

THE HORUS HERESY®

John French
**GREY
ANGEL**

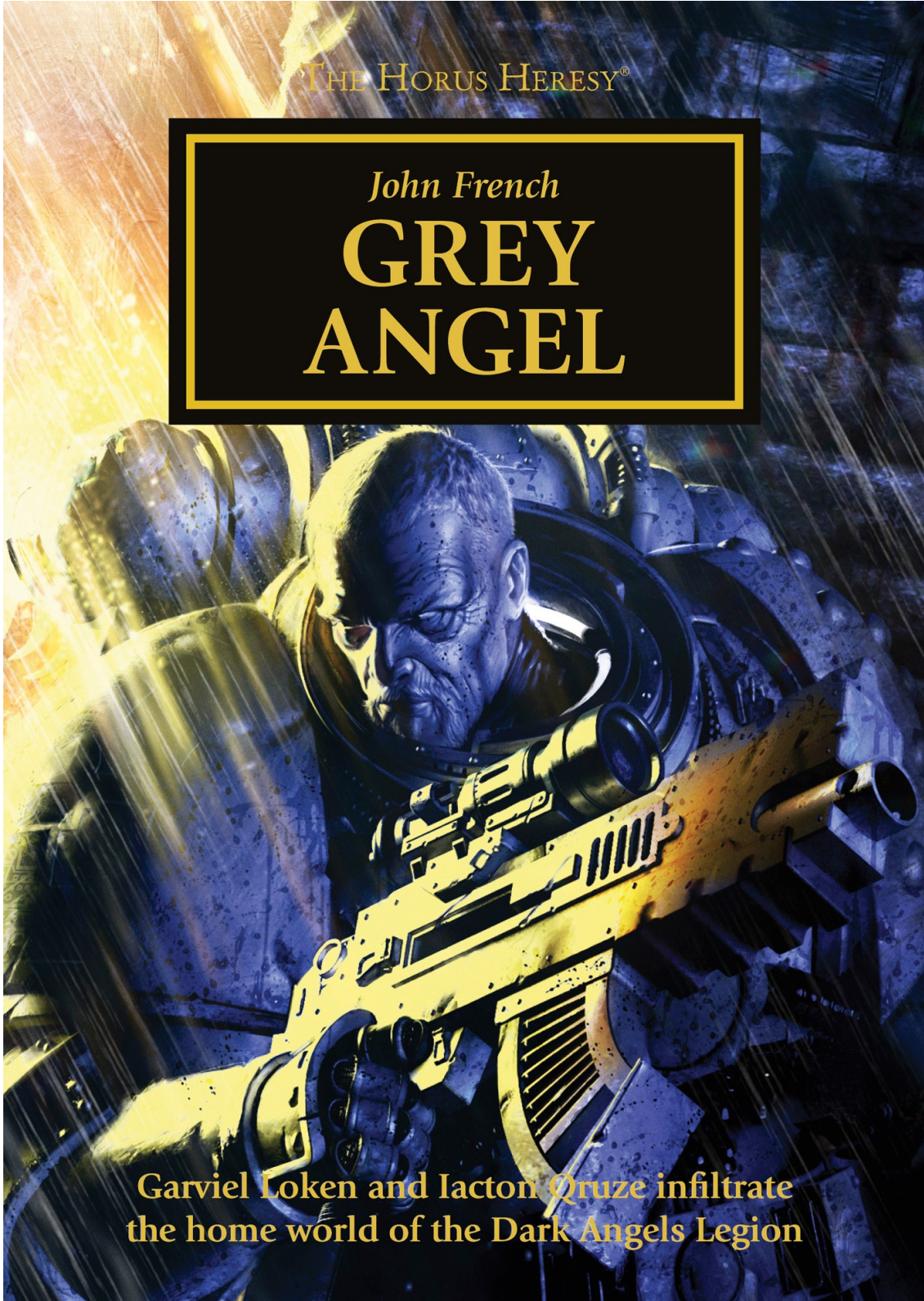
**Garviel Loken and Iacton Qruze infiltrate
the home world of the Dark Angels Legion**

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the home world of the Dark Angels Legion



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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.

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

GREY ANGEL

John French

The prisoner looked up as the cell door opened. Chains as thick as a man's wrist held him against the bare stone wall, looping over him like rust-scaled serpents. They had deactivated his power armour, its dead bulk holding his body like a manacle.

The small cell was carved from black rock, and the walls glistened with damp as a figure stepped through the door carrying a torch. The flame caught the prisoner's eyes, kindling sparks in their depths as they watched the torchbearer.

Shadow-grey robes swathed him, and the prisoner could see a hint of a smiling mouth hidden within a cowl. The iron door shut and locked behind the figure. The cell was suddenly silent but for the hissing of the torch.

'So you are the one they caught,' the figure said at length. 'I am here to question you. You understand this much, I am sure.'

'Do what you must. I do not fear your methods.'

'I am here to find answers, not cut you to pieces.'

As the figure stepped forwards the prisoner saw two liquid-black eyes glitter within the cowl. The figure was a head shorter than a Space Marine, though bulked by armour and robe.

The prisoner blinked. His vision was sharp, but it was as if his mind could not focus, as if something about the figure could not be resolved. The figure glanced into the shadowed corner of the cell as though he were waiting for something.

'What line of simple questioning requires that you chain me here?'

'Questions of loyalty.' The robed figure held the torch closer, letting its flickering light reach across the dull grey surface of the prisoner's armour. 'You wear the battleplate of the Legions, but bear no heraldry or marks of fealty. To whom we bend our knee defines who we are. This is the order of things. You are undefined, your loyalty unknown, and you have strayed into my realm. At best you are a mystery. At worst...'

‘Is this an interrogation or a sermon?’ the prisoner demanded.

‘Does it have to be either? An interrogation would imply that we are enemies, and I would not want to believe that. A sermon would mean that I was trying to persuade you, and I have no need to do that. I am simply telling you what I know to be true.’

‘These chains say otherwise.’

‘Once, upon this world, it was *death* to come unheralded into another’s domain. Be thankful that I have allowed you to keep your armour.’ The robed figure placed the torch in a metal bracket, his armoured hands glossy black and fire-touched gold. The oily light pushed back the gloom at the edge of the cell and the prisoner could see his bolter and chainsword propped against the wall. ‘The chains are simply a precaution. I have accorded you every honour, though you have not extended the meanest courtesy in return. You have not even told me your name.’

The prisoner leaned his head back, feeling the cool damp of the stone wall upon his scalp. ‘My name is Cerberus.’

‘Ah, a legend of the ancient times. As you choose. I will return the honour. My name is Luther, and I would know why you have come to my realm.’

Iacton Qruze folded into the shadow beyond the wall and listened. His armour was ghost-grey against the night, and the only mark it bore was lost in the gloom and rain spatter. He had removed his helmet, letting his senses sift the night air. He could smell the gathering charge of thunder.

Above him the fortress of Aldurukh rose in tiers of cold stone to a starless night sky. He had penetrated its outer defences, but he knew that there were guards, sensors and security precautions that would only increase the deeper he went. He was taking a risk, but time and the possibility of total failure had forced his hand.

Necessity: his watchword for all these last years, as bitter and undeniable as ever. He had been on Caliban for days, moving in the darkness – listening, watching, trying to find what they needed, what they had come for.

The Lion had sent part of the Dark Angels Legion back to its home world under the command of Luther. That had been long before Horus had begun his rebellion, but Caliban had been eerily silent ever since. In a war of betrayal and treachery, that silence could mean nothing, or many things. It was a matter they had come here to resolve, but they were running out of time.

The Dark Angels had captured Loken. *No*, he thought, Loken had *allowed them* to take him. Qruze could see only folly in such an action – it was a dangerous

gamble. He had waited for as long as he could, to see if Loken would get himself free, or if his plan had actually worked. If Loken had met with Luther and determined his loyalty, then they could deliver their message and move into the open. But there had been no sign, and too much time had passed. Now Qruze had to gamble even more.

Nothing was moving in the courtyard below – he could hear only the wind and the patter of rain on stone. He shifted forwards, his armoured bulk moving with a quietened purr. The battleplate was that worn by all of the Legiones Astartes, but a keen eye would have picked out the differences, the mark of unique artifice in its grey simplicity.

Qruze moved to the parapet edge, staying low. He cocked his head, feeling the rain run down the valleys of his scarred cheeks.

The lightning lit the sky and roared its anger over the fortress. Qruze dropped over the parapet, the sound of his impact on the stone below swallowed by the thunder's echo. He glanced around, his hand on the boltgun mag-locked to his leg plate.

Nothing.

He moved around the edge of a courtyard, keeping to the rain-soaked shadows. The oily light of a torch flickered from an open archway that led into the fortress' interior. He was three paces from the door when he heard the footsteps. He went still, hand hovering over his bolter.

A figure emerged from the doorway, the torchlight rendering it as a writhing silhouette. Qruze could see the bulk of pauldrons swathed under a fur-trimmed robe that rippled in the wind. Short wings sprang from the temples of the warrior's blunt-faced helm, and a drawn sword rested against his right shoulder. Rain ran down the flat of the blade. In the torchlight it looked like runnels of cooling fire.

Qruze held his breath, felt the rising beat of his hearts. The Dark Angel tilted his head, red eye-lenses fixed upon the sky.

Lightning bleached out the courtyard and the robed Dark Angel. Qruze could feel the rising crest of adrenaline, cold and oily, inside his old muscles. He forced his heartbeats to slow. Inside his gauntlets his fingers were almost trembling.

The Dark Angel dropped his gaze, half turned and scanned the courtyard opposite where Qruze stood. He would have to shoot if the Dark Angel turned around. It would have to be a kill-shot, clean and fast, very precise – a single Stalker round in the instant the sentry drew his bolter.

Qruze's mind ran through the movement, focusing on the target, the timing, readying himself for the inevitable moment.

He could see the rain beading on the pale fur draped across the Dark Angel's shoulders. Qruze had not come here to kill, but he would do so if needed. That it was a fellow Space Marine, whose loyalty might yet be true, did not alter that necessity. In the war they now fought, such things meant nothing.

He visualised the mercury-filled shell punching through the warrior's eyepiece. He tensed his legs – he would need to spring forwards as soon as he fired, to catch the body before it clattered to the floor...

The Dark Angel turned, and walked back through the doorway. Qruze listened to the footsteps recede. He exhaled slowly, and let his muscles relax.

He saw the glint of the blade just an instant before the power field was activated. The static edge of the tip brushed his temple, and went still.

'Do not move.'

The electric wasp buzz of the blade filled Qruze's ear. He could half see someone at his left shoulder, sharp features and a grim mouth framed by the shadow of a deep hood. He had been discovered, and that meant that all aspects of the mission were compromised.

Truth and loyalty now meant nothing. He would *have* to kill, but given the skill implied by how completely his enemy had surprised him, that would be no easy task. Qruze swallowed. He needed to wait for the powerblade to move.

'You may speak,' the blade-wielder went on, 'but if you move in any other way you will die.'

'I understand.'

'Good. Now tell me why you are here, Iacton Qruze.'

'They are not coming for you,' Luther assured him.

Loken was silent. He had come here to find an answer to a simple question: where did the Dark Angels of Caliban stand? For the Emperor, or with Horus? Rogal Dorn himself had demanded the answer and, with his brother Iacton Qruze, Loken had come to find it.

But the answer was not simple. His near-death on the murdered planet of Isstvan III had given him a hunter's instinct for the vile scent of the warp's corrupting influence, but in facing Luther he could feel the shift of immaterial energies. The coiling touch of temptation.

He was no psyker, but at that moment he felt that somehow he perceived something beyond mortal senses, as if scent and sight stretched into another

realm altogether.

Luther's eyes were fixed upon him, unblinking. Loken shook his head, and gazed into the shadows in the corner of the cell. The sensation was insubstantial, but Loken could feel it in every word Luther uttered, tasting the secrecy and the shadows of choices already long made. He could feel it in the fact of his own captivity in the dungeons of the Dark Angels.

'I am here alone.'

Luther smiled as if at a subtle joke. He stepped closer, slipped the cowl from his head. His face was strong but without the blunt brutality of most Space Marines – he was human still, at least in part. There was an openness to his features, an air of supreme confidence bound to intellect. It was the face of trust and brotherhood, the face of someone you could believe in and follow to the last.

Loken had heard of Luther's quality as a leader. He had seen something of it long ago, but as he looked back at the Dark Angel he realised that the reputation missed the essence of the man. He was a fulcrum around which conquests and loyalties turned. Such power had unified Terra and created the Imperium, and then that same power had turned it upon its head.

Looking into Luther's dark eyes, Loken realised that he had known such a quality before. For an eye-blink instant he felt he was looking at Horus himself – Horus from a more noble time.

Luther turned away, and walked to a low block of mould-covered stone at the foot of the wall. He sat, his eyes gazing into some imagined distance. Loken watched him, though in his head he flicked between strategies. Questions and possibilities.

He had taken a risk in letting himself be taken. He might have been killed out of hand, but it had been the only way for this meeting, this *test* to take place. Now Loken had to make a choice that he had not anticipated.

'Do you dream, Cerberus?' Luther asked, his voice tinged with melancholy.

'I dream.'

'Of what?'

'I dream... of my brothers.'

'Who are they? The brothers in your dreams, who are they?'

Loken gritted his teeth. 'The dead.'

'Ah. I cannot dream. Ever since the Imperium changed me I have not dreamed. I can remember it, though. What it was like, and so forth.' Luther nodded and Loken felt a jolt of surprise; there was understanding in Luther's eyes, understanding and pity. 'This is not the first time you have been left to fate. I can

see it in your manner.’

Loken felt as though Luther’s words had peeled back a scab formed over the past, as if the torment he had suffered were merely a specimen pinned out under Luther’s calm gaze.

He remembered the sky falling and him falling with it. He remembered the face of Tarik, grinning for the last time, and the wind of Isstvan carrying the stink of a murdered brotherhood.

Horus had betrayed him, had tried to kill him and then left him on a dead world. ‘It takes something from you doesn’t it?’ Luther murmured. ‘Being deserted hollows you out, and leaves a void inside. People might say that it hurts, that the psyche aches from the wound.’

Loken tried to bring his attention back to the present, but could not. *They had left him, to the ashes and the tainted ruins! They had left him amongst the dead, amongst the cursed dwellers of the netherworld! He had only been called back to fight in a war of revenge and broken futures...*

Luther went on. ‘It’s not true though. Abandonment does not leave pain. You wish it did because that would be better than the truth. It leaves nothing. Not hope, not pain, not forgiveness.’

Loken was silent. He could feel his muscles bunched inside his armour, his skin prickled with sweat as his hearts surged stimulant-laden blood through him. He let out a breath and stilled his body to calm. Luther watched him closely.

After a long pause, he frowned and stood. He pulled the torch from the iron bracket and came to stand so that he was no more than an arm’s reach away. He raised the torch, and the heat prickled Loken’s bare features. ‘There is something about your face... I am sure we have met before.’

Luther tilted his head and took a step back.

‘On Cardensine perhaps? Now *that* was a battle. The warriors of seven Legions in the field, enemies so thick they mashed the dead to pulp under their feet. Or Zaramund? Yes, perhaps it was there. We fought alongside the Luna Wolves there. Brave warriors, swift as a lance strike, and as hard as the rock of Cthonia. Yes, perhaps it was there.’

Loken looked back at Luther, his face revealing nothing. Inside him, memories spun – Cardensine, the Lion raising his sword to the sky as battle-fire burned its night away. Zaramund, where Loken had stood among the ranks and watched Luther follow Abaddon over the cratered redoubts. It had been no more than a few decades ago.

He felt cold. He should not have come to Caliban. Luther was not a man to be

judged at a glance – he was something more important, more pivotal to the course of the war than even Lord Dorn had dared to imagine.

‘Do *you* remember the fields of Zaramund?’ Luther asked him, pointedly.

‘I remember nothing,’ Loken snapped.

‘There is a brush of Cthonian in your words, “Cerberus”, few though they have been.’

Loken looked away. Luther smiled then, his mouth splitting his face with a broad crack of shadow in the torchlight.

‘So what led you here, wayward *son of Cthonia*?’

Loken stared, unable to hide his shock. Had they been wrong? Had news of the Warmaster’s rebellion already come to Caliban?

‘The Legiones Astartes do not fight their own kind,’ said Luther, his demeanour becoming more threatening, ‘nor come as spies into each other’s realms. I have asked you why you came here, and you have said nothing. So now I must wonder who sent you. The Lion, my sworn brother? Does he doubt that I keep to my appointed duty? My unique *honour*?’

For a moment Loken thought that he saw something play across Luther’s face, something ugly breaking through the veneer of perfect control. Then Luther shook his head, his eyes straying to the shadows. Loken felt the touch of destiny again in the cramped cell, a hard shape of blade-like angles and raw ambition.

Then it was gone, fading back into dull unresolved sensations.

‘No. Not my brother. Not the Lion. But who then, and why? Do you carry a message for me? Is that it?’

They did not know. It was as Loken and Qruze had first surmised, then – Horus’ influence had not yet spread as far as the fortress of Aldurukh. That should have made matters easy. Dorn had given them a message to relay to the Dark Angels of Caliban, if they were free of treachery.

Luther stared straight at him. ‘...or are *you* a message yourself?’

Loken opened his mouth. He felt the words forming upon his tongue – the revelation of Horus’ betrayal, the war that divided the Imperium, and the call for the I Legion to reaffirm their loyalty to the Emperor. He could speak that truth, could loose it with but a few words. He felt the temptation of it, the need to resolve the unanswered question.

But darkness and treachery circled the home of the Dark Angels. Loken could still feel it like a ghost of the winds of Isstvan. He thought of the intelligence and power of Luther, and the suspicion inherent in his questions. Loken had once been a warrior, able to resolve such matters with the simple martial logic of war.

Now he served only guesses and half-truths. Could he be sure of the effects his words might ultimately have?

After a long moment, he spoke. 'I am nothing.'

Luther nodded, his eyes like sparkling obsidian in a face of pale marble.

'Very well.' With a swirl of his robes, he walked to the cell door. 'I will return, Cerberus, son of Cthonia. And when I do, I will decide what you are. And if you are a herald of treachery then I will know *who* it is that has turned against me.'

Loken let his eyes close and the darkness became complete. He had to get free. He had made his decision – the message from Rogal Dorn and the revelation of the war had to be protected. The fear that they may have already upset a delicate balance of circumstance itched at the back of his thoughts.

Luther would return with more questions, and perhaps the means to get his answers. The Council of Nikaea had outlawed the use of psykers within the Legions, but he had seen the proof many times over that *necessity* undid edicts.

He opened his eyes. 'Why couldn't he see you?'

'Because we choose those who see us, and when.'

The small, hooded figure crouched in the corner of the cell, its shape a fold of deep gloom outlined by a cold halo. It had stood motionless while Luther had questioned Loken, the empty space beneath its cowl taking in all that had transpired. Loken could feel the clammy, static touch of its presence, the witch-touch of its words in his mind. There was something familiar about it that he could not place, like the face of a forgotten friend.

'You touched my mind,' he said. 'I could sense things that do not exist – the darkness and warp-taint, the possibilities, the unspoken secrets behind Luther's words. That was you.'

'We let you see somewhat as we do. But your senses are limited. Your mind is blind.'

'What are you?'

'You have asked us that already.'

'You did not answer.'

'We watch.'

Loken snarled. 'Speak plainly. I do not trust you—'

'Trust is not required,' the watcher interrupted him. *'We have allowed you to see what you must, and that is all.'*

'Is what I sensed real, or merely what you wished me to see? Was it... the truth?'

'Perhaps.'

‘Then you will tell me no more?’

‘No.’

‘Then why are you still here?’

‘*To set you free.*’

Loken felt a static charge spread through the air. Power flowed through his armour once more, and his own muscles twitched as their movement meshed with the suit’s fibre bundles. An acidic burn ran down his spine as interface plugs fizzed with charge. The chains holding him writhed and snapped, and he fell hard onto the cold flagstones beneath him.

The watcher moved towards the door, its form flickering between positions like an image from a damaged pict-feed. Loken clamped his weapons to his armour. The static in the air discharged sparks across the ceramite plates.

The cell door opened and the watcher flickered across its threshold, the dark space of its hood still facing towards Loken.

‘*Go. You must tell your masters what you have seen here.*’

The corridor was still and silent. The torch flames were a frozen flicker in their iron brackets, the shadows on the floor still. Loken glanced at the Dark Angels flanking the cell door. Each wore pale cloaks over their black armour. Double-handed swords rested point-down at their feet. Ruby eye-lenses stared unseeing as he moved past.

His footsteps scraped on the stone floor. The sound felt alien in his ears, as if he were trespassing into a dream. A dull ache of pounding blood was building in his temples, and the watcher’s final words seemed to be spoken directly into his mind.

‘*You have what time we can give you, Garviel Loken.*’

He moved down the corridor at a run, footfalls echoing in the dead air. The shadows writhed, torchlight moving in jerks like the flicked pages of a book. He turned a corner.

The Dark Angel had been walking the other way, his hand resting on the pommel of a sheathed blade. Their eyes met as Loken turned the corner, his cold grey to the guard’s red helmet lenses.

The warrior’s blade was in his hand, its length hissing with power. Loken was not here to kill. He was a hidden emissary in a fortress of unknown, and perhaps unresolved, loyalty. His mere presence might have tipped a wavering balance – a *death* in these dark corridors almost certainly would.

Loken’s hands were empty as he charged, and still empty as the Dark Angel cut

down towards his head. Loken twisted at the last moment and rammed his weight forwards, and his shoulder met the guard's arms at the elbow as the sword fell. The Dark Angel staggered but Loken's hands were already up, gripping his opponent's helm at the faceplate and crown.

The guard fell, and Loken fell with him – they hit the floor with a sound like a hammer shattering marble. The Dark Angel still had the sword in his right hand. Loken saw the blade move, and fastened his grip on his opponent's wrist.

The punch came from nowhere. Loken's teeth jarred and his nose cracked under the warrior's gauntlet. His ears rang. Blood spattered the Dark Angel's white tabard.

He swung his leg up and stamped down on the guard's free arm, pinning it to the ground, then hauled himself upright and rained down blow after blow, hammering the front of the Dark Angel's helm into a crumpled ruin. The red lenses shattered, and dull green eyes glared pure hatred up at him through the fractured sockets.

The guard twisted as Loken drew his hand back to strike again, and suddenly he was on his side, right arm trapped beneath his own armoured flank. The Dark Angel leapt to his feet, sword free and rising.

'Hold!'

The guard's head twitched around at the sound of the voice. It was enough – Loken surged to his feet, grappling the Dark Angel's sword arm as he rammed him into the stone wall. The guard's head lolled under the barrage of blows, his weapon clattering to the ground.

Loken could hear his own breath heaving from his lungs. Blood framed the green eyes inside the shattered helm.

The Dark Angel shoved him back, his strength seemingly undimmed even after being knocked senseless. He made to lunge for the sword on the floor.

The shot struck the guard in the left eye, and blew out his skull inside the ruin of his helm in a spray of blood and bone fragments. Loken felt the Dark Angel's battleplate become dead weight in his hands. He knew the sound of a Stalker-pattern bolt-shell, the hissing gasp of its flight and the wet impact of its mercury-filled head. He did not need to look around to know who had killed his opponent.

'What have you done?' he cried, carefully lowering the body to the floor.

Iacton Qruze shrugged, striding towards him. *'It was a necessity, lad.'*

'We could have subdued him! He did not need to die. You may have executed a loyal warrior of the Imperium.'

‘He would not be the first, nor do I think the last...’

‘This may have consequences we wanted to avoid,’ Loken sighed. ‘There are unresolved loyalties at play, and you have just tipped the balance against us!’

‘Possibly. But matters have moved beyond our original concerns.’

Loken took a moment to compose himself. He snorted a messy blood clot onto the flagstones, and adjusted the shattered bones of his nose. ‘I do not believe Luther knows of the war... but the seed of corruption is already here. Our message may have prevented it taking root. But we cannot relay that message now.’

‘You are correct,’ Qruze replied, ‘but our mission has yielded something of great worth, and to protect that interest this warrior needed to die.’

Loken frowned. ‘Why, what did you find?’

‘Me, Garviel. He found *me*.’

A Dark Angel stepped out from the shadows behind Qruze as though solidifying from the darkness itself. Loken felt a shock run up his spine. A skeletal angel spread its bony wings across the breastplate of the warrior’s void-black armour. Rain had soaked his split robe, and drops shook from the hem as the figure stepped forwards.

He moved with a relaxed precision that Loken knew could become a killing movement without a flicker of warning. The face within the rain-soaked hood was as hard and humourless as it had always been.

‘It has been a long time, has it not?’

Loken turned to Qruze, anger running across his scarred face. ‘What have you told him?’

‘We have reached an understanding.’

Loken met the eyes within the cowl.

‘Iacton is right,’ the Angel said. ‘Matters here are more complex than you can imagine. Ignorance is a shield. I fear that the truth you bear would not have an effect that would serve the Imperium, nor my Legion.’

Loken watched as the robed figure knelt by the corpse at their feet. He lifted the power sword and placed it in the fallen angel’s dead grip.

‘I will see you safely out of Aldurukh,’ he assured them.

‘Oh? And what will you do after we are gone?’

‘Watch and guard, in silence. Such has been my duty for a *long* time, and the duty of those who came before me.’

The robed figure stood and strode away down the passage. Loken and Qruze followed, first walking and then at a run. Behind them, echoing cries of alarm

chased the sound of their footsteps.

He called back to them. ‘Tread carefully, brothers...’

They sprinted along rough-hewn tunnels that plunged through the bedrock, passing through iron doors and over bridges spanning great, natural chasms. Sometimes they heard the sounds of pursuit, but the robed figure led them on into the darkness, and never once did they catch sight of their hunters.

Above them, the storm raged. At the base of an open cliff face beneath the night sky, Loken looked out at the now sparse forests of Caliban swaying in the rain and wind amongst the industrial smokestacks.

Panting beside him, Qruze turned to the robed figure and brought a fist to his chest in the old salute of Unity. ‘Your service... will be remembered... kinsman. No matter what happens... this will not be forgotten.’

‘Remembrance does not concern me. All of us that serve in the shadows are the *unremembered*. No, tonight I have in fact lost something. You have taken it from me, and I will never be able to reclaim it.’

Loken eyed their ally, the only person on Caliban who knew the truth of what had become of the Imperium. ‘And what is it that you have lost?’

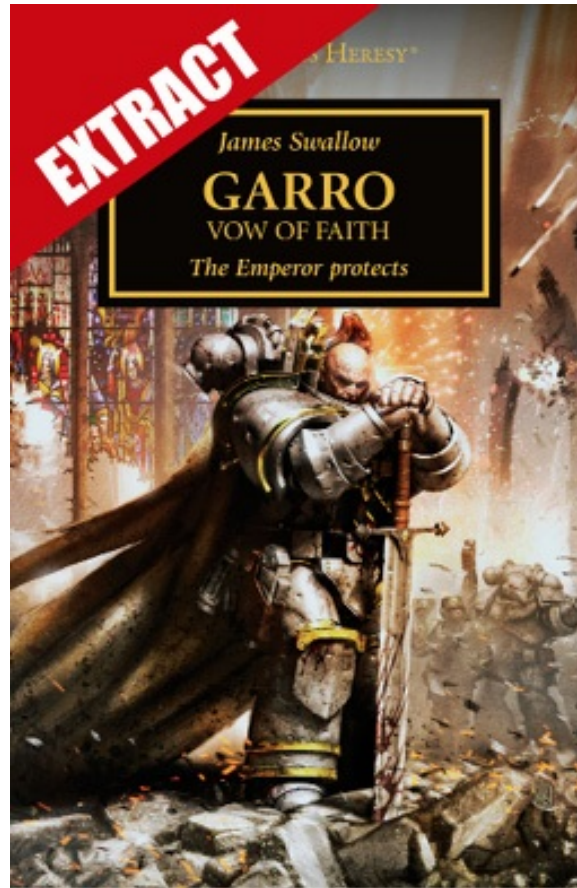
The figure turned without answer and walked back towards the hidden doorway into the bowels of the Rock. Loken looked questioningly at Qruze, but the old warrior watched the robed figure as he vanished into the night.

‘Forgiveness, lad... He has lost the chance for forgiveness.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John French has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, the novel *Tallarn: Ironclad*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile*, *Ahriman: Sorcerer* and *Ahriman: Unchanged*, plus a number of related short stories collected in *Ahriman: Exodus*, including 'The Dead Oracle' and 'Hand of Dust'. Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella *Fateweaver*, plus many short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

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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