


THE HORUS HERESY®

Chris Wraight

THE SIGILLITE



Malcador tasks his Chosen warriors with a mission to preserve the soul of mankind

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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.

**The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.**

THE SIGILLITE

Chris Wraight

Khalid Hassan sat in the antechamber, trying not to sweat, trying not to allow his hands to shake, trying to not do anything that would bring any more dishonour to his rank and regiment. He forced himself to remain still, his back against the polished marble wall. His palms pressed down onto the fabric of his ceremonial dress trousers. The high, stiff collar prickled at his neck, irritating his freshly shaved skin.

He felt ludicrous – cleaned and trimmed and starched, like a living meal to be served in some unholy banquet.

He drew in deep, regular breaths.

‘This is absurd,’ he muttered. ‘I was not wound this tight on the mission itself.’

He forced himself to go through the motions, to assess the current scenario, to run through the options.

‘Keep it together.’

The antechamber was large, just one of a series of opulent rooms he’d passed through in sequence. He had been accompanied inside by a man in a black shift and velvet shoes who had padded silently like a cat. The man had said nothing, just stared at Hassan with inscrutable, heavy-lidded eyes. He’d left him alone in the final room with a slight bow, withdrawing as sleekly as he’d arrived, closing two bronze-panelled doors with a quiet click of locks. Another pair of identical doors stood shut on the facing wall.

According to the gold-chased chrono on the mantelpiece opposite, Hassan had sat alone for seven minutes. It had felt more like an eternity.

At least the surroundings were comfortable. The air was cool and clear, filtered through shuttered windows. Hassan could hear the languid gurgle of a fountain in the courtyard outside. A low table stood in the centre, upon which rested a silver ewer, a towel and a single cut crystal glass that glinted in the soft light.

Hassan had not touched it. He had sat in the same starched position since being

shown to his place by the feline steward. He had watched the play of sunlight through the shutters, smelled the floral aroma of the wood and the fabrics, listened to the quiet play of the fountain.

He had seen it. Even if this was the last thing he saw, he had still seen it. How many men could say the same?

He had seen the vision of the immortal Emperor, the handiwork of a thousand architects, the defensive masterpiece of the primarch Rogal Dorn. Viewed from the incoming lander it had been astonishing, magnificent – a sprawling fantasy of stone, adamantium, granite and gold. Defence towers jostled with observatories and terraced gardens; missile batteries and slotted bunkers thrust up tightly amid pillared libraries; burnished monuments to the pride and ambition of mankind, all picked out under the azure sky of the Himalazian peaks.

Now, lost in the heart of its vastness, listening to the calming trickle of water, he could run through the events of the past few days.

Captain Khalid Hassan of the Fourth Clandestine Orta, the most decorated of the serving officers of his regiment, a man who had loved his work so completely that he had had no life and no family outside of it, contemplated, with a certain fatality, the failure that had brought him to the Imperial Palace.

The air was hot and thick with dust. His armour – black carapace plates, full-face helm with opaque visor and rebreather tubes, environment spine-pack with internal pressure control – was coated with it. His filters were losing efficiency, and he could hear the echo of his own heavy breathing in his earpiece.

Ahead of him, blurry through night vision, he could see the compound rearing up into the dust-thick darkness. It was ugly, squat, heavy – a defensible bastion in the Gyptian style. A few lights blinked and flickered in the gloom; otherwise, it was shadowy and sullen, surrounded by a solid perimeter wall broad enough for men to walk upon it in pairs.

Hassan lay low, feeling the hardscrabble of the desert fringes press into his armour. He rested his elbows on the ridge before him. Tiny magnocular lenses slipped down the inside curve of his helm visor and whirred into focus. He moved his head fractionally, sweeping across the walls. Each visible detail was recorded and cross-referenced with the internal schematic held in his suit's cogitator core.

Las-turret, two metres out of position. Corrected. Sentries visible, moving along perimeter boundary. They haven't seen us.

He suppressed a smile.

And they won't.

He heard Farouk squirm up alongside him, his body low and pressed into the dust.

‘Just say the word, captain,’ said Farouk.

‘Everyone in position?’ asked Hassan, completing the sweep.

‘All ready to go.’

Hassan uploaded the revised tactical overlays to the squad. Fifteen acknowledgement sigils scrolled down his helm display. He switched to an overhead schematic showing the positions of his men – they were located around the perimeter in five-man squads, each still in cover. Two of the three teams were on the far side of the compound from Hassan’s position, poised to attack the air defence tower and the atmospheric shield generators. Their sensor-resistant armour would keep all of them hidden. Until they broke inside, they would be all but invisible.

‘So what are we doing here, captain?’ asked Farouk.

Hassan smiled dryly. ‘Now? You ask me now?’

‘You’re not going to tell me.’

Hassan shook his head. ‘You know how it is.’

All of them knew how it was. That was the point of the Clandestine brigades: restricted orders, special taskings, operations outside the Imperial chain of command. Farouk chafed at it the most, but then he’d come from a regular Army regiment and was used to a less furtive way of war.

As for this mission, Hassan knew little enough himself. The orders had been shunted into the regiment core six days ago under heavy security cover. His men had re-routed from a routine sweep of the Collovis Hives. Ever since the insurrection had begun, subversive activity had been endemic in the bigger population hubs. Hassan had even heard chatter over the grid about rogue legionaries staging a prison break. He didn’t believe that one. There were always fanciful stories about those armour-clad superhumans; more, since the news of the Warmaster’s madness had filtered out.

In any case, Hassan didn’t place much faith in the Space Marines. They had a reputation, sure, but he doubted half of what was said about them could be true. The Imperium had been built by *mortal* men and woman, billions upon billions of them, toiling towards a future free from the horrors of Old Night. Genhanced monsters had no place there – they were brutal, clumsy tools and their time would pass.

Which left the way clear for more subtle weapons.

He checked his chronometer.

‘Move,’ he ordered across the vox.

Still out of visual range, all he saw of the two other teams were their marker runes moving silently across his visor display.

Farouk stayed motionless. Behind him, the rest of his own squad remained in cover.

Hassan felt his pulse quicken as he counted down the seconds.

‘Let’s go.’

He pushed himself up, keeping his body low as he jogged out into the open. He heard the soft footfalls of his men close behind him. They broke clear of the ridge and swept across the open ground leading to the walls.

As they ran, the earth was suddenly rocked by a series of hard, sharp explosions from the far side of the compound. The night sky flared up, red and angry. Arc-lights burst into life, joined by the strained blare of intruder alarms.

The sentries on the wall ahead of them disappeared from the parapet edges, drawn by the detonations at the opposite edge of the facility.

Hassan reached the base of the wall and prepared the grapnels.

‘Too easy,’ said Farouk, joining him and taking aim.

‘So far,’ agreed Hassan, squinting as he pulled the trigger. The rope sailed up, clamping fast and pulling tight, and he began to climb.

Soon all five of them had reached the summit and they swung over the lip of the parapet. They took up their weapons – projectile rifles, as sleek, black and finely tooled as everything they carried. By the time the sentries spotted them it was too late – precise kill-shots flashed in the night.

More explosions rang out from the compound below. A shower of yellow sparks erupted in the distance, making the air smell briefly sulphurous.

‘First generator’s out,’ remarked Farouk.

Hassan grunted. Farouk was a good soldier, but his tactical commentaries quickly grew tiresome. ‘Let’s just concentrate on our tasking, shall we?’ he said.

‘Whatever you say.’

The expanse of the compound spread out below – a loose collection of hangars and rockcrete bunkers, all of which were ugly, dark and scoured by wind-driven sand. Fires had broken out amongst those on the far edge, sparked by the incendiaries planted by the two other teams. Hassan could see the silhouettes of guards crossing the open spaces, their movements hurried and ill-directed. They were still trying to reinforce the northern wall, over where the evidence of

infiltration had been made most obvious.

So far, so good.

‘That’s the target,’ said Hassan, moving along the parapet and gesturing to one of the bunkers below. It was a nondescript building, just one of a dozen that were of a similar size and shape.

‘Ugly thing,’ observed Farouk.

‘It’ll be uglier in a minute,’ said Hassan. ‘Keep it quiet.’

One by one they rappelled to the ground. They kept low, running semi-hunched. Three more guards fell before they reached their destination, dropped by single rounds. When they reached the shelter of the bunker entrance they crouched down, as inconspicuous as shadows.

The bunker’s blast doors were sealed and barred. Hassan clamped six hyperacid capsules along the join, then retreated and blew the charges. The thick metal doors dissolved in a steaming, foaming cloud. Hassan heard a cluster of short-lived screams as the guards on the other side inhaled the toxic mix of dissolving plasteel and airborne chem-droplets – otherwise, the breach was almost silent, masked by the continuing explosions and gunfire running along the northern wall.

All that remained afterwards was a steaming, jagged void, its steel edges melted into stretched teardrops.

Hassan got to his feet. The bunker interior beckoned, ink-black and smelling of molten flesh and metal.

‘Now we enter,’ he said, and slipped inside.

‘Now you enter,’ came the voice, as soft and sibilant as he’d imagined it would be.

Hassan stirred out of his memories. He couldn’t see the speaker. He guessed it was the same man who’d shown him into the antechamber.

He looked up, seeing that the second set of doors had opened. He hadn’t noticed them unlock; the mechanism must have been extraordinarily smooth.

He rose awkwardly. He could feel patches of sweat under his arms and around his collar, and hoped they didn’t show. His limbs felt stiff, as though he’d forgotten how to walk and needed reminding.

Once through the doors, he passed into a vast sunlit chamber. One entire wall was given over to a long unbroken expanse of glass. Circling mountains broke up the horizon beyond, glittering white in the sunlight.

The floor was polished parquet. Eclectic items of furniture dotted the cavernous

interior – a Louis Canz armoire stood next to a Unity-era 'lith projector, overlooked by a series of Hjuort oils and a cabinet containing priceless Ming and Wejwood ceramics.

It reminded him of a magpie's nest. A collector's den. Ostentatious, given the circumstances.

Hassan was alone. The room was silent. The doors closed behind him, moving together as quietly and elegantly as they had opened.

For a moment he stood still, listening to the sound of his own breathing, wondering if the things he saw around him were even real. *Perhaps this was a test.* Perhaps he was being shown one final glimpse of glory before the end.

Hassan knew they could have pronounced their judgement at any time. He had already given them all the information he could. He had been most careful about it, making sure the details were correct. Even in his failure he had not stinted nor tried to excuse himself. That had always been his way: honesty, even in disgrace. Such, of course, were the values of the Imperium, the basis upon which his loyalty had always been commanded.

Time passed. No one else entered the room. Hassan began to lose his sense of slow foreboding. He walked over to the windows, standing close to the glass and resting his fingertips against it.

The vista spread out before him – a dizzying sweep across the Palace's western marches.

So much gold. So much of everything.

Vertiginous battlements plunged like cataracts into thickets of bone-thin towers. Colossal buttresses soared up from the bones of the mountains, massive and eternal. Even Lord Dorn's heavy alterations along the outer walls hadn't obliterated all of the Palace's old and innate beauty.

Gazing over such vastness, it was hard not to feel strangely insignificant. The walls had already stood for centuries. They would endure for centuries more – a beacon of splendour amidst an expanding empire of mortal exaltation.

'I liked it better before Rogal really got to work.'

The voice came out of nowhere. Hassan spun around, scanning across the chamber.

He was still alone. The voice seemed to rise from the air around him, echoing from the panels and sinking into the fabric of the woven rugs.

It was a strange voice. Mournful in tone, rich in timbre, cracked by age.

'I do not see you, lord,' replied Hassan, feeling stiff and stupid.

'No, not yet. I cannot be in all places at once. We may save some time this way.'

Does it unsettle you?’

Of course it did.

‘Not at all.’

‘Good. Then keep looking at the view. Remember it. With every passing day it will get a little uglier, a little more worn. Just like us, eh?’

Hassan turned back to the window. He wondered whether the speaker could see him. He assumed that he could, though one could never be sure. Throwing a voice was trivially easy. Such theatrics, as he well knew, were all part of the process.

‘You are not a man given to levity,’ came the voice again. *‘That is what the reports all say – serious-minded, diligent. I can sense that in you myself. You are the embodiment of everything the Emperor aspires to instil in humanity. He would admire you, I think, were He here with us.’*

The voice did not sound disdainful. Hassan could hear harshness in it, a harshness bred from long ages of wearying command, but also other things – a grain of sympathy, mostly resignation.

It was all so very unexpected.

‘I have always endeavoured to serve,’ he said.

‘I know you have,’ came the voice. *‘I know you have. But now you are here, with me, in this place. What you have been in the past, what you have done in the past, this is the reckoning for it. Do you know who I am, Captain Khalid Hassan?’*

‘I think so, lord.’

‘I am the reckoner. I am the judge. I am the scrivener of the Imperium, the evaluator of its ocean of souls.’

Hassan couldn’t decide why he was being told this. Boastfulness? Possibly. It didn’t sound like boastfulness, though. It sounded almost like sarcasm – a dry, self-aware sarcasm.

‘I am the Sigillite. I am the Regent of Terra. At my command the fate of a million worlds is determined. And yet here I am, conversing with you as you look through my window and disapprove of my collections. Life is full of surprises, is it not?’

Hassan almost found himself nodding in agreement. ‘It is, lord,’ he said.

‘And you know why you are here?’

‘Because of what happened in Gyptus.’

‘That is right,’ came the voice. *‘Think back, Khalid. Think back to what you did there. I will be with you soon – when I come, I will wish to know everything.’*

The lights had blown. Hassan blink-adjusted the gain on his helm's night vision and progressed cautiously.

The bunker extended deep below ground level. A central corridor ran down the length of it – about fifty metres – from which smaller chambers branched off, each sealed by fresh sets of locked doors.

‘Getting anything?’ whispered Farouk over the comm. ‘No life signs here.’

‘Not yet,’ said Hassan, continuing ahead.

The squad inched down the central corridor. Hassan heard nothing but the dim sounds of battle from outside. The other squads were doing a good job of drawing attention away, but they only had a short time in which to operate.

He activated the proximity beacon on his palm-mounted auspex and saw, with some relief, the target locator rune flicker into being.

‘Third on the right,’ he said softly, motioning to a pair of slide-doors some thirty metres ahead.

Two of his troops remained in the bunker entrance, sunk in shadow, their weapons aimed to take out any intruders. Hassan, Farouk and the third operative slunk down the corridor. As Hassan edged forwards he caught a faint hiss, like machine static.

He paused. ‘You getting that?’ he asked.

Farouk looked at him. ‘Getting what?’

‘Nothing,’ said Hassan, pressing on. ‘Sensor glitch.’

They reached the chamber. It was locked and barred, just like the others.

‘Stand back,’ ordered Hassan, drawing fresh hyperacid capsules from his belt.

As he moved, he heard a dull thud, followed by a whoosh of stale air. He threw himself around, his gun held one-handed.

‘What in–’ he began, before seeing the motionless form of his squad-mate on the floor.

‘Target!’ shouted Farouk, opening fire with his rifle. A juddering hail of ice-bright bullets sprayed down the corridor, chinking and splintering from the metal walls.

Hassan joined in, firing into the darkness. The confined space erupted into a storm of gunshots.

‘Ceasefire!’ shouted Hassan.

The last echoes of the volley died. The bunker sank back into darkness. Wisps of smoke rose up from the ravaged floor.

Farouk slammed a fresh magazine into his rifle.

‘What was it?’ demanded Hassan, still seeing nothing on his proximity scan.

‘No idea,’ muttered Farouk. ‘Never got a proper look.’

Hassan glanced down at the downed operative’s body. A single slash had torn clean through his throat. Blood beneath him, thick and dark.

‘Captain?’ came an inquiry from the soldiers stationed at the entrance.

‘Stand by,’ ordered Hassan. ‘Hold position.’

His mind began to race, wondering how anything could have got so close without registering on his sensors. He reached up to his helm and depressed the release catch. ‘Remove your visor.’

‘What?’ asked Farouk, sounding tense. ‘That’s madness.’

‘Do it.’

Hassan’s helm slid open with a smooth hiss. He felt the hot, dusty air brush against his face. Deprived of his false-colour night vision everything was black. He still saw no sign of the thing that had attacked them. He felt vulnerable – nearly blind, stuck underground with something he couldn’t detect.

He heard Farouk’s visor open.

‘Great,’ said Farouk. ‘Now we’re blind.’

‘When all else fails,’ said Hassan, reaching for a low-burn flare and keying it for ignition, ‘use the eyes you were born with.’

He hurled the flare down the long corridor, hearing it bounce from the walls. The torch exploded into life, throwing a dull red bloom across the surfaces around it. In the brief burn-time, Hassan saw something dark and hunched about ten metres further down, pressed tight against the far wall. It was man-shaped and wearing some kind of sensor-reflective armour, veined with silver wires and nodes.

As soon as the flare went off, the figure leapt from the wall and tore towards them.

‘*Now* shoot!’ ordered Hassan.

The enemy bounded towards them, darting between the spitting lines of fire with uncanny speed. Farouk winged it, blasting through the armour on the left shoulder, but it kept coming.

‘Bring him down!’ shouted Hassan, falling back as he fired, aiming for the figure’s shifting outline.

Farouk screamed. Hassan saw steel talons flash in the darkness, ripping Farouk’s protective carapace as though it were made of paper.

‘Farouk!’ he shouted, swinging back in close, feeling his gun click empty.

The enemy stared right at him then, just for an instant, the masked face caught in the jagged flashes of muzzle discharge. Hassan saw red-rimmed eyes, dilated

from combat-stimms, shot deep in stretched skin.

He thrust the hyperacid capsule – still clutched in his left fist – into the man’s face, smashing it open before throwing himself clear.

The screams were unholy, a cacophony of animal shrieks and gurgling, throttled agony. The smell of charred flesh filled the corridor, accompanied by bloody splatters as the acid ate down to the man’s arteries.

Hassan scrambled away, grabbing hold of Farouk’s reeling body and hauling it clear. The enemy staggered away from them, clutching at his disintegrating face. Then he collapsed, twitching, his savaged head and neck steaming and popping.

Hassan got back to his knees, breathing heavily. The two operatives he’d left at the doors reached his position. They stared down at the twisted body of the enemy warrior, then at Farouk.

Farouk coughed, spraying blood against Hassan’s armour.

‘How bad?’ demanded Hassan, flipping his visor closed.

‘Significant,’ croaked Farouk.

Hassan felt the heavy weight of Farouk’s body in his arms. He wouldn’t do much more fighting.

‘We’re almost done,’ he said, lowering him carefully to the ground and moving over to the sealed doors. ‘Then we’re on our way out.’

Hassan primed a charge, clamped it and withdrew. The four of them shuffled back away from the doors, and the krak grenade went off with a sharp, focused report, blasting a jagged hole in the metal.

‘That’ll bring them running,’ Hassan said grimly, getting to his feet and heading for the broken entrance, reloading as he went. ‘Now let’s retrieve the target and get out before they catch us.’

Hassan didn’t notice the Sigillite enter the room. One moment he was alone, the next he was staring directly at a cowled old man clutching a staff.

He collected himself.

‘Forgive me for keeping you waiting, captain,’ said the old man. ‘Lord Dorn is well-meaning but has never mastered brevity.’

Hassan clasped his hands behind his back and stood straight. He could feel his pulse picking up, throbbing through the veins at his neck. Something about the man before him put him on edge. He felt an unaccountable urge to look away.

The Sigillite was slight. His stoop made him short, and his hands gripped his flickering staff as though for support. For all the man’s frailty, Hassan could sense the quiet power radiating from him, as deep and cold as a well-shaft.

He does not hide it. He could destroy everything around us with a gesture.

The Sigillite reached a bony hand up to his hood and pushed the fabric back. An old, old face emerged, deep-lined and ember-dry. Bones jutted under drawn flesh, stark like the profile of famishment. But his eyes were alive – deep, darting eyes that moved with an almost avian sharpness.

Those eyes held Hassan for a moment. He felt his mouth go dry.

Then the Sigillite released him. He walked over to a low couch and lowered himself down. His movements were halting, like one who had once been trained to the peak of physical perfection but had since been terribly wounded. It was a strangely affecting sight.

Malcador leaned back. His grey face smoothed by a fraction; his clenched features relaxed. He put the staff aside and his withered hands rested on his bony lap.

‘Sit.’

Hassan did as he was told, moving over to a leather armchair facing the couch. He felt his hands trembling.

‘Will you drink?’ asked Malcador, glancing at a carafe on the table between them. As soon as he mentioned it, Hassan felt a thirst kindle at the back of his throat.

‘No, thank you.’

Malcador poured himself a glass of what looked like wine. He brought the glass up to his hooked nose and let the aroma linger for a moment.

‘I remember when there were vines in Franc,’ he said. He took a sip, swirled it in his mouth, and swallowed. ‘So much easier now. It even tastes as good. Or does it? How would we know? Who now lives who walked the vineyards of old?’

He pursed his thin lips, pensive.

‘Some of us remember,’ he said. Then his eyes snapped up, as unwavering as a raptor’s. ‘What were you doing in Gyptus?’

Hassan swallowed. ‘Clandestine mission, lord. Orders received from the Palace, maximum secrecy, military priority. We were given coordinates, times, access to an Army lifter. Then we left.’

‘Was that all?’

‘I’d been given the location of a single bunker.’ Hassan paused. ‘I checked it, just as always. Right until the end, I thought we’d got it right.’

Malcador nodded. ‘Right until the end.’

Hassan felt his cheeks flush. The humiliation of it had still not left him.

‘Perhaps, if we’d known what we were looking for...’ he began, then trailed off.

‘But that would have defeated the point, would it not?’ said Malcador. ‘Knowledge is dangerous in your profession. It is dangerous in all professions. If it were up to me, knowledge would be strictly rationed. It would be doled out only to those capable of handling it – a dozen souls, no more. An infinite empire can be run by twelve good men, if only they remain true to their calling.’ His expression darkened. ‘Though that can never be guaranteed, can it? Even the strongest have their flaws. Such is the tragedy of our species.’

Hassan tried to listen, to keep up. Malcador’s mind seemed to roam freely, passing from matters at hand to far-off issues of galactic governance. Hassan began to wonder if the old man were entirely sane.

Unexpectedly, the Sigillite smiled then. Like all his gestures, it was a compromised movement, at once bitter and mirthful.

‘The Emperor and I have a debate,’ he said. ‘It has been running for a long time, and I miss our discussions now that He is gone. Such a powerful intellect. Blunt, but powerful. And, very occasionally, even a sense of humour – of a sort. Would you credit that?’

Hassan listened cautiously. He didn’t understand what Malcador meant when he said the Emperor was ‘gone’. He was not. Surely, He was not. Where would He have gone to? Hassan wanted to ask, but Malcador kept on talking, just as if the absence of the Master of Mankind from the eternal seat of power were a trivial thing, hardly worth lingering over.

‘This is our debate – He believes that the task of a ruler is to make himself obsolete, so that his people will replace him when they are mature enough. I disagree. I do not think we will ever be mature enough for that. I believe that no one but He will ever be strong enough to hold mankind together, even for a moment. He is quite exceptional, you know, perhaps in ways He doesn’t even understand Himself.’

Malcador looked sidelong at Hassan. His gaze was shrewd. ‘So what do you think, Khalid? Whom would you side with, Him or me?’

Hassan took a deep breath. He didn’t know whether to be flattered to be asked, or insulted.

‘Do not hesitate,’ warned the Sigillite. ‘Choose.’

‘I was going to say...’ began Hassan, haltingly. ‘I was going to say that the Emperor will lead us forever. That is what we are taught. What I believe.’

Malcador nodded. ‘Well said. You are with me, then. And you are right, of course – He has such high aspirations for our species. Too high, perhaps, for He

does not always appreciate His indispensability. But will He be around forever? That is the great question. That is the current test.'

The Sigillite brought his hands together, linking his fingertips. He seemed distracted.

'The war for the throne has already started,' he said. 'Even now I feel the eye of the Arch-traitor upon us, pressing against my mind like a cancer. I hear the voices of his brothers, fawning over him, plotting with him and against him. I remember how they were, each of them, in conception and in reality. I see them as they are now, and the withering of their souls pains my heart. They have unleashed forces they cannot control. They have been lied to, and not only by the enemy. It breaks me to witness it.'

Hassan didn't know whether to keep listening. It suddenly felt like he was intruding into some private grief.

'Do you know,' murmured the Sigillite, 'out of them all, if I could have saved just one, it would have been Lorgar? Even though he despises me, and even though I was... wounded by him. He was such a fragile soul, so subtle and ready to bruise. We might have handled him better. Did we make mistakes with some of them? Surely, we did. Though I fear the time to correct them has now long passed.'

Hassan watched, he waited. Little of what the Sigillite said made sense to him. He wondered if that was part of the ordeal or some convoluted means to catching him out. If so, it seemed so contrived, so unnecessary. Crueller than it needed to be.

The Sigillite looked up at him, a tolerant expression on his face. 'I can feel your mind wandering. You think these things have little to do with you. You are wrong. They have *everything* to do with you. They have everything to do with all of us.'

Hassan felt impatience rise within him. He wanted to be dutiful, but had no idea what his duty demanded.

'I do not know why I am here, lord,' he confessed.

'Not yet,' said Malcador, nodding. 'But you will.' He pulled himself to his feet again, hauling his staff into line. 'Follow me.'

Hassan rose. 'Where are we going?'

Malcador paused for a moment. 'To the catacombs,' he said. 'Where all this started. Prepare yourself – it's a long way down.'

It wasn't a long way down. Hassan leapt through the gap, landing hard on a dirty

rockcrete floor a metre below the shattered doorway. He swept his rifle around the space, ready to fire. As he did so, he heard the thud and gasp of Farouk landing beside him.

‘You’re up to this?’ he asked, surprised.

Farouk grunted. ‘You and me, just as always. Let’s get it done.’

The chamber was small – less than ten metres across, with a low ceiling and walls cut crudely from stone blocks. It was deserted, and smelled as musty as a tomb.

Only one item stood in the centre of the room: a cargo transit crate made of ribbed adamantium and bolted to an iron pallet. It wasn’t particularly large – two metres long, a metre tall and wide – but it was shielded by an energy field that made the air hum and sent lurid light dancing across the chamber.

‘Signals closing,’ reported Farouk.

‘How long have we got?’ asked Hassan, stowing his weapon and approaching the casket.

‘A minute. No more.’

Hassan shook his head. Not much time to work. ‘They’re quick to recover. Damn them.’

He retrieved four disruptor beacons from his armour cache and placed them carefully, one at each corner of the casket. Then he stood back, checking the alignment carefully before activating the interference wave.

The air seemed to shudder in front of him, rippling like broken water. He felt his stomach lurch uncomfortably. The energy field resisted for a moment, crackling and flexing, before giving out with a hard snap.

Hassan moved over to the crate and attached anti-grav plates, four to each side. The plates clamped on tight and flickered into life, blinking red in the shadows.

‘Air defences down yet?’ he asked as he worked, relying on Farouk to get updates from the other two squads.

‘Affirmative,’ said Farouk.

‘And site shielding?’ Hassan asked, fixing the final plate.

‘All down. Lifter’s clear to approach.’

Hassan glanced at his chronometer. It would still be close. ‘Call it in, then,’ he ordered.

He activated the anti-grav plates. The transit crate broke its shackles and rose from the ground, hovering at knee-height. It was heavy, and Hassan heard the labouring whine of the repulsor fields as they struggled to keep it aloft.

Farouk limped ahead, pulling himself awkwardly back up through the breach.

Two pairs of hands reached down to drag the crate through the gap. It rose upwards shakily, buoyed by the plates, and Hassan followed it.

Once regrouped in the corridor, the four of them moved quickly back through the bunker – Hassan leading, Farouk bringing up the rear and breathing heavily. The crate went between them, humming and growling like a surly bovine.

Hassan regarded the thick-plated cover. The container was the kind used in the holds of void-going craft – heavy, banded, designed to resist hard impacts.

‘It’s a weapon,’ said Farouk, reading his mind.

‘What did you expect?’ replied Hassan, pushing the pace. ‘We’re at war.’

‘They were trying to get it off-world. Must be worth something. We get out with this, and someone’s going to be very upset indeed.’

Hassan smiled, despite himself.

‘Keep your eyes locked on it,’ he said. ‘This casing gets hit, and Throne knows what’ll happen.’

They drew close to the acid-burned entrance.

‘We’re going to have to fight our way out, captain,’ said Farouk, looking over the auspex readings a final time.

‘Expected nothing less,’ Hassan replied calmly, checking the ammo counter on his weapon. He watched the familiar target locators swim across his helm display. ‘Pick your targets, and watch for the lifter.’

The four of them emerged from the melted blast doors and hunkered down in the wreckage. Hassan rested his gun barrel on a jutting spar of plasteel. The casket hovered alongside him, barely protected.

By now the whole compound was burning, lit up vividly by raging fires on all sides. Palls of thick smoke rose from the destroyed shield generator and anti-aircraft turrets. As Hassan swept his eyes across the scene, he could see members of the other two squads fighting their way to his position.

The sharp ping and snap of las-blasts cut up the ground around him – the enemy troops beginning to find their range. Hassan cursed, opening up in return fire, pressing his body closer to the bunker’s edge.

‘So then,’ murmured Farouk, aiming his rifle. ‘Where is it?’

Before Hassan could reply he heard the rumbling echo of heavy engines. The dust around him began to swirl, and he heard enemy troops on the walls shouting panicked warnings to one another.

‘Right on time,’ he said.

A second later, and the blocky silhouette of the Army lifter swept across the perimeter, churning up more smoke and sending it billowing away. Wing-

mounted guns opened fire, sweeping the exposed parapets clear of the remaining sentries and blasting the rockcrete edges into flying shards.

‘Go, go, go!’ roared Hassan, breaking clear of the bunker wreckage. Farouk staggered along with him, as did the hovering transit crate. The other squads leapt from cover and raced across the compound floor.

The lifter swung low over the ground, its four angled engines hammering the earth beneath them on a carpet of driving thrust. The main hatch swung down with a hiss of pistons, exposing a red-lit crew compartment within.

The guards responded, aiming their fire upwards at the hovering craft. Their las-blasts fizzed against the armour plates, some of them biting. The lifter rocked drunkenly, buffeted by the rain of small-arms fire, holding position only with difficulty.

‘Faster!’ shouted Hassan, watching his men sprint towards the waiting ramp.

He was last to make it, hauling the transit crate behind him, dragging it into the maw of the waiting cargo bay.

‘We’re taking hits,’ warned Farouk, wincing as he strapped himself in. His armour was still damp with blood.

‘Take us up!’ Hassan called over the vox to the lifter’s pilot, slamming home the last of the docking clamps.

The engines mounted in a crescendo of downdraught, pulling the gunship away and bearing it aloft. The embarkation ramp swung closed, sealing them in. Muffled noises of gunfire faded away, replaced by the dull thunder of the thrusters switching alignment. Hassan felt the lifter gathering speed, powering upwards and veering into the trajectory that would take it away from Gyptus and out of danger.

He leaned back against the walls of the crew compartment, breathing heavily. For a moment he did nothing else.

He looked around. Out of the original three squads, only nine men had made it out. The survivors wearily braced against the shuddering walls of the lifter as it climbed. None of them looked triumphant – the atmosphere was decidedly muted.

In the centre of the bay stood the object of the mission. The transit crate was undamaged. It hadn’t taken a single hit. It stood between the two ranks of men, dark and heavy like an outsized coffin. Lights strobed along its ridged surface. It looked almost belligerent.

Hassan staggered over to it.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Farouk, looking at him with alarm.

Hassan began to deactivate the locking mechanism.

‘We lost men for this,’ he said coldly. ‘I have a right to see what they died for.’

Hassan saw Imperial courtiers decked out in robes of vermillion and saffron-yellow, scholars with pale faces and work-curved spines, Tech-priests wearing golden facemasks with glowing clusters of green eyes. Each room had a different smell, a different sound, a different ambience. They were distillations of humanity, those rooms – variegated snapshots of what the species had become.

Hassan found them mesmerising. He wanted to linger, to study them, to ask what tasks they were engaged in.

Malcador seemed to read his mind. ‘Ignore them,’ he said. ‘They are ephemera compared to what I will show you.’

They kept walking. The lights and splendour faded away. Hassan and the Sigillite descended through levels, travelling down ancient elevator shafts in sleet-grey cages hung from chains the width of a man’s waist.

It got warmer. Uncomfortably so. Hassan began to have the sense of something vast and ancient pressing down upon him. He saw the ungilded roots of the mountain beneath the pooled light of bronze-rimmed lumens, dark with streaks of granite and feldspar.

‘When we reach our destination, remain close to me,’ warned the Sigillite. ‘While you are with me none will challenge you. Stray from my side and you will die. Do not be fooled by what you see. Not all the sentries down here are *visible*.’

Hassan said nothing, but nodded.

Eventually they reached the bottom, the very heart of the mountain. The cage ground to a halt and the doors slid open. A vaulted cavern stretched away from them, its floor smooth and polished like onyx, its vast emptiness broken by great pillars of hewn stone. It yawned away into the gloom of the underworld, as quiet and eerie as the upper levels had been bustling.

‘Immense,’ Hassan murmured to himself. ‘And under my feet the whole time. How could such a place be hidden? How many know of this?’

Only a few figures moved across the glassy floors: senior Mechanicum adepts in blood-red robes, silent stony-faced women wearing ornate suits of battle-armor and long fur-lined cloaks, towering sentinels clad in baroque plates of gold and carrying force-staves that hummed with fierce energies. These last were, he knew, the Legio Custodes – the Emperor’s own. Hassan found himself sweating again.

The Sigillite walked out across the cavern floor, the metal butt of his staff clanking as he moved. None of the others acknowledged him – they seemed preoccupied. Those whose faces were visible betrayed expressions of resolve. Some bore signs of extreme fatigue.

Hassan followed. The whole place was almost unbearably strange. An austere, murmuring vault of shadows locked away beneath the foundations of the world.

‘What is this place?’ Hassan whispered, finding it surprisingly hard to keep up with the old man’s pace.

‘The beginning,’ said the Sigillite. ‘And perhaps the end.’

They kept moving. Hassan saw branching tunnels leading off deeper into the mountain. Some were little more than man-sized doorways, some were gaping avenues large enough for a Titan to pass through. He smelled the acrid tang of incense and felt a seismic rumbling from far beneath his feet. Every so often the ground would shudder, as if rocked by distant quakes, though none of the silent figures around them seemed to react.

‘They are so subdued,’ said Hassan, not meaning to speak. His thoughts seemed to spill out of his mouth, as if eager to break the oppressive silence.

The Sigillite paused to consider that. His head tilted as he observed the figures around him. ‘How do you wish them to be?’ he asked at length. ‘They dwell in the forgotten halls of gods, but each has his task. They cannot pause to reflect. None of us can.’ He smiled thinly. ‘That, of course, may be the origin of all of this. We never had time to reflect. A fine epitaph, for an overbold species.’

He started to walk again, and Hassan hurried along in his wake.

At length, the Sigillite paused before an opening in the cavern wall. The smell of chemicals bled out of the gap. Twenty sigils had been carved over a low granite lintel, most only half visible in the shadows. Hassan made out a wolf’s head, a snake, an angel, and other more obscure devices. It looked like two of the symbols had been scratched out or had worn away.

The Sigillite studied them for a moment. His face was sombre.

‘That was where we planned them,’ he said. ‘The archives are still there – His notes, the first studies. Some of the early gene-banks might still be there too, for all I know. Left behind when we created the main facility. Sad, really.’

Hassan looked down the long tunnel. He couldn’t see far. ‘Is that where we’re going?’ he asked.

The Sigillite shook his head. His staff started to clank again. ‘No one goes there now.’

They kept moving. More archways passed by, each one sunk deep in the

cavern's permanent gloom. As the sheer scale of the underground realm became apparent, Hassan began to feel a strange sense of regret. The entire complex was evidently the work of many centuries, a subterranean city hidden from the eyes of the world and buried under miles of solid rock. So much of it was abandoned, left to moulder amid the echoes like the graves of ancient kings. So much else was unfinished.

Something had gone badly wrong.

Hassan wondered, where was the Emperor in all of this? Did He still tread these halls? The very thought of it sent cold shivers running down his back. For the first time Hassan began to wonder if worse things existed than civil war against a renegade Warmaster. If those things slumbered in semi-ruined chambers buried deep in Terra's crust, then he was not sure that he wished to uncover them.

'We are here,' said the Sigillite abruptly, stopping before a great iron-bound doorway. It was spiked and padlocked, like the entrance to some torture chamber of the age-shrouded past.

Hassan looked at it and barely suppressed a shudder. 'We're going in?' he asked, already knowing the answer.

'Not yet,' said Malcador. 'First, tell me how you failed.'

Hassan reached for the locking pins and pulled them back. Once the seals had been broken they withdrew easily.

Farouk and the others said nothing, but watched from around the shuddering edge of the lifter's crew compartment.

Hassan unclipped the final hooks and the lid shifted in his hands. The top plate ran the length of the crate – it was as thick as his hand. Hassan pushed his fingers under it and eased it up gently. As he did so, he smelled old dust sighing from the gap. A first twinge of unease ran through him.

He pushed the lid further back. A single bulky object lay within the crate, bound with what looked like hessian sacking.

He took a knife from his boot and started to cut. Even once he'd seen what was inside he kept cutting. He didn't stop until every scrap of sacking was peeled back and hacked away, just to make sure.

At the end, he stood straight, gazing down at his handiwork.

He felt sick, light-headed. He reached out to steady himself.

'What is it?' asked Farouk.

Hassan couldn't reply immediately. A sense of painful emptiness fell over him, choking off a response. When he did speak, his voice was strained.

‘*Nothing*,’ he said. ‘Nothing at all.’

Farouk unstrapped himself then and clambered over to the crate. He looked inside and saw what Hassan had seen.

‘Ah,’ he said.

Inside the crate was a huge hunk of rock, granite perhaps, just like the thousands that riddled the semi-desert around the compound, filthy with storm-blown grime and cracked along one edge. It filled most of the crate interior: heavy enough to be plausible, perhaps the weight of a dismantled Rapier platform. It was slightly tapered at one end, otherwise blocky and crude. It might once have been a building block, discarded among the rubble of some old demolition site and left to wear away in the desert wind.

Farouk didn’t say anything else for a long time. ‘They knew we were coming,’ he remarked eventually.

Hassan nodded. ‘Duped. From the beginning.’

‘We got the right bunker?’

‘We did.’

‘You sure?’ asked Farouk. ‘Perhaps—’

‘*We got the right bunker!*’ shouted Hassan.

Farouk shrunk back. No one else spoke. The lifter’s engines thudded away angrily.

‘So what are you going to do?’ asked Farouk.

Hassan drew in a long, weary breath. ‘What do you recommend?’ he asked sardonically. He looked over to the embarkation ramp. ‘I should cast it loose. Throw it out, send it back to the desert where it came from.’

His chin slumped against his chest.

‘Seriously?’ asked Farouk.

Hassan smiled grimly, and shook his head. ‘Don’t worry. We were told to bring it back, so we’ll do just that.’

‘There’ll be a reckoning for this,’ sighed Farouk.

Hassan leaned back against the cargo bay wall, feeling a powerful headache coming on. ‘Oh, I know that,’ he said. ‘But from who? Who ordered it?’

The lifter continued onwards, hastening them towards the consequences of failure.

‘I guess we’ll find out soon enough,’ he said.

‘A stone,’ said the Sigillite.

‘Yes, lord,’ said Hassan, feeling his cheeks flush. ‘They made fools of us.’

‘I see.’

The Sigillite turned back to the doorway. Locks clunked open. The great spiked door swung inwards, rasping on its hinges. Malcador raised a long, bony finger and a soft glow of lumen strips bloomed up from floor level.

‘Come,’ he said.

The chamber beyond was small in comparison to the others he’d seen – only a hundred metres in length, perhaps, with a low ceiling and rough, unfinished walls. Box-like cases stood at regular intervals. Each was a different size and shape, mounted on pedestals of marble. Some were as tall as he was, some were no larger than his fist. Every case was dark, glinting smoothly like cut crystal.

‘Before Unity, before Strife,’ said Malcador, moving between the cases like an old hunched ghost, ‘we built these walls. We built them to last. Only later did other men raise their spires around and above them, burying our secrets beneath their own.’ His voice was proud and wistful. ‘This is the last Repository of the Sigillites. We are watched by unsleeping guardians and ringed with ancient wards against ruin. Here are kept the most dangerous and powerful creations of our species. You should feel privileged, Khalid. Not many men have seen these things.’

As the Sigillite walked, he gestured to some of the cases. Their glass surfaces lit up, exposing the objects held within. Hassan caught glimpses of them as they passed by.

‘It still makes me proud, on occasion,’ the Sigillite went on. ‘The Palace is His, of course – it always has been. But it was built atop a much older structure. The cradle of my Order. These are the last foundations of the original fortress, preserved in the depths, a relic of another age. I remember it how it was, as so few now do. Only those who linger, who endure as the ages cycle by, but we are a scattered fraternity.’

Hassan saw a long curved sword engraved with flowing script. He saw books, their metal covers thick with the patina of ages, locked closed and bound with chains. He saw suits of armour hung from iron frames – some were of impossibly old design, plates of polished steel interleaved with linked-mesh chain. Others looked more modern, like the bulky, half-dismantled power armour of the Legiones Astartes.

The Sigillite paused before one in particular. ‘The very first,’ he said, thoughtfully. ‘Such a simple principle, compared to those that came later. But so very effective.’

Hassan let his eyes wander across the other cases. ‘These are weapons,’ he said.

‘Tools of war.’

‘Some of them.’ Malcador started walking again, heading towards the far end of the chamber. ‘A species is defined by many things. As it lives, as it grows, it creates artefacts. It passes its genius into those things. They become a part of its soul, a living record of its psyche. We create. We fashion, we mould, we make. That is the essence of us, what sets us apart from the beasts, who cannot, and the gods, who do not deign to.’

The Sigillite gestured to a smaller cabinet on his left. It contained one of the chamber’s many books.

‘There was a time when that book governed the lives of trillions,’ he said. ‘None read it now, but its power still remains, locked deep in our unwaking minds. I have studied it many times. Were it not so dangerous, I would recommend you do the same.’ He smiled in the dark. ‘*All is vanity, saith the preacher.* Perhaps the greatest truth of all.’

Malcador finally halted before another large, square case. It was as tall as he was, though wider, and remained unlit and opaque.

‘If the Palace above us were destroyed, how much would be lost?’ he asked. ‘Many palaces have come and gone, many wars have been fought. But *these* things, they are the treasures of our kind. Without them, we are like children lost in the night. Cast adrift. Truly homeless.’

The casket before them blossomed into illumination, revealing its contents.

The stone from Gyptus stood there, but it had changed. The dust had been cleaned from it, leaving a smooth, polished sheen. Hassan could see words and glyphs on the flat surface, hundreds of them, all engraved in tight, dense lines.

‘Not a weapon,’ he said, finally understanding.

‘No, not a weapon,’ said the Sigillite. ‘They do not aim to destroy only our fortresses and our starships. They aim to destroy the things that make us what we are. They seek out every accomplishment and marker of success and throw them down, erasing the past, plunging us into forgetfulness.’ He gazed at the stone. ‘I am the custodian of such things. Dorn is more than capable of marshalling our physical defences – my task is the preservation of our species’ soul.’

Hassan drew closer to the glass. He could make out pictographic shapes near the top of the stone face, some of them similar to the ones he’d seen over the empty lintel.

‘What does it say?’ he asked.

The Sigillite smiled. ‘It is the record of an ancient conquest. Some ironies have been waiting for us for millennia.’ Malcador ran his fingertip along a line of text,

reading out loud. *‘The Manifest God protects all those who are subject to his kingship – he being a god, the son of a god and a goddess, like Horus, son of Isis and Osiris, who protects his father. Like Horus, who protects his father. Appropriate, no?’*

Hassan couldn’t raise a smile. ‘Then this was what you intended.’

The Sigillite nodded. ‘You did what was asked of you. This thing is what the ancients called the Rosetta Stone. I wished to have it. The enemy wished to have it. Your actions gave us one small victory to set against a tide of defeat. Worth having, I think, despite the cost.’

Hassan narrowed his eyes. ‘Why did they want it?’ he asked.

‘It is a symbol. It stands for the recovery of lost knowledge, for the continuity of civilisations. If they had taken it then they would have destroyed it. A trivial loss, you might think, set against the deaths of billions to come, but I would have felt it.’ Malcador’s eyes never left the stone. They shone wetly in the dark, as if some great emotion pressed against his soul. ‘When this is over, should we be victorious, we will have need of these things. We shall remember the tools of enlightenment so we will never forget how close we skirted the barbarity of despotism. I will see to it. That shall be my task, as it has ever been my task – to keep us from *forgetting*.’

He turned to Hassan.

‘For what would we gain,’ asked the Sigillite, ‘should we win the war and yet lose sight of why we fought it? *Enlightenment*, Khalid. Progress. Ascension into something better. That is what we are struggling to preserve.’

Hassan turned his head away, looking back over the collection of objects. ‘You still have not told me what I am doing here,’ he said.

‘No, not yet,’ said the Sigillite, moving back towards the chamber entrance. ‘Come, I have one more thing to show you.’

As they walked, the subterranean rumblings Hassan had heard earlier grew in frequency. It felt at times as if the entire floor were trembling, taut and fragile like a drumskin.

‘What *is* that?’ Hassan asked.

The Sigillite paused. ‘I told you,’ he said. ‘The war has started. You are close to the heart of it. You have heard myths of the Emperor being absent, that He has forgotten His people. It is not so. He will never forget. But He cannot withdraw, not now that the seal is broken.’

He pressed his lips together, his expression hardening.

‘In truth I have not yet learned to blame Horus,’ he said. ‘Until I see him again, changed by the powers that have consumed him, I may not be able to. But I do blame Magnus. Of all of them, he should have known better. We had so many hopes for Magnus.’ He shook his head bitterly and kept on walking. ‘So many hopes indeed.’

They went deeper, passing down spiral stairways cut from the living rock. The air began to smell of burning metal. They passed more of the Custodes, some of whom bore scorch-marks and deep rents on their glittering armour. The walls themselves trembled.

Eventually they entered another grand chamber, one that eclipsed all those that had come before. It soared up into the eternal darkness, lost in shadow. Massive censers hung on iron chains, their pans glowing with red coals and pungent with incense. More Custodians had gathered there, alongside the silent female warriors.

None of them held Hassan’s attention. He stared up at the central feature of the distant far wall: a pair of massive golden doors, each the height of a Warlord Titan, each covered in a dazzling tapestry of astrological and mythic icons, overlapping and interwoven in a riot of gilt imagery – a great panoply of serpents, wolves and angels.

The thunderous impacts came from beyond the doors. At times it seemed as if they were barely holding, despite their colossal size.

Hassan shrank back. The scale of what was taking place on the other side cowed him.

‘This is the outermost edge,’ said the Sigillite. ‘A dozen such doors stand between you and the horror, and still you feel it.’

‘*I cannot go in there,*’ Hassan whispered.

‘No, you cannot,’ said Malcador. His voice had become softer, imbued with a deep, primordial sadness. His withered face gazed up at the doors, and his eyes shone in the dark. ‘Even I cannot. These doors will not open until the end.’

Hassan couldn’t look away. The noises on the far side were horrific. He thought he caught echoes of unearthly screaming – the strangled discharge of terrible, inhuman energies.

‘No weapon you could have brought me would compare to those used in there,’ said the Sigillite. ‘No war has ever been more savage, and yet its existence will never be known. Whatever horrors are destined to take place in the material universe pale in comparison. You stand upon the threshold, captain. This is to be the true battle for the soul of humanity.’

Hassan tried to master himself. ‘And is... *He* in there?’

‘He is.’

Hassan shrank back. The thought, the very *idea*, of anything surviving in that unseen maelstrom seemed impossible. His imagination failed him. It was too immense to process.

‘You will never have to go through those doors, Khalid,’ said the Sigillite. ‘I only show you them so that you will understand.’

After a while, he turned away. Hassan followed him closely.

‘For now, I too remain on *this* side,’ said the Sigillite, ‘undertaking all that must be undertaken to preserve our species’ legacy. But a time will come when I must put these things away and make a choice. When that time comes, others will take on my work. So let me tell you why I really brought you here.’

The Sigillite looked at Hassan. His gaze was almost painful in its intensity.

‘I collect individuals as well as stones,’ he said. ‘I collect souls of integrity, capable of rebuilding what will surely be lost. Some are warriors, some masters of psychic potential, some merely mortals. They will all be needed. They are to be my Chosen, the kernel of greater things to come. I require disciples of the Repository, acolytes to guard the treasures when I cannot. I need souls to guard the flames of Enlightenment and fight the onset of ignorance. The eternal chain must not be broken, even if I am.’ The Sigillite stopped walking. ‘Will you join me, Khalid? Will you join this brotherhood?’

When the question came, Hassan surprised himself. He did not hesitate. Suddenly, it felt right, as if the question had been waiting for him all his life.

‘It is my duty,’ he said. ‘I will do whatever you command.’

‘It is not an order, captain. Orders are for Warmasters and primarchs. I merely create possibilities. But I am glad.’

Malcador made as if to move away again, but Hassan stayed where he was.

‘Forgive me,’ he said, looking back over his shoulder to where the golden doors stood and trembled. ‘You said you had to make a choice. Might I... Can I ask—’

‘What it is?’ The Sigillite smiled, though the gesture was a bitter one, as if reflecting on a lifetime of squandered promise. ‘We all have our fears, Khalid,’ he added quietly.

Hassan gazed then at the man’s aged face. For the first time he did not feel the aura of tremendous power, nor the weight of arcane wisdom.

He saw frailty. He saw dread.

The Sigillite took a deep breath. ‘But nothing is certain. Hope remains. Hope always remains.’

Then he moved away, striding back into the catacombs, the butt of his staff clicking against the stone.

Hassan watched him go – the Regent of Terra, the master of the Imperium’s countless billions, and the hand of the Emperor’s vengeance.

And at that moment, to him at least, the Sigillite resembled none of those things. He seemed then to Khalid Hassan – formerly of the Fourth Clandestine Orta, now the Chosen of Malcador – nothing more than an old man, worn out by an eternity of service, stumbling into the dark.

Hassan felt a momentary stab of pity. Then he stirred himself, hurrying after the Sigillite, not looking back towards the sealed gateway into hell but heading up instead towards the gilded terraces of the Imperial Palace.

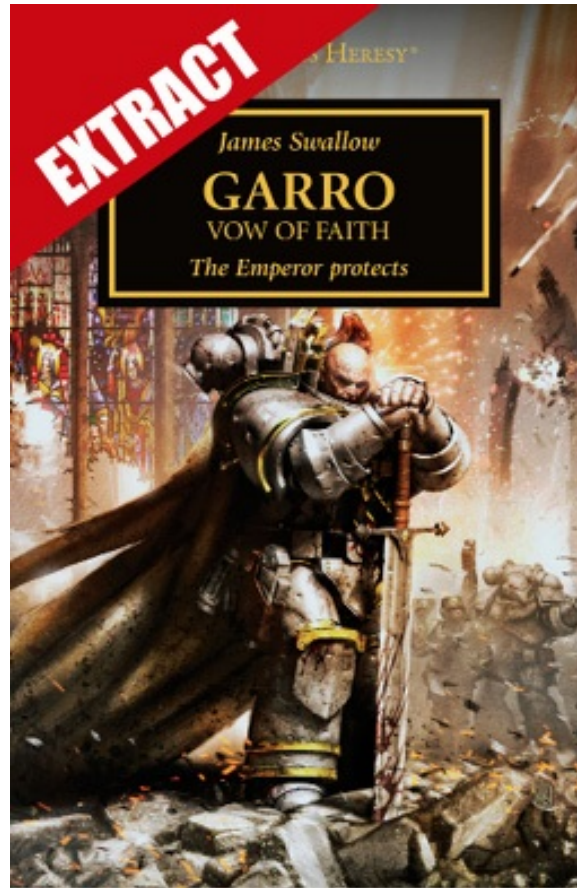
Up there it would be possible to forget the fractured screaming of the terrible battle that raged in the depths.

Up there, for a time at least, the sun still shone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Scars*, the novella *Brotherhood of the Storm* and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *Battle of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England. Legend Award.

An extract from [*Garro: Vow of Faith*](#).



As he waited for the dawn glow to rise higher, the man turned in a slow circle and passed the time reading the history in the landscape around him. Some of it he gathered from his own instincts, more he took from flashes of mnemon-implants fed into his brain by the hypnogoges, long before he had come to Terra.

The forest of tall, mutated fir trees filled a valley that had once been a bay bordered by city sprawls now long-dead and lost. The iron-hard trunks, grey-green like ancient jade, ranged away in all directions beyond the clearing where he had landed the cargo lighter. He could see former islands that were now stubby mesas protruding from the valley floor, even pick out the distant shapes of old buildings swallowed by the tree line. But to the east, the clearest of the decrepit monuments to the dead city were the towers of a long-vanished highway bridge. Only the twisted remains of two narrow gates remained, rust-chewed and thousands of years old. Beyond them, in the time before the Fall of Night, there had been a great ocean; now, the strange forest petered out and became the endless desert of the Mendocine Plains.

The bleakness of that thought was somehow comforting. *Entropy is eternal*, it said. *Whatever we do today, it will matter not in centuries to come. Forests anew will rise and engulf all deeds.*

He turned and walked back to the lighter. The snow on the ground hissed beneath his footfalls as he came around to the drop ramp at the rear, open like a fallen drawbridge. Inside the flyer's otherwise empty hold, a man in a maintenance worker's oversuit looked up at his approach and pulled listlessly at the magnetic cuff tethering him to a support frame. The two of them were similarly dressed, alike in average height and nondescript aspect, but the chained man's face was swollen and florid.

'Haln,' he began, his words emerging in puffs of vapour, 'Look, comrade, this has gone far enough! I'm freezing my balls off—'

His real name was not Haln, but it was who he was today. He stepped in and punched the worker in the face three times to stop him talking. Then, while the man was dazed and reeling, Haln released the mag-cuff and used it to lead his captive out of the lighter. He chanced a look up into the cloudy sky. *Not long now.*

The worker tried to speak, but all that came out was a wet, breathy noise.

Perhaps he had thought they were friends. Perhaps the fiction that was Haln had been so good that the worker bought its reality without question. People usually did. Haln was a well-trained, highly accomplished liar.

He wanted to strike the worker again, but it was important that the man not bleed, not yet. With his free hand, Haln pulled a metallic spider from one of the deep pockets of his overcoat and clamped it around the worker's throat. His captive whimpered and then cried out in pain as the neurodendrite probes that were the spider's legs entered his flesh, and found their way through meat and bone to nerve clusters and brain tissue.

Haln released him, but not before giving the worker another item – an Imperial soldier's battle knife. It was old, blackened by disuse and corrosion. There were stories in it, but they would not be heard today.

The worker accepted the blade, wide-eyed and confused. Wondering why he had been handed a weapon.

Haln didn't give him time to think too long about it. He pulled back the sleeve of his coat to reveal a control panel with hologlyph keys, secured around his wrist. Haln placed the fingers of his other hand on the panel and slid them around, feeling for the right position. In synchrony, the worker cried out and began a sudden, spastic series of motions. The spider device accepted the signals from the control and made him a puppet. He staggered back and forth as Haln got a sense of the range of motion. He began to weep, and through coughing sobs, the worker begged for his life.

Haln ignored his slurred entreaties, walking him away into the middle of the large clearing where the chem-stained snow was still virgin. When he was satisfied, Haln looked again at the oncoming dawn and nodded once.

Highlighting two glyphs made the worker bring the old knife to his throat and draw it across. Manipulating other symbols forced his legs to work, walking him around in a perfect circle as blood jetted from the widening wound. Haln watched the spurts of crimson form jagged, steaming lines in the snowfall. Each wet red axis pointed away to the horizon.

Eventually, the cut killed the worker and he dropped, sprawled across the mark

of his own making. Haln felt a change in the air, a grotesquely familiar acidity that was alien and uncanny. It was good, he decided.

He saw the object before he heard it. A hole melted through the low clouds and a flickering meteoric form fell from the sky. A heartbeat later, a supersonic scream came with it – although he knew no-one else beyond the valley would hear it, walled in and smothered as it was by the magicks the spilled blood provided.

The object slammed into the earth with enough shock force to toss Haln back ten yards, and rock the cargo lighter on its landing skids. When he rose to his feet, Haln saw that a shallow pit had been dug by the impact, revealing black dirt beneath the bloodstained snow. The worker's corpse had been directly beneath the fall, the very point upon which it was targeted – and if any of the man now remained, it was only shreds and rags.

In the pit was a capsule not unlike those used to eject the bodies of the dead into stars for solar cremation. Hot and sizzling, it creaked and shuddered as something moved inside. Haln looked up again and saw the hole in the cloud sealing up once more. He allowed himself a moment to wonder where the pod had come from – dropped by a ship from orbit, dragged from the immaterium itself, conjured out of a dream? – and then forgot his own question. It wasn't important. Only the mission mattered.

Heat seared him, even through his heavy gloves, but Haln found the seam of the capsule and pulled on it. A wash of thick air dense with human smells assaulted him, and fingers of fire-burned flesh emerged through the widening gap. Then presently a hand, an arm, a torso. A figure stepped onto Terran soil – a tall man with unkempt hair, a hawkish face and haunted, wild eyes – and glared at him.

'It worked,' he growled. 'Each time, I think it will not. I shouldn't. Should not doubt.' The words he spoke were rough and scratchy. The new arrival's tone made Haln imagine a feral animal taught to walk upright and speak like a person.

Haln gestured at the pod interior. 'You need to kill your pathfinder, before it—'

The other man's dark eyes flashed. 'I know. I've done this before.' He hesitated. 'Haven't I?' He shook off his own question and reached into the capsule. With a wet tearing noise, he ripped a bulb of gelatinous, oily flesh from where it had been nestled in among the pod's inner workings. It writhed and squealed, trying to squirm out of his grip.

Haln was going to offer the man another of his many knives with which to finish the task, but when he looked back the new arrival had a pistol in his fist.

Haln had not seen him draw it, had not even seen a holster for the gun. Even the weapon itself seemed strange – he didn't really see it, it was more like he saw the impression of it. Something murderous and accursed made of chromed parts moving with no mechanical logic; or was it assembled out of glassy crystal and ruby-red liquid? He had no time to really understand, because it fired and his vision went purple with the afterimage.

Even the proscribed mech-enhancements of Haln's vision didn't stop the retina burn, and he blinked furiously. After a moment, his sight returned and there was only grey ash where the pathfinder-thing had been. The pistol had vanished.

He said nothing of it. These things, these moments of not-understanding, they were not new to Haln. He kept himself above them by remembering – once again – the mission, the mission, always the mission.

'Were you briefed?' said the man. His manner shifted like the winds. Now he was cold and professional.

'A basic summary. I am to provide operational support for the duration of your assignment,' he replied. 'My name is Haln, for the interim.'

'How long have you served Horus?'

Haln hesitated, glancing around. Even here in the deep wilds, far from the nearest settlement, he was reluctant to speak the Warmaster's name aloud. 'Longer than I have been aware,' he said, at length. A more honest answer to that question would be lengthy and complex.

That seemed to amuse the other man. 'Truth in that,' he allowed, and started for the cargo lighter. 'There are several avenues to follow but only one target. You'll help me locate it.'

Haln nodded and reached inside his coat for a melta grenade, priming the timer and radius so it would obliterate all trace of the pod and the sacrifice. 'As you wish,' he told the assassin.

Half a world away, a sky of artificial night made the wastes of Albia seem like a sketch in charcoal and slate. Miles above the ground, the aertropolis of Kolob cast a massive shadow as it floated on a ring of colossal antigravs, causing microclimate veils of hard, cold rain to race across the stony hillsides.

The warrior had been walking for the better part of a day. His Stormbird had climbed away and left him on a twisted crag somewhere in the northern sinks, just as ordered. He climbed down and started on a southerly path, his pace careful and the solid clanks and hisses of his power armour a steady metronome. He walked, waiting for the great emptiness of the landscape to clear his

thoughts. It had not happened yet.

This place was home to him, or it would have been if that word held any true meaning for the legionary. His past was a gossamer thing, faint and ephemeral, so delicate that he wondered if looking too closely upon it would make it fade forever. The memories of the time before he took on oath and armour in service to the Imperium of Man were strange to him. In many ways, they were a fiction he had been told more than a chain of events he had actually experienced.

Had he ever really been the ragged youth that lurked in his deep recollection? The one that was sallow of face and always cold? If he reached for it, if he dug in and tried hard, he could pull some fragments back to the surface. Sensations, mostly. Pieces so small and dislocated that they hardly deserved to be thought of as memories. *Warmth in the embrace of a parent. The sight of shooting stars crossing the sky. A lake of captured sunlight, as gold as coin.*

Those events were centuries old. The outlines of the faces he saw there belonged to people long since dead and turned to dust, their voices lost to him. Wiped away by the bio-programming and hardwiring of his brain that made him a superlative warrior. Like all of his kind, the forgetting was required to reforge him into what he had become.

These grains of his old self were all that remained, trapped in the cracks of his newer nature, the one carved out of the body he was born in and built anew with implants, techno-organs and powerful genetic modifications. He carried a special, quiet apprehension that one day he would look for these grains and they would be gone. The legionary knew brothers like that, who had lost whatever had made them human.

He looked up into the sky, watching the orbital plate's slow progress, thinking of those men. Some of them were like him, holding on to the threads of their better selves in silent desperation, but more – far too many more – had willingly opened their hands and let go of any ties to Terra, to the past, to who they had once been.

Once, he would not have had the words to describe these events, but ever since the insurrection, he did. He thought of his battle-brothers as having given up their *souls*, if there were such a thing.

The warrior halted at the edge of a crumbling ridge, surrounding a vast pit that resembled a volcanic caldera. There had been a city here long ago, assembled atop a network of tunnels and caverns, but wars had washed over it and torn it away. Remnants of the ancient caves were visible down there, laid bare by forces that had shredded mountains. He knew this place, the spectre of it trapped in one

of the memory-pieces. Perhaps he had lived in the shanty-towns that clustered down along the walls of the pit, or ventured from one of the hive towers in the far distance. He did not know. The content of the memory was gone, only its empty vessel capable of bringing him to this place.

Another hard pulse of rain lashed over him, and he glimpsed his own flickering reflection in an elongated puddle. A hulking shape in ghost-grey wargear, face hidden behind a beaked, cold-eyed battle helm. A cuirass about his shoulders with golden detail, rendered dull and lifeless by the bleak sky. A great sword in the scabbard on his back, a master-crafted bolter clamped to his hip.

He reached up and removed the helmet, mag-locking it to a thigh plate, taking a breath of damp air laced with heavy pollutants. He met his own gaze on the water's surface.

The Knight Errant Nathaniel Garro looked back at himself, measuring the scars that were the map of his war record. He felt old and empty, a sensation that had been banished from him for a long while but now returned in full effect. The last time he had experienced such a thing, it had been as the madness unfolded over Isstvan V. As he stood aboard the frigate *Eisenstein* and slowly came to the shattering conclusion that his legion had betrayed him. As the Warmaster Horus' rebellion had been birthed before him, the very personal treachery of his brethren and his primarch Lord Mortarion hollowed him out.

Perhaps, if he had been without courage and honour, Garro might have faltered in that moment, might never have recovered from what he witnessed. But instead, he found a new kind of strength. Emboldened by the singular truth laid bare before him – that of his unswerving loyalty to Terra and the Emperor of Mankind – Garro defied the traitors and set upon a flight into danger, racing back to the Solar System with word of warning.

Had he been without focus, Garro's future and that of the refugees he brought with him might have ended with that deed. But his loyalty found reward, of a sort. The Emperor's right hand, the great psyker and Regent of Terra Malcador the Sigillite, took the reins of Garro's purpose. The former Battle-Captain of the Death Guard became Agentia Primus of the Sigillite's clandestine task force. He became a Knight Errant, legionless but charged with great deeds.

Or so he had believed. After years of working to Malcador's byzantine orders, recruiting others like himself, chasing down Horus' spies, secretly crisscrossing the stars beneath the shroud of a tormented galaxy, Garro's certainty of purpose became clouded. More and more, he was coming to believe that fate had spared him at Isstvan for something larger than just the Sigillite's enigmatic designs.

Already he had openly challenged Malcador's commands, in the Somnus Citadel on Luna and in the halls of an unfinished fortress on distant Titan. How long would it be before he spoke his doubts aloud and in the fullest? Garro could not hold to silence forever. It simply was not in his character.

His craggy face twisted in a scowl, annoyance flaring. He had been foolish to come here. Some sentimental part of his spirit hoped that walking these lands would take him to a calmer place, where he could quiet his uncertainties and find a measure of peace. But that was not happening, and he knew it would never come. He resented the lack of answers, the directionless unawareness that pushed and pulled at him whenever his thoughts should have been at rest. More than anything, he wanted to come to a place of tranquillity and in it, find understanding. Garro was a legionary, a soldier born to duty, but the one before him was not *right*. It was not *enough*.

Everyone in the galaxy had been changed by Horus' sedition, if they knew it or not. Garro knew with great clarity how *he* had been altered. Something had broken free inside him as his Legion's sworn oaths had blackened and disintegrated. He was more than just a weapon of war, to be directed at a target and told to fight or perish. A heavier mantle had fallen upon him, a champion's duty.

Have faith, Nathaniel. You are of purpose.

The words echoed in his thoughts. The woman Keeler, she had opened his mind to that truth. She understood. Perhaps for Garro to understand too, he would need to find her again and—

On the wet breeze he sensed the stale odour of animals, and froze. Garro listened and picked out the footfalls of two quadrupeds, stalking him across the shale and mud. He turned his head and picked them out against the dark stone.

Lupenate forms, the pair of them. Predators evolved from the wolves that had once stalked the woodlands of this region, in the times before the trees had died off, never to return. Their large bodies were long and sinuous, their fur slick with secreted oils that sloughed off the toxic rains and made their thermal aspects harder to see. Arrow-shaped ears twitched and stiffened as they tracked Garro's smallest movement, while narrow eyes fixed him with a gelid, hungry gaze.

Normally, lupenates stayed away from the edges of human-habited zones, preferring to prey on the odd unwary traveller caught out alone. That a hunting pair had come so close to the shanty towns in the pit could only mean their life cycle was being disrupted as well as everyone else's on Terra. The global day-and-night preparations for Horus' inevitable invasion trickled down to even the

most insignificant of the planet's creatures.

Garro had drawn his sword without being aware of it. The power blade *Libertas*, his stalwart war companion for a hundred years and a thousand conflicts, could slice through tank armour when fully charged. His lip curled. These animals were not worth that expenditure of energy.

'Go!' he barked at them, planting the sword in the ground with its hilt facing the sky. Garro took a menacing step toward the predators. 'Be gone!'

But the lupenates were starving and agitated beyond rationality. They attacked, flashing forward in a glistening arc of motion. Both leapt at him, smelling his breath, claws and teeth aiming to gain purchase on the bare flesh of his face.

The legionary's arm blurred and he snatched the closest of the creatures from the air at the top of its arc, grabbing it by the throat. The second he batted away with the back of his gauntlet – he saw it crash into the rocks with a furious yelp.

The lupenate in his grip spat venom at him, missing his face but splattering on his chest plate. The droplets sizzled where they landed, scorching the slate-coloured armour. Garro's lips thinned and he threw the creature in the direction of the standing sword. His aim was true enough, and the blade so sharp even in its inactive state, that the force of the throw bifurcated the creature and sent its parts tumbling over the edge of the pit. He stalked across to the second, wounded animal and stamped down on its head, crushing its skull beneath his heavy ceramite boot before it could rise.

Grim-faced, Garro returned to recover *Libertas*. If he had believed in omens, the appearance of the lupenates would mean ill portent.

'A wolf,' said a careful voice, 'attacking out of blind hate and savagery. That reminds me of someone.'

Garro withdrew his sword and replaced it in the scabbard, noting that the rain had suddenly stopped. 'Horus is not a savage. Unless he needs to be.'

He turned and found *Malcador* studying the dead animal with mild disdain. Quite how the *Sigillite* was able to approach him without sound or signal, the legionary did not know. Garro had learned not to ask such questions, as there were never any answers that satisfied him.

'Was it necessary to kill them?' said the other man, rolling back the cloak that concealed his gaunt features. Pale, silver hair fell to his shoulders. 'The beasts have as much right to be here as you.'

'I gave them the chance to withdraw,' said the warrior. 'I would grant the same to any foe.'

'Honourable in all things.' *Malcador* gave a small shrug and looked away,

dismissing the moment.

Is he actually here, Garro wondered? I could be perceiving some fragment of him projected by a psyker's might... It was very possible that in all the times Garro had stood before the Sigillite, he had in fact *never* stood before him, at least not in the most literal sense. The Regent of Terra's psionic power was said to be second only to that of the Emperor himself, and the Emperor...

Divine was not a word that Garro would have used, but there were few others that could encompass the power of the Master of Mankind. If the Emperor were not a god, then he was as near to it as had ever existed. The image of a golden icon, of a two-headed aquila dancing on the end of a chain, flitted through his thoughts and he pushed it away.

The Sigillite looked toward him, as if he could smell the memory just as the wolf-things had caught Garro's scent. 'You have not found what you are looking for, Nathaniel,' he said. 'This has become troubling to me.'

'I perform my duties to your order,' said the legionary.

Malcador smiled. 'There's more to it than that. Don't deflect. I chose you to serve because of your honesty, your... simplicity. But as time passes, the clear view I have becomes more clouded.' The smile faded. 'Duty turns to burden. Obedience chafes and eventually becomes defiance. It was this way with the Luna Wolf.' He nodded toward the dead lupenate. 'I did not see it until it was too late. And so I am watchful for the same patterns now, closer to home.'

Garro stiffened. 'After I tallied all the things I lost in order to prove my allegiance,' he began, 'my legion, my brotherhood... I told myself that the next man who dared to suggest I was disloyal would bleed for it.'

'Ah, but your promise contains a fatal flaw,' Malcador replied, ignoring the threat. 'You begin from the assumption that loyalty is a fixed point, immutable once established...' The Sigillite broke off, and turned to look eastward, his eyes narrowing as if attracted by something only he could perceive. After a moment he turned away and continued, speaking as if nothing had happened. 'But it is a flag planted in sand, Nathaniel. It can and will drift under the action of outside forces you may never see, until you are challenged. You were loyal to Mortarion, until the moment you were not. You were loyal to the Warmaster, until you were not. You are loyal to me—'

'I am loyal to the Emperor,' Garro corrected him, 'and on my life, that flag will never fall.'

'I believe you,' said the Sigillite. 'But my point still stands. Your missions, the whole reason why I gave you the grey and my mark to carry...' He gestured to

Garro's armour, where the small icon of a stylized letter 'I' was barely visible. 'They have been obscured of late by other issues.'

Garro looked away. 'You speak of what I glimpsed on Saturn's moon.'

Malcador shook his head. 'It began long before you ventured to places that are outside your purview.' The Sigillite wandered to the edge of the pit and looked down, taking in the gloomy settlement far below. 'You went to the Riga orbital plate at your own bidding. You have been casting out feelers in the time between your missions, looking for something. Someone.'

Garro became very still. Of course Malcador knows, he told himself. How could I have believed he would not see the pattern?

'Yes,' continued the Sigillite. 'I am aware of the Lectitio Divinitatus and the believers who have read Lorgar's book.'

'Lord Aurelian? The Word Bearer...?' Garro's brow furrowed, unsure if he had heard Malcador correctly.

The Sigillite went on. 'I know they think of our Emperor as a living deity, despite all his words to the contrary.' He took a step back. 'And I know of the woman, Euphrati Keeler. The mere remembrancer who is now revered as a living saint.'

The question slipped out of Garro's mouth before he could stop himself from uttering it. 'Where is she?'

Malcador gave a rueful smile. 'Not *everything* is clear to me, Nathaniel. Even if that is the image I like to project. Some things...' The smile became brittle. 'Some places, even I cannot reach. As curious as that is.'

'But if you know of them, why do you allow the gatherings to go on unchecked?'

'There are so many, and more with each passing month.' The Sigillite opened his arms to the sky. 'But perhaps you have forgotten that we are embroiled in a war that threatens to consume the galaxy? There are many things of far greater import before me. They are not like the lodges that Horus used to suborn the legions. These believers are little more than groups of worried people drawing solace from the pages of a fanatic's scribblings.' He paused, thinking. 'That book proves my earlier point, when I spoke of malleable loyalty. Lorgar Aurelian was so very faithful when he wrote it. And look at him now.'

Garro nodded. 'I saw the XVII Legion before Ullanor, and then after Isstvan. Like day and night, they were – but still a commonality of mad zeal in each incarnation.' He paused, marshalling his words. 'But I am not a Word Bearer. I am not even a Death Guard any more. I am only the Emperor's sword, and that I

will remain until the day I die.’

‘I believe you,’ Malcador repeated. ‘But even the best of blades can become blunted and careworn if left untended. It is clear that you cannot function fully as my Agentia Primus while you remain distracted by other concerns.’ The Sigillite’s tone hardened, and Garro found himself unconsciously taking up a combat stance.

His war-implants flexed and came alive, as they would if he were about to engage a foe. The very real possibility that Malcador was going to end him sang through Garro’s nerves.

‘You are of no use to me if you are preoccupied. I need agents who are here, in the moment. I need weapons and tools, if I am to end the war before it blackens Terra’s skies.’

‘Speak plainly, then,’ Garro demanded. If the worst were to come, he would meet it head on; this was not the first time he had been ready for such an outcome.

Malcador sighed. ‘After much consideration, I have decided to grant you a leave of absence, of a sort.’ He gestured at the sky, the floating city still blotting out the weak sun above them. ‘Go and find your answers, Nathaniel. Wherever they may lie.’

It was the last thing Garro had expected from the Sigillite. Censure and reprimand, indeed... But not *permission*. ‘You would allow that?’

‘I spoke the words. I have granted it.’ Malcador eyed him. ‘But there are certain conditions. You will leave behind your wargear, your power armour, your weapons. And more importantly, you will go without the authority I have conferred upon you. In this, you will be only Nathaniel Garro, late of the Death Guard Legiones Astartes. Whatever you want, you will find it on your own.’

In the distance, Garro heard the sound of powerful engines on a fast approach. A dropship was coming in. The warrior reached for his sword and removed it, scabbard and all, from his armour. ‘I will not leave Libertas in the hands of another,’ he intoned. ‘All else, I agree to.’

‘And still you challenge me, even in this...’ Malcador folded his arms. ‘Very well. Keep the sword. Perhaps you will need it.’

A Thunderhawk in unadorned grey livery crested the far ridgeline and tore over the pit, slowing to a hover on jets of flame. It pivoted in place as the pilot looked for somewhere to set down. Garro had done nothing to summon the dropship, nor seen Malcador do likewise, and yet here it was.

‘They will take you where you want to go,’ said the Sigillite, his words carrying

over the howl of the engines. Garro raised a hand to shield his face as the Thunderhawk settled on the wide crag, the down-draft blasting a spray of rainwater up and about him. ‘But do not tarry. Horus is coming and we must be ready. I will array every servant of the Emperor in preparation to resist him, and you are counted in that number. Am I clear?’

Garro nodded as the Thunderhawk’s thrusters fell to an idling growl. ‘Aye,’ he replied, turning back to look at the Sigillite. ‘It is—’

He stood alone on the ridge, as the rain began to fall once again.

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