

THE HORUS HERESY®

*James Swallow*

# GARRO

VOW OF FAITH

*The Emperor protects*



BS

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*James Swallow*

**GARRO:  
VOW OF FAITH**

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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.**

## ~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

### *Those who serve the Imperium*

MALCADOR, The Sigillite, Imperial Regent, First Lord of Terra

NATHANIEL GARRO, Knight Errant, Agentia Primus of the Sigillite

VARDAS ISON, Knight Errant

SIGISMUND, First Captain of the VII Legion, Imperial Fists

### *Those who would see the Imperium fall*

HALN, Covert operative

ERISTEDE KELL, Assassin

### *The people of Terra*

EUPHRATI KEELER, The Living Saint

KYRIL SINDERMANN, Former Primary Iterator

NDOLE ESTO, Driver

ZEUN THURUQ, Believer

*'Belief is blindness of a kind so powerful that certain men willingly seek it out.'*

- Shollegar Meketrix Yonparabas, from *Words Matter Not* [M24]

*'When all the Knights are gone, only their enemies will truly care. Those they saved and served will flock to the aegis of new protectors, never recalling their names.'*

- attributed to the Imperial remembrancer Ignace Karkasy

# ONE

## **Crimson on white Old ground Leave-taking**

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 magnetic 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 Istvan 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.

# TWO

## **Sanctuary Last words Confrontation**

Ndole cast a nervous glance over his shoulder, toward the back of the ground-effect truck where the big man sat cloaked in shadows. He was large enough to fill the cargo bed of the hovercraft, even bent forward with his head turned down. The big man's eyes were closed, but Ndole knew he wasn't sleeping. His kind weren't capable of that, so someone had once told him.

The driver's lips thinned and he forced himself to concentrate on the path ahead. A haze of displaced sand moved in a constant wave front before the vehicle. Kicked up by its screaming blowers, the microscopic particles of rusty metal and mineral glass forever scoured at the truck's exterior. Ndole leaned in and out of shallow, drifting turns as he guided them over the desert landscape. He kept them on rivers of sand that snaked through the larger pieces of debris that studded the terrain; here the remains of a massive bat-winged stratocarrier from the Unification Wars, there a beached ocean liner half-buried under the skeleton of a derelict arcology dome. Smaller clumps of metallic waste formed hillocks of corroded iron, all of it the collapsed remains of civilizations that had died before the Age of the Imperium.

He knew he had to keep his attention on the journey, because at the speed they were travelling across an area this cluttered, even a glancing collision could tear the truck in two and leave them stranded out here. Ndole had no doubt the big man would survive something like that, but he rated his own chances far lower.

It was hard not to keep stealing a peek, though. He had never seen a legionary close at hand before, and to think one of them was here, in his vehicle... Was it a dream or a nightmare? He hoped neither, and reflected on how he had come to give the warrior passage.

It wasn't as if the big man had threatened Ndole to make him obey. It wasn't as if he had to. Back at the border settlement, where the Wasted Ranges ended and the Nordafrik Territories really began, everyone in the tap house had heard the screech of the dropship passing overhead. It worried them all. Ndole listened to the server fret about how it could mean the bastard archtraitor was finally here, but he knew that it would not be a ship that came to warn them of that. Ndole fully expected his first sign of Horus' invasion to be the sky catching fire.

The dropship must have let the big man out at the edge of the settlement, because a few seconds later,

two panicked youths in rad-capes came hurtling through, falling over themselves to warn of the new arrival.

He came in only a moment after them. Curious, it was, the sight of a legionary without his power armour, but no less intimidating. At first, he had thought the man might have been a genhanced worker from the breaker's station, but something in his bearing – and a myriad of scars – spoke otherwise. Even in the hooded grey cloak, the warrior blocked the doorway with his bulk, and had to lower his head in order to enter. As he did that, the gigantic sword on his back briefly became visible and panic exploded. Everyone ran, fleeing for the rear exit. They did not do it because of anything the big man said or did, but because the sheer fact of his presence broke their nerve. And when one fled, all fled.

Except Ndole. He was too slow, too surprised by the new arrival to make his feet work. His lip curling in irritation, the legionary surveyed the now-empty tap house and settled on the shabby, rail-thin driver. He evaluated him with a cursory glance, spying the tarnished neural jacks on his bare arms.

‘You have a vehicle capable of ground transit.’ The voice that emerged from the giant sounded almost high-born to Ndole's ears, and the words were less a question, more a statement. He was nodding before he realized it. ‘You will take me into the scraplands.’

Ndole had to work hard to find his voice. ‘W-will you kill me if I don't? Kill me if I do?’

‘Why would I do that?’ The warrior gave a curt shake of the head. ‘But understand, I have no currency to pay you for the work.’

Despite the utter terror rooting Ndole to the spot, it was a credit to his avaricious nature that he actually frowned at that, and the question *what's in it for me?* danced on his lips, though he never dared give it voice.

The warrior answered him anyway. ‘I will owe you a favour. I think a man in a town like this one, known to be in the debt of a Space Marine, would grow considerably in stature. Yes?’

Ndole nodded again, and smiled a little. Money was good, but reputation – that was better.

‘Where do you want to go? There's nothing out there but rusted hulks and mutants.’ That wasn't altogether true, though.

‘I am looking for a place that has many names,’ replied the big man. ‘Asiel. Salvaguardia. Heilgtum. Muqaddas Jagah. Sanctuary.’ He came closer, looming over Ndole. ‘You know it, don't you?’

The driver considered continuing the casual lie, and then discarded the thought as idiotic. ‘Some pass across the border looking for it. Those names are not often spoken.’

‘You will take me,’ the warrior repeated.

And of course, he had.

Everyone gathered across the street from the tap house when Ndole and the giant walked out the front door, and he heard them all whispering. Most of them were taking bets on how he would be killed. He kept a brave face, trying to project an aura of calm, as if he did this every day.

Only when the hover-truck was long past the settlement's outskirts did he entertain the thought that the warrior could be insincere. He'd heard the reports on the watch-wire of the Warmaster's perfidy and the warnings from the Lords of Terra to be wary of spies in their midst. He screwed up his courage and spoke for the first time in hours, shouting to be heard over the engine noise. ‘What do you hope to find out here, with the... With those people?’

The warrior leaned forward, his massive head uncomfortably close to Ndole's in the close confines of the truck's cab. ‘Answers. You know why they hide out here, I think. I am not the first you have brought to them.’

‘Not the first pilgrim,’ admitted the driver. ‘But the first of *you*.’

‘Pilgrim...’ The giant weighed the meaning of the word. ‘Do you know what they believe?’

‘Aye, lord.’ Ndole was suddenly sweating, despite the actions of the coolsuit he habitually wore beneath his crew gear. ‘They say the Emperor is a god. The only real one, not like those out of the dead churches.’

‘Is a being a god if it is more than a man?’ The warrior’s question seemed directed at nothing. ‘How much more than human must one be, to be thought of as such?’

‘I don’t know.’ Ndole felt compelled to answer, and nervously ran a hand over his shorn scalp. He dared another look at the warrior, seeing again the web-work of old scars that marred his pale face.

‘What do you believe?’ said the giant.

Terror bloomed inside Ndole and he cursed himself for a fool. If he gave the wrong reply now, this war-angel would kill him with a flick of its wrist and it would all be because of his weakness, his greed, his curiosity.

The legionary reached past him and pointed at something on the control panel on the roof of the hover-truck’s cab. A tarnished brass charm on a length of grimy string, dangling from an inert flip-switch. The little aquila seemed to float in the air as the vehicle bounced over the rises in the dunes. ‘Where did you get that?’

Ndole found his voice again. ‘A pilgrim gave it to me. A-and some papers.’

‘A book in crimson ink?’

He nodded. ‘I didn’t read it!’

‘You should.’

‘What?’ Ndole blinked, and for the second time that day he felt as if he had barely escaped execution. ‘But they say the book is dangerous. And the speaker, the one who goes from place to place and reads it... The Emperor is displeased with her.’

‘Is he?’ The warrior seemed troubled. ‘How would we know?’ His every word was filled with conflict, and if anything that frightened Ndole most of all. If this being, one of the Emperor’s Angels of Death, could not navigate such questions, then what chance did a commoner have? ‘I must find her,’ the giant continued. ‘I must know the truth.’

‘We all want that.’ The words escaped Ndole, coming from nowhere. ‘But it is different for you, yes?’

He tried to find a way to express his thoughts, but the driver was a simple man and not given to great articulation. A Space Marine is born of the Emperor’s sons, he told himself, so he’s blood-kin to the Master of Terra, one step removed. Surely one so close to such magnificence could know the world better than a truck-hand raised in poverty?

The warrior’s scarred face told a different story. He nodded toward a shape looming out of the sands. ‘Is that it?’

Ndole blinked and refocused, his jacks clattering against the steering yoke. He saw a cracked minaret pointing skyward at a crooked angle – a thin tower that had once been covered in mirrors, now only a hollow skeleton that sang as the winds whistled through it. The ‘sanctuary’ hid at its base, clustered in a crater of fused glass beneath a skein of mimetic camouflage. Unless one knew where to look, it would have been nigh-invisible.

Or so it was on most days. Issuing out of the skein, pennants of black fire smoke were being pulled away on the stiff breeze, monstrous dark arrows frozen in flight above the settlement.

Ndole flinched and reflexively eased back on the throttle, but in the next second, the warrior’s hand had enveloped his shoulder with firm, unyielding pressure.

‘Get me there,’ he commanded. ‘Now.’

Garro kicked open the gate at the back of the truck and leapt down into the settling dust cloud, the keening

whine of the hovercraft's engines falling away to nothing.

His battle-honed senses built an image of the site in less than a second. The crackle of fires and the acrid stink of burning plastic; spilled blood, still soaking into the sands where it fell; the snap and rustle of torn pergolas catching the mournful wind. He drew his sword and rested his thumb on the activator stud, stalking forward.

The driver clambered out of the cab, almost falling over himself as he squeezed out from beneath an arching gull wing door. His dark face was stiff with fear. 'This is not right,' he muttered. 'What happened...?'

The legionary scanned the encampment. The great sail of energy-deadening cloth that concealed the sanctuary hid dozens of smaller tents, yurts and prefabricated dwelling cubes. Cables webbed the open spaces between them, some festooned with bio-lume clusters for lighting, others leading to dewcatchers for water reclamation. Most of the tents were blackened rags, a few patches of fire still burning here or there among them.

The first citizen of this refuge Garro encountered was a female, or rather what was left of her. He could only tell this by the dimensions of the skeleton that remained, crouched in a dark halo of thermal damage. As he approached, he could hear the hissing, ticking sound of something cooling, like metal taken too soon from a forge.

It was the bones. Fused solid into a sculpture that captured the dead woman's perfect agony, they had been transformed into dirty black glass.

He examined the seared skeleton, wondering. Garro had witnessed the effects of many kinds of weapons, from volkite ray guns to microwave throwers, and this was dissimilar to any of them. The threads of heat that radiated off the body were intense, enough that in any normal circumstance there should have been naught but a pile of grey ashes.

Behind him, the driver's boots crunched on the silicate floor of the crater. Garro shot him a look. 'Keep your distance,' he ordered, getting a wooden nod in return.

By the pattern of the thermal shock, Garro guessed the woman had been killed as she fell while trying to flee. He mentally tracked back to the place where her killer would have been standing and found a group of several more bodies. These ones were also burned, but in a different way. A group of irregular militiamen, he guessed, by the piecemeal soldier's attire they wore and the weapons still clutched in their rigor-stiffened hands.

It was impossible to tell what gender or ethnicity the five of them had been while they were alive. Their bodies were all uniform in the same terrible fashion – bloated and flayed by incredible heat, reeking meat in the form of human beings. Garro knelt by the closest one, the gears of his bionic leg clicking as it worked, and broke off its fingers so he could take the heavy stubber rifle the militiaman had been carrying. The charred sticks of flesh snapped easily, and where there should have been white bone, only grains of black powder spilled out.

'Their bone. It burned,' he said aloud. 'Burned them from within.'

The driver turned his head and retched into the dust. He made an attempt to recover and Garro heard him call out, doubtless trying to find someone still alive.

The legionary left him to it, instead raising the stubber to his nose, snapping open the weapon's breech. There was no smell of cordite. It had not been fired. He pulled the gun's drum magazine and confirmed it was still fully loaded. Garro repeated his actions with two more of the dead, and saw there were no signs of spent shell casings anywhere nearby. Five armed guards, and whomever had killed them burned them alive before anyone could let off a single round.

'Do you see that?' said the trembling driver. He was pointing with both hands, down at more heat-

swollen corpses clustered in the lee of a tent pole. ‘The... the path between the bodies?’

Garro nodded. A dry, inky pattern of burned ground seemed to join all the dead, as if the fire that killed them was a snake moving from one to another, scorching the earth in its wake.

‘Oh, fate,’ whimpered the other man. ‘Dead. Dead. They’re all burnt and murdered.’

‘Not all,’ Garro began, his acute hearing picking up something deeper into the stale gloom of the camp. But the driver wasn’t listening to him, and he staggered back toward the mouth of the camp, rubbing frantically at his face.

‘In the air, that’s all of them,’ he gasped, his chest heaving. ‘I can taste them in my mouth, it’s in my lungs... The *smoke*. That’s all that is left.’ The driver’s eyes were wide with panic. He threw Garro a look and made a split-second decision, choosing the terror that had wrought this destruction as the greater of the things he feared.

The legionary made no move to stop him as he ran away, and presently the thrusters of the hover-truck spun up to full power. Garro watched the vehicle bolt back in the direction they had come. He waited for the sound of the engines to grow fainter, and listened carefully.

*Yes. There.* Something shifted position, moving against loose rocks. Garro tightened his grip on *Libertas* and moved deeper into the foetid haze.

There was no end to the horror that confronted the legionary in the charnel house that the sanctuary had become. Cruel flames had killed and destroyed here, yet the patterns of the fire were strange and irregular. The burning was *unnatural*. There was no other word for it.

Garro scowled. With each passing year in Horus’ declared war, the legionary saw more that could fall into that category. The alien, that was something that the former Death Guard had faced on countless occasions, and no matter how grotesque and inhuman it was, there was some rationality to such a foe. But he swiftly came to the understanding that whatever powers the Warmaster had allied himself to, they were beyond reason. He took each step with care, ready to face anything.

*Horus.* For who else could have ordered this massacre? Who else would profit from sowing chaos on Terra?

Garro’s question briefly illuminated another, more sinister answer, and the Sigillite’s face rose in his thoughts. He pushed it away, silencing the treasonous impulse before it could fully form. That Malcador was not to be trusted, that was true. That Malcador had an agenda only he could see, and that it might not be in full synchrony with the Emperor’s Will, that also was very possible. But Garro did not wish to believe that the Regent of Terra would permit the kind of unbounded malice that had been wrought on these civilians.

Malcador would do what he believed was for the good of the Imperium. Garro could not square that with this horror. No, another hand was at work here, and it sickened the legionary to know he had come too late to stop it.

He approached the centre of the settlement, finding an open space between the support poles and generator pods. A ring of salvaged chairs, cushions and pews in dozens of different designs clustered to form a kind of amphitheatre. There were hundreds of bodies here, fallen atop one another where they had gathered to face their attacker and died for it.

The wind caught a drift of scattered leaflets and whipped them up and past Garro’s face, tugging on the folds of his robe. He snatched one out of the air with his free hand and the burnt plaspaper crumbled into flakes – but not before he glimpsed a dense block of words written in common Low Gothic, the ink as red as blood.

He recognized phrases from the documents he had found in the personal affects of Kaleb Arin, the man

who had once been Garro's housecarl. Poor Kaleb, dead and cast away to the screaming void of the warp. He had been a steadfast one, a weakling in the eyes of some because of his failure to pass the aspirant trials of the Death Guard legion, but strong by Garro's lights in how he endured and continued to serve.

The captain had not thought of the man for some time, and now he did, Garro felt a knife of sorrow turn in his gut. Kaleb's death had been a lesson for the warrior, and the price the housecarl paid to show it could never be forgotten. Like those who lay dead and scattered around Garro's feet, Kaleb had believed in the words of the *Lectitio Divinitatus*, believed it with all his heart. His soul too, reflected the warrior. *But what do I believe?*

The empty question echoed in his thoughts, and Garro's frown deepened as he surveyed the bodies, hoping that the one face he sought would not be among them. If Euphrati Keeler were here, if the Saint had perished among her faithful... Even the mere contemplation of that dark possibility made the legionary's breath catch in his throat.

He shook his head. He had not come all this way only to find a corpse.

The Saint was out there, he knew it in his marrow. In recent months, Garro had stolen time to take his leave unbidden and search for the woman, knowing that she too was somewhere on or near Terra. His quest to find her had taken him to secret places hidden in the cracks of the Imperial Throneworld – the derelict Vostok Hives, the Mothyards, the Nihon Peaks and Riga Suborbital – and each time he had been a day late, finding only traces, happening upon unexpected challenges.

And now here, in this sanctuary, where those who believed as Kaleb did had gathered. The Saint had been in this place, just as she had been at all the others. She had stood on these sands and read from that book. If Keeler was dead, Garro would know it. *Feel it*, even if he could not explain how.

He heard the sound of movement once again, and this time he knew for certain where it had come from. Stepping over the smashed remains of broken benches, he came upon a survivor.

The man was young and fit, and that had been some of what saved him. The other factor was the poor fools who lay dead about him, each of them burned and flayed like the militiamen out by the entrance. They had taken the brunt of the inferno meant to end them all, and the survivor's loss had been one half of his body. On one side, his right arm and leg were withered things, black and red with new agony. In his gaze, there was such pain as could drive a man mad. Yet he still held on, quivering as his undamaged hand grasped a torn *Divinitatus* tract like it was his salvation.

The young man was beyond help, and Garro turned his sword in his hand, considering where best to place the edge that he might end the lad's agony with some measure of mercy.

'Who did this?' he asked.

The man's single unblinded eye refocused and found him. He took a shuddering breath. 'Serpents.' His voice was thick with fluid, and beads of dark arterial blood gathered at the corner of his lips as he spoke. 'Burning. Turned them loose among us.' He shook and began to sob.

'Who?' Garro repeated. 'Describe them.'

The survivor's head rocked back and forth in jerking motions. 'No. No. Not enough time.' His crippled gaze bored into Garro's. 'She told me we would meet. She did not know how or when.'

'Keeler...'

He managed a nod. 'We matter not. Only the truth. They seek her now... Serpents...' His voice was faltering, drowning in itself. 'Find her. Do not let her perish. Else we are lost.'

'Where is the Saint, lad?' Garro asked him, leaning close to catch what he knew would be the young man's final breath. 'Say it!'

'I know—'

The light and the sound came from nowhere. Above the sheath protecting the sanctuary, powerful daggers of radiance blazed down, drenching everything in stark white illumination. Screaming engines added their own cries to the winds, buffeting the cloth with a hurricane of jet wash, and Garro heard the familiar weighty thuds of heavy bolter cannons being primed for firing.

He looked up, the nictating membranes in his ocular implants flicking into place to stop the legionary from being blinded. Blocky avian shadows moved up there, searching for targets.

When Garro looked back, the survivor was dead.

The legionary pivoted on his heel and brought up his power sword, as six cloaked figures came falling through the canopy, tearing it apart with their violent descent.

That they were Space Marines was not in doubt. Even in the smoke-wreathed dimness of the encampment, Garro could not mistake the familiar tread of ceramite boots and the whine of servos. But as to their allegiance and the identity of their legion, he could only guess. They did not give him time to speak. It was an assault without question.

Bolters crashed and chewed up the gritty earth beneath Garro's feet. He leapt forward into a tumbling roll that took him over a broken pew and out of the line of fire. They came after him in a charge, breaking to the left and the right in an attempt to herd him and block off any routes of escape.

Flight, however, was the farthest thing from Nathaniel Garro's mind. Was he facing the same killers who had murdered all the devoted in the sanctuary? Had the arrival of the hover-truck somehow drawn their attention? Perhaps they had come back to make certain of their work, or to ensure that the legionary did not live to tell of it.

His jaw set as he spun about to face the intruders. No-one was left to speak for these poor souls, and so Garro would speak for them. He would let Libertas be their voice.

The mighty blade flashed blue-white as power pulsed through it, and Garro threw a hooked kick at a discarded water barrel lying near his feet. The empty container clanged as his foot connected with it, and flew up and at the nearest of the hooded warriors. By reflex, the cloaked figure opened fire and shredded the barrel with a burst of full-auto fire.

Garro used the split-second distraction to launch himself at one of the long tent poles that supported the fabric roof above their heads, and with a two-handed swing, he cut it clean through. The pole quivered and fell, dragging a swathe of camo-cloth, cables and other detritus on to the heads of the new arrivals.

As he planned, they broke apart from their careful formation, allowing him to pick single targets of opportunity rather than face a united force. But still, his improvised strategy did not go exactly as he wished. Even as they reacted on instinct, the attackers were still precisely ordered, moving with great economy of motion. There was no wasted effort here, no hesitation. A sudden sense of the familiar prickled Garro's thoughts, but he was not given time to consider it. Bolters barked and he moved again, falling on the nearest of his enemies.

From beneath the hood, he caught the briefest glimpse of a blunt-faced helmet, a war-mask that resembled a fortress wall lit by glowing eye slits. Then Garro was swinging the pommel of his sword in a hard cross that raked across at head height.

The tungsten hemisphere at the base of the blade struck the helm with a sound like the peal of a dull bell, and the impact shock travelled up Garro's arm. Out of his wargear, he had sparred with other legionaries in the training cages, and in full armour it had been his grim duty to battle turncoats in theirs – but Garro had never had cause to fight like this, bare genhanced flesh against power-assisted ceramite and plasteel. He had agility and speed on his foes, but they had the advantage of numbers and endurance. One well-aimed bolt shell could end him instantly from range, whereas Garro needed to be close to use his sword

at full lethality.

The warrior he targeted stumbled and went down, caught by the uneven ground underfoot. Garro wanted to grab for his bolter, but he couldn't pause, not even for a second. Instead, the legionary burst into a sprint, spinning *Libertas* around in a web of crackling power. Bolt rounds deflected off the flashing edge of the weapon as Garro scrambled up a half-collapsed habitat cube and made a diving attack at the next closest target. This one carried a smaller bolt pistol, and he panned it up to meet Garro with a shot in the chest.

At the last second, the legionary jack-knifed and fell on the attacker with his sword aimed down. The tip of the blade *almost* hit the mark, a fraction of a centimetre from the point where the neck-ring of the attacker's armour joined the helmet seal. Had it fallen true, *Libertas* would have sliced down inside his collarbone, bursting through lung and primary heart. Instead, the sword tip slashed away hood and cloak, screeching down the chest plate to leave a sparking gouge in the ceramite.

In the bright aura of the power sword, Garro saw the colour of his adversary's wargear for the first time. A matte yellow-gold that could only belong to one legion.

He disengaged, reeling back. 'The Fists?'

In answer, a mailed gauntlet rocketed out of nowhere and stuck Garro in the side of the head, the shock and the force of it so great that he almost lost his balance. The few moments the surprise cost him were more than enough for the other warriors to close on him, and a savage kick to the back of Garro's knees planted him in the soot-caked dirt. A heavy boot clanged down on the blade of his sword, and Garro shook off the pain. When he looked up, he was ringed with the yawning mouths of bolters at point-blank range.

'Traitor swine,' came a snarl, as the warrior with the torn cloak angrily shook it off. His free hand traced the scratch *Libertas* had made down his chest. 'You'll pay for daring to come here.' Now revealed, Garro saw that the Imperial Fist was of sergeant's rank, and marked with many honours from countless campaigns.

'I am no traitor,' Garro retorted, turning his head to spit out a glob of blood, fighting off the ringing in his ears.

'He is of a Legion,' said one of the others. 'That much is plain. What is he doing here?'

'He fought us,' said the sergeant.

'You attacked me,' Garro corrected. 'Have you been waiting on the walls of the Imperial Palace so long that your trigger slips at the first hint of an adversary?' For a moment he was a battle-captain again, a command officer berating a lower rank for an error of judgement. 'Your primarch Lord Dorn would be displeased.'

The Imperial Fists stiffened, and Garro knew he had touched a raw nerve.

'This place is outside the law,' said the sergeant, his voice low and cold. 'Those settling here have no protection under Imperial edict, yet still we came. And we find you, without apparent purpose or sigil, armed and dangerous among hundreds of the dead. Give me a reason why I should not execute you and learn your name from your corpse.'

Garro hesitated. He had become used to the weight of the Sigillite's mark, of the doors that it could open for him as *Agentia Primus*, and it felt odd to suddenly be without it. He took a deep breath and stood up, the guns still tracking him. 'I am Nathaniel Garro. I was once a captain of the XIV Legion—'

'*Death Guard*? The other Fist who had spoken flinched at the name and aimed his bolter right at Garro's temple. 'Mortarion's accursed sons! How did—?'

The sergeant reached out a hand and pushed the muzzle of the weapon away. 'I have heard that name before, from my captain. You are Garro of the *Eisenstein*.'

He nodded. 'Aye, the very same.'

'I have also heard that he and his kinsmen, the ones who came to Terra after the archtraitor's defiance, are prisoners upon Luna. Held there until trust can be verified, or blame laid.' There was no ease in the words, not the smallest ember of credence. 'How have you come to be here?'

Garro frowned. 'There is more to the matter than what you have heard, sergeant,' he said carefully. 'I came to find this outpost... these people. But their deaths were not by my hand.'

'We are to take the word of a turncoat Legion's son?' said another of the Imperial Fists. 'I say we finish what we started.'

But before the sergeant could decide on a course of action, heavy footfalls signified the approach of more armoured figures. The dropships that had circled overhead had since drifted away to make landings, and now more of Dorn's warriors were entering the desolated settlement.

A legionary with captain's laurels came into view. Garro saw he wore a heavy tabard of white ballistic cloth covered in jet-black detail, and chains about his wrist-guards. The device of a black cross, repeated on the armour of all the Imperial Fists, featured prominently upon him. This new arrival reached up to remove his helm and in a gesture of obedience, the sergeant did the same.

The captain's blond hair framed a face that Garro had seen before, what seemed like an age ago, in a meeting aboard the star-fortress *Phalanx*.

'He is who he says,' said the warrior, his eyes narrowing. 'Let him be.'

Garro gave a nod. 'First Captain Sigismund. Well met.'

Sigismund's cold gaze raked over him. 'That remains to be seen.'

# THREE

## **The Templar Hesperides Tracking**

They sat across from one another in the troop bay of one of the grounded Thunderhawks, alone after the First Captain had barked an order to clear the ship so that they might have some privacy.

The act seemed unusual to Garro. Knowing the character of Dorn's stone men as he did, the legionary expected to be clapped in irons and subjected to arrest. Instead, Sigismund reached forward with Garro's sword and scabbard, briefly confiscated by his subordinates, and laid the weapon on the deck between them.

Garro made no move to pick it up. His steady gaze held. 'Did your gene-father order that?' He tilted his head in the direction of the ruined settlement.

Sigismund's jaw clenched. 'You know better than to say such a thing, Death Guard.'

'I have not been a Death Guard for quite some time,' he replied. 'The insurrection has changed many things. Perhaps your master's countenance is among them.'

'I will choose to believe you are testing me,' growled the Imperial Fist. 'And poorly at that. The alternative is that you impugn the honour of the Seventh Legion, and were that to be so, it would go badly for you.' He pulled a device from a pouch at his waist and Garro saw it was a handheld auspex unit. Sigismund tossed it to him, and he caught it easily. 'Listen,' he told him.

Garro turned the device over in his hands and found that the display screen showed a blinking rune to indicate it carried an audio recording in its memory. He pressed the button to replay the data file, and for a few brief moments the interior of the troop bay echoed with sounds of screaming and the voices of the dead.

He listened to a man whose words were distorted with terror and feedback as he shouted into a vox-pickup, desperate for someone to hear him, pleading for rescuers to come and save them. The accent was thick and several of the words were from Afrik dialects Garro did not know, but the intent of the message was clear. It had been sent as the killing was in progress, as whatever force had come to murder the sanctuary had done its swift and merciless work. The recording cut off suddenly in the middle of a panicked shout.

'That was picked up on one of the common distress wavelengths,' Sigismund explained. 'We came to investigate.'

‘And your men thought I was the cause?’

The First Captain looked away. ‘They reacted with poor judgement. Inaction has made them lax. They’ll be chastised for acting without thinking.’

Garro realised that was the closest he would get to any kind of an apology. Sigismund went on.

‘What are you doing, Battle-Captain? I have heard tell that you were at large. But why here, and why today?’

‘Both our missions have altered,’ Garro offered, at length. ‘Since the *Eisenstein*.’

Sigismund nodded. ‘You are Malcador’s attack dog now. With armour that bears no sigil or livery. What is it that you are called? A Knight Errant?’

Garro bristled at the off-hand description of his status. ‘There is more to it than that.’

‘Where the Sigillite is concerned, I have no doubt,’ Sigismund shot back. ‘He would build a scheme with a thousand players just to fetch him a cup of amasec.’ He leaned back and cocked his head. ‘But I wager he did not send you to this place. Have you escaped his employ, Garro?’ He nodded at the sword. ‘You’ve left your nameless armour behind. If not for that weapon, I might ask if you had decided to give up the warrior’s calling in hopes of a monastic life.’

‘I am here on a duty of my own, not by Malcador’s orders,’ Garro allowed. ‘I came to the sanctuary looking for information.’

‘About this?’ Sigismund reached for something and threw a wad of burned devotional papers on the deck, across the sheathed sword.

Garro ignored the question and kept his eyes fixed on the Imperial Fist. ‘If I am Malcador’s attack dog,’ he began, ‘one might say that you are Lord Dorn’s. What was the name they gave you? The Templar, I recall.’ He gestured at the black cross on Sigismund’s tabard. ‘We both serve masters who seek to safeguard Terra and the Imperium.’

For the first time, Sigismund’s expression shifted, and Garro saw a cold twist of humourless amusement on his lips. ‘We are alike, is that what you wish me to believe? You, a man who moves in shadows under the aspect of a ghost, are the same as I? Who stands for all to see, his duty clear as daybreak?’

The First Captain’s blunt truth cut Garro more deeply than he expected. ‘I did not choose the path I am on,’ he said tersely. ‘But we each fight the battle we have, not the battle we want...’ His words faded as a suspicion crystallised, one that had been gnawing at him since the moment the Imperial Fists had arrived. ‘You answered that distress call.’

‘Aye.’

Garro leaned forward. ‘*You* did. Captain Sigismund, commander of the First Company of the Imperial Fists, defender of this planet... You brought two dropships and a detachment of Space Marines into the desert for... what? The sake of a garbled message from some luckless civilian? There was nothing in that signal to warrant the deployment of such a force. Why not leave it to the local garrison instead?’

‘We were passing through the area. It seemed expedient.’

Garro snorted. ‘You do not lie well, cousin.’ He pieced the facts together. ‘The Imperial Fists were already monitoring this place. It is the only explanation that fits. My question is, for what reason?’ He saw a flicker of doubt in Sigismund’s eyes and chased it down. ‘Or am I mistaken? These warriors are not here at Lord Dorn’s behest... they are here at *yours*.’

Sigismund’s face turned to stone, and it was then Garro knew he was right.

‘When I first met you,’ said the other captain, after a long moment, ‘I thought you a deluded fool. We pulled you and your fellow refugees from that frozen hulk, dead in space, and you stood before my grandfather with stories about treachery and betrayal. I knew they were lies. *Knew it*... until the very moment that remembrancer Oliton showed us her memories.’ Sigismund shook his head. ‘Emperor’s Blood,

Garro... Do you realize what damage you wrought with your flight?’

‘More than you can know. I took no pleasure in it,’ Garro said quietly, and he felt the shadow of that moment pass over him once again. It was not untrue to say that Nathaniel carried resentment for the burden that had been forced on him at Isstvan. ‘I curse Horus Lupercal every day for forcing me to make the choices I did.’

The Templar looked away. ‘The woman, Keeler. You know what she is.’ It wasn’t a question.

Garro frowned. ‘I...’ He halted, unable to frame his thoughts. ‘We have spoken. I was... illuminated by her insights.’ He nodded in the direction of the burnt-out settlement. ‘I hoped to find her here so we might talk again.’

‘She spoke to me,’ said Sigismund, and Garro could tell that the admission was a hard one for the Imperial Fist to voice. ‘Told me things. *Showed* me things.’

He nodded. ‘Yes. She has a way about her.’ Garro thought back on the counsel Keeler had given him when he felt lost and rudderless. That she had become connected to some greater actuality, perhaps some fragment of the Emperor’s manifested will, had never been in doubt. It came as no surprise to him that the so-called Saint shared that counsel with others. He looked at Sigismund with fresh eyes, assimilating this new truth.

It was as if he had given the First Captain permission to unburden himself. As he went on, hesitantly at first, Sigismund leaned close in the manner of a brother sharing a confidence. He described how he had crossed paths with Keeler aboard the *Phalanx*, and spoke of the futures she had laid out before him – one, to perish forgotten and alone under an alien sun; the other, to stand at Dorn’s side when the inevitable invasion of Terra took place. Sigismund told him of his own grave choice, to go back on his primarch’s command to lead a chastisement force against Horus, and beg a different posting closer to home.

Suddenly, Garro understood why the Imperial Fist had ordered his men to leave them aboard the Thunderhawk. He did not want anyone else to hear this, to glimpse what some might see as a fissure of weakness in the man’s otherwise granite-hard exterior. If the Knight Errant ever spoke of what was said here, he knew he would be ignored and derided by Sigismund’s brethren.

As Garro had become Malcador’s agent in acts of preparation and retribution, so Sigismund had been tasked by Dorn along the same lines. The First Captain purged the Solar System of Horus’ spies wherever he could find them – and Garro had frequently seen the results of his work from the sidelines as their missions crossed one another, always in parallel but never in unity.

But there had come a moment when Sigismund could no longer keep his secrets from his gene-father. That bleak mien Garro had seen pass over the Imperial Fist’s face before returned, and he saw it for what it was – great sorrow and regret. Sigismund confessed to Dorn, and in turn his primarch tore him down for it. The master of the VII Legion decried Keeler as a charlatan trading in worthless religionist dogma, and reprimanded his son for allowing himself to be swayed by her.

Garro said nothing. Inwardly, he thought that it was Dorn who did not see clearly. It had been clear to him at their first meeting when he revealed Horus’ perfidy, and then again when he stole aboard the *Phalanx* on a mission to recruit one of the Fists’ psykers. The latter sortie had ultimately failed, but on both occasions Garro had known that for all his greatness, Rogal Dorn’s rigidity of mind was a flaw. *As much as stone may endure*, he thought, *it cannot bend and so it may shatter*. He only had to look Sigismund in the eye to see that truth reflected in the Templar’s troubled thoughts.

‘Keeler showed me a vision of arcane horrors,’ Sigismund concluded. ‘And I have since seen them with my own eyes. You have too.’

‘Aye.’ Garro nodded grimly. ‘That I have.’

‘Then you know her gift is not worthless.’ It was a hard admission for the Imperial Fist to make, to

suggest that his liege-lord could be so mistaken. He took a long breath. ‘I do not profess to know how all... this... is supposed to work. But I know the woman is important. With that in mind, I have watched over her from a distance, as best I could. I have used the assets of my Legion and the Imperial Court to track her movements.’ He shook his head. ‘She and her devotees have not made it simple. There are many gaps, many unknowns. It speaks to a great network of believers in existence, far larger than any of us suspected.’

Garro pressed him for more. ‘But you knew she would be here, or was here, at the sanctuary?’

‘Yes. As you surmised, I had the location monitored. One of many, in fact. When the call for help came, so did I.’ Sigismund paused. ‘Garro, you know how Horus’ turncoats operate. Like the hydra of myth, we sever one head and two more rise to take its place. For all that we root out, others still lurk unseen. I believe that Keeler may perish at their hands if we do not prevent it.’

‘The killings here, they show that the archtraitor is getting close to her...’

He nodded. ‘She must be protected.’ The Templar rose to his feet. ‘But I have reached the limits of my agency. Tonight, I exceeded authority to come out here and Dorn will learn of it. He will be displeased once again. You see that the Imperial Fists do not have the freedoms of Malcador’s Knights Errant. I can go no further with this.’ He fixed Garro with a hard look. ‘But you can. It is clear to me now that you are the only option.’

Sigismund reached down and took the auspex unit from Garro’s hand and raised it to his face, allowing a retinal aura-reader to scan his eye. ‘Identify me. Ex-load storage stack. Codeword *Iconoclast*. Unlock,’ he told it. The device chimed and he passed it back.

Where before the unit’s memory had been almost empty, there were now dozens of other files revealed – surveillance intercepts, intelligence files and more.

‘What am I looking at?’ said Garro.

‘All that I have gleaned about Euphrati Keeler’s movements over the past months. You may be able to fill in the gaps. I believe it will help you to predict where she will go next.’

‘You are trusting me with this,’ said Garro warily.

‘We have to keep her safe, Nathaniel,’ Sigismund replied. ‘As much as I wish to, I can go no further. So the duty falls to you.’ Some of the chilly fire of his earlier manner returned to his voice, and his next words were very much a warning. ‘Do not fail.’

The Imperial Fists called in a cohort of servitors to catalogue and then bury the dead, but Garro was gone before the first of them arrived. It took him the better part of a day to walk back across the scraplands, and the passage gave him the time he needed to digest the import of his conversation with the Templar.

As he walked, he pored over the content of the auspex, using hypnogogics to flash-read the vital data as a starving man might gorge himself on a banquet. As he expected from an Imperial Fist, Sigismund’s record-keeping was precise and bereft of anything but cold fact.

The files tracked dozens of reports of illegal *Lectitio Divinitatus* gatherings, partial scans from sightings of women who matched Keeler’s description, and dozens of other vectors, collating them into something that resembled a pattern. He found strings of intelligence that connected with his own research, including the same blind lead that months before had sent him to the Riga platform on what turned out to be a fool’s errand. Although the journey to Riga led Garro to other things – and eventually to the uncovering of a secret the Sigillite had wanted to keep from him – the legionary found no traces of Keeler’s passage.

She moved from place to place, slipping in and out of hive cities and metroplexes, space stations and orbital plates, never once being captured despite the iron grip the Imperium kept on the Throneworld and its satellites. What did that suggest, Garro wondered? Did Keeler’s preternatural abilities enable her to

weave through the security net that grew ever tighter as the Warmaster's threat encroached? Or was the truth more prosaic than that, was it that her association of followers was so large that those devoted to her simply looked away as she passed?

How far does the word of the Lectitio Divinitatus reach? Garro had no answer for that question, and it troubled him. The Imperium of Man was just that, and it had gone so far to stamp out the falsehood of religion, imposing secularity wherever its shadow fell – but what if that was impossible? What if there was something in the nature of humankind that meant they always needed something greater than themselves to believe in?

He scowled and displaced the nagging thought. For the moment, he cared not for what other men might think, feel or believe. He only knew what Nathaniel Garro felt... and that was loss.

'Where is this leading me?' he asked the air. The winds gave him no answer.

Garro returned to the data, moving from past records to present ones. According to Sigismund's sources, there were rumours that Keeler had visited the sanctuary less than four days ago – the closest Garro had been to her in a long time. There were a dozen other possible locations that the Saint could have journeyed to on the next step of her endless pilgrimage, but he quickly considered and discarded all but one. The guess was part instinct, part calculation.

*Hesperides.*

Garro halted and looked up into the night sky, craning his neck until he found a particular shadow off toward the south-eastern horizon. From here, it was little more than a blue-black smudge against a rare starry evening, low against the sallow glow of Luna. The orbital plate was one of the older aertropolis platforms, and he recalled it was an *insula minoris* that served Terra as a dioxide refinery and tertiary shipping hub. It was an ideal place upon which to deliver a sermon; much of the population were transients, system crews and unskilled labourers who moved as needed on contract indentures to Venus, Mercury and the teeming null-grav work yards of the Belt. The kind of men and women, Garro reasoned, who would have empty lives overshadowed by the insurrection. The kind of people who, if so enticed by the Lectitio Divinitatus, could carry word of it to all corners of the Solar System.

A day later, Garro dropped from the wheel well of an automated cargo barge and fell a hundred feet to a landing deck on the western arc of the floating city. At a distance, Hesperides Plate recalled the shape and form of a great pipe organ, buoyant on a cushion of dirty clouds and wreathed in grey haze. Up close, the imagined form gave way to a less attractive reality, a great convoluted knot of tarnished tubes and gargantuan bell-mouths that resembled the fatal collision of a thousand giant brass instruments, crushed into a clump by the hand of a mad god.

Nowhere on Hesperides could one find silence. Every passage and walkway was walled in by lines of rattling, echoing pipes that hummed and gurgled with chemical reaction. Deep in the bowels of the platform, engines that had operated for centuries sucked in polluted air and fractioned it into its component elements, desperately trying to salvage some breath of purity from the wounded atmosphere of the planet.

The constant noise made it difficult for Garro to extend his battle-senses to the full, and he mentally recalibrated the parameters of his actions. A place like this would make it harder to see an enemy coming, and the confined byways were perfect territory for ambushes, choke-points and murder boxes.

Pulling his hood down and his robes close, Garro made sure his sword was hidden where none could see it, and ventured deeper into the endless range of narrow alleyways.

Hesperides had never been designed to be a city – it was a glorified atmosphere processor with a few support modules bolted on – but someone had neglected to reveal that to the people who lived there.

Humanity crammed itself into every nook and cranny of the structure, with ramshackle hovels built around spaces between the great brass tubes that snaked this way and that. Parts of the makeshift city were permanently cold, platforms rimed with hoarfrost from the chilly aura of vast coolant towers. Others were always tropical-hot and damp from the steaming output of chemical fractionators. Frequently, both extremes could be found within a few hundred yards of one another.

Poverty was rife here. The legionary saw no souls who were not clothed in shabby, grimy cuts of worker garb, and their hollow faces and averted gazes spoke to him of people who were beaten down, who hung on by their fingertips. Unseen, he grimaced in the shadows of his hood. It seemed wrong that here, above the planet that was the bright heart of the Imperium, citizens had no taste of the glorious future the Emperor wanted for them all.

Garro pushed the thought away as he came upon what he was looking for – a ‘village square’ for want of a better term, a larger open space between two towering smokestacks that the locals had repurposed into a marketplace and meeting point. The legionary found a shaded perch above from which he could observe the area and scanned the milling crowd for his targets.

The group were dressed no differently than those around them, but to a warrior’s trained eye they stood out like magnesium flares on a dark night. A trio of earnest-looking men, two keeping watch while the third carefully offered slips of paper to anyone who would take one. Garro saw red ink on the paper, text he could not read from this distance and the shapes of icon-symbols to aid any illiterates to understand the leaflet’s intent.

He smiled thinly. The followers of the Lectitio Divinitatus were becoming bolder, and that would give him what he needed. Garro planned to wait for them to finish their proselytising and then track the men back to their point of origin. Somewhere amid this hissing, clanking mess of conduits there was a clandestine church, and if he found it...

A low cry came to him, arresting his train of thought. Four more figures had emerged from the passers-by – rough types with the build of Imperial Army troopers about them, although none of the quartet wore anything approaching a uniform. The new arrivals were haranguing the believers, and Garro speculated on what was happening below him from body language and the snatches of snarled words captured by his augmented hearing.

The four were members of the group in charge of this part of Hesperides. Garro had not seen a single Arbites officer since he arrived on the orbital plate, not even a monitor drone. He guessed that whichever member of the Tech-Barony was charged with rule of Hesperides had little interest in the people who lived in between the air machines, as long as the processors kept working. In this kind of environment, thugs of a certain stripe flourished where law enforcement was absent and weakness was rife.

Demands were being made. From his vantage point, Garro glimpsed the flash of silver from Throne coins as the larger of the thugs – a broad barrel of a man with a wild beard – pulled tribute from the hands of one of the believers. It clearly wasn’t enough, because the thug produced a push-sword from under his coat and ran through the man who had been holding the leaflets. It was a basic but efficient kill, up under the ribcage. The victim went down, dead before he hit the platform, the papers he had been clutching scattering like windblown leaves.

There were shouts and screams, and the two remaining believers exploded into panicked motion, bolting through the crowd, heading toward rat-runs on the western side of the marketplace. One of the thugs stayed behind to pick over the dead man’s corpse, but the bearded killer led the other two on a chase.

Garro cursed silently. If these fools killed his only leads, he would be stymied. All the members of Keeler’s church would draw back and hide themselves, and the Saint – if she was here – would be spirited away by nightfall.

Moving as quickly as he could without drawing attention, Garro went after them, leaping from one cluster of conduits to another. The terrain became increasingly difficult, as his elevated path was blocked at random intervals by outcrops of machinery or shrieking steam grilles. Twice he lost sight of the fleeing believers and the men in pursuit, but their shouts allowed him to zero in and keep them from vanishing into the complex root system of brassy tubes.

The legionary heard the bass cough of a heavy-calibre gunshot and a wail of pain. Away from the crowds, the thugs were happy to start shooting where collateral damage would be minimal. Garro's enhanced senses smelled fresh blood, and plenty of it. The injured believer was bleeding badly.

He managed to get ahead of the thugs, closing the distance to the running men below along a high maintenance walkway. Amid the constant background chorus of rattling apparatus and clanking vents, Garro's heavy footfalls went unnoticed. Forced to a halt as the walkway came to a sudden dead end, he paused to take in the scene.

Fifty feet beneath him, the uninjured man was struggling to help his wounded comrade stagger forward, but the slick of blood that trailed behind them was enough for Garro to know that one of them would be dead in minutes.

That estimate fell to zero when the thugs emerged from a side-passage, and the one with the gun put a second round into the bleeding man. The hydrostatic shock of the impact parted the two believers, sending the injured one over a safety rail and into oblivion. Garro glimpsed the body spinning away toward the filthy clouds.

The one with the beard shouted something about being owed more money, about promises made, and the dimensions of this sordid drama became full and clear to the legionary. The thugs ran this part of Hesperides Plate, and they were letting Keeler's followers have a safe haven here in return for hard currency. But belief alone was not enough to mint coin, and the greed of men like these had few limits. He imagined that no matter what they had been given, it would not have been enough. They were going to kill all three of the believers to send a message.

*What other reason was there to have committed brutal murder before so many eyes, if not to sow fear?* For a brief moment, the Warmaster's snarling aspect rose and fell in Garro's thoughts. He shook off the memory.

Out came the push-sword again, still red with the gore of the man it had killed. The last of the believers was looking back and forth between the killers and a narrow passage ten yards away. Asking himself if he could make it there before a bullet buried itself in his back.

Garro had seen enough. He stepped up and over the edge of the suspended walkway and dropped the distance to the deck below, hitting with the impact of a demolition hammer. The metal flooring flexed under the force of his arrival, putting the thugs and their would-be victim off their feet. The panicked believer was quick to recover, however, and scrambled away toward the gaping alley.

Furious at the interruption, the three thugs turned on Garro and fear was not what they showed him. He was so used to seeing that barely-controlled terror on the faces of common humans that it struck him as odd to find it absent. Without his power armour, they must have thought Garro was some kind of mutant affected by gigantism. It never occurred to them that he was a Space Marine; after all, why would one of the Emperor's Angels of Death ever come to this light-forsaken place, much less so without armour or fanfare?

'What are you?' spat the one with the pistol, taking aim. 'Go away, freak.'

The bearded man hesitated – perhaps he had some clue about Garro's actual origin – but his rat-faced cohorts were too snappish and blood-hungry to think twice about what they were facing.

'Y'heard him,' bellowed the third member of the group, whose mouth was full of teeth filed to points and

whose flesh was a canvas for dozens of obscene electroos. ‘Piss off!’

Garro took a step forward and met four bullets fired in quick succession by the gunman. The shots hit him in the chest and belly, breaking the outer layer of his epidermis but penetrating no deeper. He grunted with irritation and reached into each of the wounds with thumb and forefinger, pulling out the flattened heads of the kinetic rounds and flicking them away. Blood, thick with gene-engineered Larraman cells, was already clotting the trivial wounds.

The one with the gun was clearly an imbecile. Instead of putting distance between himself and Garro, he came closer, aiming the heavy pistol up to target the legionary’s head.

Garro stepped in to meet him. With a lazy backhand, he smacked away the weapon, shattering the bones in the gunman’s forearm. He could have left it there, but there was a lesson to be taught, and so he put what he considered to be a light punch into the squealing gunman’s chest. The blow caved in the thug’s ribcage, collapsed his lungs and stopped his heart.

The man covered in phosphor-glowing tattoos cried out the dead man’s name, and turned tail and fled back in the direction of the marketplace.

The thug with the beard and the push-sword yelled and slashed at the air before Garro, attempting to force the legionary back with a wild, uncontrolled feint. He was trying to put Garro on the back foot, perhaps so he could extend away and flee as well.

The warrior watched the criminal’s pattern, saw it, and in the next breath he grabbed the razor-sharp blade and yanked it forward. A seasoned swordsman would have let go of the handle, but the thug’s best challengers had only been untrained civilians with no grasp of bladecraft, and he had no more moves to make. Ignoring the distant sting of pain as the push-sword cut into his palm, Garro twisted his wrist and disarmed the bearded thug, the motion breaking fingers in his opponent’s hand.

The blade fell to the deck and he stamped on it, the steel heel of his bionic leg snapping it in two. Garro reached out and grabbed the thug by the shoulder and squeezed, feeling bone grind on bone.

‘You have made several mistakes,’ he told the man, as he listened to him panting. ‘And your path brings you to me.’

‘Please...! Don’t...!’

Garro shook his head. ‘That time has passed.’ He shook back the cuff of his robes and showed the man one of the sigils branded into his flesh, the device of a skull against a six-pointed star. ‘You attacked a legionary. Do you understand that?’

The bearded man’s eyes were wet and streaming. A patch of dark colour spread on his breeches as he soiled himself in fear.

‘I want to know where they are.’ Garro nodded in the direction that the surviving believer had gone. ‘You know. Tell me.’

‘Don’t...don’t know!’ gasped the thug. ‘Don’t remember....’

‘You do,’ Garro corrected gently. He tapped the thug’s forehead. ‘Memory chains in your brain tissue. Either you access them...or I will.’

‘What...?’

Garro put his other hand around the man’s skull and slowly began to apply pressure. He would need to be careful, to crack the bone without destroying the soft organ inside. The warrior took on a gentle, lecturing tone. ‘When the genesmiths made me what I am, they placed an implant in my belly called a preomnor. A stomach within a stomach, if you will. It allows me to ingest poison and toxics, subsist on edible materials that would kill any other living thing...’

A wet crackle sounded from beneath Garro’s fingers, and the thug cried out in terrible pain, fruitlessly trying to peel the legionary’s grip apart.

‘Moreover,’ he went on, as if this were instruction for some neophyte battle-brother, ‘there is a second implant, the omophagea. Capable of separating genetic memory from ingested matter, if you can conceive of that.’ He leaned close and looked the thug in the eyes. ‘What I *eat*,’ he said, with cold clarity, ‘I take the memories from. Do you understand?’

The thug’s cries became whimpers, and Garro knew that he did.

‘One way or another,’ said the legionary as he increased the pressure, ‘you will tell me where to find the hidden church.’

# FOUR

## **The mark, and the marked Sermon A burned figure**

Haln spent an hour or two getting used to the steady rocking motion of the Walking City, but eventually he had taken to it like a local, and now he could move through the mile-long corridors without scuffing his elbows on the iron walls with each gyration. It made spotting other new arrivals very easy. Even the most experienced counterspy would take a time to get in synch with the *lurch-drop, lurch-rise* rhythm of the great mobile platform.

That was part of the reason Haln had picked the city as their means of transit down the continental spine, an extra way to help him flush out any potential followers on their trail.

His caution was yet to be tested, however. Haln always kept to the tenets of his tradecraft, following rules of espionage that had been set down centuries before humans had even left this blighted planet. He took circuitous routes, never used the same vox module twice, varied his pattern, his gait, his appearance. He assumed nothing, distrusted everything, just as he had been trained.

And yet, in all the time he had been active on Terra, there had never been a moment where he was truly afraid. Never a point where he had glimpsed a flash of an enemy's blade and known he was close to being discovered. Was it that his opposite numbers in service to the Sigillite were so good that he never saw them? Were they watching and waiting to see where he would lead them? Or was the opposite true, that Malcador's agents were as ignorant to his like as the people about this platform were to Haln's real intention?

He suspected the latter, but he would not allow the opposition's laxity to infect him. It was acceptable – desirable, even – for one's enemy to be lazy, but that didn't mean Haln could slacken off. He had to behave as if those out to stop him were as competent as he was, even if that had never been true.

Haln halted at the iron door to his rented cabin, and rearranged the cups and plaspaper bags he carried so he could recover the beam-key that opened it. Checking the alcove to make sure he was alone and unseen – he had already disabled the primitive security monitor at the far corner – Haln unlocked the hatch and kicked it open with his boot.

The room was small and gloomy. It smelled of old metal and sweat. Haln deposited his load on the collapsible table in the middle of the compartment and went to the circular window, pivoting it to open outward. Immediately, the steady crunch and grind of massive gears entered the space, and he stole a

glance out. The cabin was above and to the aft of the eighth leg mechanism on the port side of Walking City, a massive iron limb as tall as a hab-tower that ended in a splay-toed foot large enough to crush a city block. Twenty legs on both sides of the gargantuan moving platform provided motive action for the slab-like mobile settlement as it laboured southwards towards the equator, endlessly marching through a dustbowl that stretched from horizon to horizon.

Rising from a corner, the assassin helped himself to a cup of lukewarm tisane and scowled at the taste. Then, he found a bag with skewers of cooked arthropod meat and set to work devouring them. Haln sat on a stool, took his own meagre portions and ate in silence, observing the killer without directly watching him.

Haln was only ever honest with himself, and he was so now as he considered how much he disliked the mission he had been given by his handler, his Aleph. What he knew for sure was that the directive had come from outside the legion to which he was oath-sworn. Haln was one of many non-Lords, part of a vast army of commons who toiled for his masters the First and the Last, and he gleaned that his assignment had been handed down from the Sons of Horus... Perhaps even from the Lupercal's Court itself.

He had been diverted from the midst of other duties and forced to leave work undone for this, to be the chaperone for a man who woke screaming in the middle of the night, who constantly shifted back and forth between icy lucidity and morose disengagement. At first, Haln wondered what was so special about this particular killer – there were many capable of that act, he reasoned, Haln among them – until the moment he saw the assassin at his work.

The killings at the sanctuary were unlike anything he had witnessed before. That horrific weapon that seemed to hide away until the assassin called it forth, and the things it did to living flesh... If Haln had still been capable of sleeping, he imagined it would have given him nightmares. As it was, he used chem-shunts to edit his own memories of those scenes, softening his recall of the worst moments. What he could not remember fully, he could not dwell on – that was the idea. In reality, it didn't work. He had to hold much of it untouched in his mind, for the sake of the operation. And so Haln still recalled enough to be fearful of the assassin and that cursed gun of his.

He wanted this to be over and done. The work he had come to Terra for, that the Aleph had tasked him to prepare, that would now go on without him. Dozens of operatives, primed to spring a great feint against Rogal Dorn's defences, an invasion *before* the invasion that would entice the primarch of the Imperial Fists into tipping his hand. It was an elegant endeavour that Haln had been enthused by. He liked the clockwork of the notion, the sheer *game* of it.

By contrast, conveying a murderer – no matter how monstrous his ways might be – seemed like a lesser work. Any bloody fool can pull a trigger, the spy told himself.

As the thought crossed his mind, the assassin stopped chewing and stared directly at him. 'How do I know I can trust you?'

Haln arranged his features into a neutral aspect. 'We've already had this conversation. Don't you recall? Before you... sterilized the settlement.'

The assassin nodded slowly. 'What did we learn from them? The killed?'

'There are several possible vectors for the target.' Haln took another sip of tisane and with patience, gave the same report he had twice already. He reminded the assassin about the half-dead, burned souls who had begged for quick ends while Haln flensed them for intelligence on the target. There were many probable locations, and it was taking time to narrow them down. Haln had contacts he was using to follow up leads, and that data was yet to mature.

'You have told me this,' snapped the assassin, his hard eyes glittering, his manner becoming stony once again. 'Is there no more you have? What use are you to me?' He held out his hand. 'Show me your mark.'

‘I don’t have a—’

‘*Show me your gods-damned mark, you stinking whoreson!*’ The words exploded from the assassin with such venom that Haln actually jerked back, the stool scraping across the metal deck. Before he could get out of reach, the assassin grabbed his arm by the wrist and pulled him over the tiny table. Haln toppled off the stool and his cup emptied its contents over the floor.

Still, he was quick enough to will his own tattoo into quiescence before the killer could wrench back his sleeve and glare owlishly at his hand, his forearm. Had he been unready, the thin greenish tracery of a many-headed form would have been visible there. Instead, there was only umber-coloured flesh with the texture of worked leather.

‘You don’t have it,’ said the assassin, his towering fury smothered in a moment. He released his rigid grip, disgusted. ‘You don’t,’ he repeated. Then the killer pulled off one of the black ballistic-fabric gloves he habitually wore and offered Haln his bare palm.

The mutant shape on his pale skin could not be called a scar. That word simply wasn’t grotesque enough to encompass the abhorrent nature of the brand on the assassin’s flesh. It was, in some fashion, an eight-armed star. An octed, Haln had heard it called. But it was also a festering stigmata, ever-bleeding and raw, a cut that smoked rather than oozed, a monstrous and abnormal wound not just in the meat of the man, but greater than that. Haln instinctively sensed that the mark went soul-deep.

He shrank back, recoiling as carefully as he could so as not to show how squeamish it made him feel. Haln had opened the flesh of hundreds and never felt anything as base as the repulsion he experienced at that sight.

Mercifully, the assassin hid his horrible grace back inside the glove, eyeing him. ‘You have been here a while. How was that possible? They couldn’t send too many with the pathfinders, the scry-seers in the towers would read it...’

‘I came here through more conventional methods,’ Haln said, gripped by a sudden need to fill the air in the cramped cabin with anything other than the thought of that cursed mark. ‘My insertion was with a group of refugees... Previously I served my masters with disinformational sorties and proxy attrition. Then I was tasked with a direct intervention.’ Normally, Haln would never had voiced even a fraction of this detail to someone from outside the legion hierarchy, but he suspected that the assassin would never live beyond the completion of this mission to tell of it. He had swept the cabin and pronounced it clean of listening devices that very afternoon. The only person who can hear my words is a dead man walking, he thought.

‘On Terra?’ prompted the assassin.

‘Not at first.’ Haln shook his head as the room tilted, the Walking City clanking and heaving over some ravine far below. ‘I was put aboard a flotilla of ships running to Sol after escaping the rebellion...’ He had to remember to call Horus’ act a rebellion, not an insurrection or a revolt, as he did when speaking in the character of his cover. ‘It went... poorly. The Custodian Guard intervened and there were many deaths. But I was able to escape in a small craft and reconnect with our assets already in-situ.’

The assassin grimaced at the mention of the Legio Custodes and looked away. ‘Those arrogant, gold-plated pricks! I should like to kill one of them, under the gaze of all their cohorts. Just once. To remind them they are not perfect. Let them know there are better weapons.’ He glared up at Haln and the barely restrained violence the man had shown earlier was back again. ‘I want a target, do you hear me? I *need* it. There’s no purpose for me otherwise!’

Haln’s eyes narrowed. ‘I can’t just find you someone to murder, even in a place like this. Not in the way that you do it.’ He nodded toward the marked hand, the killer’s gun hand, and remembered the dead at the sanctuary once again. ‘It would be too risky. Traces would be left behind, too difficult to explain away.’

‘Then find me what I came here for,’ spat the killer. ‘Quickly.’

What the followers had made their church had once been a vast section of a sluice mechanism, a crevice between two large coolant channels that could direct waste water away from the atmosphere processors and into the air below Hesperides as dirty rainfall. Accumulated layers of rust and grime told Garro that the system had not worked for years, perhaps decades. This was borne out by the silence coming from the coolant pipes; nothing flowed in there. The whole area of the orbital plate was inert and largely abandoned, buried as it was deep on the floating city’s keel where sunlight never fell.

The church was suspended on one of dozens of gridwork deck frames, each of them layered atop one another in complex profusion. He made his way down to one of the lower levels and found a point to watch what took place overhead, and wait.

Above the legionary, the believers moved back and forth, none of them pausing to consider that an intruder had already found his way into their house. Once, he saw the believer who had escaped the thugs in the marketplace, heard him talking to his comrades about the dangers out there in the alleyways. While the specific threat of the bearded man and his friends had been removed by Garro, there were others that these poor fools were only vaguely aware of.

The best part of a day passed. Garro willed his body into a state of solidity, becoming static and unmoving as he lingered. He did not require water or food. His bio-implants were more than capable of sustaining him for months on the stored nourishment distributed throughout his artificial organs. He let his mind drift, absorbing the sounds of the believers at their worship. He listened to them as they quietly sang old forbidden hymnals, or recited pieces of the Lectitio’s texts. For the most part, though, they kept together in small groups and their conversations, no matter what aspect they wore, orbited around the same unpromising subject. *When will the Warmaster come to Terra?*

Then a voice Garro had not heard for years reached into his quiet mind and brought him back to the surface of full awareness.

‘Hello, my friends.’ The legionary raised his head to get a better view of the church’s dais, just visible through the holes in the floor plates, and there he saw an old man. ‘I’m pleased to find so many of you here.’

Once upon a time, that old man had worn the robes of a high Imperial iterator and he had spoken only of the Emperor’s crusade against idolatry, religionism and the plague of superstition. But since the evolution of one young woman into Sainthood, the man had become the greatest convert to a new understanding – the veneration of the Emperor of Mankind as a living god.

Kyril Sindermann clasped his hands together and bowed to the assembled group. Garro could tell by the creaking of the deck above his head that the makeshift church was filled to capacity, even though none of the attendees spoke louder than a murmur.

Despite his advanced years, Sindermann’s voice carried over them with the clarity born of zeal. ‘I know you are afraid,’ he began. ‘Of course you are. It is true, what many of you fear. We are on the edge of an abyss, and a step too far will send us to our end. Not just death, mind. Not the material ending of our flesh and bone, but of our souls. Our faith.’ He broke off, chuckling to himself. ‘There were days when I did not believe in such ephemeral notions,’ admitted the iterator. ‘No longer. My eyes were opened by the Saint, who in her glory, showed me a brief glimpse of the God-Emperor’s will... and the darkness He is ranged against.’

A ripple of apprehension echoed through the space, and Garro held his own counsel on the exemplars of that darkness that he too had seen.

‘The archenemy has a force of such great fatality at his fingertips,’ Sindermann continued. ‘And as we

stand here and draw breath, it closes the distance to Terra. Inevitable. Inexorable. When Horus... arrives...' The iterator stumbled over the Warmaster's name, as if it were ashes in his mouth. '...there will be such horror. This *will* come to pass. The God-Emperor knows it, and by His wish so does the Saint and so do we. Know that I speak truth to you when I say we have gruelling days to come. The sky will burn and blacken. Death in manners undreamt of shall stalk the world.'

The crowd were utterly silent now, and even Garro felt his breath stilled in his chest by the old man's steady, purposeful sermon.

'Some of you question,' said Sindermann, the deck rasping as he walked off the dais and out among the gathered followers. 'You ask why we must face this terror. Why does He not leave the Imperial Palace and show His face, why does He not cast down the Ruinstorm from the sky and take the war to His errant sons? I tell you it is because even now, in the bowels of this planet, the God-Emperor fights on another front, in another war. A war that only He can wage.'

The legionary's eyes narrowed. How was it possible that Sindermann could know such a thing? Garro had heard many rumours about the Emperor's absence on the stage of conflict, but never anything stated with such certitude.

'We are being tested, my friends,' Sindermann was saying, his words echoing off the iron walls. 'Tempered in these moments to become something greater for the coming battle. To be made ready for the advance of such chaos, we must be primed for it. We must grow to be unafraid.' He took a long breath, and his tone became almost fatherly. 'Doubts are not forbidden. Questions are not silenced in this chapel. Ours is not a faith that is so delicate that it cannot stand up to hard questions. That is why we swept away the old churches and the false gods during the Great Crusade! We erased every ancient, crumbling belief because they were weak. Their credo could not resist the test of a keen mind, or questions not easily answered. They asked for blind faith in something that could not be perceived, touched or experienced. We do nothing of the kind. Our deity lives among us. He can be seen, and in some small manner, He can be known to us!'

A few of the believers picked up on Sindermann's words and called out in affirmation, and he continued. 'We question, and we have answers. We emerge the stronger for it, and so we shed our fears.' He paused again, and the room quieted. 'I am unafraid because I have walked the path to reach this place and on that journey I have *learned*. Now I look to the road ahead, the road that leads to the edge of the abyss and see it for what it is. Not fate. Not some pre-destiny scripted by a phantom deity that puppets me like a toy. No. *No!*'

Sindermann's voice shifted again, taking on a hard, defiant edge that seemed strange coming from the elderly iterator. 'This is the duty we have! This is the path we are on! *Resist!* Resist and survive and resist again! For the God-Emperor of Mankind is not the engine of our future, no, my friends. *We* are the engine of *His*.' The old man's words rose to fill the chamber. 'He empowers us and we empower Him! And through that unity, we will know glory!'

The church erupted in a cacophony of cries and applause, and for a moment even the legionary felt his spirit lifted by the power of Sindermann's oratory. The decking above his head shuddered, resonating with the righteous power of the followers. That was why Garro did not become aware of the child until it was too late.

Beneath the shouting, he heard the clank of movement somewhere nearby, on the same under-level. Moving as quickly as he could in the cramped space, Garro came about and found himself face to face with a small girl. The child had the delicate features and red hair characteristic of some Jovian commoner bloodlines, and her dirty clothes suggested she might be a refugee from one of the outer moons.

Her eyes were very wide and her face was pale with shock. 'Wait,' he rumbled, keeping his words soft.

Her scream was high and piercing, and it seemed to go on and on. How a little frame with such tiny lungs was capable of emitting so sharp a sound was beyond the legionary, and the girl scrambled away before he could reach her. Cursing himself for his momentary lack of focus, Garro pushed out of his hiding place and took two quick steps across the lower deck. The child vanished up toward the church proper, scrambling along pipes and through gaps that would barely have accommodated the warrior's hand, let alone his body. Cries of alarm were spreading through the gathered followers, and he caught the sound of lasguns powering up. Clearly, the beliefs of the Saint's followers did not stretch to pacifism.

There was no point trying to hold on to his meagre cover now it had been well and truly blown. Better instead, he decided, to use what Space Marines were best at. *Shock and awe.*

With a growl of effort, Garro launched himself upwards and bulled his way through layers of the metal deck, forcing rusted metal outward until he crashed out on to the floor before the dais. He rose to his full height, his face set in an imperious glare, casting a cold gaze over the followers as they stood terror-struck before him. In the front rank there were eight people with short-frame Naval-issue beam rifles, and as one they trained their weapons on the giant that had risen into their midst.

Of the child who had raised the alarm there was no sign, nor could Garro see Kyril Sindermann. He guessed that the iterator had been rushed out of the chamber the moment the screaming started.

'Is that it?' said a frightened voice, from somewhere among the faces hiding behind the ranks of pews.

'First Salvaguardia and now here!' said another. 'He's come to kill us all!'

Garro raised his hand, but panic detonated like a bomb, and suddenly the crowd behind the followers with guns was fragmenting, some groups rooted to the spot, others flooding toward the hanging blackout cloths that were the entrance to the church.

The legionary read the faces of the believers before him and he saw the glitter of determination in the eyes of the one that would shoot first – a wind-burned woman with hair in tight black rows. Garro's right hand was already snapping back to the hilt of *Libertas* with transhuman speed, running to a clock that was far faster than any unaugmented response. His tactical mind told him that he could put down these eight with only two cuts of the blade, killing outright at least half of them and leaving the rest to bleed out in minutes. Without his armour, the concentrated las-fire of multiple rifles at close range could gravely wound him. A lucky shot might even end his life.

But he was not here for battle. These people had been waiting for an enemy, and in his haste, Garro had presented that to them. *No killing today*, he told himself. *Not here, at least.* Even though this chapel was nothing more than a repurposed drain-way, it felt disrespectful to shed blood here.

In a lightning-fast flash, Garro drew the sword in a downward flourish that took off the front quarter of the woman's rifle as easily as trimming a plant stem. She recoiled, staring at the sparks bleeding from the end of the ruined gun.

The sharp crack of superheated air sounded, and Garro hissed – more in annoyance than genuine pain – as a single laser bolt grazed his shoulder. He turned a hard glare on one of the other armed followers, a gangly dark-skinned youth who looked at his rifle as if it had betrayed him by going off on its own.

Garro's unflinching gaze was enough that the youth dropped the weapon and backed away. 'I am not here to kill anyone,' intoned the legionary. 'I was at... Salvaguardia, or whatever you wish to call it. The Afrik sanctuary. But I was too late to halt what happened there.'

The woman with the broken gun tossed it away, trying to recover some of her earlier courage. 'Or maybe you did it. Maybe the Regent sends you and his phantoms to cross us off, eh? One at a time.' She shook her head, her wary gaze never leaving his. 'Men of the Legion, they don't come to read the book. We don't trust.'

'You're wrong,' Garro told her. 'The book... Its reach is further and higher than you can know.'

‘You need to go,’ she shot back, unwilling to listen to him. She knew – they all knew – he could end them, and yet they still stood against Garro. They were as brave as they were devoted.

He opened his mouth to reply, but a commotion at the back of the chamber stilled his words. He heard an argument taking place, and Sindermann’s voice raised in great annoyance. Suddenly, the iterator burst through the blackout cloths, shrugging off the grip of those around him as he went.

The old man took a few steps and stopped, his hand rising to his mouth as he caught sight of the standoff. ‘Oh, infinite. Yes.’ He came forward, an honest smile breaking out across his lined face. ‘Captain Garro...? It is you, isn’t it? Alive and well.’

What happened next was quite alien to the legionary. The iterator pushed his way through the armed followers and embraced Garro like a long-lost sibling – or at least, as much as he could given the discrepancy in their heights.

‘Do you know who this is?’ Sindermann demanded of the believers, some of whom were now warily filing back into the chamber. He threw a derisive wave at the woman and her armed cohort, speaking to them like they were disobedient children. ‘Do not court further insult. Put those guns away. This person is a friend to the Imperial Truth. He is always welcome among us.’ Sindermann’s manner shifted and briefly he was the great orator again, his words filling the air. ‘You look upon the face of Battle-Captain Nathaniel Garro, and you should be honoured! He is a true hero, a rescuer! He saved my life, and that of the Saint... We would be long dead at the hands of the archtraitor if not for his fortitude and daring.’

Garro heard his name rush back and forth across the church in a wave of whispers, and the strange moment made his skin prickle. ‘Well met, Kyril Sindermann,’ he offered, then faltered over his next words. Now he was here, he was not sure how to ask the question that had been gnawing at him for months.

‘The last time you came to my chancel, you made a forthright entrance.’ Sindermann nodded toward the buckled floor plates. ‘And so again. You could have used the door, Captain.’ He smiled up at the legionary.

‘I... erred on the side of caution. Perhaps too much so.’

The iterator nodded gravely. ‘Zeun was right when she said that the Legiones Astartes are uncommon in these halls... but all are welcome. After a fashion.’

‘There are many among my kindred who would hear you,’ Garro told him. ‘If they could.’

Sindermann touched Garro’s hand and his smile returned. ‘They will. In time.’ He gestured toward the dais and an area beyond it hidden behind more of the heavy black drapes. ‘Come, my throat is parched and I need a drink. We’ll talk.’

Garro nodded, and carefully returned his sword to its sheath. As he turned away, he met the gaze of the dark-haired woman Sindermann had called Zeun.

‘You owe me a weapon, phantom,’ she told him. ‘You good for it?’

‘We’ll see,’ he replied.

Above the endless clanking tread of the Walking City, there came a sharp rapping on the metal hatch of the cabin. The assassin burst from the place where he had been crouched for the past few hours with such velocity that Haln almost drew his shimmerknife in shock. The killer had been so silent, so still, that Haln had begun to wonder if he had fallen into a slumber of some kind. Now he realized that the man had only been at rest, waiting for a target of opportunity.

Inky black smoke gathered in the assassin’s hand and began to take on a familiar shape, but Haln was quickly on his feet, stepping between the hatch and his twitching charge. ‘No,’ he said firmly. ‘Put that away. This isn’t the time.’

‘You don’t tell me what to do,’ hissed the killer. ‘I tell *you*.’

Haln let the exasperation show on his face. ‘My orders don’t come from you,’ he hissed. ‘They don’t even come from *him*. So back off, and let me do my job.’

The assassin muttered something foul and venomous under his breath, slinking away to the open window. His scarred hand was empty again, and his fingers toyed with the growth of unkempt stubble on his chin.

The scent of brimstone lingered in the air as Haln peered through a spy hole in the hatch and then cracked it open to allow a wiry deckhand to slip inside. She had a pict-slate in her hand. ‘Got you something,’ she explained, her accent thick with the heavy vowels that betrayed a tech-nomad upbringing. ‘Did just like you asked.’

When they had boarded the *Walking City*, Haln had paid this woman to slip a code-spike into a port on the maintenance level of the central interlingua, the *Walking City*’s core vox nexus, through which ran a steady stream of pirated data.

The woman’s employers, the mistresses of the city, were information brokers with great access to the decrepit digital networks in this part of the world. Haln could have paid them for the data he wanted, but that would have drawn too much attention. It was easier to steal it using a greedy cat’s-paw like the deckhand.

‘Give,’ demanded Haln, and he snatched the slate away. He leaned forward, allowing his right eye to open like a quartered fruit. Long ago, Haln had killed a Mechanicum adept for the optic implant and added it to his own repertoire of tools – it extruded a fine mechadendrite that wormed across the surface of the slate and into a connector slot.

Immediately, his forebrain was assailed by a storm of images and sounds, pieces of data captured in the net of scrapcode that had been lurking inside the spike. The demi-intelligent software device had sifted the torrent of raw data passing through the *Walking City*’s servers – much of it so grossly illegal that the mistresses would have been executed if they were known to possess it – and plucked out what Haln needed to complete his mission.

He drifted into a mechanically-induced fugue state, the data temporarily becoming his whole world. Much of it was useless, redundant or vague, but the valuable gems among the silt shone through. The trawl of data slowly confirmed what he had suspected from the start. The woman called Keeler, the target that they had missed at the sanctuary, was on the *Hesperides* orbital plate. Snatches of vox chatter, pieces of raw machine-code, probability percentiles, all of it accreted into a solid, high-order chance that Keeler was there. Confidence is strong, Haln told himself. This time we will have her.

But there was something else that rose out of the stolen data. An outlier.

For a moment Haln thought some programming anomaly had crept into his feed, but as the information presented itself he realized that it was what it appeared to be. Someone else was in the mix, following the same path, looking for the same thing.

He found a partial pict-capture from a monitor bird of a huge, muscular figure in robes, caught in the act of killing a man. *Legiones Astartes*. There was no doubt in Haln’s mind. Bereft of armour and guns, it appeared, but still very much a grave danger.

And the face... Haln knew that face. He had seen it before, back when he himself had worn a different aspect. The legionary had been clad in storm-shade wargear then, the decks of the starship *Daggerline* reverberating beneath his boots as he strode past the alcove where Haln stood. Not seeing him. Not knowing what he really was.

Haln got off the ship as soon as he could after that, learning that the legionary had another of his kind with him, a psyker whose gaze might pierce Haln’s otherwise flawless disguise. He kept out of sight, with no other choice but to let things take their course... That he had escaped the confrontation out beyond *Eris*

had been a miracle.

But at least the legionary was alone this time. That shifted the odds against them from insurmountable to merely incredible.

‘There’s a problem,’ Haln began, his voice sounding slow and drawn out to his own ears as he disengaged from the data mass and returned himself to a more human thought-mode. ‘There may be a...’

He halted as he became aware of what was going on around him. Being inside the information cluster caused Haln to lose focus on the real world. Time could pass, events could occur right in front of him and he would remain only vaguely aware.

Haln’s face was wet. He reached up and wiped away hot specks of blood.

In the middle of the cabin, a slagged thing that was some repugnant fusion of a melted metal stool and a burned human body lay on its side, emitting high-pitched squeals as it cooled in the breeze from the window. What was left of a face there sat locked in freakish horror.

The assassin stood over his work, black smoke coiling back into his hand as a gun-shaped object deliquesced and vanished.

Haln blew out a breath, secretly pleased that the killer had sated his needs but also irritated at his lack of restraint. ‘You couldn’t wait? Now I’ll be forced to find a way to dispose of her that doesn’t draw notice.’

‘That’s one of the things you’re good at,’ whispered the assassin. ‘What is the problem?’

‘You have very poor impulse control.’

The killer shook his head, gesturing at the data-slate. ‘With that.’

‘I believe we have the target’s location. But there’s an added complication. A Space Marine is also on site. He may be there to protect the target.’

‘Oh.’ The assassin leaned in toward the burned corpse, until his face was almost touching the blackened bone of its skull. ‘I’ve killed that kind before.’ He looked away, glaring at Haln with glittering eyes. ‘More than once.’

# FIVE

## Ask the question

### Lucidity

### The Gallery

Garro sat awkwardly on a chair that, while large, was still too small for a transhuman. He accepted a flask of water from Sindermann more out of ritual than actual thirst, and presently the iterator found a seat for himself, where he could look the legionary in the eye and consider him.

‘It makes me glad to see you alive,’ said the old man. ‘There were times when I wondered if you might have fallen victim to this damnable conflict.’

‘The war has tried to kill me. Many times,’ Garro allowed, one hand falling to rest atop his augmented leg. ‘It’s taken pieces but not the whole.’

‘*It is* a war,’ Sindermann said, nodding gravely. ‘There are people out there who still think it is just a minor revolt. A thing that can be put down with the correct application of reasoning, gunfire and belligerence.’ *We know otherwise.* The unspoken coda hung in the air between them, and the moment stretched.

‘I am here to see Euphrati,’ Garro said, pushing out the words with some effort.

‘I know.’ The iterator nodded again. ‘But why do you *need* to, Captain?’

‘You of all men ask me that?’ Garro looked away, his gaze ranging around the room. The chamber they sat in was another part of the drain-way, walled off with pieces of repurposed decking and old girders. It was an anteroom of sorts, with an entrance at either end. One passage led back to the makeshift chapel, and the other vanished into an unlit tunnel. Sailcloth shrouds hung from the ceiling to pool on the floor, deadening the sound of distant atmosphere processors.

‘I can only imagine the things you have seen,’ Sindermann prompted. ‘I witnessed horror enough at Horus’ hands, and I would live a happy life if I never saw the like again. But you? You brought us back to Terra and then threw yourself into the fight anew.’

Garro eyed him. ‘I never did learn how you were able to leave the Somnus Citadel on Luna. I recall that the Sisters of Silence were determined to hold you in custody for as long as they desired.’

The iterator smiled slightly. ‘Some of the Null Maidens have read the book. They understood. And dear Iacton played a role for us. We found our way out.’

The mention of the Luna Wolf veteran’s name cast a shadow over Garro’s thoughts for a brief moment. ‘Qruze was a great warrior, a better man. His loss is keenly felt.’

Sindermann pointed back toward the chapel. ‘I keep a sacrament lit in his name. He won’t be forgotten.’ He took a breath. ‘You still haven’t answered the question.’

Garro took a sip of the water, tasting the impurities in it, delaying the moment of his reply. Now he was here, he was reluctant to go forward. But eventually the words came, as he knew they would.

‘After the *Eisenstein*, after we made it to Sol... I thought I understood what my duty was. Before, it had been simple. Serve my Legion, my primarch, my Emperor, fight the crusade, bring about the golden age... But Mortarion and the Death Guard broke that covenant. The moment he allied with the Warmaster, my purpose was sundered. I lost my identity, do you see? Great pieces of who I was, stripped away or corrupted. And for a time, I clung to what was in front of me. I reached for the last thing I had left... My only compass was my honour, Sindermann. My only path was to do what was right.’

‘And so you have,’ said the iterator. ‘You took a warning to Lord Dorn and then to Terra. You saved many lives.’

A bleak mood settled on the legionary. ‘I believe now that the Emperor and the Sigillite already knew about the rebellion, even before we reached Terra. I carried that warning for nothing. Men were lost – good men like Kaleb Arin and Solun Decius – and for what? Because I did not stand and fight.’

‘And die?’ Sindermann snapped. ‘We all would have been destroyed, had you not taken us to the warp. Or worse!’

Garro shook off the moment of self-pity. ‘Aye, perhaps so. But it stings no less. And I wonder if it was my arrogance at play to believe that I would find new purpose when I shed the Fourteenth Legion’s colours. Was I a fool to take up Malcador’s offer of patronage? He promised me I would serve the Imperium, and I thought that would be enough.’

‘But what have you really done?’ The iterator’s question was plucked from Garro’s own thoughts.

‘I have passed back and forth across the stars through secretive byways, and by means that only the Sigillite understands,’ he said quietly. ‘I have dug up a dead man who lost his mind, stolen a loyal son from his brothers... These and many others, all to press-gang them into the same ghost army I now march with. For what? For a purpose whose design is beyond my ken? So that Malcador can have his grey legion for tomorrow’s wars? That is not what I hoped for. It is not who I wish to be.’

‘You are of purpose,’ intoned Sindermann, and the familiar words sent a chill down Garro’s spine. For a moment, it was as if he heard other voices speaking the words in synchrony with the old man. ‘The Saint told you that. And you believed that purpose was the one Malcador presented to you.’

‘It is not.’ It was the first time Garro had given voice to the nagging notion that had grown, slowly and surely, in the depths of his thoughts over the passing months. ‘Whatever great schema the Sigillite plans to assemble, I am not a part of his endgame. He confronted me on Titan, in the hall of the hidden fortress that even now he builds for his knights. I knew then. I am his tool. It is true that his purpose aligned with mine, for a while... but I look over my shoulder now and see that they diverged a long time ago.’

‘And you fear you will never find your way back.’

He nodded, his gaze dropping. ‘Euphrati... the Saint... gave me clarity once before. I need that again. If not... I will slip back to what I was that one day over Isstvan. A man who does not know himself.’

‘That will never...’ Garro’s head snapped up as he heard the strange echo-voice beneath Sindermann’s words, clear and distinct now. A woman’s voice.

‘Never be so,’ said Euphrati Keeler. She stood at the iterator’s shoulder, as if she had been there all along. Garro half-expected her to be bathed in some kind of ethereal radiance, but there was nothing of that – only a warm serenity that flowed from her peaceful smile. Sindermann mimicked her words, and the legionary realized that in some manner, she had been speaking *through* him.

Keeler saw the question in Garro’s eyes and shook her head. ‘No, no, Nathaniel. Nothing like that. But

dear Kyril is elderly and he has not endured our fugitive life well. Sometimes I can help him. Strengthen him.'

Sindermann rose, colouring slightly. 'I should let you two talk alone.' He bowed to the woman. 'Blessed,' he said, and then walked away, pausing only a moment to pat Garro on the shoulder. 'Captain. I am so glad you found your way back to us. This is meant to be.'

Garro accepted that without a word, and watched the iterator disappear through the blackout cloths, back into the church proper. 'I've been looking for you for some time,' he said, without turning back. 'Often, I was so close I could swear I sensed your presence in the room as it faded.'

'Yes,' she agreed. 'I'm sorry that was necessary.'

He shot her a look. 'You knew, then?'

'That you sought me? I did. The time wasn't right before.' She took a step away, walking toward the dark tunnel. 'No longer. We shall talk, Nathaniel. I will help you.'

Then he was alone, as the sound of a banned hymnal began in the nearby chamber.

Someone had taken the ruined shell of a passenger shuttle, ripped away the pilot space and the aft drive modules, and then by enthusiasm and a lot of molecular welding, bonded it to the edge of a yawning gap between two huge thermal runoffs. Dangling out into naked air over a sheer drop, the ramshackle cantina was a nexus for every lowlife chancer, petty criminal and thug who wanted to numb themselves against the unpleasant reality of life on Hesperides.

Haln nursed two fingers' worth of something brackish and electric blue in a tumbler cut from the bottom of a water bottle. It tasted like spindle oil and ingesting too much of it in one go would have blinded a normal human, but he was only simulating the act of drinking. Occupying the sparse end of the cantina's grubby steel bar, he kept watch on the place through a wireless link to the spare eye he cupped in his free hand. Now and then he would roll it back and forth across the countertop with the idle motion of someone who wasn't looking for companionship or conversation.

His charge, the assassin, had changed his manner once again on the voyage up from the surface to the orbital plate. He was actually in a frame of behaviour that Haln would have been willing to call 'lucid', and the spy wondered if the horrific murder aboard the Walking City had aided with that. He dismissed the thought. The assassin was a short distance away, near a hololith tank showing a playlist of tawdry burlesques and sanctioned watchwire broadcasts. Mostly, though, he was pretending to be interested in the ranting of a stocky, rat-like man covered in shimmering electroos. The obvious social dynamics of the room revealed that the tattooed thug was in some position of authority here, and after slipping unnoticed into the cantina a few hours earlier, Haln and the assassin had swiftly built up a model of the power structure in this sordid little corner of the Emperor's mighty Imperium.

The thug had recently ascended to the top of his gang through attrition, and not by his own guile. The termination of two of his closest allies had forced the tattooed man to become the leader, and it was abundantly clear to Haln he did not have the acumen for it. The thug talked again and again about the circumstances in which his comrades had perished, embellishing it a little more each time to make the story play like he had been its focus. Haln read through all that, of course, nodding along with the rest of the audience and laughing in the right places. The assassin was particularly good at this sort subterfuge, even volunteering the occasional comment in an accent that passed muster. He was like a different person now, and Haln hoped this version of him would stick around for a while.

The thug's story wound round again and the broad strokes remained the same. A killer Space Marine, undoubtedly dispatched by personal order of Horus the Whoreson himself, had come to Hesperides to join up with the chanting religionist freaks living in the underlevels, clearly on a mission to kill, defile or

eat those hardy souls who called the platform home, in the name of something or other unhallowed. The thug and his comrades had bravely set out to stand in their way, and despite a spirited fight that claimed the lives of all his friends, he alone had survived. His pyrrhic victory had been to chase the slaving monster into the underlevels, where it had either perished of its wounds or found safety with the god-lovers. If the Space Marine or the believers knew what was good for them, they'd stay there.

Haln ignored the gaping lapses in the story's logic and sifted for facts. So the legionary was alive, and most likely with the target. But the location of the followers and their 'church' would be difficult to find. By the thug's own admission, the body of the last man to know where it was had been thrown off the gantry and buried in the sky.

Then someone else mentioned that there were other followers who had come to this quadrant, and how it amused the gang greatly to kidnap and keep them chained up for beatings. There were suggestions that the captives be sold to harvesters in the nearby Mindano Plex, who reportedly paid good coin for fresh organs.

This was the information they needed. The assassin gave a pre-arranged signal, and at the next thing the tattooed thug said, Haln burst out laughing. He pocketed the spare eye, turned on the thug and told him how all the effluent he had been spouting for the last two hours made his brain ache. Missing nothing, Haln called out each and every point where the thug's tissue of lies made no sense, giving special focus to the places where he had obviously covered up his own cowardice.

The fight blew up in an instant. Haln fought off the gang's lesser members, giving the assassin the chance to step in and 'assist' the thug in disposing of this mouthy interloper. He made it look convincing – too convincing, in fact – and ended up pitching Haln out of a window toward what would seem to be his grisly death.

In fact, Haln scrambled out across the underside of the ramshackle construction and waited there, clinging on with a web of cables while the assassin ingratiated himself with his new best friend. He observed through the remote eye, which he had deftly dropped into the killer's jacket pocket while they struggled.

The plan had made Haln nervous when the assassin described it, but now it was in play, it proceeded exactly as expected. Another surprise, he considered.

Hanging there, with the wind pulling at him and the thud of worker boots drumming through the deck over his head, Haln eavesdropped on the lie the assassin unfolded for the thug.

*He hadn't been totally honest. He wasn't just someone passing through. The truth was, he was here as a servant of the Emperor himself, oh yes. As an agent of the Legio Custodes, the Emperor's personal guard, no less. Hard to believe? But true, a truth that could only be told to a patriot. Someone like you. And that Space Marine, that enormous freak that had dared to kill your friends and sully your city with his presence? He was here to hunt it down.*

Haln could not deny that the assassin knew how to play his part. The thug's reaction was lamentably predictable. His initial wariness was soon overridden by greed, vanity, and no small amount of self-preservation. He had to know his newfound status was shaky, but what better way to cement his role than by ending the threat that had already claimed the lives of his betters? Someone more intelligent, less desperate, might have questioned it a little more. But the thug wanted it to be true, and Haln knew that the fictions most easily imposed were the ones that were willingly swallowed.

*Of course, the only way to locate this monstrous traitor-kin will be to find the place where these fanatics are hiding their filthy place of worship... But who could know where that might be?*

The thug was not intelligent enough to realize that he had been guided to his answer before he gave it.

*The pilgrims, of course! They had to have some idea, didn't they? All it would take was someone to*

*cut on them for a time, and the location would be freely given...*

He was telling the assassin where to find them as Haln began to navigate a slow and careful path across the underside of the platform and back to the decks of the lower levels. By the time he had made it to safety, Haln witnessed the two men speaking in coarse good humour like they were old friends.

The spy found a good place to wait, a short way from the cantina, and settled in to prepare for the next phase of the deception. He didn't have to linger too long; the tattooed thug, a couple of his cohorts and the assassin emerged on one of the swaying gangways and set off toward a satellite platform, connected to the main bulk of Hesperides Plate by a series of interwoven conduits.

Haln followed at a distance, still listening to the feed being transmitted to the short-range receiver implanted in his skull. The mutter of their conversation echoed through his mastoid bone, and he listened for the trigger word.

*Lupercal.* The assassin said it twice so that Haln didn't miss the moment. The spy burst into a run, drawing his shimmerknife as he came out of the shadows.

He put the blade across the backs of the thug's men in two short sweeping motions, the weapon's aura-generating edge slashing through bone and nerve and flesh to sever their spinal columns. They fell screaming and he sneered. Their tradecraft was appalling, barely the smallest inkling of situational awareness that dull, almost bovine reactions did nothing to improve. He declined to give them mercy-kills to end their lives swiftly, and let them bleed out as they lay paralysed and screaming.

Haln saw the assassin raise his hand as the tattooed man's face twisted in shock and surprise, and for a moment he was afraid the killer would conjure his daemon weapon there in broad daylight. But something odd flashed over the assassin's face instead. The open hand became a heavy fist, and he sent it crashing into the thug's jaw. The man went down, and more blows rained upon him. Each time the assassin struck, a spasmodic feedback pulse went through the thug's electroos and they gave off a desultory flicker of light.

The assassin lost himself in beating the thug to a pulp, and Haln hesitated, unsure if he should intervene. Raw emotion twisted the killer's expression into something filled with rage and pain. Haln heard him cursing the thug – who by now was quite dead, his nasal bone having been smashed into the front of his brain – and saying a woman's name, over and over.

'Who is Jenniker?' He asked the question without thinking.

The assassin let the thug drop to the deck amid a pool of his own blood. 'What are you talking about?' His expression was stony once more, and he fished in a pocket to find the spare bionic eye. 'You don't know that name.' He tossed the eye at Haln, who snatched it out of the air. 'Why are you asking me pointless questions?'

Haln's lips thinned. Was his charge losing clarity of mind again, so soon? Perhaps that was the price of having such a horror of a weapon bound to him by that gruesome scar. 'It doesn't matter. You know where the pilgrims are being held?'

'We'll need another story to tell, if we are to find the target. Torture will take too long, and we've wasted too much time already on this effluent.' He gave the dead thug a kick, gaining a dull blink of light in return.

'I have a suggestion,' Haln ventured. 'The same game we played in the cantina, but for a different audience.'

'As long as there will be kills for me,' muttered the assassin.

'Soon enough,' promised Haln. 'Soon enough.'

The woman called Zeun grudgingly found Garro some privacy in a meditation cell of sorts, cut out of the side of a feeder pipe. Her distrust of him hung in the air like acrid smoke, but he made no effort to assuage

it. The legionary was tired of having to answer every single challenge made to his character, no matter how large or how small. If this woman thought ill of him, then so be it. All that mattered was the Saint, and what she would tell him.

Garro had a very real sense that he was reaching the end of a chapter of his life, turning a page from what he was now to what he would be next. It had happened before, this profound state of transition – when he was a youth, recruited to become a neophyte of the Dusk Raiders, again when his Legion had bent the knee to Mortarion and become the Death Guard, then on Luna when Malcador had spoken to him... But this time there was something more. A feeling, not of dread or anxiety, but of grim understanding. A sense, perhaps, that the next chapter of his life might be the last.

‘So serious,’ said a light, warm voice, and Garro turned to see that Zeun was long gone and Euphrati Keeler stood in her stead. ‘And so troubled. Sometimes I wonder what your face would look like if your heart was lighter.’ She cocked her head, studying him. ‘You’d make a good subject.’

He frowned. ‘For what?’

Keeler smiled, holding up her hands, thumbs and forefingers making a rectangular frame that she held in front of her. ‘A pict-image or three. That used to be my canvas, Nathaniel. I miss those days, sometimes. When all I had to do was capture a moment of time.’ She let her hands fall. ‘The language of an image can be understood by anyone, anywhere. It’s timeless. It can communicate so much... I wish it were so easy for me to pass on the message I carry now.’

‘I’m not sure I understand...’ he began

‘I can show you.’ Keeler moved toward him, and unaccountably, Garro retreated a step, motivated by something that he could not quantify. ‘What’s wrong? You’ve come so far, but now you have doubts?’

‘I have come this far precisely *because* I have doubts!’ he retorted. ‘It is a state that is anathema to me. I am a legionary and I was made to be *certain*. It eats at me that I am not.’

‘The curse of the intelligent man,’ she offered. ‘To question all things, while those less gifted act without hesitation.’

On an impulse he couldn’t explain, Garro surged forward and grabbed her wrist. ‘Then answer the question,’ he demanded. Keeler’s forearm seemed a tiny, fragile thing like spun glass, and he knew that with the slightest pressure he could crush her bones to powder.

The Saint showed no reaction to what he had done. Instead, her other hand snaked down and found his, gripping it gently but firmly. Garro felt a strange, electric thrill run through his nerves. ‘Let me show you the gallery,’ she told him. ‘The place where I hang all the images that come to me.’

Keeler’s voice was melodic and strangely distant. Garro felt a chill crawl over his bare arms beneath his travelling robes. He tried to speak, but the action was difficult to complete.

He blinked, and a shade had been drawn across the world. The room looked different, the light of it falling in odd ways, as if through a prism.

‘See here, Nathaniel. In this one, I am killed.’ Keeler was showing him a still image, sharper than any hololith or high-definition pict, brighter and more detailed than reality itself. It engulfed him. He could not look away from the hyper-saturated, overwhelming composition of it. ‘I don’t care for it myself,’ she said.

Somehow, in this non-moment, he was *inside* the image with her, both of them observers who had stepped into this trick of the mind. The transition had been so subtle, so easy, that Garro had barely felt it happen.

He beheld a tragic scene. Keeler, draped across outslite steps that were pock-marked with bolter hits, surrounded by common soldiery and weeping helots. She was quite dead, but angelic in her repose. ‘Where... is this?’ he asked.

‘The Annapurna Gate of the Imperial Palace. This is one of my fates.’ She paused. ‘Here, another.’

Darkness eclipsed the moment and it became another time and place. A near-lightless dungeon, all sallow illumination coming from the glow-flash of a meltagun about to discharge. It was impossible to see the hand on the weapon, but the shadow behind it was a hulking one, unquestionably a Space Marine. Keeler knelt on the stony floor before the muzzle of the weapon, still meditating in the split second before the beam destroyed her.

‘Another,’ Keeler went on. This time, in the hold of a shuttlecraft that was on fire around her. ‘Another.’ At the foot of the Byzant Minaret beyond the Petitioner’s City, a sword at her neck. ‘Another.’ Desperate hands dragging away mounds of rubble, finding beneath them the hem of her tattered robes. ‘Another.’ Garro saw himself cradling her limp body in his arms, his face and his shattered grey armour a monument to the hardest-fought battle of his life.

On and on it went, visions of futures that might come to pass, a cascade of unhappened days where the only constant was Euphrati Keeler’s death. He thought he glimpsed other places he knew – the Somnus Citadel on Luna, the tactorium of the *Phalanx*, even the nave of the makeshift chapel.

‘Stop!’ he demanded. ‘Why are you showing me this?’

The Saint looked up into his eyes and the sorrow he saw there was pure and endless. ‘These are the lives that extend out before me, dear Nathaniel. I capture glimpses of them, and fate ends my life again and again.’

‘I reject that,’ Garro snarled. ‘There is no fate but what we make for ourselves. Nothing is pre-ordained. If destiny exists, it is to guide us, not yoke us!’

‘And yet, I perish,’ said Keeler. ‘Here, and here and here and here...’ She paused. ‘In all skeins of time I am dead... save one.’ She shook her head as all around them became darkness. ‘And that place, I have not seen.’

Garro blinked as she released her grip on his hand, and he let go her arm. All was as it had been, and they stood unmoved from the anteroom beyond the makeshift church. Keeler’s ‘gallery’ faded from his memory like a sunset. ‘You must not die like that.’

She smiled gently. ‘I won’t live forever, Nathaniel. None of us will. Only the God-Emperor has that gift... That curse.’

*We have to keep her safe, Nathaniel.* Sigismund’s solemn words tolled through his thoughts, and suddenly Garro’s own troubles seemed small and inconsequential. ‘You bring hope to millions in these darkest of days. I can’t let you be killed.’ He shook his head. ‘The Templar was right. I let my own uncertainties cloud the duty before me. You must be protected.’ He nodded to himself as the doubt that had plagued him suddenly melted away. ‘I wasn’t certain what that purpose was... I think I am now.’ The clarity was stark and dazzling.

But then the Saint shook her head. ‘You see and you still do not see.’

Garro stiffened. ‘You must leave Hesperides immediately.’

‘No, Battle-Captain. I will not.’

‘You *shall* leave!’ Garro barked, and his shout drew Sindermann’s attention, the iterator dashing back through the blackout cloths with a look of fear on his lined face.

‘What is going on—?’ he began, but Garro spoke over him.

‘You are exposed, Euphrati,’ the legionary insisted, forcing himself to meter his tone. ‘This place is not safe. Horus sent killers for you at the sanctuary, and they hunt you still. I know a place where we can protect you, a remote outpost in the Ishtar Range...’

‘On Venus?’ interrupted Sindermann.

Garro went on, formulating the plan as he spoke. ‘There are automated cargo ships that ply the run to the Venusian protectorate. It’s isolated, lightly populated, and you will be out of harm’s way. From there, we

will be able to gain passage from the Solar System and out across the segmentum.’

A flash of disappointment crossed Keeler’s face. ‘Why would I ever want to flee, Nathaniel?’

How could she not comprehend this? ‘Because if you stay on Terra, you will die here! Your own insight showed you that!’

‘I have you to protect me.’ Keeler turned away from him. ‘And you should know by now – nothing is that simple.’

A cloud of conflicted emotions swirling about him, Garro strode out to the gantry beyond the chapel of the followers and scowled at the night sky. He struggled to process the churn of his thoughts.

‘I am of purpose,’ he muttered.

For too long, he had vexed himself over what the meaning of those words might be. For a time, he had thought that purpose was the same as the Sigillite’s plan, but events had shown him otherwise. Garro wondered if there really was a kind of fate, and if it were playing him for a fool.

Keeler was the hub around which his future was turning. He saw that now, looking back at the path his life had taken. The escape of the starship *Eisenstein* had not just been about his passage from last loyal son to Knight Errant, or the warning brought to Terra – it had been the Saint’s journey as well. It fell to him to keep her safe, and he had done so. Now that duty was coming full circle and the undeniable realities of those grim futures Keeler showed him could not be ignored.

‘Sigismund...’ For a moment, Garro wished the Imperial Fist could hear his words. ‘You were more correct than you realized...’

‘Do you know yourself now, Captain?’ Garro turned as he heard Sindermann approaching him. ‘Those cross words in the chapel, I admit I did not expect—’

‘I don’t remember her being that wilful,’ he snapped.

The iterator chuckled. ‘Then you have not spent enough time in the Saint’s presence.’ He folded his arms. ‘She’s much more than she was last time you saw her. The changes the Saint has been through... Can you imagine what it must be like for her? To awaken one day and know that you have been chosen as a vessel for the will of a higher being?’

‘I am a legionary,’ Garro said simply. ‘That is every day for me. Or it was once.’

Sindermann came to the guide rail where Garro stood and looked out at the same sky. ‘She’s more than just a symbol of hope for those who believe. She is the embodiment of that potential. The Imperial Truth...the *real* Imperial Truth.’

‘That makes her dangerous,’ Garro insisted. ‘It puts her at risk.’ He shook his head. ‘Ever since Isstvan I have been searching for a true reason to keep on going, to keep fighting and striving. She may be it, Sindermann. I should have seen it all along. I can protect her. If she will only let me.’

‘But are you certain you know what you are protecting her from?’

Garro shot him an acid glare. ‘This is not a moment to give me riddles, iterator. My patience wears thin! Speak plainly or not at all.’

He sighed. ‘The Saint is a flashpoint, Captain. Her life or death will affect the course of this war, even if it seems like great hubris to say so. If the Warmaster’s agents reach her now, while the word of the Lectio Divinitatus is still finding its level, it could trigger a religious uprising here on Terra. That is what Horus wants. The commoners touched by the words of the book finding cause for fury... It could destabilize the planet, perhaps the whole star system, ahead of any invasion. Think of it... While Lord Dorn toils building a fortress and hemming in Mars, while Malcador schemes and the God-Emperor faces what we cannot in the secret realms of His palace, as each of them is distracted the book could sour the common people without the Saint’s guidance. Chaos, Captain Garro. The seeds of chaos would bloom.’

‘I can prevent that,’ said the legionary. ‘I’ve seen the weapons the Warmaster uses, with blood in their teeth and murder in their eyes. I know how to kill them.’

‘But Horus Lupercal is not the only one with designs upon the Saint,’ Sindermann replied, watching him intently. ‘The Sigillite is not ignorant of her potential. A man like him... How could he not be concerned by what she might become?’

‘I am not here as Malcador’s instrument,’ said Garro firmly.

Sindermann waved away that notion. ‘Of course not. No one thinks that.’

‘Zeun does.’

The iterator chuckled again. ‘She’ll learn. But her suspicion is a valid one. If the Sigillite were to find some way to fetter the spread of the book, he would usurp it. Turn it into something that serves his interests.’

‘Malcador told me all he does is in service to the Imperium.’

‘But not to the God-Emperor?’ Sindermann leaned closer. ‘They are not the same thing, Captain. Think on this, sir: Euphrati is what the people need... a conduit to His glory, uncluttered by other intentions. She is the hope they so desperately want in this time of great uncertainty.’

Garro was silent for a long moment, before he stepped away from the guard rail. ‘She will not leave for Venus and beyond.’

Sindermann shook his head. ‘She will not.’

‘Then it falls to me to ensure that the Saint survives to fulfil her potential.’ The legionary drew himself up, reaching inside for the familiar sense of his warrior soul that had been muted these past few months. ‘To do that, I must shift the balance of the battleground. Anticipate the enemy... and destroy him.’

# SIX

## **Interception Revelations Infernal**

They looked, but they did not find the shimmerknife on Haln when they searched him. The spy had hidden it inside a flesh-pocket on his inner arm that only a close inspection with a medicae auspex would have revealed. The other pilgrims surrounding him submitted to the same checks without question, some of them quietly accepting, others giddy with anticipation. When the believers in the makeshift chapel were satisfied, the pilgrims were allowed into the wide, curved space of the chancel proper.

Haln melted into the group, drifting forward to the front without obvious effort on his part. It had been little challenge to set these people free from the thugs who captured them on the upper tiers of Hesperides. He watched the assassin murder the hapless guards left behind with casual brutality, making use of his bare hands to do the deed. Under cover of darkness, Haln inserted himself into the group of captives, many of whom had seen no light for days. In the dank, dripping gloom of their haphazard prison, one more frightened face was easy to overlook.

He was ready to push them on to the right course with some choice words, but the moment never came. Someone eventually figured out that the silence outside meant the guards were gone, and gingerly pushed open one of the hatches. There they found dead bodies, and in one of the rooms off the main corridor, somebody else discovered another prisoner chained to a chair – a prisoner with a hawkish face and a scarred palm. The hostage pilgrims were so deliriously relieved to be free, not one of them stopped to think that their escape was part of a larger gambit. As the spy hoped, several of them knew where to locate the hidden chapel in the lower levels, and all he needed to do was follow them.

Haln heard one man saying that this was the God-Emperor's will, and the ease with which the others accepted that meant Haln's armoury of prepared lies went unused. He allowed himself a smile, and entertained the thought that this might actually be easy. He liked that idea. The sooner they could bring this mission to a close, the sooner Haln could jettison the mercurial assassin with his monstrous gun and his see-saw moods. The sooner, he reasoned, he could return to the work assigned by his lords. That was where the real war lay, not in these foolish games—

He snapped back to the moment. The pilgrims were forming into a queue that wound back through the chapel, and Haln was close to the head of it. He shot a look over his shoulder, seeing fifty or more of the faithful who had journeyed to this rusting hulk of a city on little more than a word and a hope. The

believers who had met them with open arms stood in clusters all around, some of them linking hands and speaking litanies to one another.

He was very careful not to look upwards, into the dark shadows among the gantries overhead. The assassin had vanished from the group as soon as they arrived in the chapel, and he had to be up there somewhere, waiting for the right moment.

Step by step, the pilgrims advanced toward the stage at the far end of the chapel, and Haln felt the ebb and flow of emotion from everyone around him. He put away his smile and kept a fixed expression of humility on his face, not wishing to betray even the smallest iota of his true feeling to the others.

In point of fact, Haln despised these religionists. The spy considered their dogged acceptance of a mythical deity to be backward and childish. He would admit that, indeed, the Emperor was an incredibly powerful being, but then so were his sons, and so were their scions, the legionaries. Power of that kind could command fear and loyalty, that was a given – but to suddenly attest numinous nature to a real and quantifiable thing? Such thoughts came from limited minds unable to appreciate the true nature of existence... There were no gods in the universe, only unknowns. Life existed in a cruel space that neither rewarded nor punished. If Haln believed in anything, he believed in that.

The followers in front of him moved forward in a jerky surge and Haln suddenly found himself at the foot of the stage, near a jury-rigged wooden stair that would allow the pilgrims to climb up and walk across the dais. He looked ahead and saw an old man in what looked like the robes of an Imperial Iterator, standing close to a dark-skinned woman who scowled at every one of the new arrivals, as if searching for a face that disagreed with her. Haln glanced away without making it obvious as the group shifted forward again, and he heard a female voice cut through the air.

‘Blessings of the God-Emperor be with you,’ she said, the words soft and perfect. ‘Go forward in His light. The Emperor protects.’

Haln found the speaker and something strange happened. He was at a loss for words.

Revealed as another of the pilgrims moved away, there stood *the target*. Haln had seen a hololithic image of the woman taken years earlier, something dredged up from the public data nets, unflattering and basic. It hardly seemed possible that it was the same woman whom he looked upon now. She was changed in a way he could not put into words. She seemed more alive, and there was an energy to her that he could sense even yards away. Charisma, for want of a better term.

As he watched, she said the holy litany again for the man who stood in front of him, giving him the blessing of her god. Haln felt a peculiar energy around him and his heart pounded against the inside of his ribs. Against all willingness, the spy felt a pulse of elation run through him. It was like moving closer to a naked flame, bright and warm and enticing. The target – the Saint – looked to him and met his gaze for the first time.

Her radiance washed over him, and Haln was torn in two. One voice inside his thoughts rejected whatever gentle witchery she was casting over him, another throwing itself into the glow of it with abandon. The pressure built inside him.

It would be easy to take her hand, and admit it all. Give up the darkness he had shackled himself to. Surrender. Redeem whatever remnants of a faded spirit still remained in him.

But the other voice won out. He shook it off and ran a hand down his arm. Flesh parted, blood oozed, and the shimmerknife slid into his grip. This is who I am, Haln told himself, his smile growing wide and cold. He wished he could see the face of the assassin as the blade came alive. The killer had sent him into the crowd to sow distraction, but now chance had put Haln directly at the point of the execution.

He laughed aloud at the thought that it would be he and not Horus’ broken vassal who would end her. The sound was swallowed up in a crash from the other side of the chamber.

‘No—!’ The dark-skinned woman saw the vibrating glow of the shimmerknife and shouted, throwing herself into Haln’s path.

The kills at the sanctuary had not been the random murder of an untrained mind. From the first sight of the fallen, fire-twisted corpses, Garro had instinctively known that he was dealing with an expert in the art of death. The way the infernal flames had been laid down defied analysis in some places, and there the legionary suspected sorcery was at work. But elsewhere, the pattern of shots and kills fell into a state that approached regularity. The hand that wielded the weapon at the gutted stronghold was methodical and callous, leaving nothing to chance, chasing down every last wounded believer and burning them alive.

He wondered if the killer took some form of pleasure from the slow, agonizing deaths – or was it more arcane than that? Did the killer literally consume that pain? With all the horrors Garro had faced since the eclipse of the insurrection, he doubted nothing any more.

He believed in what he could see, even if that was something preternatural and horrific – and what he had seen at the sanctuary gave him insight into the mentality of the killer. Knowing that gunsight mind, grasping and understanding it, Garro knew where such an assassin would strike, and fathomed how it might be done.

The legionary stood up for the first time in hours, allowing his body to snap back from a low-heartbeat, slow-slumber state to full combat readiness. Concealing himself in a cluster of coolant pipes, he had blended in and become a piece of the darkness. Now that shadow came apart and he strode forward, each step ringing on the plates of the suspended gantry.

The man stood before him, balanced on the edge of the raised catwalk with a hand that grasped a bell made of black smoke. He turned to see the new foe that had presented itself, and Garro glimpsed a masked face. Tarnished steel and shredded synskin surrounded a baleful viridian mono-eye strip. The mask was damaged, but it was unmistakably that of a Clade Assassinorum.

Garro drew his sword. ‘I should have known. The kill profile was familiar to me. You are Vindicare. The outcome that justifies the deed.’

The assassin cocked his head. ‘I haven’t been that for a long time.’

Garro heard the echo of his own words in the reply and grimaced. ‘What you are now is a traitor.’

The barb had no effect on the killer. The coil of inky haze in his hand shifted and changed, becoming a solid, glassy form. ‘Can one betrayed become the betrayer?’ He pointed with his other hand. ‘You are deceived, legionary, as much as I was. We’re all just weapons in the end. But they lie to us, they make us think we are more.’

There was uncomfortable truth in those words, but now was not the moment to dwell on them. Garro raised his sword, thumbing the stud that brought the blade’s power field to life. ‘There will be mercy, if you surrender. I can promise no more than that.’

The smoke gathered into a great pistol of blocky crystal shapes, lit from within by a liquid, hellish luminosity. The form of it was sickly and unreal, and just the act of looking at it made Garro’s jaw clench. The killer balanced the daemonic gun easily, making lazy aim toward the chapel below. Garro saw the recently-arrived pilgrims and the rest of Keeler’s followers mingled down there, all unaware of what was happening just above them.

The former Vindicare shook his head. ‘I cannot accept your offer. That choice can only be made by a man. And I told you... I am the weapon.’

With a sudden jerk of motion, before Garro could strike, the assassin tipped backwards over the edge of the gantry and fell to the floor below with a clattering din.

Haln planted the shimmerknife in the dark-skinned woman’s chest, a quick in-and-out blow that punctured

her aorta. She went down on the dais in a jumble of arms and legs, blood jetting from the wound in her torso.

‘Zeun!’ The old man in the robes stumbled after her, too slow and too feeble to catch her before she collapsed. Impotent rage flared on the elderly iterator’s face and he foolishly turned his ire on the spy. He tried to shove Haln back, but he had little strength behind him.

Haln batted the old fool away with a hard backhand blow, and it was no different from punching a wrap of dry twigs. The iterator tumbled headfirst off the stage and into the screaming crowd of believers.

The fixed, rigid grin on Haln’s face faltered a moment as he caught the sound of a fire catching. He paused in his grisly duty and saw the assassin rising from among a pile of crushed chairs. The unhallowed pistol was massive in his pale fist, and Haln knew what would come next.

Just as before in the extermination of the Afrik settlement, the daemon gun discharged with a firedrake’s roar and vomited up a stream of plasma flame. The murderous lance of burning warp-energy was itself alive, and it wound through the stale air of the chapel as a sea-serpent would move through open water. Blindingly fast, the blazing streamer described twists and turns that no conventional munition would ever have been able to achieve – and everything it touched came alight, consumed from within by a shrieking internal fire. The assassin kept firing, and more snakes of hellish plasma were unleashed into the chamber, dancing and killing as they went.

None would survive this, just as none had lived to tell the tale of the deaths at the sanctuary, and this time the tally of kills would include the greatest prize of this idiotic little cult. Haln turned back with the bloody shimmerknife still humming in his grip and saw the target down on her knees, draped over the body of the woman he had stabbed through the heart.

The target had her pale, long-fingered hands over the gushing knife wound, and Haln saw strange glittering motes of gold misting the air around the injury. She was singing a hymnal to the dying woman, and by no means Haln could grasp, that act was pulling energy from nowhere, keeping her from perishing.

With all her attention on her charge, the target seemed barely aware of Haln coming toward her. He decided that he would make his fatal cut across the back of her neck, severing the spinal cord.

Garro sprinted to the edge of the gantry as the odour of burned flesh and scorched metal filled his nostrils. He heard screams and saw bodies falling, their skin seared away in the same grisly fashion as the dead at the sanctuary. Below, the turncoat killer was firing into the crowd with cold abandon. The discharges moved as only living things did, whips of fire coiling around their victims, burning them, moving on to the next.

Perhaps they were some minor phylum of warp-creature, squeezed into this plane of reality though the annulus of the daemon-gun. Garro understood why the burn patterns in the sanctuary had been so haphazard and unreal – the fire from the weapon was *toying* with its victims.

*I must end this–*

The thought perished half-formed as his genhanced hearing pulled a cry from Sindermann out of the melee. Finding the old man through the chorus of shouting and screaming, he glimpsed the iterator fall at the hands of some nondescript man in shabby work clothes. From up here, Garro could clearly see that the other man had a powered blade of some kind in his grip. He was advancing on Keeler, who had ignored all sense to flee and instead knelt over the bleeding body of Zeun. The Saint was a heartbeat away from joining the injured woman on the road to a painful death.

The assassin with the sorcerous pistol was immediately, undoubtedly, the greater threat – Garro’s tactical mind pushed options into his thoughts, weighing how he could end the gunman’s existence as quickly as possible and save the bulk of the followers. But Keeler would die if he chose that target over

her preservation. Was she worth it? Did this woman have the right to be saved over all the others in the chapel?

She would say not, Garro told himself. That it why she must not perish.

Blotting out the screams, the legionary gave himself over to the detached, clinical battle-skill that ran through his flesh like a second spirit. He ceded control to muscle-memory and the precise, unflinching proficiency that was forged into him. With a snarl, Garro spun *Libertas* up and around his head, putting might and momentum into the hilt of the crackling power sword. At exactly the right instant, the weapon slipped from his grip as if it were escaping of its own accord, and it looped away over the heads of the panicked believers.

Haln raised his arm at the beginning of the downward arc that would slash through the Saint's unprotected back, and saw a blink of motion from the corner of his eye. He had no time to register it, not even enough for his adapted nervous system to react and push him away.

Like a sight from the holy tales of gods and monsters he so reviled, a titan's sword fell from the shadows and cut through him. The blade severed his forearm just above the elbow and then went across his neck and shoulder. Haln was still trying to understand as his head fell away from his body and tumbled to the stage. He glimpsed the mighty weapon embedded in the curved steel wall, his own blood vaporizing into pink smoke off the energized flat of the blade. Beneath it, flung there by force of impact, his bifurcated arm with the hand still clutching the shimmerknife. Without a consciousness to control the skin reactives, his concealed mark of fealty darkened and reappeared. The blue-black ink of the hydra tattoo, the many heads curving in on themselves. His true fealty as covert auxilia of the XX Legion, there for all to witness.

Haln's severed head rolled, the cut that removed it so fine that nerve impulses were only now starting to misfire, fluids spilling from the clean-cut meat of his neck. Consciousness stayed with him, brain-death still long seconds away.

He saw his own body, the headless mass sinking to its knees and jetting blood from its stumps. There was enough energy in him to blink once and move his eyes.

In the spy's last moments, his gaze was filled by a woman's face. The target.

Haln felt the terrible, final panic of this instant, and all he wanted was to get out one last thought, one last regret. *I wanted to see victory.*

The woman's sorrow washed over him, and then darkness.

Now without a weapon, Garro was not unarmed. More than his sword, more than a bolter or a suit of powered armour, a legionary alone was the greatest weapon in the arsenal of righteousness – that was an axiom that had been drilled into the warrior as a neophyte, back when he trained hard under Terra's storm-blackened skies, and the gloom of *Barbarus* and all it augured were still a lifetime away.

He followed the gunman down to the lower level in the same fashion, leaping the gantry and allowing himself to drop twenty feet to the steel deck. For Garro, it was barely a step, and he struck the metal in a perfect three-point landing, his robes snapping out around him.

Fires burned everywhere, and each one of the shrieking torches was a human being engulfed by cruel witchflame. They were not allowed to die quickly. Whatever brutal animal instinct drove the fire-serpents unleashed by the gun, they clearly liked the taste of pain.

Garro ignored the agony around him and broke toward the assassin as he reeled around to bring his accursed weapon to bear. The legionary had no time to make a definitive killing blow; the angle was wrong and the moment off-kilter. All he could manage was a sweeping backhand that clipped the killer and sent him spinning up and away. The assassin landed hard atop a line of cracked wooden pews and

tumbled across them.

The strike dislodged the killer's battle-damaged mask and Garro came storming toward him, sweeping low to scoop it up as he approached. The corroded, stained metal of the faceplate made it resemble an object centuries old. Garro sneered and crushed the mask in his hand, shattering delicate crystal circuits and visi-lenses. 'Let me see your true face,' he spat, as the assassin rose shakily to his feet.

The legionary's sword was rooted in the wall, across the chaotic, smoke-wreathed chamber and well beyond his reach. But no matter; Garro would end this wretch without it if he had to.

The assassin glared at him, and Garro saw an angular, unkempt face that was a mess of hatred and grim determination. If not for the hell-gun in his hand and the wraiths of morbid light it cast across his features, the killer could have been mistaken for a vagrant pulled from the foetid alleys of some overcrowded hive city.

Garro closed the distance. 'I gave you a chance. You should have taken it.'

The assassin did not grace him with a reply. He *fired*.

A gush of volcanic flame erupted from the yawning maw of the glassy pistol, opening into a multitude of blazing streamers that flicked toward the legionary. Garro thought he saw dark spots at the tips of the fire-streaks, reminiscent of arachnid eyes. Then the weapon's war shot was striking him and he staggered into the infernal deluge. A conflagration hotter than any natural flame he had ever encountered bent and moved around him, holding close to Garro in a tormented embrace. He felt the material of his robes crisp and catch alight, polymerized synthetic plasti-threads flexible enough to turn a knife blow now burning like a common weave. The hood rolled at his back spat and burned, searing the fuzz of shorn hair on his scarred scalp.

Garro forced himself to advance, step upon step toward the gunman, hands raised to protect his face. The halo of flames sang as they consumed the air around him, filling his lungs with choking smoke. He uttered the Warmaster's name as the curse it had become, and snatched handfuls of his burning robes. With a grunt of effort, Garro ripped the flaming material from his back and flung it away. Beneath, he had only the form-fitting body-sheath that he would have worn under his Mark VI Corvus-pattern battle plate, the connector ports to his implanted black carapace glittering in the muddy firelight.

He shrugged off his own tide of fire, a terrible phoenix intent only on stopping cold this killer's mission. Leaping at him, Garro grabbed the assassin's gun hand and forced it up and away, his other hand snatching at the greasy tunic his target wore.

The legionary lifted his foe easily off the deck and shook him hard, but the obscene pistol would not be dislodged from the assassin's grip. From the corner of his eye, Garro saw that the daemon weapon appeared to be a seamless part of the man's hand, the glassy matter of the breech, grip and barrel morphing out of flesh, bone and blood. Aimed uselessly at the ceiling, the muzzle grunted and flexed like a gasping mouth.

'Why did you turn?' Garro bit out the words as he increased pressure with his other hand, feeling ribs crack and grind on one another beneath his implacable grip. 'What did they offer you?'

The uncertainty curdled in his throat. It was a question he could never answer for himself, one that troubled him deeply. So many of his battle-brothers in the Death Guard – led, to his eternal shame, by their gene-sire Mortarion himself – had made the same pact as this man, surrendering their honour to Horus Lupercal's new vision.

'What could be enough?' he roared, anger fuelling him as much as the pain from his burned flesh.

'...*Truth*,' said the assassin, forcing out the reply.

'What?' The word hit Garro like a slap in the face, and there was an instant when he lost focus. 'What truth? Speak it!'

‘My name... is Eristede Kell.’ The assassin choked in the legionary’s death-grasp. ‘Your God-Emperor took... everything from me. Your Sigillite sent... sent me to die.’ He showed a mouth of blood-flecked teeth and shouted back at Garro. ‘*Horus set me free!*’

The daemon-gun was an impossible weapon, and so its next transformation, the act sudden and ugly, was no shock to Garro. He saw it happening and realized that this man Kell had drawn him in, used a moment of hesitation against him.

The weapon and the hand that gripped its blocky, crystalline form both disassembled into a pulse of seething black smoke that remade the component parts. Bone and glass, blood and mist, fed by hatred. In the blink of an eye, the gun was Kell’s hand and Kell’s hand was the gun, shifting and moving, a writhing eel-thing that bent itself out of Garro’s grip. It turned back along an axis that no bones could have accepted without shattering, to aim point blank at his face.

Garro had no choice but to let go, arms coming up once more to shield himself. A breath of white-hot plasma ignited before him and shrieking overpressure blasted the legionary back into a mass of blackened corpses and smouldering matter.

He lost precious seconds reeling from the fiery shock front. Garro’s skin sizzled and cracked where the bite of the flames marked him, and had it not been for the autonomic nerve-shunts and the agony inhibitors generated by his bio-implants, every breath would have been misery for the legionary.

He was back on his feet, flexing his hands into fists, when a voice cried out his name. ‘Nathaniel! Here! Look to me!’

Garro turned and saw old Sindermann staggering toward him. The elderly iterator was dragging something behind him, all his strength put into hauling his burden across the chamber.

Libertas. Somehow the old man had managed to dislodge it from the wall where the thrown sword had embedded itself, and was attempting to bring it to him. Conflicted thoughts crossed Garro’s mind – respect for the aging preacher that he could do such a thing, even though he was bruised and bleeding; annoyance that old fool was putting himself in harm’s way. He let the latter take the lead.

Garro dove toward the iterator and shoved him to the floor, pulling the blow as best he could. Even as he moved, he felt new surges of witchfire at his back. The assassin Kell would not stop until he had reduced the legionary to ashes. Sindermann went down in a heap as Garro snatched back the hilt of his power sword. A surge of confidence bloomed as the familiar weight of the weapon settled into his hand. He had always felt a special bond with the blade, something above and beyond the simple equation of warrior and weapon. A bright object clattered about Libertas’ cross guard and Garro saw a golden chain wrapped around it, the links ending in an icon of a two-headed eagle. The Emperor protects, aye, he thought. But today, that responsibility falls to me.

Kell shouted a foul curse and Garro reacted without hesitation. He dragged Sindermann close and shielded the iterator’s body as a new wave of murderous flame bathed them both. A hiss of pain escaped the warrior’s lips as the outer layer of skin across his back was burned away, exposing the plasti-form sheath of his black carapace implant. The torrent of heat seemed to go on forever, and not even the legionary’s pain blocks were enough to dam the flow of raw, searing torture.

Then at last it ceased, but Garro knew it would only be a few moments before Kell fired again, unleashing another blazing serpent-thing from the immaterium even as echo of the last shots faded.

Drawing a breath laced with the sweet stink of burned human meat, Garro forced himself to his feet. Sindermann lay on the deck before him, white as milk and trembling in terror. ‘Get her out of here,’ Garro growled, forcing the words out of his damaged throat. ‘There’s a dock platform at the edge of the district. Go now, and stop for nothing.’

As Sindermann nodded, a question fell from him. ‘Can that witch-gun kill you?’

‘I will find out,’ Garro managed. He came about, each step jamming razors into the dozens of open wounds across his torso and his limbs, and advanced on the assassin through the wreaths of dirty smoke.

Sickly vapour streamed from the mouth of the glittering glass pistol as Kell brandished it toward him. ‘I think I understand how the Clade Eversor find such joy in their kills,’ he said, as if speaking to some unseen audience. ‘Every murder I made before, it was distant and cold. I saw their faces but I never really knew the moment of death.’ He showed Garro the daemonic gun. ‘This makes it different. When you are close, you can taste it. It allows you to love the act.’

‘You are quite mad,’ spat Garro. ‘Horus did that? Or did he just make use of it?’

Kell’s face twisted. ‘He let me *see*. And I’ve seen you dead, Death Guard. Your heart broken and bleeding black.’

‘Perhaps,’ he allowed, fighting back a weariness that reached up from the darkness. ‘But it will not be your hand behind it, murderer.’

The assassin bared yellowed teeth in a feral snarl and took the daemon weapon in a two-handed grip, bracing to aim toward him. The square-cut shape of the muzzle undulated and snapped open into a glass flower, its maw widening in a funnel of crystal petals. Garro saw baleful fire shimmer within the impossible spaces of the gun’s interior a split-second before it vomited forth a great comet of flames. The air screamed as it was torn open by the power of such elemental horror forcing its way into reality.

A mass of living fire, dancing and swooping above him, came at Garro in a blinding rush. It had no shape that could be held in the mind for more than a few moments, shifting between forms that could have been avian, arachnid or humanoid.

There might have been a time – before becoming a Knight Errant, before the Warmaster’s betrayal – when Nathaniel Garro would have beheld this horror and wondered how he would fight something so utterly unreal. He was no longer that man.

This war – Horus’ war – had changed him in ways he had never expected, and in this second Garro realized that whatever doubts he had were now ashes. They had burned away, just like the skin across his body. He was free of them.

He did not question how he would fight the daemon. He would destroy it as he had every other enemy put before him. *With the weapon in my hand and the strength of my soul.*

Garro triggered the power field surrounding Libertas’ blade at its maximum potentiality. Lethal jags of captured lightning scintillated along the length of the sword, generated and collimated by ancient, time-lost technology. This weapon had brought down tyrants, it had slaughtered rampaging beasts, ended the lives of traitors and, when called upon, given the Emperor’s Peace. One more monster would not be its match.

Ignoring all sense of caution, Garro threw himself at the fire-form as it swept down on him. Raising his power sword high into a jousting thrust, he pushed himself past the pain from the lashes of flame bombarding his tormented body and let the point of the blade find the pulsing heart of the daemon. The creature, a primitive predator-form from the abyssal deeps of the immaterium, did not possess the wit to realize that the legionary had used its own momentum against it.

Libertas plunged into the core of the abhorrent form and the energy resonating through its blade flashed free in a catastrophic shock of unleashed power. Unknowable science from the age of Old Night met unreal anti-life from another dimension and cancelled out its existence. Blue aurorae rippled through the fire-daemon, and with a cry that chilled the blood it combusted into a haze of orange-black embers. Whatever malevolent quintessence had motivated the creature was sent screaming back to the warp, and Garro’s sword became dead metal once again, its power drained for now.

‘No!’ Kell shook his head wildly, whatever brief clarity his tortured mind had known now dispersed like

the daemon. He raised the gun again, aiming at Garro's chest. 'You should die! You are supposed to die, that is how it will be, I have done it before, I will do it again—'

'Enough,' snarled the legionary, and Libertas sang through the choking air on a downward arc. Powered or not, the age-old sword was still a formidable tool of battle. The cut cleanly severed Kell's hand at the wrist, the shock knocking him back as the lump of flesh and glass spun to the deck.

The assassin's howls echoed off the curved walls, but Garro ignored him. He watched as the severed hand flopped back and forth of its own accord like a landed fish, dragging the profane crystal mass of the gun with it. Meat and bone became molten, changing shape once more. The weapon took control of the flesh and remade itself into a form that resembled a scarab beetle, grimy fingers for legs and a vitreous block for a shell.

Garro stepped to the thing and impaled it on the tip of his sword before it could completely reconfigure itself. It burst in a welter of blood, oil and silvery pus. For good measure, the legionary stamped what remained into the deck plates, grinding it to nothing beneath his heel.

A trail of dark fluid led him to the assassin, as the man stumbled across the makeshift chapel toward the altar. 'She is gone,' Garro called after him. 'You failed in your mission.'

'Not the first time,' gasped Kell, refusing to accept defeat. 'No.'

Fatigue pulled at Garro, and he knew it was his body's energy racing to repair the grievous damage wrought by the witchfire. He shook it off and aimed a finger at the other man. 'Eristede Kell. I name you traitor. Stand and answer for your crime.'

'Traitor?' echoed the assassin. 'We are all traitors in the end, legionary! We are all betrayed and then the betrayer... You are no different than I!'

Garro's lip curled. 'I did not swear fealty to the first primarch to turn against his father!'

'But you did turn against your father!' Kell shot back, cradling the bloody stump of his wrist close to his chest. 'Your kinsmen too! Traitor... What does the word mean? It changes colour depending on where you stand... All that anyone can know is that we will eventually be betrayed...' His words trailed off into a painful wheeze. 'Are you prepared to save her?'

The question came from nowhere. 'Save who?'

'You know! Are you ready to surrender everything for her?' Kell looked away, his watery gaze suddenly lost and distant. 'I was. All for nothing.'

Garro's sword turned in his hand, shifting to a backhand grip as he closed the distance between them. 'This ends now.' He raised the weapon, point downward.

'It won't,' said Kell, but then the blade dropped through his clavicle and down inside his ribcage, cutting his heart in two and freeing the assassin from whatever bargain he had made with the Warmaster.

Alone now, with only the murdered and the ashen fires surrounding him, Garro withdrew the sword from the corpse and watched it fall.

# SEVEN

## **Betrayal Of purpose Never seen**

The burn-pain lingered along with the stench of the dead, pressing into Garro with a throbbing ache. A cursory search of the makeshift chapel found not a single follower there still alive, and with a grim cast to his face, the legionary left it behind.

He crossed through the blackout sails and followed a route through the derelict overflow conduits, the path that he had ordered Sindermann to take toward the upper tiers of Hesperides. With each step, he wondered if he would come across more flame-crisped bodies like those killed by the daemon-serpents. His thoughts tormented him as he walked, suggesting ways of death for the Saint and the others that were manifold and horrible.

He recalled Sigismund, and the Imperial Fist's entreaty to protect Keeler at all costs. If she perished under his watch, Garro knew that the Templar would hunt him down and see him pay for her loss.

These were the thoughts that plagued him as he ascended a vent shaft by means of an iron ladder. Wan light streamed down on him from an open grille at the shaft's exit, and presently Garro emerged on to a shadowed landing platform that extended out from the western side of the orbital plate.

He took a deep breath of damp air, and there was faint, brackish moisture on his face. A fine rain was falling. The industrial aertropolis' weather screen was poorly maintained, and as Hesperides skirted a dense cloud formation, some of it wandered in past the city limits. Garro nodded to himself. That would be useful; it could cover an escape.

'Sindermann.' He spoke the iterator's name aloud, and the word was a husky growl from his smoke-scarred throat. 'Show yourself.'

He glanced around, finding a pair of stubby oxy-tankers parked line abreast in the middle of the platform, little more than clusters of spherical pressure tanks in winged frames with gravitic motors to get them in the air. They would do as a way off this wretched place.

Garro sensed the survivors before he saw them, hearing the rattle and creak of their footsteps over the rusting deck. Limping badly, Kyril Sindermann emerged from the shadows. He was leaning heavily on a young man, one of the armed posse of believers that had surrounded Garro when he first arrived. With them were a handful of others who crowded an unseen figure in the middle of their group. Zeun was leading these followers, and she was almost corpse-pale, her tunic covered with drying blood. Still, she

walked toward him with brittle strength, those hard eyes once more daring him to cross her.

‘You live, then,’ he said, with a nod. ‘I thought I saw Kell’s accomplice take you down.’

‘Kell?’ she echoed, making it a challenge. She waved a hand in front of her face, mimicking a mask. ‘That one?’

He nodded again. ‘That one. I killed him.’

‘Good...’ Zeun was going to say more, but she trailed off as she got a better look at him. He had to appear as something barely alive to them, the burns on his body so fierce that they had only ever seen the like upon the dead. She struggled with her reaction – was that disgust or pity? Amazement or revulsion?

Garro peeled open part of his body-glove, where it had become stuck to his bloody torso, to remove an object he had placed there. With care, he cleaned it off. ‘Here. You should have this.’ He handed it to her, and Zeun looked down at the shimmerknife dagger lying across her palm.

She held it like it was a poisonous snake, fascinated as much as she was repelled by it. After a moment, Zeun took the weight of the energized blade in her hand and rolled it in her fingers. Garro could see that she had the skills of a street fighter, and the pragmatism too. Some might have balked at taking the very weapon that had almost ended them, but not this one.

From where he stood, he could see the cut in Zeun’s tunic where the blade had gone in. If there had been a wound behind it, that injury was gone now. ‘You said I owed you a weapon.’ He gestured at the blade. ‘My debt is paid.’

He didn’t linger to see if she had more to add, and turned toward Sindermann – but not before casting a glance at the knot of hooded believers. One among them seemed to move differently to the others. Keeler. Hiding in plain sight.

‘Captain,’ began the iterator, labouring a breath with the words he uttered. ‘What of our people...?’

‘None remain.’ He saw no merit in softening the blow. ‘Your secret church of Hesperides, such as it was, has suffered the same fate as the sanctuary in Afrik.’

‘And others too, that you know not.’ Saying the words aged Sindermann terribly, and his young companion had to hold him steady. ‘But the killers are dead. I heard you say that.’

‘*These* killers are dead,’ Garro corrected. ‘But there will be others. The archtraitor has many more broken souls to call upon.’ Frustration rose in him, his growl becoming harder and colder. ‘You should have listened to me.’ He turned and glared at the hooded figures. ‘Euphrati!’ barked Garro. ‘You should have listened!’

The group parted and there she was in the middle of them. He wondered if they really thought the act of surrounding her with their frail human bodies would be armour enough to keep her safe.

The Saint rolled back her hood and showed him a weeping face. ‘I did not want this,’ she breathed, coming to him. ‘I don’t want it to happen any more.’ She halted and looked up at the sky, as if seeing something Garro could not.

He glanced at the iterator. ‘You must go into hiding, that is clear. I will stand with you. I have contacts. I will find us a safe haven.’

‘You would reject the Sigillite’s dominion over you?’ said Sindermann. ‘You would become a renegade?’

‘I will never reject Terra and the throne,’ Garro snapped back. ‘Lord Malcador, however...’

But before his thought could fully form, the legionary felt the wet air around him take on a taut quality. He tasted ozone on his crackled lips and knew the familiar sensation for what it was – the precursor effect to a battlefield shock transit.

He had Libertas clear of its sheath as the first emerald flash emerged out of nothing, across the platform past the prow of the second tanker. In the span of milliseconds, other motes of green lightning blinked into

existence all around them, and then came a low crack of displaced air molecules as multiple teleport fields deposited a dozen faceless figures at all points of the compass.

Garro wheeled, seeing human soldiers in blank-eyed carapace armour bearing high-power laser carbines. His gaze settled on their leader – a Space Marine in full Corvus-pattern war plate, a heavy bolt pistol already drawn and ready in his grip.

Like the soldiers', the other legionary's armour was the shade of storm clouds and bereft of all sigils, honours or iconography – or at least, no marks that were immediately apparent to the eye. But if Garro had looked closely, he would have found the ghostly imprint of a stylized letter 'I' upon their shoulder pauldrons.

The bolt pistol – the sole object that carried a splash of colour upon it – was a clue to the face behind the beaked helmet. Then, as the legionary advanced toward Garro, the way he moved confirmed his identity. 'Ison? Malcador sent you, then?'

Ison reached up and twisted off his helm as he walked closer, snapping it to a magnetic pad at his waist. The other legionary's face was olive-hued and his eyes were dark and almond-shaped. A duelling scar ran the length of his jaw and it had not healed well, giving him a permanent half-sowl. The bolt pistol floated in his mailed fist, lazy and deceptive. Garro could almost believe it wasn't aimed at him, but he had seen the warrior in action and knew how he fought.

'Captain Garro,' Ison said formally, giving him a slow look up and down, his gaze lingering on the worst of the burns. 'Do you require an apothecary?' His voice was a steady murmur.

'I'm well enough to fight.' He tightened his grip on his sword.

Ison cocked his head, and as one the soldiers raised their rifles to firing stance. 'Will it come to that?'

'The choice is yours.'

The other legionary released a weary sigh. 'The order falls, Garro. Stand down. You are recalled to duty.'

'Malcador tracked me...' Garro's lips thinned as he considered this turn of events. 'He used me to find Keeler?' He nodded toward the Saint, who had gathered Sindermann and Zeun to her.

'He is the Sigillite,' Ison replied, and tapped a long finger against his temple. 'Did you ever think he would *not* know where you were?'

'He sees so much, aye... But not enough to intervene below?' Garro pointed at the deck, in the direction of the under-levels. 'Or is it that he cares little for civilians who lose their lives daring to seek a different truth?'

'I know nothing of what you speak.' Ison's expression remained neutral, and Garro realized he was telling the truth. The Knight Errant went on. 'By the command of the Regent of Terra, you must stand down and allow the woman Keeler to be taken into Imperial custody. She won't be harmed. No blood will be shed... if there is co-operation.'

Garro's damaged features turned stony, and he let his weight shift away from his bionic leg. If it came to combat, he did not trust the replacement limb to work flawlessly after all the heat damage it had suffered. Libertas was at the ready. He could strike at any instant. 'I do not wish to comply.'

'Out of respect for what you have done for me, I suggest you reconsider that statement.' Ison stiffened, tightening his grip on the pistol. 'I say this for the final time, Captain. Stand down.'

The sword began to move, but then Garro felt a delicate touch on the blackened flesh of his arm and he looked down to see Keeler's hand resting there.

'*Wait*,' she said, and all at once the air became slow and heavy. The gauzy haze of raindrops around them gained sudden definition as they were suspended, and every motion was arrested.

He looked back to Ison and saw that the other legionary was as motionless as a statue. The soldiers and

the believers, Sindermann and Zeun alike, all were frozen in a timeless instant.

‘How... are you... doing this?’

There was a peculiar echo to his voice, the sound flat and contained.

The Saint was pale, the effort taxing her greatly. ‘It doesn’t matter.’ She took a shaky breath. ‘Don’t fight him, Nathaniel. That act cannot be called back.’

‘I have taken the lives of brother legionaries before,’ he said, regret weighing down the words.

‘Not like this. Ison is not your enemy.’ She gestured at the soldiers, whom Garro knew he would have to butcher to a man if it came to blades and guns. ‘They are only doing what they believe to be right, as you are.’

He turned on her, Libertas dragging in the air as if moving through thick oil. ‘I did not protect you from Horus’ agents only to turn you over to the Sigillite! Malcador’s schemes are known only to him, and I will no longer place my trust nor yours in his hands! Not while he has so many secrets.’

She shook her head. ‘I told you before. You see and you do not see.’

‘So tell me,’ he demanded.

The Saint’s head bobbed. ‘Have you not considered that I am *meant* to go with Ison? That this confrontation was always going to happen?’

‘Malcador fears your influence,’ Garro retorted. ‘He hides it, but there can be no doubt! If the Knights Errant take you this day, you will vanish... There are a myriad of dungeons buried deep in the rock of the Imperial Palace. You will disappear into one of them and never see light again!’

‘I don’t believe that,’ she said firmly, with enough conviction to give the legionary pause. ‘Not as long as you still draw breath.’ Keeler leaned closer to him, and he felt an ethereal warmth radiating from her face. ‘You told me before I am in danger. What better fortress walls for me to shelter behind than those of the greatest bastion in the Imperium?’

‘As a prisoner?’

She smiled. ‘If the esteemed Regent wishes to consider me that, I won’t correct him until I have to. And the word will out, Nathaniel, even if I am not there to speak it. I am the Truth, but the Truth is not me. The book continues to spread across all human worlds. The work will go on. We approach our darkest hour, and the people need that light to guide them, now more than ever.’

His heart felt leaden. ‘Then this is to be my doing? I do not protect you. I step aside, stand down... What am I then? What value do I have any more, if not this?’ The sword in his hand had never weighed as much as it did now.

‘Nathaniel Garro, you are as you have always been.’ The smile on her face became radiant, and her eyes shimmered. ‘You are of purpose. When the moment comes, and mark me when I tell you, you *will* know it... It will be your hand that sees me set to freedom, your sword that holds fast my safety. Do you believe me?’

How could he not? The force of veracity behind every word she said resonated with him in a way few things ever had. Garro knew now that he was sworn to her, that he had been from the very moment they first met on board the *Eisenstein*. If there was a fate, then this woman was its hand upon his. He nodded. ‘Aye.’

‘When the time is right,’ she told him, ‘you will release me.’

‘From what?’

‘You’ll know,’ said the Saint. ‘Until then... you must have faith, Nathaniel.’

There were so many other questions he had, but then Keeler withdrew her hand from his arm. The gossamer rain resumed its fall and the moment was in motion once again.

‘Put up your sword,’ Ison was saying.

Without breaking the Saint's gaze, Garro tapped the stud that deactivated the power field around Libertas' blade, and then carefully returned the sword to its scabbard. He took a step back from the woman's side, and at a nod from the other Knight Errant, a trio of soldiers detached from the group and came in to escort her toward the edge of the platform. His hearing picked out the muted thunder of a stealth-rigged Stormbird approaching from the north.

Garro eyed the troopers with cold malice. 'She is to be respected, understand?'

'Of course,' Ison replied. There was a faint note of reproach in his words, as if he was insulted by the suggestion of any other behaviour. He nodded again, and the remainder of the grey-armoured soldiers stepped forward, moving toward Sindermann, Zeun and the other followers.

'No.' Garro's hand had not left the hilt of his sword, even though it remained sheathed. 'You won't take them. She is all you'll have today.'

Ison hesitated. 'It is true that Lord Malcador did not make specific reference to any others beyond Keeler... As you wish, Captain.' He gestured to the soldiers, who stood back.

The weak scattering of rainfall was briefly whipped into a fury as the Stormbird rose into view, hovering at the edge of the landing platform. Its thrusters turned the air to a turbulent squall as it moved to present a drop ramp for boarding. The Saint gave a bow to Sindermann and the others, and then walked directly into the ship without waiting for her escorts. Garro watched the iterator take two shaky steps after her and then falter, his face falling. Zeun shot the legionary a poisonous glare, blaming him for all of this. She has good cause, Garro told himself.

Ison crossed to his side, his voice rising to be heard over the engine noise. 'You'll accompany us, then? I have been told your wargear has been repaired and renewed during your leave. Your mantle as Agentia Primus awaits your return.'

Garro let go of the sword's hilt and watched as Sindermann and the other followers came to the realization that they were free to leave. Slowly, they turned to face the Stormbird, and without any bidding from the iterator they all bowed in the direction of the Saint. Against their breasts, they crossed the flats of their hands over one another, forming the shape of the aquila.

As elderly as he was, Sindermann's old mind still held a fire of oratory that would continue to carry the truth of the Lectio Divinitatus, even without Keeler's ephemeral support. And perhaps a quiet word to Brother-Captain Sigismund would help that on its way – if the Templar ever forgave Garro for letting Keeler fall beneath Malcador's shadow.

'Is there anything more to hold you here?' said Ison.

'My questions have been answered,' Garro told him, walking toward the drop ramp.

Weeks passed, and Garro left Hesperides behind in thought and memory – first in the non-sleep of a curative trance to heal his wounds, and then with new duties. There were many tasks to be addressed, fresh missions to be attended to. It seemed that with every passing day, the clandestine work of the Knights Errant grew in scope and complexity.

In a lull before his next deployment, Garro travelled back to the surface of Terra, back to the forbidding hills of Albia. Now he walked there once again, alone with his thoughts, refreshed by the silence.

It felt right to be back in his war plate once again. Without it, he was less than the sum of his parts, incomplete – and Ison had been right when he said the armour had been well cared for in his absence. While outwardly it still bore many of the scars earned in decades of long battle, beneath the skin the mechanisms that drove it had been invigorated with new components and the loving care of the armourium's tech-wardens.

With flesh regrown across his burns, his bionics newly attuned, he was whole again, not just in

physicality but in spirit – something that had eluded him for too long.

Garro walked on, wondering how many others there were like him, at large in the galaxy at this moment. How many men in grey, featureless armour at the Sigillite's beck and call? He considered what he had seen on a mist-wreathed moon of Saturn and the moment of insight that had come to him there. My fate does not lie on Titan, he had told himself. He would have to trust that it would reveal itself in due time, rather than allow itself to be sought out.

His gauntlet closed into a fist. Garro had been a Death Guard legionary, and a Dusk Raider before that. He understood the acts of patience, dedication and unyielding perseverance better than any scion of the Legiones Astartes. So be it, he thought. I will be ready. Until then...

He sensed movement on one of the nearby crags and halted, his hand dropping to his mag-locked bolter. Presently, a trio of oily black shapes detached themselves from the dark granite outcroppings and gingerly skirted around him. Garro halted and let the lupenates come a little closer.

The wolf-things sniffed at the air, tasting his scent on the stiff breeze, and lowed mournfully to one another. A simple communication passed between the animals and they slowly backed away, giving him a wide berth. An intelligent predator learned from its errors, and the lupenates had learned not to challenge the warrior in grey, instead to respect him. But as they moved to a distance, the creatures became twitchy and skittish, finally breaking into a loping run and vanishing over the ridge line.

Garro knew without needing to turn around what apparition had frightened them into headlong flight. 'Am I never again to have my own counsel, my lord?'

Malcador walked past him, marking out each step he took with the black iron staff in his hand. 'Is that why you come here? To be alone?' The Sigillite looked at everything except the legionary, a pool of light cast around him from the slow-burning fires in the basket atop the rod.

'I find something in this place that exists nowhere else.'

'Indeed?' Malcador's eyebrow arched.

'Clarity,' explained Garro. 'I have learned that as time passes, it becomes a more valuable commodity.'

'And what does your clear vision grant you?' Malcador turned to face Garro, that ice-cold gaze washing over him. 'A greater understanding of the threats we face, I hope.'

'I know those things well enough.'

The Sigillite gave a nod. 'Yes, I think that may be so. Your conduct proves it.' Garro wondered what that might mean, and Malcador told him. 'When we stood here before, and I granted you leave to follow your own path for a time... I confess, there were many ways in which that might have unfolded. But in the end, you did what I would have ordered you to do regardless, even without my command. You did what best served the Throne and Terra. What does that say about you, Captain?'

Garro held the Sigillite's burning gaze. 'That I am as I have always been. Loyal to the vow I swore.'

'No doubt...' Malcador seemed about to break off, but then the smallest of expressions pulled at his lined features.

Garro saw it clearly for what it was – puzzlement. For a brief moment, the air stiffened around him and the legionary sensed the Sigillite turning a greater force of his powerful psionic ability to bear on him. Then the strange pressure fell away, like a wave retreating from shore.

'Something has changed,' said Malcador. 'I did not see it before, but now I perceive it clearly.' He tilted the head of the iron staff toward Garro, the flames atop it quietly crackling. 'There is a part of your spirit that is opaque, Nathaniel. Obscured, even to my insight.' A faint, brittle smile played upon the Sigillite's lips. He seemed at once amused and dismayed by the possibility.

'Aye, lord.' Garro remembered a touch of gentle radiance against his seared skin, of how it passed through him and what that might portend for the unwritten future. 'That place you cannot see into? That

part of me that remains forever closed to you?’

He broke Malcador’s gaze and turned away from him.

‘That is my faith.’

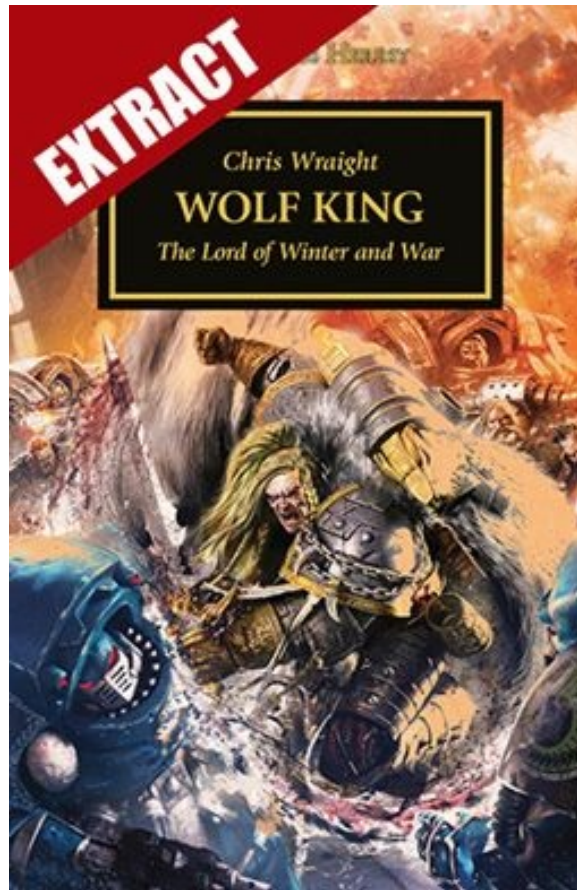
## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Nathaniel Garro is the son of several fathers, and I'm just one of them. My eternal thanks to Jervis Johnson and Andy Chambers, for introducing him in the *Epic 40,000* rulebook; to John Gravato, for the portrait that first set the tone for his character; and to Toby Longworth, for making him speak and live and fight on.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**James Swallow** is best known for being the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Fear to Tread* and *Nemesis*, which both reached the New York Times bestseller lists, *The Flight of the Eisenstein* and a series of audio dramas featuring the character Nathaniel Garro. For Warhammer 40,000, he is best known for his four Blood Angels novels, the audio drama *Heart of Rage*, and his two Sisters of Battle novels. His short fiction has appeared in *Legends of the Space Marines* and *Tales of Heresy*.

An extract from *Wolf King*.



Three standard days previously, inside the Alaxxes Nebula – called the blood-well, the eye of acid – the Wolves had met in war council.

The Legion had been driven into the cluster by extremity, and only its extraordinary stellar violence had kept them alive to fight on. The gas cloud was vast, a skein of rust-red on the face of the void, falling into deeper and more intensive virulence the further one went in. Sensors were blinded, engine systems crippled and the Geller fields fizzed like magnesium on water. No sane Navigator would have taken a ship into those depths, save but for the certain promise of annihilation on the outside.

There were tunnels within, mere pockets of clear space between the great blooms of corrosive matter. The ships of the fleet could slip down them, guarded and menaced by the lethal shoals on every flank, hidden from enemy scan-sweeps and torpedo-rakes but open to devastating flares that punched through armour-plate and overloaded void shields. As they pushed into the bowels of the blood-well, the Wolves found that the capillaries grew narrower, more fouled, less open, tangled like nerve fronds. A ship dragged into the burning gas fields would be consumed in hours, its hull melting as its shield-carapace imploded and its warp core breached; so the Wolves ran warily, sending escorts out wide and running repeated augur-soundings.

No starlight illuminated those depths, and space itself glowed with the red anger of a clotted wound. The ice-grey prows of the *Vlka Fenryka* ships were as bloody as wolf maws. Every warship carried scars from the brutal battle with the Alpha Legion out in the open void. They had been ambushed while still recovering from post-Prospero operations; outnumbered and outmanoeuvred, and only retreating into the heart of the cloud had kept them alive to fight again. Many of their ships were now incapable of making for the warp even if the gas tides had allowed. Tech-crews crawled over every surface of every battleship, working punishing rotations just to get shield generators functioning and macrocannon arrays back online, but they would never complete that task adequately, not without the attentions of Mechanicum-sanctioned shipyards, and the closest of those was unimaginably far away.

So the Wolves were cornered, wounded and lean with hunger, forced into retreat by an enemy with greater resources and infinite patience. They were harried at every turn, driven onward like cattle before the whip, until the madness of confinement ran like a virus through the decks.

That was the environment in which Gunnar Gunnhilt, the Jarl of Onn, called Lord Gunn by his brothers and second only to the primarch, made his case.

‘They will run us down,’ he said.

The Legion command, a council of forty souls, listened intently. Russ himself had not spoken. The primarch was slouched in a granite throne, his true-wolves curled at his boots, his ruddy face locked in brooding. Frost-blue eyes glittered dully under a mane of dirty blond hair. The Lord of Winter and War had not fought since the abortive attempt to summon Alpharius to the *Hrafnkel*, and the enforced lethargy seemed to have atrophied him.

Bjorn had witnessed that last fight, had seen his primarch take apart a Contemptor Dreadnought as if it were a child's toy. That power must still have been there, coiled deep, locked in his brawler's hearts even in the midst of endless defeat, but the surface fire had gone. Russ now surrounded himself with runes, listening to the cold whispers of white-haired priests and trying to divine the auguries like a *gothi* of old.

It was whispered, and Bjorn had heard the whispers, that the Wolf King had lost his stomach for the fight; they said that being kept out of the greater war had turned his mind, that the death of Magnus haunted him and that he had not slept a clear night since the Khan had refused to come to his aid. Bjorn did not believe that and knew the whispers were foolish, but something, it had to be admitted, had changed. Lord Gunn knew it, Helmschrot knew it, as did the priests and the ship commanders and the jarls of the Legion.

'They believe us beaten,' Gunn said. 'That makes them unwary. We strike back hard, the fleet together, launching boarding actions to take out the lead battleships.' There were grunts of agreement around the ceremonial circle, lit only by the swaying light of half-cold fires. Above them all, looming in the dark, were totems from the origin-world – animal skulls, knot-handled axes, wide-eyed masks of gods and monsters – still bearing the marks of long-gone Fenrisian wind and rain. 'If we keep running, we will deserve to die here, skinny as starving dogs.'

Russ said nothing, but his fingers moved through the thick fur of the wolves at his feet. He stared into the heart of the circle at the annulus-stone, brought from Asaheim like all the other sarsens in that massive ship. Circles had been carved on its surface, concentric and spiralling, worn smooth by aeons, predating the Great Crusade by a thousand years.

'Gunn speaks true,' said Ogvai, adding to the counsel he had given before. All the jarls were united in this – they were tired of running.

Russ looked up then, but not at Lord Gunn or Ogvai Helmschrot or any of the others. He looked, as he so often did, straight at Bjorn. As he did so, Bjorn sensed the spark of resentment from the elder warriors, even Ogvai, the master of his own Great Company, and he felt the old mix of shame and pride that Russ's attention gave him.

No one knew why the primarch favoured him so much. For some, it was further evidence of the softening of his once-peerless battle-cunning. The rune-rattlers and bone-carvers kept their own counsel, and Bjorn himself had never wanted to know the reasons, not least for fear of what Russ might have seen.

In the event, the primarch said nothing to him. His gaze wandered away again, and one of the two wolves at his feet whined uneasily.

'This will be your fight, Gunn,' Russ said at last. 'Hit them hard, or not at all – they have the numbers on us.'

Lord Gunn did not grin at that, not like he might have done in the past. 'It will be done.'

'You have two hours, once we start,' said Russ, distractedly. 'No more. We break out in that time, or I'm calling you back.'

'Two hours–' started Gunn.

'No more,' snarled Russ, his eyes briefly flashing. 'They outnumber us, they outgun us. We break the cordon and push free of it, or we fall back. I will not have my fleet crippled on their anvil.'

He slumped back into torpor. He had not said whether he would try to hunt down Alpharius again, or leave the bladework to his warriors. He said so little.

Slowly, Lord Gunn bowed his head. He had been given his chance, but the margin for success was slender.

'As you will it,' was all he said, his fists balled on the stone before him as if he wanted to break it open.

They tracked the Alpha Legion on long-range augurs for the next two standard days, gaining as complete a picture of the enemy formation as they could. Lord Gunn's war council estimated that two-thirds of Alpharius's fleet had followed them into the gas cloud's heart, arranged in as loose a formation as the treacherous ingress-routes would allow. The rest had remained further back, hanging above the entire sprawling structure to ward against the Space Wolves escaping.

Precise numbers were hard to gauge, even across the Wolves' own ravaged fleet. Comms malfunctions led to many smaller ships being misclassified as lost when they were still within sensor range. What was clear was that the Alpha Legion resources were far in excess of what Gunn had at his disposal, and their capital ships were in better shape too. *Hrafinkel*, the fleet's lone Gloriana-class behemoth, had taken a beating during the escape into the nebula and would only offer ranged support to the break-out attempt. That left the line battleships *Ragnarok*, *Nidhoggur*, *Fenryrsavar* and *Russvangum* to carry the main assault, even though the *Fenryrsavar* was in only marginally better battle condition than the flagship.

The Alaxxes gulf presented tactical challenges: there was no space to spread out into the void, or to make elaborate manoeuvres. They would be fighting in the largest of the gas tunnels, hemmed in on all sides by the shifting curtains of foaming crimson. The aperture's diameter at the narrowest point was less than two hundred kilometres – a claustrophobic space to be marshalling a battlegroup in, and one that gave almost no room for proper movement.

Given those constraints, Lord Gunn had opted for the one thing his Legion could always be relied upon to excel at: full-frontal assault, conducted at speed and with full commitment. The core attack from the capital ships would be supported by two wings of strike cruisers, each one aiming to power ahead on either flank to hem in the lead Alpha Legion vessels and keep their lateral gun-hulls busy. As soon as battle was joined, Gunn would give the order for massed boarding torpedoes and gunship assaults. The earlier encounter in the deep void had driven home the lesson that the Wolves' only real advantage lay in hand-to-hand combat, despite the self-evident risks of losing warriors to a more numerous enemy. Lord Gunn's aim was, so he told his brothers, to 'ram our blades into their throats, twisting them so deep their eyes will burst'.

No one disagreed. The councils were concluded, swords were sharpened, armour was sanctified with runic wards and battle-rites were completed. Being hunted didn't suit the Wolves, and the chance to turn the tables sat well with the Legion's bruised soul.

Late on the second day, as the chronometer had it, the fleet was put on high alert. The trajectories had already been calculated, responding to expected Alpha Legion movements. The pursuing fleet was allowed to close in through a gradual slowing of the main plasma thrusters, made to look consistent with steadily leaking containment shells.

Throughout all of this, Russ remained only part-engaged. He spent increasing amounts of time in his own private chambers. Petitions went unanswered. Soon it became apparent that he'd meant what he'd said: this was Lord Gunn's attack.

As the fleet chronometer clicked into the nominal nocturnal phase, trigger-signals were distributed throughout the Wolves' rearguard, alerting them to the imminent movement of the battleship-core. The trailing escort vessel *Vrek* reported augmented real-view sightings of Alpha Legion outriders at a range of nine hundred kilometres, and those readings were fed into the prepared attack-pattern cogitators.

Six minutes later, the order for full-about was given and the bulk of the rearguard executed a lazy turn. The slowness of the manoeuvre served two purposes: to allow time for the lumbering battleships to bring their forward lances to bear, and to delay alerting the enemy that a major reconfiguration was underway until the last moment.

Nine minutes after that, attack vectors were transmitted to all line vessels – battleships, cruisers,

frigates, destroyers. Boarding parties were given their target-locations and sealed in launch tubes. As if in anticipation of what was to come, the gas clouds on all sides throbbed violently, sending arcs of glowing matter lashing across the face of the cloying depths.

Two minutes later, the lead Alpha Legion vessels entered true visual range. They were already formed up into defensive positions, spaced evenly across the width of the gas tunnel to prevent a sortie slipping through. The closest signals were those of strafe-attack destroyers, all now bearing the scaled sapphire livery of the XX Legion. Behind those came the bigger vessels, the real targets: Dominus and Vengeance-class warships bearing the hydra mark upon their axe-blade prows.

Lord Gunn, standing fully armoured on *Ragnarok's* throne dais, took in the final assessments of the enemy formations. His amber eyes glittered under grey-black brows, scrutinising the void as if he would twist it apart with his fingers. On the ranked levels below, warriors of the Rout looked up at him, waiting. They all knew that the last time they had attempted to engage the Alpha Legion head-on they had danced with destruction, and now every expression was tight with the need for vengeance, to prove themselves, to do *better*.

*We are the Wolves of Fenris*, thought Gunn, drawing strength from their devotion. *We are the executioners, the savage guardians*.

He gripped the iron rails, leaning out over *Ragnarok's* cavernous bridge-chamber.

'Begin,' he ordered.

And with a void-silent glare of superheated promethium, the massed ranks of the Rout's battlefleet lit engines, activated weapon banks and powered up to attack speed.

First, flanking wings of strike cruisers leapt down the edges of the tunnel, overburning their engines in an attempt to hit faster than the Alpha Legion could respond. *Ragnarok* took the central dominant position, covered on all sides by four wings of escorts. *Nidhoggur* and *Fenrysavar* formed up in a loose triangle position on the battle-plane, angling to widen the leading fire-aperture to its widest point.

The gap between the fleets closed. The Alpha Legion formations remained static, each vessel locked tightly to the next by the range of their main macrocannon batteries. They made no attempt to match the Wolves' attack speed, but kept up a steady velocity, holding together in the classic lattice formation.

In void war, structure was everything. In the open void, a fleet's defence hung entirely on its overlapping formation. Every warship of the Legiones Astartes was ferociously, almost comically, over-armed – built to subdue the galactic empires of xenos, each was the equal of an entire world's sub-warp defences, capable of dishing out phenomenal rounds of atmosphere-shredding punishment from long range. Putting such vessels into geometric patterns in which every single ship guarded the flanks of another produced an exponential multiplier effect, and thus Crusade war-fleets slid through the void like glittering predator packs, giving an enemy no unwatched facets and no open sectors. To break a settled Imperial fleet formation was a daunting task, and every shipmaster in every battlegroup knew the importance of maintaining the armour of numbers.

But this was not the open void. The Alaxxes tunnels prevented the most flamboyant outflanking figures, and so what was left was a test of speed and close-range manoeuvring, something that the VI believed gave them the advantage. Though they couldn't match the XX Legion's patient accumulation of territorial advantage, they could outdo them in daring.

So the Space Wolves outriders hurtled into contact with a kind of feral abandon, rolling away from incoming flak-battery fire, their lances burning like stars. The Alpha Legion vanguard fell back, maintaining their interlocked position, soaking up the first assaults.

It took only seconds for the capital ships to engage. Making use of the narrow channels cleared by the

strike cruisers' runs, *Ragnarok* launched a massed salvo of torpedoes, backed up by lance-fire from its escorts and tightly packed broadsides from its own macrocannons.

That hurt the Alpha Legion ships. The volume of impacts, launched all at once, smashed frontal void-coverage and sheered adamantium buttresses. Gunn had ordered every commander to run primary weapons grids at overcapacity, running the risk of system overload but giving a savage punch to the opening exchanges. Two hurtling Wolves destroyers were lost in catastrophic explosions as their power-containment systems failed, but the resulting maelstrom compensated for their loss – half a dozen Alpha Legion ships were crippled or destroyed in the blaze, including a Dominus-class monster with the ident *Gamma Mu*.

That, though, was not the primary purpose of the attack. Hangar doors on every warship hissed open, bleeding oxygen into the void in plumes. Waves of boarding torpedoes burst from the delivery tubes, clustering and twisting before locking on to strike coordinates. Secondary wings of gunships launched while the mother ships were still at attack speed, shooting off on pre-planned assault vectors as the lateral batteries opened up behind them.

Lord Gunn had made his move, committing the fleet to close-range assault, and it lit the gas tunnel walls with sunbursts of thruster backwash. Powering towards the hulking monsters ahead, the salvos of tiny assault craft screamed towards their targets, taking the slender hopes of their Legion with them.

Bjorn's pack launched from the fast-attack frigate *Icebitten* during the first few seconds of the assault. The boarding torpedo tore into the battlesphere alongside the others, wheeling and diving through exploding plasma bursts as the cogitators ran the trillions of calculations needed to deliver them to their target.

Locked down in his restraint harness, Bjorn saw the incoming ship-ident flash up on his helm display a split second before they hit it: *Iota Malephelos*. It didn't mean anything to him then; it was just another one of the swarm of escort craft that the boarding parties were aiming to take down, freeing the capital ships to open up with their main gun-lines.

With a sickening *crack*, the torpedo crashed into the vessel's hull, and Bjorn's world dissolved into a juddering chaos of white noise and follow-up impacts. The torpedo's prow smashed deep through layers of armoured decking, screeching like a banshee before grinding to a halt amid molten tangles of burning steel.

Meltas fired, clamps blew and the bow doors slammed open. The thunder of driver-engines, amplified by the close-pressed walls, gave way to the howl of escaping atmosphere. Bjorn ripped his restraints free, unhooked his bolter and charged out of the flaming aperture. His pack – Hvan, Ferith, Angvar, Eunwald, Urth and Godsmote – fell in close behind, their helm lenses shimmering crimson in the whirl of lambent shadows.

Bjorn no longer carried *Blóðbringer*, the power axe he'd borne during the previous action, but now wielded a master-crafted lightning claw at the end of his left arm and bolter in his right gauntlet. The fighting was heavy, first against well-armed ship menials, then against the real targets: Alpha Legionnaires. The traitors emerged from the flickering shadows, their scale-pattern armour dark under failing lumen-strips. The pack wiped out the three of them, overwhelming in both numbers and speed. They stayed tight after that, sweeping down narrow feeder-corridors with the blood still hot on their blades.

More mortals were slain as the pack zeroed in on the objective, all members acting in concert, driven to a greater pitch of savagery by the burning need for vengeance.

The sternest test came just before the command bridge – an Alpha Legion champion in Terminator plate, backed up by a dozen more Space Marines and mortal auxiliaries, blocking further access amid the criss-

cross ironwork of barricades. The legionnaire came straight towards them, chainblades revving under blazing combi-bolters. Hvan was blasted out of contention and thrown against the deck in a hail of shells. Godsmote ducked down below the volleys; his chainsword lashed out to bite, but was kicked away and crunched into a bulkhead. Urth and Eunwald slammed themselves back against the corridor's walls, launching ranged fire at the enemy.

The champion never spoke. There were no vox-amplified roars of aggression, just silent, efficient murder-dealing. Ferith was downed next, unable to evade the sweeping paths of bolts, his armour shattered into a network of blood-edged cracks. Angvar charged, and was crushed against the far wall with a mighty swipe of the Terminator's right arm.

Roaring death-curses from the Old Ice, Bjorn leapt out at the enemy. His four adamantium talons snarled into energy-shrouded life, harsh blue against the gloom around him.

The champion came at him hard, chainblades juddering in a bloody shriek. The two warriors crashed together, and Bjorn felt the raking pain of adamantium teeth cutting into his pauldron. He took a bolt-round close to the chest, nearly hurling him onto his back. He veered, swerved and thrust, twisting to keep his foe close.

He thrust his claw upward, catching the legionary beneath the helm. Lesser talons would have cracked and splayed, breaking on the reinforced gorget-collar and opening Bjorn up to the killing blow.

But these talons bit true. Their disruptor shroud blazed in a riot of blue-white, tearing into the thick ceramite. The claws pushed deeper, slicking through flesh and carving up sinew, muscle and bone. Hot blood fountained along the adamantium claw-lengths, fizzing as it boiled away on the edges.

The champion staggered, pinned at the neck. Bjorn twisted the blades and the enemy fell, his throat torn out, thudding to the deck with the heavy, final crash of dead battleplate.

Bjorn howled his triumph, flinging his claws wide and spraying blood-flecks across the corridor. In his wake came his four surviving brothers, firing freely, locking down the surviving Alpha Legionnaires and driving them back.

Godsmote, Bjorn's second, chuckled something as he ran past, but Bjorn paid no attention.

'Slay them!' he roared. 'Slay them all!'

His body pumped with hyperadrenalin as they rampaged onwards. He knew they'd been lucky – surely not many enemy ships would carry so few legionnaires – but the ecstasy of combat washed away doubt. The remaining levels blurred past in a whirl of slaughter, and soon the blast doors to the command bridge loomed. Bjorn, Eunwald and Urth crouched down at the head of the leading corridor, training their bolters on the doors, while Godsmote sprinted up, laid breacher charges and raced back.

The detonation blew the corridor walls apart. Bjorn powered up through the flying debris, firing instinctively through the percussive explosions. His pack-brothers remained close on his heels, and the four of them crashed through the disintegrating lintel and into the chamber beyond.

The bridge was circular, with the command throne in the centre and terraces and servitor pits arranged concentrically. The crew had had plenty of warning, and a hail of las-fire and solid projectiles zinged towards them out of the drifting smoke.

Bjorn vaulted over a sensorium pillar and crunched into a three-metre-wide pit full of mortals. He sliced his way through them, punching his crackling claw into armour shells and the soft flesh beneath. Having cut his way down the length of the pit, he boosted clear at the far end and swung around for the next target.

By then Godsmote and Eunwald had driven a bloody swathe through the open centre. Urth's bolter-fire had downed snipers clustered in the high galleries, and he was now working his way along the terraced stations, ripping menials from their places and flinging them to the deck below.

Bjorn strode to the ship's commander, a mortal in Alpha Legion colours still occupying the tactical

throne, his face white with fear. The commander tried to raise his pistol to his forehead, but Bjorn grabbed it, hurled it aside and seized him by the throat, lifting him bodily from his seat.

The man's veins bulged, and his fingers scraped frantically along Bjorn's gauntlet. There had been a time when Bjorn might have demanded information, for something that might unlock the Alpha Legion's mysterious strategy, but no longer. Too many pack-brothers had died, and his hatred was pure.

'This we will do,' Bjorn hissed, 'to you all.'

He broke the man's neck, taking his time to squeeze the life out of him, before casting the corpse down and crushing the skull beneath his boot.

Then he raised his claw overhead, threw his bloody head back and howled again. The rest of his pack paused in their killing and did the same, and the entire bridge of the *Iota Malephelos* – gore-streaked, broken, strewn with the slain – echoed to the millennia-old war cries of unpitying Fenris.

The two fleets grappled truly then, locked in close-range combat across the whole width of the cloud tunnel. Ranks of boarding torpedoes hit their targets or were gunned down, leading to a rolling cascade of brilliant explosions along the leading flanks of the Alpha Legion's protective cordon.

The only response from the ranks of sapphire was a steadily more concentrated pattern of counter laser-fire, scything through the twisting mass of battleships to strike at the capital vessels beyond. No Alpha Legion ship launched its own boarding parties, preferring to hit hard at a distance. The inner core of heavy battleships drew together slowly, buffered by burning rings of escorts.

Lord Gunn watched the carnage unfold from *Ragnarok's* bridge, searching for signs that the high-risk tactic had paid off. A whole swathe of frigate-class Alpha Legion vessels had been disabled during the initial assault and was now drifting away from the battle-plane, their hulls riven with explosions. Slate-grey gunships plied a devastating trade among the remains, swooping close to rake them with strafing fire from battlecannons and heavy bolter mounts. Combined with the hammer-strike volleys from *Hrafinkel's* long-range artillery, the Wolves' assault had left the Alpha Legion's outer fleet badly dented.

Still the enemy remained static. They made no attempt to protect their outer ranks, and let the first wave of frigates burn. Dominus-class warships drove up the centre, wreathed in flame along their massive sides, bolstered by fresh fire-support drawn from the rear of the Alpha Legion formation. Soon the volume of lance-strikes reached critical levels, sizzling through the void as if the beams could set it alight. With no room for flanking moves, the Wolves vessels began to turn clumsily, launching broadsides from their ventral batteries in an attempt to match firepower levels.

All across *Ragnarok's* bridge, tactical reports flooded in, attended to by sprinting menials and relayed to the Legion's command points. Several boarding parties had closed in on their prey's bridges. Three light warships had already been taken, another six were contested and two more had been destroyed from within.

Slowly, Gunn began to realise the truth: the Alpha Legion commander, whoever he was, was happy to let his lesser ships die. The frigates were undermanned and poorly protected, bait for the infantry assault that he must have known would come. Nothing would deflect the onward advance of their capital warships, all of which were now training forward weapon arrays on the numerically inferior Wolves. Gunn's battleships could compete with them for a while, but not forever – so much had been thrown into the first wave, counting on the enemy not wishing to surrender its vessels and so compromising formation to save them.

He felt the beginnings of a foul sickness in his stomach. *Ragnarok* ploughed onwards, right into the heart of the cataclysm, all lances thundering. His shipmasters were piloting with skill, rolling and angling the guns to maximum effect. All around him, local space bumped and spiralled with the corpses of burned-out

hulls, but still he saw that it would not be enough.

*They knew I would launch the gunships.*

Ahead of him, less than a hundred kilometres out, the Alpha Legion's core group of line battleships was drawing up into lance-range. None of them had made any attempt to shield the frigates in their line of fire, and from the power build-ups detected it looked likely they were planning to fire straight through them. They were bound to hit some of their own, though they clearly calculated that many had already been boarded and crippled, thus limiting the loss to the whole fleet.

It was a wretched philosophy of war. Gunn checked the chronometer. Less than an hour of Russ's impossible deadline remained. Unless something changed quickly, his assault had no chance of breaking through.

'Increase fleet attack speeds!' he thundered, knowing how close he had already pushed them. 'Order all vessels to concentrate fire on the vanguard formation!'

It was not over yet. The two fleets were still grinding into one another like juggernauts, and a random warp-core breach or sudden loss of nerve could still turn the tide. All around them, lit up by the flares and bursts of las-fire, the boiling heart of Alaxxes pressed in, seething like the nine hearts of Hel. The Alpha Legion advanced before it, as cold and calm as machines.

'Break them!' Lord Gunn roared, his whole voice shaking with the wrath that burned up from his hearts, his gauntlets clenched tight. 'By the Allfather, by immortal Fenris, *break them!*'

The last of the defenders on *Iota Malephelos* were slaughtered, the control systems taken over and the whole place had begun to stink of still-hot blood.

Godsmote strode over to one of the sensorium consoles and looked down the list of incoming signals. 'Fekke,' he swore, watching the pinpoints of light dance.

Bjorn looked out of the bridge's cracked real-view portal and saw the ruddy void beyond scored with explosions. Local space was clogged with the arcs and crackles of energy-release ripping into gargantuan void-craft with an eerie, deceptive silence. Even as he watched, the burning hulk of a strike cruiser bearing Alpha Legion markings tumbled across the visual field, its spine broken, saviour pods shedding from its underbelly like spawn released into the ocean.

'Status,' he demanded, moving over to Godsmote's position. Eunwald and Urth took up guard by the broken doorway, reloading their bolters.

'It is Hel,' said Godsmote, sounding impressed.

Bjorn only needed to glance at the tactical scope to see that he was right. Lord Gunn's manoeuvre already had no chance of success. The Alpha Legion cordon across the gas tunnel held firm, bolstered by their willingness to let their outer flanks be ripped away. Bjorn suddenly saw why their seizure of *Iota Malephelos* had been so easy: the enemy had husbanded their strength, allowing the Wolves to expend theirs on weaker outriders. Waves of boarding actions had taken out much of the protective aegis of smaller ships, but not enough to seriously expose the main formations of capital vessels.

*Russvangum* and *Ragnarok* had waded into the heart of the battle, their flanks blazing with broadsides, surrounded by the vast cordon of the Alaxxes blood-well's lethal blooms. *Hrafinkel* stood further back, launching barrage after barrage of torpedoes, hammering a path towards the enemy's heart in a cascade of smouldering, broken ship-spines, but it was all too slow, and all too blunt.

The Alpha Legion held the advantage. They could afford to lose two ships for every one Space Wolf vessel, and they played the game well. Lord Gunn had driven the Rout vanguard hard, knowing they needed to gouge a hole in the defensive wall and knock the supporting vessels out of position. He'd almost done it in one sector – *Ragnarok* had taken apart its nearest rival, a leviathan named the *Theta*, and

was continuing to power up the very heart of the battlesphere with all cannons spitting.

But several dozen Alpha Legion ships had the ident *Theta* – everything was repeated, referenced and double-signalled, which was another hateful mark of the XX – and it made no difference to the tactical situation. The Wolves had not established positional dominance, and were now at the mercy of greater ship concentrations. Beyond the darkening mass of this particular *Theta*, more battleships were already lumbering into position, supported by new wings of escorts. The Wolves could not muster anything like that discipline, and with their warriors spread thin in disruptive operations, the shackles of the Alaxxes tunnel edges prevented anything other than a frontal assault they were now ill-equipped to maintain.

‘He will take us back,’ muttered Bjorn, seeing the inevitability of it.

‘We will never get a better chance,’ said Godsmote.

He was right. If they failed to break out now, all that remained was to be driven deeper in, where the void corridors would narrow further, restricting their options down to nothing. They would be hounded, day after day, until death came for them in petty battles conducted at long range.

A poor way to die.

Bjorn strode over to the command throne, kicking aside the broken-necked corpse in the way. He summoned up trajectory readings for the frigate, overrode them and punched in new orders.

‘This isn’t over yet,’ he growled, sweeping his helm lenses across the devastated bridge. ‘Find a comms station. Prepare new allegiance codes for *Ragnarok*.’

The *Iota Malephelos* swung around hard, angling towards the closest Alpha Legion vessel, a frigate bearing the mark *Keta Rho*. The ship was fully occupied running up close to a Wolves formation led by the strike cruiser *Runeblade*, and its main lance was powering up for the strike. All around them, a thousand other battles were playing out, studded amid a maelstrom of flaring cannon discharge.

The weapon-control console on *Iota Malephelos* was almost exactly the same as the one on *Helridder*, bar the variant sigils. The irony of this war was its awful familiarity – they were fighting with the same weapons, in the same way, with the same commitment.

The *Keta Rho* swam into the real-view portal, still powering along the same trajectory towards its target, and Bjorn unlocked the codes he needed. Hundreds of metres below him, the broadside batteries slammed open, primed for firing.

‘They have detected our course change,’ reported Godsmote.

‘Too late,’ said Bjorn, activating the gunnery release.

*Iota Malephelos* continued on its trajectory, flying clumsily now that the secondary guidance crews were all dead, and launched its full payload at the *Keta Rho*. The space around it sizzled with coruscation as the guns all fired at once, hurling a storm of ship-killing shells across the narrowing gap between them. *Keta Rho* attempted evasive action at the last moment, but it was too close to escape. In a series of sharp impacts, its facing flank was peppered with cannon bursts, shattering the void shields and penetrating down to the hull plates below.

Immediately, other Alpha Legion vessels started to home in on *Iota Malephelos*’s position, now alive to the switch of allegiance.

‘Come about for another pass,’ said Bjorn, watching the tactical display fill with enemy signals and wondering how long they’d last.

Godsmote made the adjustments just as the chronometer hit the two-hour mark. Almost instantly, the fallback order came over the fleet comm.

Lord Gunn had had enough – even he wouldn’t see the fleet ripped apart to salvage his pride. All across the battlesphere, assault rams, boarding boats and gunships would already be streaking back to their hangars, covered by whatever escorts had survived the initial melee.

The *Keta Rho* still lived, and was turning to bring its own weapons to bear. Six other enemy ships were hurrying up from the starboard nadir, all zeroing in on the *Iota Malephelos*.

‘What are your orders?’ asked Godsmote.

Bjorn didn’t need to look at the tactical displays to know what he needed to do. It made him sick to contemplate it, but there were no alternatives.

‘Broadcast the new ident,’ he snarled, tasting – again – the pain of retreat. ‘Then full-burn, back with the rest.’

Gunn remained at the helm of *Ragnarok*, glaring grimly out across the bridge of the enormous battleship. Below him, ranked across the dozens of terraces radiating out from the command dais, hundreds of mortals and servitors struggled to enact the withdrawal command without getting the ship destroyed. Alpha Legion vessels streaked in from every direction, now at full velocity, aiming to pierce the outer defensive shell and get in among the more damaged warships.

‘Maintain the perimeter,’ warned Gunn, flagging up a weakness in the sector held by *Fenrysavar*. ‘Get the gunships landed. *Skítja*, we need to pull those torpedoes *out*.’

The entire Wolves fleet was contracting, pulling in on itself and swivelling into retreat trajectories. It was a dangerous time, risking exposing the battleships’ flanks before they could power up to full speed again. Some captured vessels were responding to the command, but not enough to replace those lost in the fury of the counter-assault. The claustrophobic dimensions of the gas tunnel hindered them further, since straying into its margins would be as catastrophic as a full lance-battery strike, so everything was tight, constricted by the volume of incoming fire as well as the collapsing dimensions of the battlesphere.

Gunn glanced down at the full-range hololith, noting the positions of the battleships. The *Hrafnkel* had remained in the centre of the formation, somehow eking out even more ranged support from its ravaged gun batteries; it was the linchpin around which the rest of the fleet was turning.

He stared at the flickering image before him, feeling a kind of hatred for it. The primarch was aboard that ship, lurking in his chambers, lost in a surly indifference. He should have been *here*, leading the charge. Lord Gunn was a veteran of centuries of warfare, but was under no illusions about the disparity in shipmastery between the two of them. Perhaps Russ could have done it. He’d have summoned up something, dragged out from the depths and hurled into the enemy’s treacherous faces. That was what he was *for* – to do the impossible, to haul the Legion out of the mire and set it loping back into the hunt.

‘Lord, the fleet is pulling clear,’ reported *Ragnarok*’s navigation master. ‘Trajectory has been set – are we joining them?’

Even as the man spoke, fresh shudders radiated up from *Ragnarok*’s bowels. More impacts followed – solid rounds, torpedoes, las-bursts, all raking along shield-arcs that were already close to failing. If Gunn closed his eyes he could feel the ship’s agony, cut with a thousand wounds and bleeding into the vacuum.

He could order a final charge. He could send the battleship surging into the oncoming Alpha Legion vanguard, destroying as much of it as he could before they snapped the ship’s neck at last. They might even board before the end, and he’d die like a warrior, the corpses of his enemies piled high around him on the command bridge.

*Then I would slay with a smile*, he thought.

‘Pull away,’ Gunn ordered, forcing the words out. ‘Cover the retreat. Maintain ordnance barrage. We will be the last to fall back.’

Then he turned, his huge shoulders a fraction lower, and looked away from the forward oculus, sickened by it.

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A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2016

This eBook edition published in 2016 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd,  
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

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ISBN: 978-1-78572-373-5

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