers devouring a whale. There, Kellendvar caught the scent of fresh blood.

Not long afterwards, he heard screams.

'Kellenkir...' he breathed. He shifted his grip upon his axe, and thereafter he went with greater care.

THE SERF HAD not been lying. Kellenkir had set up his lair in the heart of the Great Vault.

The relics of two centuries of warfare in the service of the Emperor had been smashed from their stands. Mildewed rags were all that remained of the banners of once-honoured enemies. Xenos weapons and skeletons were heaped in corners. Artefacts from dozens of scattered human civilisations lay broken upon the floor. Whether this was from deliberate vandalism or merely the punishment that the ship had sustained at the hands of the Dark Angels was immaterial - all sense of the Vault as a place of remembrance had been smashed by treachery either way.

It had become instead a place of horror.

Shackled bodies, all bearing signs of cruel torture, hung from every stanchion and pillar. The central aisle of the hall was lined by eyeless human heads. The air stank of excreta, blood, spoiled meat and burning flesh. Firebowls, torches and tallow-wicks of human fat gave the room a hellish light. What few windows remained unbroken were unshuttered, the view of the eerie, starless nightmare beyond bringing further menace to the vault.

Six crude cages lined one wall. Most were empty, but two were crammed with emaciated, filthy bodies. Chips of light glinting from their eyes betrayed the life that was still in them. Otherwise they were utterly still, resolutely staring away from the iron table at the centre of the room.

Chained to it was a serf in the last stages of death - male or female could not be discerned. Breath still bubbled from its lipless, eyeless face. The skin that had formerly clad it was folded with obscene decorum over an empty frame.

There Kellendvar saw his brother Kellenkir at work. He was as guilty as the next Night Lord of atrocity; true enough, he enjoyed it. But it was always to some end or other, not merely a pleasure in its own right. Such were the workings of his twisted morality.

What he saw in the Vault was simply gratuitous.

'Brother,' he called, softly.

Kellenkir answered without looking up from his work. He was naked, bloody to his elbows, the gore of his latest victim and the clean metal of his interface ports glittering in the firelight.

'I heard you coming. You always were too heavy footed, Kellendvar.'

'I have come to take you back. The *Umber Prince* is finally ready to depart. Time to put aside this idle torture and take up your weapons again.'

'There is nothing idle about this. I teach these people a valuable lesson.' He bent over, dug his fingers in between the ribs of his victim. It made a surprisingly loud crack, and Kellenkir's unconscious plaything took two ragged breaths. Then, with a long, drawn out exhalation redolent of relief, the tortured soul slipped away into oblivion.

'Skraivok is going to take your toys away regardless, brother. Come back with me.'

Kellenkir looked up. 'Why? Has he killed his own?'

'We were out of supplies. We were not sure if we would escape. Now, we need the crew. Leaving them here to fight for survival means we get only the strongest, and they'll be pathetically grateful to be rescued.'

'How very noble.'

'How very *practical*, my brother,' countered Kellendvar. 'As the Thirteenth would say, at least.' He walked to the table's edge, his axe still at the ready.

'We are no longer brothers,' said Kellenkir. 'This travesty of a fleet has fallen apart.'

'You will always be my brother. You *are* my brother. We were born from the same mother, the same father. "Brother" is a word that means more to us than it does to the rest.'

'Does it? What does blood mean, really? Nothing. Nothing is worth anything - not loyalty, and certainly not blood. Everything is worthless in the face of the night.' Kellenvir grabbed the lolling head of the dead serf and, by brute force alone, wrenched it free of the neck.

'Father would be so proud,' said Kellendvar sarcastically.

'Which one?'

'Lord Curze. You killed our flesh-father.'

'I did, didn't I?' Kellenkir smiled at the memory. 'I remember so little from my time as a weakling. But I remember that.'

'Come back with me. We will reave the stars together! Out there, that is where

we should be, bringing terror to a thousand worlds!

'Oh yes? And how long will this dream last under a traitorous dog like Skraivok? Our Legion is no more. Those remaining are only the murder-gangs of dead Nostramo born again. We are not an army. We're returning to type, hiding in the shadows. We'll be at each others' throats again before long. A man can only ever be the man he is, transhuman or not. We were fools to believe that it could be different, Kellendvar. The other Legions are right to hate us.'

Kellenkir tossed the head aside. It landed with a wet thump.

'There is no civilisation, no justice. Only pain and deprivation. And suffering, and the blessed end of suffering. Surely this place is proof of that, if proof were ever needed. Why fight it? I will remain here, and bring an end to suffering and sin.'

Kellendvar shook his head.

'Not all of the Legion is accounted for. We can rejoin the others, and fight on.' He lowered his guard a little, to show his sincerity, but only a little. He knew that Kellenkir was one of the few who could best him in single combat. 'Please, brother.'

'Who is Skraivok to think it'll be any better in the rest of the Legion? The Night Hunter is dead. There is no way he could have survived the Lion.'

'We don't know that brother.'

'He nearly killed him the first time. The Lion is not one to leave a job unfinished.'

Kellendvar's face contorted. This wasn't going as planned. His brother was always contrary, but never so awkward. 'We're all we have, you and I. It's always been different for us. We're not like the others. Even amidst all this, we have that.'

'Nobody has anything. Nothing has value.' Kellenkir held up a pendant on a length of chain. 'Have you seen one of these before?'

'No,' said Kellendvar. 'Should I have?'

Kellenkir chuckled, and the serfs in the cage gibbered in terror at the sound. 'No, I think the likes of us not seeing it is entirely the point.' He tossed it over to his brother, who caught it in his hand.

The chain was sticky with blood. Kellendvar held it up. 'An aquila?'

'I've found a few of them wearing these as amulets,' explained Kellenkir. 'And on deck fifty-two, I found a whole lot of them together. They'd killed themselves. There was a bigger one of those mounted on the wall.'

'So?'

'So? You always were the stupid one, Kellendvar. It was a congregation, a *temple*. They're worshipping the Emperor. Hoping he'll come and rescue them. Imagine that! Imagine it sinking into their fragile little skulls that there will never be any settlement dues, no shift rotations, no alternative duties, pay or rights like some of the Legions offer. Just endless servitude in the belly of an Eighth Legion starship, and most likely a painful death at the end. This is *our* war, not theirs. So they turn to the Emperor as a god. The Imperial Truth!' he scoffed. 'How quickly they abandon it for a taste of hope.'

Kellenkir turned to the captured serfs.

'Hope is an illusion, life is pain!' he bellowed. 'And I intend to perfect its art.' He went over to the cages and pointed at one cowering wretch. The man fell to his knees, pleading - not for life, but for a clean end. With a cruel smile, Kellenkir shook his head, and swung his digit around to indicate another. 'You.'

He reached in with one hand and grabbed the second serf in a crushing grip. The man screamed like a child caught by a monster. The others did nothing to help, but shrank away from this angel who had become an ogre.

'I was afraid you would say that, brother,' Kellendvar sighed. 'But you are wrong.' He ran at his brother without warning, tackling him high. Kellenkir dropped the serf, who crawled away on his belly, weeping, and the legionary's face twisted with fury. He grappled with his brother, and both fell to the floor.

'How dare you!' He scrambled onto Kellendvar's armoured shoulders, squatting on his chest, pinning his arms to the floor. He smashed his brother four times in the face, each blow like a falling anvil. 'You are wrong! *You* are wrong! No one is coming! It will all end in darkness. It is the only way that anything ever ends!'

Kellendvar bucked under his sibling. Kellenkir was the stronger -he always had been - but he did not have the added strength of his armour. Kellendvar twisted, sending his brother sprawling, before rolling smoothly to his feet with his bolt pistol aimed at Kellenkir.

Something caught his eye in that moment. Through the windows, out in the void.

The glimmering precursor of an incoming warp translation.

Kellendvar spat blood from his mouth. 'Then brother, look, and see that I am not wrong.'

Kellenkir's narrow eyes flickered warily to the view. A tear appeared in reality, vomiting bright colours into the shadow of Sotha. Tendrils of semi-sentient light writhed out as a battlefleet emerged from the empyrean, psychic backwash

boiling from its Geller fields.

A Night Lords fleet.

The *Nycton* rocked in the warp-wake of the vessels coming in, pitching them both from their feet. Kellendvar recovered first. He dived at his sibling, a pain-spike in his hand. He jammed it into his brother's chest interface port. Devised to render a Space Marine immobile, its discharge blasted directly through Kellenkir's nervous system.

'One day, little brother, I will kill you,' Kellenkir managed to slur, before collapsing with a thunderous crash.

Kellendvar holstered his pistol and locked his long axe to his backpack. 'Maybe. But I am saving you first,' he muttered.

He picked Kellenkir up under the arms, and began the long process of dragging him back to the salvage area.

In their cages, the serfs wept.

KRUKESH THE PALE, 103rd Captain, a lord of the new Kyroptera, strode onto the command deck of the *Umber Prince*, twenty of his warriors filing in close order around him. Only when he reached the waiting Skraivok and Kellendvar did the bodyguard part ways, and then he stepped forwards. He had his helm in the crook of his arm, exposing his pallid, corpse-like face.

He looked around the bridge with eyes blacker than jet, an expression of mild amusement on his face. 'Well, Skraivok - you have made quite the mess of this ship, have you not?'

'Only because we did not run quite as quickly as you,' said Skraivok, who was painfully aware of the large number of fully operational vessels now crowding his limited view outside.

'Ah, ah, ah!' Krukesh wagged a finger. 'I am Kyroptera! I have gathered much of our scattered forces into something approaching a fighting Legion once more, and am here, it appears, to rescue you from this little hole you find yourself in. A little more respect is due me, Claw-master.'

'You are only Kyroptera by the say-so of Sevatar. That makes you no Kyroptera at all,' said Kellendvar.

'I am the one standing before you, with a fleet at my back,' countered Krukesh. 'By my reckoning, that makes me better than most.'

'Didn't the First Captain kill all the others?' asked Kellendvar. 'You're a dog on a leash, nothing more.'

'Perhaps you have a point,' said Krukesh with mock equanimity. He held up a

finger, as if he had just had the most marvellous idea. 'I tell you what - how about I offer a place in my fleet to any of your warriors who desire it, and then leave you here to die alone in the dark. If I'm feeling sporting, I might contrive to let Guilliman's Thirteenth know of your presence. At least you'll have a glorious death. Isn't glory what you desire?'

Skraivok gave Kellendvar a warning look.

'Kneel,' said Krukesh.

Kellendvar unhitched his axe and planted its butt on the deck. Together, he and Skraivok got to their knees.

'Welcome to the *Umber Prince*, my lord,' said Skraivok through gritted teeth.

Krukesh accepted their obeisance with a satisfied sneer. 'Better. You can get up now, if you like. Now, who is this insolent pup?'

'Kellendvar. He is my Headsman.'

'And who is this one, in chains?'

Skraivok glanced over to a corner where Kellenkir was firmly shackled to a punishment post, furious eyes staring over a corrosion-resistant muzzle.

'That's Kellenkir. He was the vexillary for the Fourth Chapter,' said Skraivok with a pained smile. 'But he's gone... well, mainly insane.'

Krukesh looked incredulous. 'Kill him then.'

'Ah, Kellendvar wouldn't like that very much, would you, Kellendvar?'

'No,' said the Headsman, hefting his executioner's axe.

'They're brothers you see,' explained Skraivok. 'Actual brothers, inducted at the same time. And Kellenkir is quite the warrior.'

'I could have all three of you killed,' said Krukesh. His escorts raised their bolters.

'It is not wise to taunt him, Krukesh. Kellendvar is unbeaten in the practice cages by any but his brother. It's why I chose him as my Headsman.' Then, in a stage whisper, Skraivok added. 'So you see, he'll probably kill you first before he dies.'

Krukesh snorted, and let his threat drop.

'This phenomenon you told me of. The Thirteenth are building some kind of super-weapon on Sotha?'

Skraivok scratched the back of his neck, worrying at the cable entering the neural port there. 'Some of the others thought so, which is why they all sneaked away. Cowards. But I'm not so sure it is a weapon. It has an effect on our systems, but not much. It's more... It's more like a powerful transmitter array. Or a beacon.'

'A beacon?'

'You'll see for yourself... *my lord!*', said Skraivok with a total lack of sincerity. For the briefest moment, he got an insight as to how Shipmaster Hrantax must feel. 'You won't have to wait long. The Ultramarines are terribly conscientious. They've fired the thing three times a day, every day, for the last two weeks.'

'Always at the same time?'

'What do you think? It's the Thirteenth.'

'True enough,' said Krukesh.

Hrantax cast a chrono-count up onto the hololithic display. A miniature version of the Sothan System sprang up beneath it.

'*Sotha anomaly in thirty seconds,*' droned a servitor. '*Twenty-nine. Twenty-eight.*'

Skraivok watched Krukesh out of the corner of his eye. Looped holographic images of the captain's favourite victims played over some of his armour plates, interspersed with the Legion's customary lightning bolts in an endless exhibition of his past atrocities. His personal heraldry and insignia had been lavishly re-applied to his pauldrons. Fresh little affectations dangled from his armour - not just trophies, but cast representations of his Chapter, companies, and veteran squads' iconography.

His helmet bore a new, spread batwing crest in blatant imitation of Sevatar's own. So sure of himself. So puffed up by his survival. Skraivok had never liked him before, but this new Krukesh was detestable.

The servitor's countdown ended. '*Three. Two. One. Mark.*'

Skraivok waited expectantly. They all did.

'Nothing's happening,' said Krukesh. 'It looks like I'm going to leave you here after all, Skraivok.'

'I don't understand!' blustered Skraivok. 'It's the Thirteenth! They must be up to something else. Wait, wait a moment longer!'

'No, I don't think-'

Krukesh stopped. A frown brought faint shadows to his pale features.

A strange foreboding took hold of every one of them, and even the crew-serfs looked to their displays and the one undamaged armourglass port in alarm. A pressure built in their hearts, presaging something dreadful.

Skraivok felt a tickling sensation behind his eyeballs. An instant later, Sotha burst into brilliant light, more penetrating than the rays of the system's sun. The accompanying electromagnetic pulse overwhelmed the systems of the damaged ship, crashing cogitators, wiping out displays, dropping servitors and sending the

command deck into a darkness striated by the terrible, invasive light searing through the viewport.

The Night Lords shielded their eyes and winced in pain. The lesser men and women upon the bridge collapsed screaming to the floor, clutching at their faces.

Skraivok waited for night to fall again. It did not.

He lowered his hand a fraction, daring the light.

Unlike every other time before, the blaze of Sotha did not abate, but burned constantly. Seconds later, far too quickly for the light to have travelled by any normal, physical means, another light seemed to answer it from afar: a single star burning true in the sickly blaze of the aether-storm.

'Well, well, well,' said Krukesh. 'That, if I am not mistaken, is Macragge.' His spread fingers held up before him cast a hard black shadow across his face. 'How very interesting.'

Macragge. Sotha. What was the connection?

Then Krukesh activated his vox-link. 'Prepare the fleet!' he ordered, 'And gather my commanders. I think it is time for us to investigate this system a little more closely.'

VIRTUES
OF THE SONS
Andy Smillie

'WE ARE POOR fathers, brother,' I say to Horus's armoured back. My brother's attention is, as always, divided, torn between the twin roles of Legion primarch and commander. He stands at the head of his temporary war room, eyes fixed on the large hololith that dominates the wall.

'How so?' he asks without turning.

'It is a father's duty to educate his sons, to steer them towards a better path.'

Horus turns then. It is the first time I have seen his face these last few months. His brow has grown heavier, his eyes narrower under a burden that my words have done nothing to ease.

'Look at what our Legions have accomplished,' he says, gesturing to the hololith. He is a proud father in that moment, stood before me championing his sons. Across the display, the details of a thousand wars fought across a hundred systems scroll and resolve. The tapestry of information and tactical data tells of our sons' unstoppable might - they are conquering worlds even in the face of overwhelming opposition. 'Were the Legions not under our stewardship, they would have accomplished far less.'

He is the commander again. I smile to myself, wondering if even he is aware of how often he slips between the two roles.

I shake my head. 'No. That reasoning is flawed. Our sons are born to battle - we did not teach them that. What they do in our names, and the name of our father, they do out of obedience, out of duty and honour. We use them as tools to accomplish our ends, but we teach them little.'

'What would we have them be, if not what they are?'

'Were we better teachers, we would be able to help Perturabo accept his place, or ease Lorgar's mind. We could focus Angron and bring balance to Curze. Our limitations as fathers are doubly reflected in our failings as brothers.'

'No.' Horus's voice was iron-hard, his resolve absolute. 'We each have our part to play. The Emperor knew this and made it so. We are each of us the sword or the shield that He needs us to be.'

'What of the warrior cast to the fighting pit who must wield both sword and shield?' I ask.

'It is not the weapon, brother, but how it is wielded.'

'My point. We, each of us, only know how to wield our might one way.'

Horus speaks to me then the way I address my own captains: any sense of brotherhood hidden behind a mask of purpose and responsibility. 'What is troubling you, Sanguinius?'

'Nothing,' I lie.

I tell him nothing of my visions, nothing of the Emperor's palace burning with unnatural fire. I do not speak of my nightmares, or of the fear that my Legion will drown in its own cursed blood. What would I say? I cannot envisage any foe that could threaten Holy Terra, nor any catalyst that could send my sons as one into madness.

Of all my brothers, I had hoped that I could share my doubts with Horus. The sense of sudden isolation steals the strength from my voice. 'Just a passing thought.'

I turn and walk from the chamber.

The memory of that vision follows me. It was a warning against shortcomings, a cautionary tale about trusting solely in one's greatest strengths. My vision spoke of my sons, and their failures. At the last Tempest of Angels - a ritualistic duel from the distant history of Baal - I tried to teach the most polarised of my sons something of balance. Yet even atop the duelling stone, when all else but life and death was stripped away, my teaching was lost upon them.

I sigh.

True learning only occurs when consequence forces a change, for we are selfish creatures and we cling to our ways like deposed kings clinging to the ashes of a failed kingdom.

It is a truism from my childhood, a saying passed down from the first elders. The words burn in my gut. Anger draws my hands to fists. Amit and Azkaellon - my sword and my shield. But at the blades of my brothers' sons, I will have them learn to be more than this.

Before the next Tempest approaches, I will teach them the virtue of the lesson.

AZKAELLON

IT ALWAYS RAINS on Henvinka. An entire planet sodden by an unceasing downpour, its continents are turned to slurred mulch, its seas storm-wracked gulfs. The enemy hides in the planet's core. Tomorrow, our companies will descend into the depths of this place and bring them the Emperor's justice. Tonight, we stand upon a rig of steel and adamantium, a towering platform holding us proof against the perilous waves.

I remove my helm and feel the rain on my skin. Within a moment my hair is soaked through, slicked to my scalp by the downpour.

'Where are the rest of your warriors, Azkaellon?' My opponent gestures to the five Sanguinary Guard that have accompanied me here. Lucius, the greatest blademaker of the III Legion. His features are noble, patrician. Even blasted by the storm, his hair lashing in the wind, he looks as though he had been born to stand there.

Yet any beauty he possesses is ruined by the sneer that stains his face.

'I am in no need of an audience as grand as yours,' I reply, indicating the thousand legionaries of the Emperor's Children stood in serried rank at Lucius's side of the platform.

He smiles a barbed grin that holds no warmth. 'Your companies will hear of your defeat whether they are present or not.'

Lucius's confidence is not misplaced. His face is unscarred - a rarity for any Space Marine, even more so for one who has fought so many hundreds of duels.

I regard him carefully. 'Only a fool tallies the battles still to be fought among his victories.'

The remark twists Lucius's lip into a snarl. 'Perhaps. I suppose it is not beyond my lessers to have a good day.' He steps towards me, a casual swagger shortening his gait, and draws his sword. 'Unfortunately, Angel, this shall not be one of yours.'

His blade is exquisite. The slender longsword has a wire-wound handle that stretches longer than I would have expected for a blade of its length.

He catches me studying the weapon and smiles, flicking its point up with a flourish. 'It's an antique. The long handle lets me switch between grips.' He demonstrates, effortlessly changing to a two-handed grip and back again.

I frown. Among a Legion of perfectionists, Lucius was a *narcissist*.

He taps the hilt of his sword against the combat shield locked to his left arm. 'Now, if you are ready, I would begin.'

I draw my weapon, a wide-bladed sabre in the same bronze and gold as my armour. 'First blood.'

'As you wish. First blood.' Lucius performs a mock bow, and begins to circle me. He struts with an air of casual disregard. He plays for the crowd, mocking me as he tosses his blade from hand to hand, and shifts his gaze between the adulation of the Emperor's Children and his seemingly forgotten opponent.

It is all for show. For all his posturing, he takes not a single careless step, never straying more than a handspan within my striking distance, and never without his blade resting between us.

This is no game to Lucius.

I hold my ground. I am in no rush. Unlike many of my brothers, I am not prone to bouts of... *enthusiastic* anger. I have nurtured the patience needed to defend my father, a being who in all likelihood will never need my blade to keep him. I will outlast Lucius's hubris, too.

Ten more heartbeats pass.

The Emperor's Children begin to tire of the standoff, their earlier jeering replaced by the begrudging silence of boredom.

Lucius's eyes narrow as he senses their disinterest. 'I was content to let you thrust first, to give you a fighting chance before I claim victory. But...' He stops moving, a sardonic smile spreading across his face, '...we have only tonight.'

He attacks.

His sword is a flash of movement and nothing more, its length little more than an incorporeal spectre. Its bite is real enough, though. My hurried parries manage only to turn aside the truest of his strikes, defending the exposed flesh of my face against the tip of his blade. A dozen times he scores my armour. Were he to draw even a single drop of blood from my cheek, the duel would be over.

The Emperor's Children erupt in approval with each new graze.

Whooping, they stamp their boots in rhythmic applause against the steel of the platform.

Lucius breaks off. 'It pleases me to find you have some skill. Dull victories bring me little pleasure.'

I feign distraction, concentrating on my breathing, careful to keep my breaths shallow and quick, as though I am in need of the moment's respite. Lucius takes the bait. He steps in to thrust towards my leading leg. But his attack is overconfident. I ignore the feint, parrying his blade as it rises towards my face. I strike back, gripping my own sword two-handed and cutting down towards his abdomen.

There is no room for him to parry. He twists, turning into the blow, denying me the momentum, and braces behind his combat shield. My blade shudders as it connects, carving a rent down the length of the shield. I pivot, reversing my grip and stabbing my blade around behind me.

Nothing. I am not quick enough. Lucius has already sprung out of range.

'Yes, let us give them a show!' He spreads his arms for the crowd but his eyes narrow further and, beneath his preening exterior, his blood is up.

'I tire of your voice, cousin,' I growl. 'Let us finish this in silence.'

I see it then. The ugly, prideful anger that churns beneath the blademaster's still exterior.

Then Lucius twirls his sword in his hand, and another empty smile creases his cheeks. 'We are not at war, you and I - why not enjoy these moments?'

'I see through you, Lucius' His face hardens at my words. A ripple of anger ruins the corners of his eyes. 'Your nonchalance is nothing more than a blade wrapped in silk. You remind me of my brother, Amit. His aggression runs as deep as yours. Though he at least has the courage to embrace it.'

'The Flesh Tearer?' Lucius barks. 'I am nothing like him!'

I ignore Lucius's protestation. Courage. It surprises me to have given voice to such a thing where Amit's temper is concerned. Yet my brother would not have suffered this dance. It is my turn to smile as I imagine him fighting this duel, bludgeoning Lucius's face. I can almost hear the crack of his skull as Amit's armoured gauntlet batters it. The hammerblows ring out in my mind until my hearts quicken in echo...

I see Lucius speak again, but hear nothing beyond the thunder in my chest. Defence, strategy, honour - they all pale into quiet whispers beneath the roar of my rising anger.

Lucius's mouth moves again. I reply with a snarl.

He makes to attack, but I move first. I charge forwards, my blade raised overhead. He blocks my downward strike, turns aside the reverse stroke, and steps back out of range as I lunge with a kick. I keep going. A sweeping horizontal slash, followed by another as my blade twists in my grip. My sudden fury catches him off-guard. He makes good on his defence, but he has clung too tightly to his position, allowed me to step inside his reach.

I am larger than he. Stronger. Now is my chance.

I let go of my sword and grab the hilt of his with both hands. Pulling him tight to me, I launch a thunderous head butt. But Lucius has the wits to lower his head, and I grimace as my forehead strikes the thick bone of his. Grunting with effort, I turn my hips and throw him, blade and all, across the deck.

'This is not a brawl!' Lucius's voice is still thick with frivolity, but his eyes burn in outrage as he leaps back to his feet. 'First blood is first cut with a blade. You will not bludgeon your way to victory.'

I advance on him.

'Have you forgotten something, Blood Angel?' Lucius grins and gestures to my gauntlets with his sword point.

I look down at my empty hands. *Damn my rage, I have left my sword on the deck behind me.*

It is in that instant that I find respect for Amit's way of war. It is harder than I

had imagined, to lose control and yet still remain in command of one's actions.

'This contest is over,' Lucius sneers.

I keep advancing. 'Then why do you back away from me, blademaster?'

A look of confusion spoils his swagger, but he keeps his eyes on me.

I knew he would. He was far too experienced to fall for such an old lure.

But if he had glanced over his shoulder, he might have realised just how close to the platform's edge he has come.

My words have done their job. The single moment of doubt that passed through Lucius's mind, the one instant when his instinct turned to going backwards instead of forwards, was all the extra leverage I needed.

I lunge forwards.

I feel something score my cheek as I crash into him. My momentum drives us both over the edge. We fall, both of us together, my arms locked fast around his waist. Cries of laughter follow us over the edge as the Emperor's Children pour scorn on their champion's mistake.

'You have lost!' His voice is a desperate plea against the rush of our descent.

'I know.'

I smile and spread my arms. We tumble away from one another. I close my eyes and relish the calm touch of the rain as it follows me down to the sea.

Lucius had won the duel, but that was never the victory he sought. Admiration, the adoration and worship of his fellow warriors, was the prize he fought for. By the time we are recovered, the gash in my cheek will have healed and the moment of his triumph will have passed. His victory, like everything else on this planet, will have been washed away by the oceans of Henvinka.

AMIT

WE ARE VICTORIOUS. We have slain the enemy and returned another world to the Emperor. I crack my neck and roll my shoulders free. For me, though, one fight remains.

I duck low under a natural archway, and step into a hollowed-out trench in the rock face.

If this planet has a name, we have never bothered to learn it. Such a task we have left to those whose concerns do not run as bloody as ours. We however call it Bask, and it suits the name. An undulating landscape, baked dry by the oppressive blaze of its four suns.

I follow the trench for six more paces. If it is straight, it is only because it is not winding. Irregular chunks of rock narrow it in places. The ragged stone scores my pauldrons, yet yields and crumbles as I force my armoured bulk through. The space I emerge into is almost circular, a shallow basin at the foot of a mountain.

Kharn is waiting for me.

Behind him, a limp World Eater, his white and blue armour scarred and rent, is dragging himself away down another channel in the rock. Kharn follows my gaze.

'A warm up,' he smiles. It is an empty expression, something to fill the space between the twitch of his fingers and the flicker of rage that tugs at the corners of his eyes, and his voice is a guttural rasp. 'To keep the blood from my ears while I waited.'

He was right. I was late.

'It could not be helped.' I say holding Kharn's gaze without apology. 'Sergeant Barakiel had demanded the honour of this duel. I owed him the chance to fight for it.'

'As you say.' Kharn speaks free of menace as we stare at one another. 'I knew in the end it would be you and I who stood here.'

He and I are bound together by more than this moment. At my primarch's command, we have fought against one another in the duelling pits of the *Conqueror*, even as we have waged war together on this world for months. We have killed the same enemy and bled on the same earth. I see myself reflected in the dark of his eyes, and I am forced to admit that there is more. We have each borne witness to the other's bloodlust, to the rage that steals away all else. In truth, there have been days when, were it not for the colour of our armour, it would have been hard to tell us apart. Even now we both stand with the same unease. We are strangers to peace - addicts on edge, craving the familiar embrace of violence.

'This may be the last battlefield we share. I would not cede this chance to pit my blade against such an opponent one more time.'

Kharn grins. 'Few are the warriors who seek me out so readily.'

Above us, the slopes of the mountain are barren. This fight is between us. It is *for* us. My Blood Angels and Kharn's World Eaters will not stand in audience.

'This is a fitting end to our time here,' I say. Then my lips twist in contempt. 'But there is no honour in this. This is not true combat.'

Kharn smiles. It is as real as the sweat that soaks his brow. 'You do not

disappoint, Flesh Tearer.'

Flesh Tearer.

It was once so rare to be addressed by that name by someone outside my Legion command. I was a Blood Angel, a captain. My name was Amit, and yet - like those other titles - it always seemed less fitting than Flesh Tearer.

'And no, this is not combat,' Kharn continues. 'So let us forge our own honour, you and I. Let us stand here as flesh and blood. Let us fight as warriors, and not symbols of honour or tithes.' He crashes a fist into his breastplate.

I nod.

Neither Kharn nor I speak as we strip to our undersuits, revealing scars that wrap our torsos like thick ropes.

'One shall stand,' I say, eventually, my eyes still fixed on Kharn.

'Very well.' He nods and extends his hand.

I step forward and grasp his forearm in a warriors' salute. We will fight until one of us cannot rise again. 'Let us see whose blood runs stronger, the Angel's or the Butcher's.'

Kharn's face twitches in furor even as I feel my own hearts begin to quicken.

Together, we approach the arming post stood at the side of the pit. It bristles with long blades and polearms. Crude clubs sit beside barbed flails. There are punch daggers, bucklers and everything in between. I choose a short cleaver. Its ragged edge is blunt, its blade thick and heavy. It will not cut or slice. It will break bone and tear flesh.

'A good choice,' Kharn mutters as he pulls an axe and a lumpen hammer from the rack. 'A better choice than the blade that your brother, Azkaellon, once fought me with.'

I stifle a smirk at the comparison. 'You will never find me like my brother.' I take a length of barbed chain and wrap it around my left fist. 'This fight will not long be fought at blade's length.'

'Yes. This will be painful and bloody.'

Armed, we ready ourselves five paces from one another.

I see only Kharn.

The howl of the wind, as it scrapes across the rock of the valley, falls under the roar of blood swelling in my muscles. My grip on my weapon is white-knuckle tight. My weight is forward. It is all I can do to stay on the spot.

I imagine the first moments as we clash, my blade knocking Kharn's axe aside to smash his arms. I see his face crumple as my fist thunders into it. I want to hit him again and again. I hear my hearts beat and his bones break. I see Kharn

broken, and nothing else beyond it.

He roars, and charges me. I echo his call, a grumble tearing from my throat as I leap at him. His axe is high. I bring my blade up to meet it as it chops down for my head. The weapons ring out as they clash, and a reverberating ache shoots through my arm. Kharn's strength is fierce. I push forwards as his hammer swings low towards my thigh. I spear my left hand downwards, grimacing as his forearm collides with mine. I wrap my hand up around his shoulder and pull him in, dropping the cleaver to fold my elbow into his jaw. He raises his arm in defence, snarling as I smash into the meat of his bicep.

Weapons forgotten, we are a tangle of limbs scrabbling for dominance.

His head strikes my nose and blood fills my mouth.

My fist connects with his ribs. Bone cracks.

His teeth savage my shoulder.

My head cracks his jaw.

We hold our ground, suffering under incessant blows from the other. We are a mess of blood, sweat and saliva.

'You are holding back,' Kharn spits. 'Give me everything.'

'As are you,' I say, throwing my elbow up into his chin.

'I must.' His fist closes my right eye. 'Once the Butcher's Nails compel me, I am lost. Until they are sated.' Kharn pulls my head close to his mouth, and his voice is a blood-slick whisper. 'And they are never sated.'

'True fury cannot be manufactured. It is in the blood.' I catch the look in Kharn's eyes, and I know that I am wrong. For all its cruelty, my rage is a part of me; Kharn's has been forced upon him, an insult against his flesh. His mind was not born to deal with such a thing.

I see Kharn then, lost to his Nails. I see it in the drool that flecks his mouth, and the pulse of his eyes as they strain in their sockets.

My left leg buckles as Kharn hammers his shin into my thigh. He strikes again, pain flaring to my hip. I snarl and dig a punch into his throat. The blow buys me a moment. I grunt in pained effort, and shoulder Kharn away, then pace backwards and recover my footing.

'You have... lost...' Kharn's mouth curls in a sneer as he advances. 'There can be no... *backwards*. We must go forwards.'

I stagger as his fist hits my ear.

He is right. The fight's momentum is his.

I struggle to defend against a series of brutal punches and kicks. My arms burn with the toll of defence. They will soon fall, and he will crack my skull. Kharn's

mouth hangs open in a snarl that I cannot hear. His cry is lost under the roar in my head, swamped by the blood-red fog thickening behind my eyes.

No. This battle shall not be the one that claims me.

Kharn's knees drive up into my abdomen, knocking the wind from me. My vision blurs. The light of the suns presses down upon me, an oppressive glare of gold - the colour of Azkaellon's Sanguinary Guard plate. I find the strength to smile at the thought. My brother has never bested me in combat, yet he has survived my most wrathful endeavours.

I throw myself at Kharn, riding a punch that almost breaks my jaw, and lock the blades of my hands around his neck. He drives forwards. We topple.

Kharn continues to batter me as we fall. He lands atop me, pinning my torso beneath his hips. I cover my face with my arms in a desperate guard. He bludgeons them with fists and elbows in a frenzied attempt to get at my skull. He lands a blow with every beat of my hearts. I roar in frustration, swallowing my every instinct, all of them demanding that I hit back. If I move my arms now, I am dead. He will smash my skull open upon the rock as surely as the suns will bake my blood dry.

I wait while Kharn strikes again and again.

His rage is not coordinated. Left does not follow right in an economy of motion. Right follows right follows right. The gap between strikes lengthens as the favoured limb tires.

Kharn attacks. I wait.

Another blow. More pain. I wait.

A slew of incoherent curses tears from Kharn's throat. He strikes again. I wait. He strikes.

I counter.

I hook my left arm over his right and pin it against his body, as I throw my weight up. We roll. This time, I'm on top of him. Kharn hasn't registered the reversal. I have a moment's clear shot.

I hit him. The blow dents his cheek, breaks my fist, and leaves blood pooling under his skull on the rock. I drop my weight behind an elbow and collapse onto his face. Bone breaks. I ignore the pain in my ribs as he lands a series of wild punches, and grab his head with both hands. I growl, smashing it into the ground.

Kharn lies still. I slump away from him.

I hear the roar of my blood rolling and crashing like a distant wave. It begs me to rise. I cannot.

The words fall from my lips. 'A draw.'

Cruel laughter rumbles in Kharn's throat. 'There can be... no such outcome. Our fight is... not over...'

'It is for today.'

'Finish it.'

I ignore him, and close my eyes. *I see only Kharn, and the World Eater wears my face.*

THE TEMPEST

IT IS THE ninth day of the ninth month. The Tempest of Angels is upon us. I stand in the centre of the duelling stone and await my sons. It has been a year since I have seen either Amit or Azkaellon, not since I sent them to face Lucius and Kharn. I turn my gaze to the twin statues of the Emperor set above the chamber's main archway. Between them burns a single, blood-red candle. The pillar of wax is almost gone. When the last of it has burned down, the Tempest will begin.

For a hundred heartbeats, I watch the flame. It stands upright in the still air of the room. Only at its last does it waver. I watch as it flickers and fades. A moment more and it will burn its last. It is the same moment in which it burns brightest.

Then my thoughts turn to my sons, and my mood diminishes just as the candle has. I think of my Angels and their fury as they war across the stars. I wonder for how long such a fire will keep them from the darkness in their blood. Foreboding threatens to steal all strength from my limbs as I ponder my sons' final moments, and the terrible loss that such a time will bring.

'Lord Sanguinius.'

The strength in Amit's voice breaks my reverie. I remind myself that the flame is still lit. The destiny of my bloodline will unfold - if I am to be more than a mere observer, my focus must be on guiding them now.

I turn to find him stood under the eastern archway, a ragged frame of dark brass and jagged iron. He neither bows nor salutes, for there is no honour in this place. Only life and death, and the moments that act as passage from one to the other.

He has come as the Blood Seeker. The attacker, the destroyer. A role I have never doubted he was born for. I sigh.

'Lord Sanguinius.'

Azkaellon's voice sounds from the opposite side of the chamber. I do not turn to greet him. He stands as the Saviour. My defender.

I feel my limbs swell with anger in the same moment that my hearts grow heavy.

I have failed. The lesson has gone unlearned.

They have come to play the same roles that they always do.

I wait, motionless, while they step onto the duelling stone and ready their blades. I nod for them to begin, and close my eyes. I have no wish to watch this same dance again.

I am barely aware of their actions as they clash around me. Azkaellon will never let Amit's blade strike me, and the Flesh Tearer will never stop trying. My mind begins to wander, to slip away down the threads of thought, until—

The familiar clashing of Baalite steel, the background wash of the Tempests I have stood through all these long years, changes. There is something different in the tempo this time.

Something in the cadence of the fight.

I open my eyes to find Amit wrong-footed, his attack beaten back by Azkaellon's savage counter. I hide a smile as Azkaellon presses this advantage, each sweep of his blade more furious than the last. Amit remains composed, turning aside Azkaellon's blows until he finds an opening. Amit's strike is exacting. Azkaellon only just stops his blade as it drives toward my abdomen. I watch now with keen interest.

But the break in the normal rhythm of the pair is fleeting, and they return to their natures by the next sword stroke. Amit attacks with pure aggression, sacrificing his guard for a chance at victory. Azkaellon, his composure regained, strikes with direct poise, unwilling to throw himself off balance for a kill stroke. Yet, as the duel progresses, there are moments when the tempo is altered again, and in each of them I see a glimmer of the other.

I was wrong to have expected these two to switch roles. Horus was right - we are who we are.

But we can be tempered. Our flaws rounded off by the virtues of our brothers. I know hope then. It is as a third heart in my breast, beating in slow time as it waits for the chance to race, to pump a glorious future through my veins.

I have seen too much of the possible ends to believe that it is glory awaiting me and my lineage. Yet the weight of certainty is not crushing, for when the day comes when my sons each fall to the darkness in their blood, I hope that the virtues of those they stand beside will keep them in the light.

GUNSIGHT

James Swallow

In all things, readiness is the watchword. Always be prepared to act at a moment's notice. Always be within a hand's span of your weapon. Always be ready to make the kill if the prospect presents itself; but be certain of the opportunity. You will only have a moment to make that decision.

It must be flawless.

THE PISTOL WAS much heavier than he remembered, in his rough, scarred hand. That was a strange thing to consider. He was intimate with this angular, unadorned gun in such subtle ways. He could tell exactly how many rounds were loaded by weight alone. There were six: five in the magazine and one in the chamber. There should have only been five - that was how his instructors trained him and that was the rote command they had taught. The extra round unbalanced the weapon, created unnecessary wear on the mechanism. They would say that there was no need for more than five shots. Who would require more than one?

But they were teachers who were long since gone from the war zones of the galaxy, and they forgot that one extra bullet might be the line between living and dy—

He was drifting. His thoughts were slipping into old memories and trivial minutiae. This was happening too often. Shake it off. He fought to stay in the here and the now. To maintain his focus.

The gun, then. And the target towards which it aimed.

Across the ragged, uneven floor of the hide, the little man was pressed as much as was humanly possible into the far corner. Hands with long, pallid fingers splayed over the metal pallets made into walls, knees bending and cowering on the scrap iron deck. Head bobbing. Those were tears rolling down the dirt-streaked face.

A word. 'Please...!' Then others. 'Why would you do this now? After all this time, you want to end me? I thought we had... You and I...'

'An understanding?' He plucked the end of the sentence from the air - *or was it the whispers that told him what to say?* 'You think you know me?' His voice was coarse and alien in his own ears, the sound of it like the action of a device long out of use. 'You do not know me.'

'We kept each other alive!' shouted the little man, finding something close to defiance.

What does that mean? The words did not seem to connect to anything. His free hand, the one webbed with void burns, came up and ran over his face, catching

in his oily beard and matted hair.

It was not easy. The thing that he knew best, the way to pull the trigger and to kill clean and fast, that pushed at him to be done. He had no calendar to reckon how long it had been since he last took a life.

He wanted to do it. He wanted the gunshot's roar and the sweet silence afterwards. Not just because he feared that otherwise he might forget the taste of those things, but also because it was required. It is what had to be done to set the last kill - the greatest kill, the unforgotten mission - into motion.

As he saw the shape of that deed in his thoughts, he could not help but look over his shoulder to the other wall of the hide, where his liberation waited wrapped in oilcloth and darkness.

And so he took aim, putting aside the bits of broken memory that accreted in his thoughts.

What are our tools? Rifle. Pistol. Mask. Suit. Cloak. What is not on that list? What do you carve from the landscape of the kill? What is the tool that is always the same but always unique? The hide. Plan as much as you can, but you will never really know the hide until you come to construct it at the site. Your hide may be as ephemeral as mist or as solid as stone. But if it is found wanting, then it will be your grave marker.

WHAT WAS LEFT of the medicae kit was spent on healing the wounds from the serpent bites and bringing him back to some semblance of stability. He had lost much in the brief, brutal engagement with the foul bilge-predators, including the belt packs that contained his chronometer and data-slate, his primary ammunition pouch, the fluid purifier module and, worst of all, every last wrapper of freeze-dried rations.

In the iron canyons where he found himself, there was nothing human-scale for him to investigate, no sign of habitat quads or barracks where he could conceivably have stolen some kind of sustenance. On a planet, he might have dug for grubs or found a river. Here, inside the endless metal spaces of this gargantuan starship, there was nothing of nature to plunder.

Or so one might have thought at first.

Unable to reckon the passing of ship-days and ship-nights by anything other than his own guesswork, he ventured onwards in fits and starts from the point where he had boarded, eventually leaving it far behind.

After the serpent attack he had briefly returned to the escape pod's impact

point, but found it subsumed under a gelatinous mass of metallic bio-foam where the vessel's auto reactive systems had plugged the hull breach. Rather than remain in the area should servitors be sent to investigate the penetration, he hiked in the opposite direction for what felt like hours. The mechanical, repeating motion of that helped to calm his mind and make the vivid poison-dreams seem less overwhelming. He would not begin to think of it as a vision until much later.

But in time he came to the canyon that could not be crossed, and although he would have never admitted it, he felt a horrible kind of fear as the view across the black metal abyss came into synchrony with the ghost images that he had seen in the dream.

He stood on a narrow service walkway that had no handrail, following the metal cliff's edge into infinity. The canyon itself might have run the entire length of the ship for all he knew - a long, echoing hollow buried in the deep bones of the great vessel. To the fore and aft, the chasm vanished into a distant orange glow of working machinery and churning fuel smoke. Looking up and down, there was only unfathomed darkness and, from the vantage where he stood, he hawked up phlegm and spat it out into the void. Cables stung along the length of the great gulf rattled and sang as trains of tethered container cars rolled back and forth below him, pennants of rich chemical smog billowing up from cargos of icy coolant slurry bound for the massive, city-sized reactor cores. Things that he first took to be great patches of rust and discolouration on the sheer iron crags resolved into odd patterns that were hideously familiar.

Instead, he unwrapped the rifle with a lover's delicacy and peered through the compact viewscope to scry the distance.

His hands were shaking a little. Laser rangers picked out platforms jutting from the walls on either side, each made from a patchwork of metal sheets the size of a hab-block. Rarely, he saw bridges that spanned the full width of the canyon, but the nearest was hundreds of metres above and seamlessly welded into the walls. Without a crawler rig or mag-boots he had no hope of reaching it.

Part of him wanted to put the rifle down and not to look any more. It was the effect of what he had seen when the venom was in him, the strange broken scenes that he had thought were just creations of his temporary fever. He was seeing them again now, for real. *The chasm. The iron walls. The bridges and the*

The dream-fear returned when the scope settled on the dais. There it was, as real as death, on the far side of the canyon. One-point-five-three-three kilometres

away by reckoning of the rangefinder's unblinking eye. An ornate, brassy observation platform upon which a ship's commander might briefly alight upon a tour of the vessel's lower decks.

He had glimpsed it in the poison-dream and imagined standing upon it. In the storm of unreal images, he had turned as a great shadow fell across him and looked up at a dark figure towering high: a war god wrought of adamantium and black gold. Magnificent, and malignant.

Horus. He has stood there. He will stand there.

The tremors in his hands were such that he almost lost his grip on his precious, precious rifle, near to panic as the thought of seeing it tumble away into the dark crackled through him. He reeled back on the gantry, clutching the weapon to him.

This was the moment when he started to believe that the nightmare the serpent venom had given him might not be a nightmare at all. Just for the briefest of instants, mind. The thought rose to the surface of his consciousness, then dropped away again.

The need to act, to feel that he was doing something of worth, came next. Perhaps if he had stopped and asked himself why he did these things, the narrative that followed would have taken a different path. But he did not.

A short distance down the service gantry was the skeleton of some sort of watchtower - just the base of it, jutting out over the abyss, ending in broken-tooth pieces of unfinished girders and half-welded panels. Left incomplete by some long-dead shipwright perhaps, or deemed useless in a revision of the warship's designs centuries ago when the keel was still being laid... It mattered only that it could form the framework for a hide where he could perch and look towards the distant brass dais.

Over the next few increments - he decided to call them 'days' - he foraged pieces of scrap metal from a long-forgotten waste buffer and made a deck of sorts to lie upon, and walls behind which he could be concealed. In the shadows beneath the broken framework there were damp, rusty spaces where brackish moisture gathered, and in those he set up dew-catchers. The damp drew other things too, like fat crawling insects and doughy, spade-like blades of fungal growth that did not sicken him when he ate them.

Truth be told, he had made camp in worse places than this, but never so deep in the enemy's breast. He did not allow himself to think of such things as exit vectors and post-strike scenarios; to do so would be a delusion.

This would be his last mission... but then he had never expected to live this

long.

If a man expects to die, hopes, knows that it will happen... Is he still really alive? If you have surrendered to such a thing, can you ever come back from it?

Would you ever wish to?

He pushed the troubling thought aside and started to build a plan of action.

Of those whom you encounter as you execute your duty, there will only be two kinds of souls: Targets and Collaterals. Never forget that the latter can become the former with a word, a deed, a thought. The reverse is never so.

THE MIND COULD play tricks down here.

There were whispers in every passing moment at the old starship's echoing core. Moans and whimperings of air forced through fractures in deck metal or over the surface of unseated plating. Vessels of this size frequently had their own microclimates, their mass so great that systems of wind and pressure came into play as hatches opened and closed, even as the throngs of their crews breathed in and out. On some craft, there might even be small clouds or rainfall. A fanciful thing.

He listened to the whispers when he was in the depths of his resting state, that trance-like phase of no-mind where time was malleable. Nothing existed there but bullet and target.

Or so it was supposed to be.

The whispers invaded that space. Sibilant and airy sounds, most often - meaningless exhalations of the ship as it went on its way. Ambient and empty.

But they could trick the mind, yes. He might think that they were words or names, sometimes coming from far, sometimes from near. He did not like to sleep for fear that the sounds would infiltrate his slumbering psyche.

This is the reason why, at first, he did not think that the man he saw was real.

He heard the crewman before he laid eyes on him - a hollow, toneless hum from someone who had no understanding of how to carry anything resembling a tune. At first he thought it was some discordant noise from across the great iron chasm, until he turned beneath his inert cloak and spotted motion.

Slowly and carefully, he pulled his mask up and fixed it in place. A blink-click activated the thermographic scan, and he perceived the man clearly now, a blotch of false colour picking its way along the line of some protruding heat exchangers.

The menial crewman - the ragged, careworn uniform gave that away - was a

glum little figure, as downcast as the lilting, humming dirge. Now and then, he would stop at some imagined terror, peering around as though afraid to be discovered.

He watched the serf find a spot to sit and saw a shaky hand vanish into the folds of a greasy tunic. It returned with a lho-stick and lighter. The crewman lit the smoke and sucked greedily upon it. Every action seemed to say that this was a secret vice being indulged out of sight of those who would disapprove.

Sensors in the mask registered the compounds in the stubby roll-up. Some mild narcosis, low-grade stimulants. All banned by Imperial decree.

A smile came at that. As if Terran law had ever meant anything aboard this ship.

He left his pistol behind. The suppressor had been damaged in the frantic egress of the saviour pod and despite the weapon's insistence that the silencer would work flawlessly, he did not wish to test that unless there was no other option. Instead he gathered the cloak to him, for now leaving it unpowered, and picked up the knife. It barely deserved the name, in truth being little more than a shard of hull metal that he had stamped flat and crudely sharpened, but it would open a naked throat as well as any fractal blade or mollycutter.

Off the hide he came, silent and fleet of foot. Close and closer. The serf did not become aware of him until a cable-train passed by and light from a green indicator lumen atop one of the cradles threw odd shadows over them both.

The look of abject, childish terror was so stark upon the crewman's face that it struck him as perversely comical. He released a rough, mocking chuckle, wondering if the crewman might soil himself in fright.

The spark of humour went away, though, as he realised that he would still have to kill this fool, murder him and dump his corpse into the abyss. There could be no chance of the hide being seen, of course.

And the serf, with his smoke and his tuneless hum, could not be allowed to dither nearby. Discovery could not be risked.

'D-did they send you?' said the crewman. *Letae*. The name was there, visible on a discoloured tab over his right breast. The lho-stick dropped forgotten to the deck. 'This is it, isn't it? They've had enough of me! This is how it ends...'

'Who?' He asked the question before it had fully formed in his thoughts.

'The others!' Hands were wringing now. *Letae* wavered, blinking back tears, clearly considering running away. But then the serf seemed to think better of it. The only avenue of escape was to go over the sheer iron cliff and into the bottomless dark. 'I accepted the bloody tattoo. I said I was devoted - isn't that

enough?'

He saw the oily ink that the crewman spoke of. It was a reddish-black design laid over the flesh of the man's cheek. The like was commonplace on the lower ranks of starship crews, where menials would tattoo watch numbers and quadrant sigils on themselves as badges of loyalty and rank. A crude hierarchy for the loaders of shells, the stokers and other non-combatants.

But this was different. The design was wildly complex, and in the dimness it played with the mind so it would seem to move of its own accord. Something about the star-like shape of it made him uneasy, and he refocused his gaze upon the serf's watery eyes.

'Who are you devoted to?'

'The Warmaster,' came the reply, but it was so obviously forced, rehearsed to within an inch of its life. 'Horus.' Letae added the name as if one might be unsure of whom he was referring to.

'Why are you lying to me?' He advanced, bringing up the crude knife.

Letae backed away instinctively, then froze. Beyond was only the yawning abyss. 'I'm not!' he insisted. 'Warmaster... Praise...' He made the vague sketch of a motion with his hands, like some old-religionist at prayer. 'All glory to Horus. Death to... to...'

'Say it.' The rusty blade danced in the air. 'Why can't you say it? You are one of them, aren't you? So speak.' He goaded the crewman, prodding him with his free hand.

'Death to...'

The Emperor. The unspoken words hung between them, and yet Letae could not force them out.

Why? Did this inconsequential little man understand that he was about to die? Was it that now, at this final moment, his treachery was failing him?

That brought the cold killer's smile back. In time, all those who had nailed their colours to the traitor's mast would pay for that choice, from the most powerful primarch to the lowliest of deckhands. *A traitor is a traitor is a traitor*, he told himself, *and death is the reward for all of them.*

'I am no traitor!' The words burst from Letae in a sudden, spittle-flecked blast.

Did I give voice to that last thought and not realise it? He frowned at himself.

'Death take you all, you filthy whoresons!' The crewman was immediately red-faced and sweating, furious and impotent all at once. This was true desperation, this was the dam breaking as the end loomed, knowing that it didn't matter anymore. 'I won't say it again!' he bellowed, his voice becoming a dull resonance

robbed of meaning as it echoed away down the canyon. 'I reject you all, do you hear me? Kill me then! But I'll die clear of conscience! I am a son of Cthonia, loyal to Terra and the Emperor of Mankind.'

'Is that so?'

'Ten generations!' he raged. 'Fathers and mothers and sons and daughters, we toiled aboard this ship for the Luna Wolves!' Letae turned his face upward and a great sadness swept over him, as though he were looking at a loved one lying mortally wounded.

'What has he done to her? She was so beautiful and noble, and now she's been... *corrupted!*'

It took a moment for him to realize the man was speaking of the great vessel itself. *'The Vengeful Spirit'*.

'Yes! So strong and faithful. But he broke all that from her. But not from me, do you hear? Loyal, damn you! Loyal...' The last word became a weak, defeated cry. He knew that his end was upon him, and that final surge of righteous anger had not beaten it back. 'I will not live the lie anymore,' he said, starting to weep. For a moment, it seemed like the crewman might actually lunge for the crude knife to dash himself upon it, in some futile and final gesture of defiance.

'Courage, Letae,' he said, warily lowering the weapon. 'You will not die today.'

'No?' The serf's expression veered between pathetically grateful and deeply suspicious. 'Why?'

'Because I want to look into the eyes of a loyal man.' He sat down on one of the inert exchanger hoods and after a while, the crewman did the same. 'I want to know if there are any of those left.'

Letae studied him, and abruptly he realised that he was still wearing his mission mask, regarding the serf through the blank, emotionless gaze of the mono-band visor. He reached up to take it off, to show the poor fool that there was a human being beneath the tattered black cloak.

'Who are you?' asked the crewman. 'Why are you here?'

'My name...'

Now that he came to say it, it was hard to form the shape of the words. He was almost afraid that they would slip away from him.

'My name is Eristede Kell,' he said, at last remembering. 'I am here to slay a monster.'

What is the mask? It the lie of who we are. It is the truth of the same. Each mask we wear is identical and never differs. If you suffer the fate to perish behind it,

the mask will consume your bio data and render you into slurry that no technology can ever reconstruct. Thus, behind the mask we all are faceless and we are all unkillable. Each time one of us falls, another rises. To those outside, we seem immortal.

HOW DID HE reach this place?

Without the ability to reckon time, it was important to him to continue to reiterate the significant memories, the ones that had value and potency. He had lost much - that was undeniable. The blow to the head he had suffered as the pod breached the belly decks of the Warmaster's flagship. The corrosive effects of the serpent venom. They had taken their toll upon his mind.

I am the weapon.

Kell had been quite ready to die, in those last moments. His mission, entrusted to him by his master within the Clade Vindicare and the Assassin-Lords of Terra, had all but crumbled by the end. He and the fractious team of killers and madmen that the High Lords had assembled did not complete the task at hand. They had been sent to terminate the Warmaster Horus with extreme prejudice, there on the surface of the planet Dagonet.

And they had failed.

He had failed. Only a proxy dead by the pull of Kell's trigger, a ranked lieutenant of the Warmaster executed in the arch-traitor's stead. But in the ashes of that error, they had found traces of an even greater evil lurking in the shadows. A warp-spawned thing, a murderous daemonic hybrid that defied all known laws of existence, a creature that should never have been and yet at once was something perfectly engineered for assassination. A living weapon, pointed straight at the heart of the Emperor of Mankind.

Kell and the others, they did not question if such a thing might be possible. Even the faintest possibility of it had to be stopped at all costs.

And so they did stop it, and the cost was all. Tariel of the Vanus and the Callidus change-face Koyne, the mad psyker waif Iota and the Eversor brute Garantine - all dead and ashes to end the existence of the Spear-thing.

And sister too... His dear sister. *What was her name?* He could see the ghost of her face, hear her voice. But her name. *What is my sister's name?* She too was dead, and he was robbed of her. Kell ground his hands into his scalp and pressed until he was in agony, but that particular memory was black and cold. It was an empty shell.

In the end, he had wanted to die. To be the weapon.

Taking the guncutter *Ultio* into the void, seeking out the *Vengeful Spirit* and knowing that Horus would be aboard. He had aimed the craft like a missile at the deck where the Warmaster stood, in that vain, vain hope that he could mortally wound the Emperor's turncoat son in the collision.

But so futile, as-

-the ship burned around him-

-a vista of red warning runes wherever he looked-

-a tiny saviour pod, blue light spilling from the hatch-

-he would only need to take a step-

-the mission was all Eristede Kell had left in his echoing, empty existence.

And so he had fled. He convinced himself that dying in that moment would prove nothing, and it would mean even less. He could not end there, not while he still had a single breath left in his body, a single bullet left to spend.

In the confusion of his headlong attack run, the launch signature of the escape capsule had been lost in the backwash of nuclear fire from the *Ultio's* destruction. Boring into the hull of *Vengeful Spirit*, the pod carried him into the domain of the enemy, lodged him there as shrapnel might settle in a raw wound.

Kell went over this memory more than any of the others, more than the fragments of childhood or the past kills in their blood-spattered perfection, because of what it represented to him. This memory, this act, changed the conditions of his existence.

On Dagonet, he had not killed Horus. He had failed.

But here, aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*, hiding in her deep decks and planning that murder anew, the failure became meaningless.

He had *not* failed. The mission had *not* ended. Kell still had yet to take his shot.

'I am here to slay a monster,' he said, and this time he vowed that he would succeed.

Never question who they are. Never spend a moment of your time dwelling on the equation of their being. Do not ask yourself if they are fit to die or deserving to live. This is not a matter for you to address. That burden is taken on by men and women of greater knowledge than yours, and they bear it in your stead.

Be grateful for the clarity this brings to you, and accept it without hesitation. Know that the target is the only truth.

THEY FELL INTO an uneasy peace, the Assassin and the deckhand. Letae had more

of the lho-sticks, and with trembling hands he gave one to Kell. After the offering, they smoked in companionable silence for a while as each took the measure of the other.

Kell sucked the narcosia deep into his lungs and he liked it. An eternity had passed since he been able to partake in a vice, or so it felt to him. In this little, trivial act, he felt something other than the bleak, endlessly hollow melancholy that had followed him from Dagonet. He did not have a word for the emotion, though. He had forgotten the names of such things.

Letae broached the subject of his scars and the discolouration of his flesh from the serpent bites. But Kell was not ready to talk about those things yet. Instead, he asked the crewman to speak of himself... and slowly, warily, the man did so.

'You will think I am weak,' he said. Kell did, but saw no reason to say so. 'Let me tell you of how it has been. I've worked the *Spirit's* decks since I was old enough to lift a dyno-coupler, truth in that. I know all the stories about how her keel was laid down in the shipyards, and I can talk about the men who died making her live. That's the book of this ship, y'see?' He tapped his head. In the dim light, there were bruises and evidence of old contusions upon him. 'In here,' Letae went on. 'I'm not forgetting it.'

Kell knew of such things. Oral histories and traditions built up around the great warships of the Imperium just as they did about cities on the surface of planets, so big and so complex they were that legends could be spawned in their shadow. Ghost stories and modern myths, some with one foot in fact and the other in whimsy. The *Vengeful Spirit* was such a craft, and the Assassin did not doubt that there were tales that spanned centuries living inside her iron hide. The crew would share those stories, pass them down to each new generation who served, embellishing and enhancing the narrative along the way. In their own rough fashion, deckhands like this one were the crude remembrancers of their ilk.

But their tales wouldn't warrant a statue or an opera. Not like the epics of the Legiones Astartes, who strode over the heads of these lesser beings and never once paid them any mind.

Letae talked and talked, and once started he didn't seem to have a way to stop.

'We fought in the Crusade we did, for high glory.' Tears glistened in his gaze. 'Oh, if you'd only known it. When Horus came to the ship, there was such celebration. We were whole, see? And we were the Warmaster's boat, the first among equals. We were going to be known as the greatest crew in history... For a while, we were.'

And then? Kell didn't need to offer the prompt.

The crewman looked at his feet, his words turning sorrowful.

'Didn't last. The beauty, it all burned away. I saw it, from down here in the lowers. You didn't need to be a man on the bridge to notice, no. We all saw. We all did.' He pointed at his face. 'Davin was the place. It began to change there. Maybe the seeds were rooted before, but the Delphos on Davin was where they bloomed.' Letae's voice dropped to a husky murmur, so fearful was he that he might be overheard even in this empty place. 'Horus fell, and mark me for saying this, but we would have been better served if he might never have stood again. When he came back, he was changed'.

'Explain what you mean by that.'

'I don't have the words. Not an educated man. But I see it. Saw it. *Know it!*' He shook his head slowly. 'Then Isstvan. Oh, for Throne's sake - *Isstvan*. What was done there haunts us all. It tainted this ship and every man-jack upon it. He killed kith and kin, the Warmaster did. In the name of betrayal, cloaked it in rebellion like it was something righteous.'

Then Letae told him a story about a man - a tier-master, a kind of foreman for the decks where the serf worked maintaining the great focusing crystals of the warship's lance cannons. This man was Letae's superior, and by a commonality of birth he was also a distant relation to the deckhand. This was not an exceptional thing; the lower ranks on some ship crews became communities in some cases, living on their vessels and forming the same bonds one might come across in a small colony outpost or rural settlement.

The tier-master spoke out against Horus's rebellion and was killed for it. Tragic enough, if expected. But the *horror* was of how it was done. They lashed the man to the lasing crystal as it went through a rising-falling test cycle and his flesh was allowed to burn inside and out for sixteen days. The stasis matrix generator in the lance cannon's inner workings made the torment go on and on, a peculiarity of the suspensive energy field slowing the relative passage of time for the condemned man. Every crew-serf in earshot was forced to listen to the sluggish, drawn-out screams.

But this was not the worst of things, no. Letae explained that this had been just the start of them.

'Soon, the spilling of blood... It was a daily occurrence. It had to be done, just to keep the shadows happy, you see? The things in the shadows, I mean. They take people. Sometimes they bring them back, too. And you wouldn't want to see how that alters a man. Or a legionary.'

'I have seen the like,' Kell offered. The crewman gave him a wary look, as if he didn't quite believe the Assassin. But then an unspoken understanding passed between them, a terrible similarity of experience, and both knew that this was truth.

'I'm a coward,' Letae ventured, ashamed of himself. 'Weak. I don't speak up. I keep my head down and I work and I pretend that I don't see. But I see. Can't talk about how it frightens me, because I don't know who feels the same, and who is the believer now. You have to pretend, even if you are not. Or it's death. And not the quick kind.' He nodded towards the metal canyon. 'There's many who took that path rather than toil on under the lash of the Warmaster and his... lackeys.'

Kell watched him shiver, even though the air was blood-warm. 'You can't speak of me,' he told him. 'I will end you if you do not swear to that.'

The deckhand nodded. 'I wish I had the courage to ask you to do it. But I don't.' He looked away. 'Maybe you should make it quick and painless for me. If they suspect I've seen a man down here, they'll force it from me. I am weak,' he repeated.

The Assassin had killed so many on so little a pretext that it was odd to feel what he did now - this *reluctance*. Was it that he was alone on this traitor-barge, and that he craved one other soul to speak to?

How long had he been here? Was it days? Weeks? Months? Kell could not understand why it was so hard to reckon the passing of time. It gnawed at him.

He put the crude knife away. 'I need water,' he said, at length, thinking of the brackish liquid he was forced to drink, laced with whatever unknown contaminants might be issuing from the ship's structure. 'Can you get me a purification filter?'

A nod. 'I can do that. It won't be missed.'

'Bring it,' said Kell, 'and perhaps you can aspire to be more than a coward.'

Later, when he was alone, the Assassin tried to find the used stubs of the lho-sticks, just to have physical proof that the man had been there at all. But he had no success. The breathy wind up and down the canyon had taken them.

At least, he imagined that was so.

Do not seek aid from others, even if there is no alternative open to you. It is true that there are good and loyal souls abroad in the galaxy, those who would willingly aid the servants of the Emperor's Will if they knew you moved amongst them. But you must not put them in jeopardy. They are not trained as you are.

They may make mistakes. A slip of word or deed. Do not take the risk. Your rifle is the only husband, only bride, only friend you can confide in.

HE COULD NOT escape sleep forever, though. When it came for him, there was an inevitable return to the moment when he first came aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*. It was as if the ship itself wanted to be certain that Kell never forgot that, even if every other memory in his damaged mind became brittle and piecemeal. The vivid power of the recollection was there each time he closed his eyes.

When the pod hit, the grinding of hull metal under the grappling teeth sounded like screaming. *A child made of tin and glass, screaming as it was cut open by razors.* That was the noise.

The saviour capsule breached as it blew into the belly decks, foul air filling the tiny, coffin-sized space. It came to rest burning red-hot with force of entry, clicking and ticking as the ablative outer armour melted off in great tarry blobs. Kell seared his lungs and his flesh on egress. Temporarily blinded, the Assassin was greeted by the ship with biting, venom-laced fangs.

The pod had bored into the hull near one of the warship's mammoth bilge reservoirs, a reeking space heavy with organic fetor. Caked layers of filth deposited one over another for hundreds of years were home to colonies of fat, maggoty things that crawled and writhed amidst the vanes of the environmental system's bioprocessors. The maggots were prey to larger creatures that slithered in the darkness, eyeless serpentine forms with tooth-ringed maws. Ill fate had landed him near one of their nests.

Kell was hauling what pieces of his gear he could from the crushed escape capsule when the snakes finally decided to attack him. Ripping jaws, muscular and savage, bit down and sank poison into his blood. In the maggots, the neurotoxic venom would induce an instantaneous torpor, allowing the serpents to eat them alive. But to a human, the effect was very different.

The toxin acted upon his mind. At first he stumbled about like a drunkard as he beat off the predators, his limbs becoming rubbery and disobedient. Kell tried to stagger away from the serpents, dimly aware of the thick splashes behind him as he lost pieces of his kit to the deep and murky sewer waters.

Then down to his knees as the poison took control of him. It swirled through his veins, reacting and changing, becoming psychotropic. For a time, it sent the Assassin into madness.

What did he see there?

The dream state curdled as it mixed with memories of recent experience, the

horrific encounters with the un-human that Kell had lived through on Dagonet; the murders that he had witnessed and the twisted things that they augured. Flowing like pools of blood and oil, one across the other, time and sight showed Kell a surreal landscape.

He beheld things that made no sense to him, images and scenes that did not come from his mind or memory. Later, in the quiet times as Kell waited out his endless vigil in the hide, he would pore over those moments and try to fathom their origin. What if he had been seeing not his own recollections, but something from the primitive brains of the serpents themselves? Such things were known to exist - xenos beasts with a tiny measure of psyker-power to open the thoughts of prey creatures. Did the venom make that happen? Or was it something else, something more subtle and sinister?

Was it the *Vengeful Spirit* herself that showed those things to him? So great and so complex a mechanism, and now contaminated by warp-dark and daemon-taint, did it reach into his mind through the venom of the things living inside it, into him by poisoned blood? Did the ship gift him with these visions?

Has my sanity fled me that I think that possible? He tormented himself with these questions. *Am I mad?*

He had no answer. Kell held only the dream-vision-madness-fantasy-poison-hallucination. It remained glass-bright and burned indelibly upon his thoughts, embedded in the matter of his mind like a needle of sensation.

The vision did not change in any iteration that he experienced. On the great dais protruding from the wall of the iron canyon, the shadow of the Warmaster came falling over him, blotting out the waxen light. The dark glory of the primarch, the cruelty and malevolence simmering beneath a face so perfect and noble.

Like the statues Kell had seen on Dagonet.

Come to life. Looming large. Reaching for him.

But in the moments when he was most lucid, when the Assassin could hold his thoughts tightly and grasp some measure of rationality, the thing that frightened him the most were the sensations that the vision engendered. So pure they were, but shameful with it.

Eristede Kell did not look upon the face of Horus and hate him, even though he told himself that he was supposed to. No, the Warmaster's appearance was a kind of black fire that could not be fully beheld by a mortal man, but instead a dead radiance at once engulfing and desireful. A singularity of being.

It was as if an emotional circuit in Kell's heart had been reversed. He knew

intellectually that Horus should bring forth the greatest hatred in him. *A traitor is a traitor, and death is the reward for all of them.* But the words were rote performance, they were hollow things filled with ash.

Kell *knew* that he should hate Horus, that he and all humankind should feel betrayed by the first-among-equals of the Emperor's sons. *He knew it.* That was the mission, after all: to slay the monster.

But who had *really* betrayed the Assassin? Not Horus. Who had sent Kell and his sister and all the others on a fool's errand, a mission that they could never, *would* never hope to complete? Who had left him to perish?

In the vision-dream, Horus reached out for him. The gesture was not one of anger or violence. There seemed to be compassion in it.

Am I mad? He asked it over and over. *Am I now corrupted too? Is anything still pure?*

When the poison eventually released him, the Assassin found himself in the shallows of the tainted bilges with dead serpents all around him. His mouth was filled with bits of their scaly flesh, and black blood coating his teeth. Kell vomited the contents of his stomach into the water and dragged himself away, reeling, fouled and blood-sick.

Fate smiled briefly - he found his medicae kit and tore it open, taking anything he could to make the horror retreat from his mind.

At least for a while.

The mission is never over. Until recall comes, until authority speaks differently, the mission endures. There can be no dissent to that diktat. It matters nothing how difficult the execution will be, how long the tasking may last, how much collateral will burn in the act. It must be done. It will be done. You will see it to its ending. You will do this.

HOW WOULD IT occur, this killing of a warlord? That was the question that came to consume him as the days passed.

Kell cleaned and prepared the precious Exitus rifle at regular intervals, even though it did not require such over-attentive care. It was in danger of becoming less about the action of vital maintenance for the Assassin's tool, and more a kind of sacrament to be carried out. The passage of the cloth over the disassembled trigger assembly, the slow and intricate testing and re-testing of each sensor grid in the sighting array... These took on the measured and ritualistic pace of holy tasks in mimicry of the deeds that had been done in all the

dead churches, burned away by the light of Imperial Truth.

He put away the golden aquila that his sister - that poor, name-lost sibling - had left to him and never looked upon it again. Kell did not want to be distracted by such trivia. The hide was his altar, his cathedral. He was at peace there, for a time. His serenity was to kneel at gun-prayer, the spindly shape of the advanced sniper rifle rising from his hands as a sculpted hymnal made of metal and ferrocenone.

He rehearsed the killing in his mind's eye until he could recall any fractional part of the deed without hesitation. The calculation of windage, the numerals on the scope's glass eyes as perfect as a symphony's notes. The shape of the target zone like the skin of a bed-partner beneath his fingers, known so very well to him.

And in the finality, the single rifle bullet.

It was all that he had left, and occasionally he would release the unfired round from the breech and roll it gently across his palm. The touch of the cool, brass shell was soothing. The motion of it, the subtle weight of the killing payload there in his hand, these things helped to root him in the moment. They kept him from drifting.

The stamping around the ignition tab told him that the round had been made on Telemachus, in one of the secret forges owned by the Clade Vindicare. Tooled to within a tolerance of micrometers to fit the rifle and no other weapon, the round was fresh - only one Solar year old - when it had been issued to him. The mass was even, and finely distributed. The bullet head, a dense armour-piercing round with a discarding sabot and a frangible kill-core, had been spun into existence in a gravity-null manufactory chamber.

Perfect. Flawless. *Ready*. It only required a murder to make it bloom.

Kell calculated the transition time across the abyss, from the moment Horus would show his face to the instant that the trigger would be pulled, and on to the time of impact. He would have to put the shot directly through the Warmaster's eye - he favoured the right one, but either would suffice - in order to have the best chance of killing the Luna Wolf lord outright. Once the shot pierced the ocular surface, it would begin a process of fragmentation down to the nanometre level. Tiny slivers of fractal-edged shrapnel would dissipate into a sphere of miniature daggers, each moving at supersonic velocity. They would cause a concussion wave that would shred even post-human flesh, fracture even the iron-dense bones of a war god. He estimated that with a perfect hit, there was a one in seven chance of an outright kill. The probability went down as other variables

were factored in, but catastrophic brain damage without true death was still within his mission success criteria.

Anything less would be classed as a task failure.

All this predicated upon a target standing still, without a helmet or benefit of meta-energy barriers. *A target unlike any other. A target. ..A being of a kind that has never been killed by the hands of a normal human.*

'Impossible.'

Did Kell say that aloud, or did the breaths of air whisper it in his ear? It was hard to be sure. He often forgot what his own voice sounded like.

Could a man kill a primarch? Could a mortal slay a demigod? Part of Kell wanted to find out if it was possible; another part ran screaming at the audacity of that suggestion. In the beginning, with his great and towering hubris, the Assassin had thought it a task he could achieve.

But after all that had happened, Kell's mind was changed. There were doubts. That was why it had to be done. *To be sure.* To silence the whispers.

Vindicare.

High Gothic, Old Terran origin (pre-Strife, approximate). Present active infinitive of 'vindico'.

Compound word, from elements: 'vindex - meaning a protector or defender; 'dico' - meaning 'to say'.

Meanings (Multiple): To protect. To deliver or spare or liberate. To claim or to vindicate. To avenge or to punish.

HE DRANK FROM the broken water canteen, the flat taste of the filtered fluid dead and empty in his mouth. Kell remembered wine, suddenly and brilliantly, the memory like a flare in the dark caverns of his mind. He glared at the bottle. The purifier was clogged with particles, and he shook it out. Had the deckhand Letae brought the filter to him, or had he just found a spare at the bottom of his torn pack? Either was possible.

Then the questions went away as he heard sirens lowing across the canyon.

It was not an illusion, no. There were small flying drones moving around over there, eagle-mecha hybrids probing the gloom with pin-beam search arrays. What were they looking for?

Kell could only guess at the *Vengeful Spirit's* moods, but he was certain that the ship was ill-tempered this day. He had been here long enough - and how long was that? - to sense when something was awry.

They were at battle. Somewhere up above, hundreds of decks away in his strategium, the Warmaster and captains of the Sons of Horus were engaged in the business of killing. Kell felt this more than he knew it, but by now he had given in to instinct over intellect. He had allowed himself to be the feral and reactive animal, the patient hunter-beast more than the man who would plot and wait and wait and plot. He had no interest in what participants the distant battle would encompass. Those thoughts were vague ideas, abstract and brittle in form. All Kell wanted was for Horus to come to him.

And that *would* happen. He had seen it in the dream-vision. It had already taken place, in some other skein of time and possibility. That was what the whispers told him.

'Eristede!'

He whirled around as a crack-throated voice called his name and Kell saw the crewman running across the metal deck towards him. His face was bloody from a cut upon his cheek, and he was in the throes of panic.

Kell swore and shot a look back across the iron canyon. Some of the machine-birds paused in their dipping and swirling paths and looked his way. The fool's shout might have reached them.

Not for the first time, he wished that the camo-cloak still worked properly. At full capacity, he could have dropped to the deck and shrouded, and to the eyes of the drones he would have looked like nothing more than a nub of cold steel protruding from the gantries. But now, ripped and ragged, it could only make him visually indistinct. He could not use it to hide from short-range scrying, or from vision in thermal, ultra-violet or magnetosonic ranges.

He ran to Letae, gesturing sharply for him to find cover. 'Silent, you fool. Be silent! Don't you see them coming?'

The crewman scrambled clumsily into the lee of a heat exchanger. 'I had to come warn you, Master Kell.' The man's face looked different close at hand. The witch-mark tattoo seemed more detailed than before, becoming scarification more than ink. The lines of it were raised against his flesh, and reddened with blood-flow. Letae was more gaunt than he recalled, too - eyes sunken, hollow of cheek. Even his trickling vitae seemed less potent. It was watery, like crimson ink.

The menial didn't notice Kell's fixated attention. 'There are intruders aboard the ship,' he gushed, talking without taking pause for breath. 'It is said, a force of warriors sent by the Sigillite himself!' It surprised Kell that the mention of Lord Malcador's title actually made him flinch. He could not parse the strange

reaction, and so he ignored it.

'Are they here for Horus?'

'Of course!' Letae's expression became one of surprise and confusion, as if the answer to that question was obvious. 'What other reason could there be?'

Kell had his hands on the man now, and he was shaking him violently. 'How many of them? Where are they? *Tell me!*' The crewman's hands came up to fend off the Assassin's sudden assault. 'No one knows! That's why the monitors are searching the ship, they're looking for them! Don't you see? If these legionaries kill him, then we're free-'

'No! *No!*' Kell shouted at him. Behind, steel feathers buzzed in the sticky air as the machine-birds rode the thermals across the abyss towards them, probing and scanning.

But Kell wasn't thinking of them at that moment. What occupied him totally was the chance that the fate he had glimpsed would not come to pass. *It could not happen.* Horus would not be killed by some rogue agents sent by that thrice-accursed psyker! The vision had promised that Kell would have his chance to slay the monster.

'You are hurting me,' gasped Letae, eyes brimming with tears. 'Please, let me go. Before the monitors see us-'

But that was a fruitless wish on his part. A pair of machine-birds fell from the smoky dimness over their heads with tungsten talons bared, ready to snare them both. Fans of emerald laser light washed over the deck around them, termination trackers finding the two men as clearly as if they had been naked upon a landscape of pure snowfall.

The monitors dived, each emitting a metallic shriek. Kell pushed Letae away and the act saved the man's life, although that had not been the Assassin's intention. Letae's bare throat missed being sliced open by slashing claws, the passage of them so close that he felt the air being cut in their wake.

The second machine-bird was diving for Kell's eyes to gouge them out and open the meat of his face. He dimly regretted leaving his spy mask in the hide. The Assassin hardly ever wore the thing anymore.

He went low and spun out of the old cloak's clasp at his neck, making the material flare out into a half-circle of shadow. The mechanical misjudged and tried to arrest its dive, turning it into a swooping bank, but Kell was ready. He snapped the cloak back around and caught the machine-bird in its folds, smothering the avian drone before it could power away back into the air. He snared it inside the cloak, swinging it around by the thick hem of the old battle

garment, and smashed it into the deck. Without hesitation, Kell ran forward and stamped on the writhing, squawking shape under the black cloth, vicious and wild with each blow from his boots. He killed it in short order.

The second bird was harrying poor Letae, cutting and swatting him with the blade-tip edges of its wings. It reacted to the death of its mate by abruptly ignoring the deckhand and turned all of its raptor's ire upon Kell. A winged lance of metal, plastek and animal flesh bolted through the air towards him, and the Assassin snarled as he came to meet it.

Kell had the crude knife in his fist as the thing went for his throat, and he rolled with the impact as it raked its claws over his chest. Screaming with anger and pain, Kell cut his free hand to ribbons as he used it to grab hold of the machine-bird's body. His other hand came up in a blur and he stabbed the drone through its torso, over and over, causing processing fluids to spurt in arcs across the iron deck plates. He kept stabbing until he was sure it was dead, and by then his hands were a ruin of cut meat, black oil and thick blood.

Letae recoiled from Kell as he took a shuddering step towards him. The crewman was so full of fear, he realised. It coloured everything about him - it was the air in his lungs, the water to his lips. Kell felt a writhing, sickly disgust at the other man's very existence, as if each indrawn breath that the menial took was somehow an insult.

The Assassin did not question where this bile had come from. That did not occur to him. Instead he shouted at Letae, shouted at him until the other man ran away.

'Go, you pathetic mongrel! I do not want to look upon you, do you understand me? Take your words and go away!' He spat onto the slick deck. 'If you come back, if you show your face here again and it is not with word that *Horus yet lives...*' Kell's words rose to a crescendo, 'then I will gun you down where you stand!'

Letae fled, seemingly unable to believe that he had not died here, and in the wake of his echoing footfalls Kell slumped to the floor and looked at his ruined hands.

With slow, agonised motions, he dragged the dead cloak to him and began to cut it into uneven strips that could be wrapped around his palms and fingers. As Kell did this, he strained to listen for the whispering of the *Vengeful Spirit*, for some fraction of knowledge that the monster was still alive, and that Malcador's men had failed...

And that thought made him smile. The Sigillite too could taste the bitter wine

of disappointment.

The greatest weapon in our arsenal is the oldest, the purest, the easiest to bring to hand. But by turns it is the hardest to master. Each killer must acknowledge a singular truth. You are not unique. You are not special. You are going to die and nothing will prevent that from happening. With this fact accepted and known, comprehend that you are the weapon, and that your unblunted cutting edge is sacrifice.

AND SO HE took aim, putting aside the bits of broken memory that accreted in his thoughts.

'Why are you doing this?' Letae cried. 'I have never told anyone about our meetings. I have always been loyal, like you! Always, even though they did such terrible things to me...' He crawled forward a step, seeing the pistol and stopping, thinking better of it. 'You... You made me stronger, Master Kell. I knew that if you were down here all these years, I could resist them too. And it has been so hard...'

Years? Kell was shocked by the revelation. That could not be right. It was only days since the guncutter *Ultio* had fled Dagonet, no more than weeks at the longest. How could it be years?

The Assassin shook his head. He would have remembered that. It had to be a lie. The whispers would have told him otherwise. He bared his teeth in a wild grimace. 'You know, don't you?'

Letae shook his head, confusion in those watery eyes again. 'I know... What I have seen... That Horus is alive...'

'*Not that!*' Kell bellowed at him. 'The whispers told me about the Warmaster! That's not what I mean, and you know it!'

'Wh-whispers...?' Now Letae was looking at him as if he were spouting the ravings of a madman. Couldn't the deckhand see? Did he not understand?

Kell came closer and pointed his Exitus pistol at the man's heaving chest.

Letae raised his hands in submission. 'I beg you, please do not do this. I don't know what you are talking about. You're speaking in riddles! I thought it was just your isolation down here, but you're-'

'Tell me who it is!' Kell demanded, ignoring the man's entreaty and gesturing sharply at the dank air. 'The whispers keep talking, they won't leave me to sleep. They told me what I have to do with *you!*' He shoved Letae with the barrel of the pistol, forcing him up and out on to the gantry. Below them, the cables sang as

the endless trains of coolant wagons went back and forth.

Letae looked up at him, imploring. 'It was too much for you, wasn't it? That's the truth. I see now. This place...' He nodded at the wall. 'The *Spirit* broke you.'

'*Tell me!*' He was screaming it, heedless of any chance that he might be overheard by some distant aura-scanner. 'I want the one who whispers to me! Where is he?' His hand was sweaty where he clasped the gun, and he kneaded the grip, squeezing it until his knuckles were white.

The deckhand shouted back. 'I don't know.'

'*Tell me who Samus is!*'

He did not recall where the name sprang from. It felt alien on his lips, as if forced up from his throat by something he could not control.

But it was a moot point. In his fury, Kell lost focus for a moment and his finger twitched. Even as the last word was leaving his lips, the Exitus pistol accidentally went off and a ragged-edged wound burst open in Letae's belly. Blood, bone and intestinal matter made a wet slick where they were blasted out of the crewman's back and across the deck.

He had not meant to kill him - at least, not at that moment. But now it was done, just as the voices had told him that it would be.

With a shaky sigh, Kell gathered up the corpse and set to work on it with the knife. Into the dead man's torso he carved a single word, making the cuts deep and clear.

The word was *LUPERCAL*.

As a final flourish to the deed, he fished out the golden aquila charm that had belonged to his forgotten sister. It was tarnished now, the lustre dulled, the spread wings of the icon scratched and pitted. He fastened it around Letae's skinny neck and dragged the body to the edge of the iron cliff.

Time passed. He waited until the right transit, for the correct cargo wagon to pass beneath. When it did, Kell pitched the corpse out so that it fell true. Letae landed on the head of the cable-car, sprawled there like a broken doll, and the wagon carried him away in the direction of the far-off dais. It would not take long for the dead man to be discovered.

The spilling of blood. In retrospect, it seemed obvious to Kell. That was the way of things now aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*, and within the ranks of those who defied the Emperor. It made sense that the lure should be baited in such a way.

Kell remembered the mythical stories he had read as a child, fanciful tales of how monsters could only be summoned from their netherworld realms by a ritual shedding of vitae. *Sacrifice*, he recalled, *was also a weapon.*

He returned to the hide, holstering the pistol along the way. Once in his concealment, he unfurled the old cloth and breathed gently upon his sniper rifle, bringing the weapon to life.

The rifle's one and only round slid silently into the open breech, and Kell settled in to wait for what he knew was certain to happen. He waited, and eventually the whispers returned.

Feel no pity. That emotion is a corrosive, tormented and acid thing that can hollow out purpose and righteousness. Do not pity the target for whatever path has put them before your gun, no matter how misguided or tragic. And do not pity yourself for the acts you are asked to commit in the name of righteousness. It weakens you, and when the time comes, it will make you hesitate.

AND AT LAST, the Warmaster was in his sights.

He has stood there. He will stand there.

It seemed as if Kell blinked his eyes, and it was so. Through the circular window of the telescopic sight, surrounded by a halo of projected windage measurements, rangefindings and atmospheric data, he was suddenly there.

How much time had elapsed, or how long he had waited... None of that mattered any more.

Horus Lupercal, the Emperor's fallen son and the lord of this vessel. Kell did not have the words to describe the titanic being before him - an immense presence that seemed to radiate out across the distance towards the Assassin, pouring through the scope's eyepiece and in danger of overwhelming him.

How was that possible? His will became frozen and, curse his weakness, he actually hesitated. Kell had never known such a thing in all his time as a killer in the Clade's name.

That time seemed very far away, though, and this - what was happening in the moment - was so close and so real and so very, very powerful.

Horus stood considering the corpse of Letae, where it had been deposited at his feet. The huge man-shape assembled out of iron and armour was nodding, as though he had expected to see what lay before him. He was reading the letters of his honorific etched upon dead flesh. He was holding a tiny golden thing between the armoured tips of his thumb and forefinger.

Kell's weapon told him that it was ready to fire and the scope dialled in the last few notches until the Warmaster's eye filled the image. Kell knew that the gun was shaking in his hands, but the Exitus rifle's stabilizers amended the tremors.

He took a breath, released half of it.

Horus turned and looked directly at him.

Kell's will broke and he ran screaming, but only inside the halls of his own tortured thoughts. Out in the domain of flesh, he completed the act by muscle-memory alone, and at last he pulled the trigger.

The Warmaster smiled as he plucked the bullet from the air, as delicately as if it were a butterfly alighting on his hand.

flawless
ephemeral
execute
immortal
clarity
loyal
dissent
punish
sacrifice
pity
truth

The whispers became a roar - a shouting, wordless hurricane that tore at Kell's ears. He bolted to his feet, feeling giddy, the air about him turning dense and syrupy. He moved like he was underwater, dragged backward by ghost-force and thickening streamers of time. The remnants of the cloak, now little more than a cowl, fell away from his shoulders and spun out into the void beyond the iron cliffs. He lost the rifle, the spindly weapon suddenly becoming dead weight in his ruined hands. It clattered to the deck, the sound of its landing upon the metal plates abruptly lost in a concussion of displaced smoke.

Light of a dirty amber hue washed over the hide and the gantry, briefly dazzling the Assassin. It drew his gaze towards its source, like gravity exerting its pull upon a planet.

Everything seemed *golden*. The dead metal, the corroded iron, it all glowed under a blooming shroud of illumination. Too late, Kell understood that it was not the brass dais he had seen in the poison-dream.

It is here. It has always been here!

A leviathan moved into view as the light faded, and the Assassin turned as a great shadow fell across him.

He has stood there. He will stand there.

Magnificent and malignant, a figure that was swathed in darkness but also

luminous and brilliant towered high above him. He saw a face that no sculptor could ever have hoped to capture, an aspect that could have been handsome but now was marbled by cruelty. An immense clawed hand clacked and flexed, extending one single adamantium talon to point at him.

'You are Eristede Kell,' said Horus. 'You ought to be dead.' He dropped the spent shot from the sniper rifle at his feet. 'Why are you here, Assassin?'

'I am here to slay a monster,' he managed.

'As am I,' rumbled the Warmaster, and a shadow of something bleak crossed his face. Around him stood a halo of legionaries, each resplendent in armour detailed with arcane runes and fearful fetishes. None of the others moved, no weapons were drawn. They stood back to give their lord room to do as he wished.

Horus came forward, absently snapping the discarded rifle in two beneath the tread of his huge ceramite boot. 'Make no mistake this time. It is I.'

Kell nodded stiffly, remembering the warrior he had shot dead on Dagonet. *Luc Sedirae, Captain of the 13th Company of the Sons of Horus*. He had been so certain that his target was the Warmaster himself, so eager to end Horus's life and the insurrection with one shot, just as he had on a hundred other worlds. But this was not that kind of war. He had been a fool to believe that it was.

Horus beckoned Kell with the claw. 'Do it, then. Take your final chance to end me, mortal.' He tipped back his neck, exposing a patch of his bare throat. 'Here, I will help you.'

'How...!' It was a monumental effort for Kell to force every word out of his mouth. 'How do you know my name?'

'Many voices whisper to me,' smiled the demigod. 'And I remember the names of all who have tried to stop my heart. It keeps me... humble.'

Kell's hand dropped to the butt of the Exitus pistol at his hip. The action was reflexive, even as he knew that it would be futile to follow it through to the end. But he could not stop himself - it was as if he were a player upon a stage, set on a path towards the story's end that he could not alter.

'I saw you...!' Kell managed. 'When the poison was in me... I saw *something*...' He shook his head. 'I don't know how.'

'This vessel belongs to me, Assassin. Iron and bone, body and soul.' Horus opened his claw to the air. 'I know everything that transpires on this ship. The *Spirit* speaks to me. I see with all her eyes.'

The *serpents*. Kell saw them again in his memories, felt the burning of their bites all over him, and shuddered.

'Blood summoned me.' The Warmaster inclined his head towards the distant dais where Letae's corpse still lay. 'I came to you, little man. Think how rare that is. *I came to you*. So the matter can be ended.'

Kell slowly drew his pistol. 'I've lost everything that mattered to me because of you.'

'Not so.' Horus gave a slight shake of his head, ignoring the weapon. 'I did not send you here. I did not force you to risk all on a mission that could only fail. The end of Terra and my father is inevitable, Kell. You see that, don't you? Perhaps only now, at the end? *He* was the one who sent you here. *He* sent you to perish, and for what?' For a moment, the Warmaster seemed genuinely sorrowful at the waste of it.

Kell wanted to cry out in despair, a sudden surge of powerful emotion burning in his chest as the great warrior's words touched a truth buried deep inside him. He struggled to keep it silent. Horus looked at him and saw it, though - saw through him as if he were glass.

'My father's Sigillite wretch dispatched your execution force, and others since. I have turned them all away. Assassins are a tool of the weak. Are you no better than that, Eristede Kell?'

His control melted away, and Kell screamed at the top of his lungs, putting every last fraction of his energy into bringing the pistol to bear. He squeezed the trigger over and over, putting explosive Infer-nus rounds in a spread across the Warmaster's chest. Horus turned his face away, shielding it with one armoured gauntlet, but made no other move.

He weathered the brief, shrieking firestorm, and when the wicked flames dissipated there was nothing to show that his armour had taken even the lightest kiss from the Exitus pistol's discharges.

Kell's heart sank and he waited to die.

Horus came to him, and still the Warmaster's warriors did not move even a fraction to give reprisal for this attack upon their liege-lord. The primarch took the spent weapon from Kell's hand with surprising gentleness, and loomed over him. 'You see?'

'I see,' Kell managed, swallowing a sob. *I am broken*, he told himself. *Useless and defeated*. 'I beseech you, lord. End it swiftly.' He heard the echo of poor Lartae's words beneath his own.

But when the killing blow did not fall, Kell looked up and saw Horus watching him intently. 'Do you know what you are?' asked the Warmaster. 'Have you ever wondered how many threads of possibility pass through you? Think, man. Think

about how many destinies have been changed by your gun. That is something that has power.' The cold steel talon rose to touch lightly upon Kell's chest. 'In this world and the next, there is a nexus of fates surrounding you. Millions of lives changed in the wake of your assassin's bullet. That trails behind you, yet you are forever blind to it.'

Kell blinked back tears. 'What... What do you want from me?'

Horus studied him. 'Tell me what you want.'

Before, Kell might have said that he wanted an end to the pain, to the terrifying questions he asked of his own sanity, his fractured memories. But he knew that there would be no solution to that. He was broken beyond mending. There was only one place for him to find peace now.

'I want to have clarity again.' He looked at the pistol in Horus's hand, small and childlike by scale. 'To be the weapon. Machine cold and focused.' Saying the words was an act of both liberation and of betrayal.

'I will grant that,' Horus told him. He looked down at the Exitus pistol he had taken from Kell. 'You don't need this. I will see you are awarded something better.' With a flick of his wrist he tossed the spent gun away, then gestured to Kell. 'Give me your hand, murderer.'

Kell presented his ripped palm and the Warmaster took it. The long icy talon came down and cut a shape in agony across his scarred flesh. Darkness bloomed there, inky and smoking. Slowly, painfully, Horus drew the same arcane octed design that Kell had glimpsed on the walls of the *Vengeful Spirit*. He felt the mark sinking into him, resonating out and repeating all through his bone and meat, replicating like a virus. The Assassin was being changed by the act in ways beyond his understanding.

The searing, soul-rending pain brought him almost to the edge of heart-cess, but then it mercifully ebbed away and Kell was breathing hard, chilly and rough-edged gasps coming thick and fast.

'Now then,' said Horus, releasing him and stepping back. 'We shall see what the weapon can do.'

When Kell looked back down at his hand there was a gun in it, something alien and menacing, something unhallowed.

A pistol, made of glass and blood and hatred.

If you are ever in doubt, look to your weapon and see the words inscribed upon it. Know them and know you are certain. This singular truth will never alter.

The outcome justifies the deed.

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