

THE HORUS HERESY®

# GUNSIGHT

*James Swallow*



In the shadowy undercroft of the *Vengeful Spirit*,  
deadly Assassin Eristede Kell still seeks his target

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# GUNSIGHT

**James Swallow**

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

*It must be flawless.*

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

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

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

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

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

the dirt-streaked face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

wrapper of freeze-dried rations.

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

Or so one might have thought at first.

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

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

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

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

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

His hands were shaking a little. Laser rangers picked out platforms jutting

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

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

The dream-fear returned when the scope settled on the dais. There it was, as real as death, on the far side of the canyon. One-point-five-three-three kilometres away by reckoning of the rangefinder's unblinking eye. An ornate, brassy observation platform upon which a ship's commander might briefly alight upon a tour of the vessel's lower decks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Would you ever wish to?*

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

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

The mind could play tricks down here.

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

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

Or so it was supposed to be.

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

But they could trick the mind, yes. He might think that they were words or names, sometimes coming from far, sometimes from near. He did not like to

sleep for fear that the sounds would infiltrate his slumbering psyche.

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

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

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

The menial crewman – the ragged, careworn uniform gave that away – was a glum little figure, as downcast as the lilting, humming dirge. Now and then, he would stop at some imagined terror, peering around as though afraid to be discovered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The spark of humour went away, though, as he realised that he would still have to kill this fool, murder him and dump his corpse into the abyss. There could be

no chance of the hide being seen, of course.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Who are you devoted to?’

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

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

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

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

‘Death to...’

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

Why? Did this inconsequential little man understand that he was about to die?

Was it that now, at this final moment, his treachery was failing him?

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

'I am no traitor!' The words burst from Letae in a sudden, spittle-flecked blast. *Did I give voice to that last thought and not realise it?* He frowned at himself.

'Death take you all, you filthy whoresons!' The crewman was immediately red-faced and sweating, furious and impotent all at once. This was true desperation, this was the dam breaking as the end loomed, knowing that it didn't matter anymore. 'I won't say it again!' he bellowed, his voice becoming a dull resonance robbed of meaning as it echoed away down the canyon. 'I reject you all, do you hear me? Kill me then! But I'll die clear of conscience! I am a son of Cthonia, loyal to Terra and the Emperor of Mankind.'

'Is that so?'

'Ten generations!' he raged. 'Fathers and mothers and sons and daughters, we toiled aboard this ship for the Luna Wolves!' Letae turned his face upward and a great sadness swept over him, as though he were looking at a loved one lying mortally wounded. 'What has he done to her? She was so beautiful and noble, and now she's been... *corrupted!*'

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

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

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

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

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

Letae studied him, and abruptly he realised that he was still wearing his mission mask, regarding the serf through the blank, emotionless gaze of the

mono-band visor. He reached up to take it off, to show the poor fool that there was a human being beneath the tattered black cloak.

‘Who are you?’ asked the crewman. ‘Why are you here?’

‘My name...’

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

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

*What is the mask? It the lie of who we are. It is the truth of the same. Each mask we wear is identical and never differs. If you suffer the fate to perish behind it, the mask will consume your bio data and render you into slurry that no technology can ever reconstruct. Thus, behind the mask we all are faceless and we are all unkillable. Each time one of us falls, another rises. To those outside, we seem immortal.*

How did he reach this place?

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

*I am the weapon.*

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

And they had failed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But so futile, as–

–*the ship burned around him–*

–*a vista of red warning runes wherever he looked–*

–*a tiny saviour pod, blue light spilling from the hatch–*

–*he would only need to take a step–*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They fell into an uneasy peace, the Assassin and the deckhand. Letae had more of the lho-sticks, and with trembling hands he gave one to Kell. After the offering, they smoked in companionable silence for a while as each took the measure of the other.

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

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

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

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

rough fashion, deckhands like this one were the crude remembrancers of their ilk.

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

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

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

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

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

'Explain what you mean by that.'

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

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

The tier-master spoke out against Horus's rebellion and was killed for it. Tragic enough, if expected. But the *horror* was of how it was done. They lashed the man to the lasing crystal as it went through a rising-falling test cycle and his

flesh was allowed to burn inside and out for sixteen days. The stasis matrix generator in the lance cannon's inner workings made the torment go on and on, a peculiarity of the suspensive energy field slowing the relative passage of time for the condemned man. Every crew-serf in earshot was forced to listen to the sluggish, drawn-out screams.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At least, he imagined that was so.

*Do not seek aid from others, even if there is no alternative open to you. It is true that there are good and loyal souls abroad in the galaxy, those who would willingly aid the servants of the Emperor's Will if they knew you moved amongst them. But you must not put them in jeopardy. They are not trained as you are. They may make mistakes. A slip of word or deed. Do not take the risk. Your rifle is the only husband, only bride, only friend you can confide in.*

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

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

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

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

Kell was hauling what pieces of his gear he could from the crushed escape capsule when the snakes finally decided to attack him. Ripping jaws, muscular and savage, bit down and sank poison into his blood. In the maggots, the

neurotoxic venom would induce an instantaneous torpor, allowing the serpents to eat them alive. But to a human, the effect was very different.

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

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

*What did he see there?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Like the statues Kell had seen on Dagonet.

Come to life. Looming large. Reaching for him.

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

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

It was as if an emotional circuit in Kell's heart had been reversed. He knew intellectually that Horus should bring forth the greatest hatred in him. *A traitor is a traitor, and death is the reward for all of them.* But the words were rote performance, they were hollow things filled with ash.

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

But who had *really* betrayed the Assassin? Not Horus. Who had sent Kell and his sister and all the others on a fool's errand, a mission that they could never, *would* never hope to complete? Who had left him to perish?

In the vision-dream, Horus reached out for him. The gesture was not one of anger or violence. There seemed to be compassion in it.

*Am I mad?* He asked it over and over. *Am I now corrupted too? Is anything still pure?*

When the poison eventually released him, the Assassin found himself in the shallows of the tainted bilges with dead serpents all around him. His mouth was filled with bits of their scaly flesh, and black blood coating his teeth. Kell vomited the contents of his stomach into the water and dragged himself away, reeling, fouled and blood-sick.

Fate smiled briefly – he found his medicae kit and tore it open, taking anything he could to make the horror retreat from his mind.

At least for a while.

*The mission is never over. Until recall comes, until authority speaks differently, the mission endures. There can be no dissent to that diktat. It matters nothing how difficult the execution will be, how long the tasking may last, how much collateral will burn in the act. It must be done. It will be done. You will see it to*

*its ending. You will do this.*

How would it occur, this killing of a warlord? That was the question that came to consume him as the days passed.

Kell cleaned and prepared the precious Exitus rifle at regular intervals, even though it did not require such over-attentive care. It was in danger of becoming less about the action of vital maintenance for the Assassin's tool, and more a kind of sacrament to be carried out. The passage of the cloth over the disassembled trigger assembly, the slow and intricate testing and re-testing of each sensor grid in the sighting array... These took on the measured and ritualistic pace of holy tasks in mimicry of the deeds that had been done in all the dead churches, burned away by the light of Imperial Truth.

He put away the golden aquila that his sister – that poor, name-lost sibling – had left to him and never looked upon it again. Kell did not want to be distracted by such trivia. The hide was his altar, his cathedral. He was at peace there, for a time. His serenity was to kneel at gun-prayer, the spindly shape of the advanced sniper rifle rising from his hands as a sculpted hymnal made of metal and ferrocenone.

He rehearsed the killing in his mind's eye until he could recall any fractional part of the deed without hesitation. The calculation of windage, the numerals on the scope's glass eyes as perfect as a symphony's notes. The shape of the target zone like the skin of a bed-partner beneath his fingers, known so very well to him.

And in the finality, the single rifle bullet.

It was all that he had left, and occasionally he would release the unfired round from the breech and roll it gently across his palm. The touch of the cool, brass shell was soothing. The motion of it, the subtle weight of the killing payload there in his hand, these things helped to root him in the moment. They kept him from drifting.

The stamping around the ignition tab told him that the round had been made on Telemachus, in one of the secret forges owned by the Clade Vindicare. Tooled to within a tolerance of micrometers to fit the rifle and no other weapon, the round was fresh – only one Solar year old – when it had been issued to him. The mass was even, and finely distributed. The bullet head, a dense armour-piercing round with a discarding sabot and a frangible kill-core, had been spun into existence in a gravity-null manufactory chamber.

Perfect. Flawless. *Ready*. It only required a murder to make it bloom.

Kell calculated the transition time across the abyss, from the moment Horus would show his face to the instant that the trigger would be pulled, and on to the time of impact. He would have to put the shot directly through the Warmaster's eye – he favoured the right one, but either would suffice – in order to have the best chance of killing the Luna Wolf lord outright. Once the shot pierced the ocular surface, it would begin a process of fragmentation down to the nanometre level. Tiny slivers of fractal-edged shrapnel would dissipate into a sphere of miniature daggers, each moving at supersonic velocity. They would cause a concussion wave that would shred even post-human flesh, fracture even the iron-dense bones of a war god. He estimated that with a perfect hit, there was a one in seven chance of an outright kill. The probability went down as other variables were factored in, but catastrophic brain damage without true death was still within his mission success criteria.

Anything less would be classed as a task failure.

All this predicated upon a target standing still, without a helmet or benefit of meta-energy barriers. A target unlike any other. *A target... A being of a kind that has never been killed by the hands of a normal human.*

'Impossible.'

Did Kell say that aloud, or did the breaths of air whisper it in his ear? It was hard to be sure. He often forgot what his own voice sounded like.

Could a man kill a primarch? Could a mortal slay a demigod? Part of Kell wanted to find out if it was possible; another part ran screaming at the audacity of that suggestion. In the beginning, with his great and towering hubris, the Assassin had thought it a task he could achieve.

But after all that had happened, Kell's mind was changed. There were doubts.

That was why it had to be done. *To be sure.* To silence the whispers.

*Vindicare.*

*High Gothic, Old Terran origin (pre-Strife, approximate). Present active infinitive of 'vindico'.*

*Compound word, from elements: 'vindex' – meaning a protector or defender; 'dico' – meaning 'to say'.*

*Meanings (Multiple): To protect. To deliver or spare or liberate. To claim or to vindicate. To avenge or to punish.*

He drank from the broken water canteen, the flat taste of the filtered fluid dead and empty in his mouth. Kell remembered wine, suddenly and brilliantly, the

memory like a flare in the dark caverns of his mind. He glared at the bottle. The purifier was clogged with particles, and he shook it out. Had the deckhand Letae brought the filter to him, or had he just found a spare at the bottom of his torn pack? Either was possible.

Then the questions went away as he heard sirens lowing across the canyon.

It was not an illusion, no. There were small flying drones moving around over there, eagle-mecha hybrids probing the gloom with pin-beam search arrays. What were they looking for?

Kell could only guess at the *Vengeful Spirit's* moods, but he was certain that the ship was ill-tempered this day. He had been here long enough – *and how long was that?* – to sense when something was awry.

They were at battle. Somewhere up above, hundreds of decks away in his strategium, the Warmaster and captains of the Sons of Horus were engaged in the business of killing. Kell felt this more than he knew it, but by now he had given in to instinct over intellect. He had allowed himself to be the feral and reactive animal, the patient hunter-beast more than the man who would plot and wait and wait and plot. He had no interest in what participants the distant battle would encompass. Those thoughts were vague ideas, abstract and brittle in form. All Kell wanted was for Horus to come to him.

And that *would* happen. He had seen it in the dream-vision. It had already taken place, in some other skein of time and possibility. That was what the whispers told him.

‘Eristede!’

He whirled around as a crack-throated voice called his name and Kell saw the crewman running across the metal deck towards him. His face was bloody from a cut upon his cheek, and he was in the throes of panic.

Kell swore and shot a look back across the iron canyon. Some of the machine-birds paused in their dipping and swirling paths and looked his way. The fool’s shout might have reached them.

Not for the first time, he wished that the camo-cloak still worked properly. At full capacity, he could have dropped to the deck and shrouded, and to the eyes of the drones he would have looked like nothing more than a nub of cold steel protruding from the gantries. But now, ripped and ragged, it could only make him visually indistinct. He could not use it to hide from short-range scrying, or from vision in thermal, ultra-violet or magnetosonic ranges.

He ran to Letae, gesturing sharply for him to find cover. ‘Silent, you fool. Be silent! Don’t you see them coming?’

The crewman scrambled clumsily into the lee of a heat exchanger. ‘I had to come warn you, Master Kell.’ The man’s face looked different close at hand. The witch-mark tattoo seemed more detailed than before, becoming scarification more than ink. The lines of it were raised against his flesh, and reddened with blood-flow. Letae was more gaunt than he recalled, too – eyes sunken, hollow of cheek. Even his trickling vitae seemed less potent. It was watery, like crimson ink.

The menial didn’t notice Kell’s fixated attention. ‘There are intruders aboard the ship,’ he gushed, talking without taking pause for breath. ‘It is said, a force of warriors sent by the Sigillite himself!’

It surprised Kell that the mention of Lord Malcador’s title actually made him flinch. He could not parse the strange reaction, and so he ignored it.

‘Are they here for Horus?’

‘Of course!’ Letae’s expression became one of surprise and confusion, as if the answer to that question was obvious. ‘What other reason could there be?’

Kell had his hands on the man now, and he was shaking him violently. ‘How many of them? Where are they? *Tell me!*’

The crewman’s hands came up to fend off the Assassin’s sudden assault. ‘No one knows! That’s why the monitors are searching the ship, they’re looking for them! Don’t you see? If these legionaries kill him, then we’re free–’

‘No! *No!*’ Kell shouted at him. Behind, steel feathers buzzed in the sticky air as the machine-birds rode the thermals across the abyss towards them, probing and scanning.

But Kell wasn’t thinking of them at that moment. What occupied him totally was the chance that the fate he had glimpsed would not come to pass. *It could not happen.* Horus would not be killed by some rogue agents sent by that thrice-accursed psyker! The vision had promised that Kell would have his chance to slay the monster.

‘You are hurting me,’ gasped Letae, eyes brimming with tears. ‘Please, let me go. Before the monitors see us–’

But that was a fruitless wish on his part. A pair of machine-birds fell from the smoky dimness over their heads with tungsten talons bared, ready to snare them both. Fans of emerald laser light washed over the deck around them, termination trackers finding the two men as clearly as if they had been naked upon a landscape of pure snowfall.

The monitors dived, each emitting a metallic shriek. Kell pushed Letae away and the act saved the man’s life, although that had not been the Assassin’s

intention. Letae's bare throat missed being sliced open by slashing claws, the passage of them so close that he felt the air being cut in their wake.

The second machine-bird was diving for Kell's eyes to gouge them out and open the meat of his face. He dimly regretted leaving his spy mask in the hide. The Assassin hardly ever wore the thing anymore.

He went low and spun out of the old cloak's clasp at his neck, making the material flare out into a half-circle of shadow. The mechanical misjudged and tried to arrest its dive, turning it into a swooping bank, but Kell was ready. He snapped the cloak back around and caught the machine-bird in its folds, smothering the avian drone before it could power away back into the air. He snared it inside the cloak, swinging it around by the thick hem of the old battle garment, and smashed it into the deck. Without hesitation, Kell ran forward and stamped on the writhing, squawking shape under the black cloth, vicious and wild with each blow from his boots. He killed it in short order.

The second bird was harrying poor Letae, cutting and swatting him with the blade-tip edges of its wings. It reacted to the death of its mate by abruptly ignoring the deckhand and turned all of its raptor's ire upon Kell. A winged lance of metal, plastek and animal flesh bolted through the air towards him, and the Assassin snarled as he came to meet it.

Kell had the crude knife in his fist as the thing went for his throat, and he rolled with the impact as it raked its claws over his chest. Screaming with anger and pain, Kell cut his free hand to ribbons as he used it to grab hold of the machine-bird's body. His other hand came up in a blur and he stabbed the drone through its torso, over and over, causing processing fluids to spurt in arcs across the iron deck plates. He kept stabbing until he was sure it was dead, and by then his hands were a ruin of cut meat, black oil and thick blood.

Letae recoiled from Kell as he took a shuddering step towards him. The crewman was so full of fear, he realised. It coloured everything about him – it was the air in his lungs, the water to his lips. Kell felt a writhing, sickly disgust at the other man's very existence, as if each indrawn breath that the menial took was somehow an insult.

The Assassin did not question where this bile had come from. That did not occur to him. Instead he shouted at Letae, shouted at him until the other man ran away.

'Go, you pathetic mongrel! I do not want to look upon you, do you understand me? Take your words and go away!' He spat onto the slick deck. 'If you come back, if you show your face here again and it is not with word that *Horus yet*

*lives...* Kell's words rose to a crescendo, 'then I will gun you down where you stand!'

Letae fled, seemingly unable to believe that he had not died here, and in the wake of his echoing footfalls Kell slumped to the floor and looked at his ruined hands.

With slow, agonised motions, he dragged the dead cloak to him and began to cut it into uneven strips that could be wrapped around his palms and fingers. As Kell did this, he strained to listen for the whispering of the *Vengeful Spirit*, for some fraction of knowledge that the monster was still alive, and that Malcador's men had failed...

And that thought made him smile. The Sigillite too could taste the bitter wine of disappointment.

*The greatest weapon in our arsenal is the oldest, the purest, the easiest to bring to hand. But by turns it is the hardest to master. Each killer must acknowledge a singular truth. You are not unique. You are not special. You are going to die and nothing will prevent that from happening. With this fact accepted and known, comprehend that you are the weapon, and that your unblunted cutting edge is sacrifice.*

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

'Why are you doing this?' Letae cried. 'I have never told anyone about our meetings. I have always been loyal, like you! Always, even though they did such terrible things to me...' He crawled forward a step, seeing the pistol and stopping, thinking better of it. 'You... You made me stronger, Master Kell. I knew that if you were down here all these years, I could resist them too. And it has been so hard...'

*Years?* Kell was shocked by the revelation. That could not be right. It was only days since the guncutter *Ultio* had fled Dagonet, no more than weeks at the longest. How could it be years?

The Assassin shook his head. He would have remembered that. It had to be a lie. The whispers would have told him otherwise.

He bared his teeth in a wild grimace. 'You *know*, don't you?'

Letae shook his head, confusion in those watery eyes again. 'I know... What I have seen... That Horus is alive...'

'*Not that!*' Kell bellowed at him. 'The whispers told me about the Warmaster!

That's not what I mean, and you know it!

'Wh-whispers...?' Now Letae was looking at him as if he were spouting the ravings of a madman. Couldn't the deckhand see? Did he not understand?

Kell came closer and pointed his Exitus pistol at the man's heaving chest.

Letae raised his hands in submission. 'I beg you, please do not do this. I don't know what you are talking about. You're speaking in riddles! I thought it was just your isolation down here, but you're—'

'Tell me who it is!' Kell demanded, ignoring the man's entreaty and gesturing sharply at the dank air. 'The whispers keep talking, they won't leave me to sleep. They told me what I have to do with *you*.' He shoved Letae with the barrel of the pistol, forcing him up and out on to the gantry. Below them, the cables sang as the endless trains of coolant wagons went back and forth.

Letae looked up at him, imploring. 'It was too much for you, wasn't it? That's the truth. I see now. This place...' He nodded at the wall. 'The *Spirit* broke you.'

'*Tell me!*' He was screaming it, heedless of any chance that he might be overheard by some distant aura-scanner. 'I want the one who whispers to me! Where is he?' His hand was sweaty where he clasped the gun, and he kneaded the grip, squeezing it until his knuckles were white.

The deckhand shouted back. 'I don't know.'

'*Tell me who Samus is!*'

He did not recall where the name sprang from. It felt alien on his lips, as if forced up from his throat by something he could not control.

But it was a moot point. In his fury, Kell lost focus for a moment and his finger twitched. Even as the last word was leaving his lips, the Exitus pistol accidentally went off and a ragged-edged wound burst open in Letae's belly. Blood, bone and intestinal matter made a wet slick where they were blasted out of the crewman's back and across the deck.

He had not meant to kill him – at least, not at that moment. But now it was done, just as the voices had told him that it would be.

With a shaky sigh, Kell gathered up the corpse and set to work on it with the knife. Into the dead man's torso he carved a single word, making the cuts deep and clear.

The word was *LUPERCAL*.

As a final flourish to the deed, he fished out the golden aquila charm that had belonged to his forgotten sister. It was tarnished now, the lustre dulled, the spread wings of the icon scratched and pitted. He fastened it around Letae's skinny neck and dragged the body to the edge of the iron cliff.

Time passed. He waited until the right transit, for the correct cargo wagon to pass beneath. When it did, Kell pitched the corpse out so that it fell true. Letae landed on the head of the cable-car, sprawled there like a broken doll, and the wagon carried him away in the direction of the far-off dais. It would not take long for the dead man to be discovered.

*The spilling of blood.* In retrospect, it seemed obvious to Kell. That was the way of things now aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*, and within the ranks of those who defied the Emperor. It made sense that the lure should be baited in such a way.

Kell remembered the mythical stories he had read as a child, fanciful tales of how monsters could only be summoned from their netherworld realms by a ritual shedding of vitae. *Sacrifice*, he recalled, *was also a weapon*.

He returned to the hide, holstering the pistol along the way. Once in his concealment, he unfurled the old cloth and breathed gently upon his sniper rifle, bringing the weapon to life.

The rifle's one and only round slid silently into the open breech, and Kell settled in to wait for what he knew was certain to happen. He waited, and eventually the whispers returned.

*Feel no pity. That emotion is a corrosive, tormented and acid thing that can hollow out purpose and righteousness. Do not pity the target for whatever path has put them before your gun, no matter how misguided or tragic. And do not pity yourself for the acts you are asked to commit in the name of righteousness. It weakens you, and when the time comes, it will make you hesitate.*

And at last, the Warmaster was in his sights.

*He has stood there. He will stand there.*

It seemed as if Kell blinked his eyes, and it was so. Through the circular window of the telescopic sight, surrounded by a halo of projected windage measurements, range-findings and atmospheric data, *he* was suddenly there.

How much time had elapsed, or how long he had waited... None of that mattered any more.

Horus Lupercal, the Emperor's fallen son and the lord of this vessel. Kell did not have the words to describe the titanic being before him – an immense presence that seemed to radiate out across the distance towards the Assassin, pouring through the scope's eyepiece and in danger of overwhelming him.

How was that possible? His will became frozen and, curse his weakness, he actually *hesitated*. Kell had never known such a thing in all his time as a killer in

the Clade's name.

That time seemed very far away, though, and this – what was happening in the moment – was so close and so real and so very, very powerful.

Horus stood considering the corpse of Letae, where it had been deposited at his feet. The huge man-shape assembled out of iron and armour was nodding, as though he had expected to see what lay before him. He was reading the letters of his honorific etched upon dead flesh. He was holding a tiny golden thing between the armoured tips of his thumb and forefinger.

Kell's weapon told him that it was ready to fire and the scope dialled in the last few notches until the Warmaster's eye filled the image. Kell knew that the gun was shaking in his hands, but the Exitus rifle's stabilizers amended the tremors. He took a breath, released half of it.

Horus turned and looked directly at him.

Kell's will broke and he ran screaming, but only inside the halls of his own tortured thoughts. Out in the domain of flesh, he completed the act by muscle-memory alone, and at last he pulled the trigger.

The Warmaster smiled as he plucked the bullet from the air, as delicately as if it were a butterfly alighting on his hand.

*flawless*  
*ephemeral*  
*execute*  
*immortal*  
*clarity*  
*loyal*  
*dissent*  
*punish*  
*sacrifice*  
*pity*  
*truth*

The whispers became a roar – a shouting, wordless hurricane that tore at Kell's ears. He bolted to his feet, feeling giddy, the air about him turning dense and syrupy. He moved like he was underwater, dragged backward by ghost-force and thickening streamers of time. The remnants of the cloak, now little more than a

cowl, fell away from his shoulders and spun out into the void beyond the iron cliffs. He lost the rifle, the spindly weapon suddenly becoming dead weight in his ruined hands. It clattered to the deck, the sound of its landing upon the metal plates abruptly lost in a concussion of displaced smoke.

Light of a dirty amber hue washed over the hide and the gantry, briefly dazzling the Assassin. It drew his gaze towards its source, like gravity exerting its pull upon a planet.

Everything seemed *golden*. The dead metal, the corroded iron, it all glowed under a blooming shroud of illumination. Too late, Kell understood that it was not the brass dais he had seen in the poison-dream.

*It is here. It has always been here!*

A leviathan moved into view as the light faded, and the Assassin turned as a great shadow fell across him.

*He has stood there. He will stand there.*

Magnificent and malignant, a figure that was swathed in darkness but also luminous and brilliant towered high above him. He saw a face that no sculptor could ever have hoped to capture, an aspect that could have been handsome but now was marbled by cruelty. An immense clawed hand clacked and flexed, extending one single adamantium talon to point at him.

‘You are Eristede Kell,’ said Horus. ‘You ought to be dead.’ He dropped the spent shot from the sniper rifle at his feet. ‘Why are you here, Assassin?’

‘I am here to slay a monster,’ he managed.

‘As am I,’ rumbled the Warmaster, and a shadow of something bleak crossed his face. Around him stood a halo of legionaries, each resplendent in armour detailed with arcane runes and fearful fetishes. None of the others moved, no weapons were drawn. They stood back to give their lord room to do as he wished.

Horus came forward, absently snapping the discarded rifle in two beneath the tread of his huge ceramite boot. ‘Make no mistake this time. It is I.’

Kell nodded stiffly, remembering the warrior he had shot dead on Dagonet. *Luc Sedirae, Captain of the 13th Company of the Sons of Horus*. He had been so certain that his target was the Warmaster himself, so eager to end Horus’s life and the insurrection with one shot, just as he had on a hundred other worlds. But this was not that kind of war. He had been a fool to believe that it was.

Horus beckoned Kell with the claw. ‘Do it, then. Take your final chance to end me, mortal.’ He tipped back his neck, exposing a patch of his bare throat. ‘Here, I will help you.’

‘How...’ It was a monumental effort for Kell to force every word out of his mouth. ‘How do you know my name?’

‘Many voices whisper to me,’ smiled the demigod. ‘And I remember the names of all who have tried to stop my heart. It keeps me... humble.’

Kell’s hand dropped to the butt of the Exitus pistol at his hip. The action was reflexive, even as he knew that it would be futile to follow it through to the end. But he could not stop himself – it was as if he were a player upon a stage, set on a path towards the story’s end that he could not alter.

‘I saw you...’ Kell managed. ‘When the poison was in me... I saw *something*...’ He shook his head. ‘I don’t know how.’

‘This vessel belongs to me, Assassin. Iron and bone, body and soul.’ Horus opened his claw to the air. ‘I know everything that transpires on this ship. The *Spirit* speaks to me. I see with all her eyes.’

*The serpents.* Kell saw them again in his memories, felt the burning of their bites all over him, and shuddered.

‘Blood summoned me.’ The Warmaster inclined his head towards the distant dais where Letae’s corpse still lay. ‘I came to you, little man. Think how rare that is. *I* came to *you*. So the matter can be ended.’

Kell slowly drew his pistol. ‘I’ve lost everything that mattered to me because of you.’

‘Not so.’ Horus gave a slight shake of his head, ignoring the weapon. ‘I did not send you here. I did not force you to risk all on a mission that could only fail. The end of Terra and my father is inevitable, Kell. You see that, don’t you? Perhaps only now, at the end? *He* was the one who sent you here. *He* sent you to perish, and for what?’ For a moment, the Warmaster seemed genuinely sorrowful at the waste of it.

Kell wanted to cry out in despair, a sudden surge of powerful emotion burning in his chest as the great warrior’s words touched a truth buried deep inside him. He struggled to keep it silent. Horus looked at him and saw it, though – saw through him as if he were glass.

‘My father’s Sigillite wretch dispatched your execution force, and others since. I have turned them all away. Assassins are a tool of the weak. Are you no better than that, Eristede Kell?’

His control melted away, and Kell screamed at the top of his lungs, putting every last fraction of his energy into bringing the pistol to bear. He squeezed the trigger over and over, putting explosive Infernus rounds in a spread across the Warmaster’s chest. Horus turned his face away, shielding it with one armoured

gauntlet, but made no other move.

He weathered the brief, shrieking firestorm, and when the wicked flames dissipated there was nothing to show that his armour had taken even the lightest kiss from the Exitus pistol's discharges.

Kell's heart sank and he waited to die.

Horus came to him, and still the Warmaster's warriors did not move even a fraction to give reprisal for this attack upon their liege-lord. The primarch took the spent weapon from Kell's hand with surprising gentleness, and loomed over him. 'You see?'

'I see,' Kell managed, swallowing a sob. *I am broken*, he told himself. *Useless and defeated*. 'I beseech you, lord. End it swiftly.' He heard the echo of poor Lartae's words beneath his own.

But when the killing blow did not fall, Kell looked up and saw Horus watching him intently. 'Do you know what you are?' asked the Warmaster. 'Have you ever wondered how many threads of possibility pass through you? Think, man. Think about how many destinies have been changed by your gun. That is something that has power.' The cold steel talon rose to touch lightly upon Kell's chest. 'In this world and the next, there is a nexus of fates surrounding you. Millions of lives changed in the wake of your assassin's bullet. That trails behind you, yet you are forever blind to it.'

Kell blinked back tears. 'What... What do you want from me?'

Horus studied him. 'Tell me what *you* want.'

Before, Kell might have said that he wanted an end to the pain, to the terrifying questions he asked of his own sanity, his fractured memories. But he knew that there would be no solution to that. He was broken beyond mending. There was only one place for him to find peace now.

'I want to have clarity again.' He looked at the pistol in Horus's hand, small and childlike by scale. 'To be the weapon. Machine cold and focused.' Saying the words was an act of both liberation and of betrayal.

'I will grant that,' Horus told him. He looked down at the Exitus pistol he had taken from Kell. 'You don't need this. I will see you are awarded something better.' With a flick of his wrist he tossed the spent gun away, then gestured to Kell. 'Give me your hand, murderer.'

Kell presented his ripped palm and the Warmaster took it. The long icy talon came down and cut a shape in agony across his scarred flesh. Darkness bloomed there, inky and smoking. Slowly, painfully, Horus drew the same arcane octed design that Kell had glimpsed on the walls of the *Vengeful Spirit*. He felt the

mark sinking into him, resonating out and repeating all through his bone and meat, replicating like a virus. The Assassin was being changed by the act in ways beyond his understanding.

The searing, soul-rending pain brought him almost to the edge of heart-cess, but then it mercifully ebbed away and Kell was breathing hard, chilly and rough-edged gasps coming thick and fast.

‘Now then,’ said Horus, releasing him and stepping back. ‘We shall see what the weapon can do.’

When Kell looked back down at his hand there was a gun in it, something alien and menacing, something unhallowed.

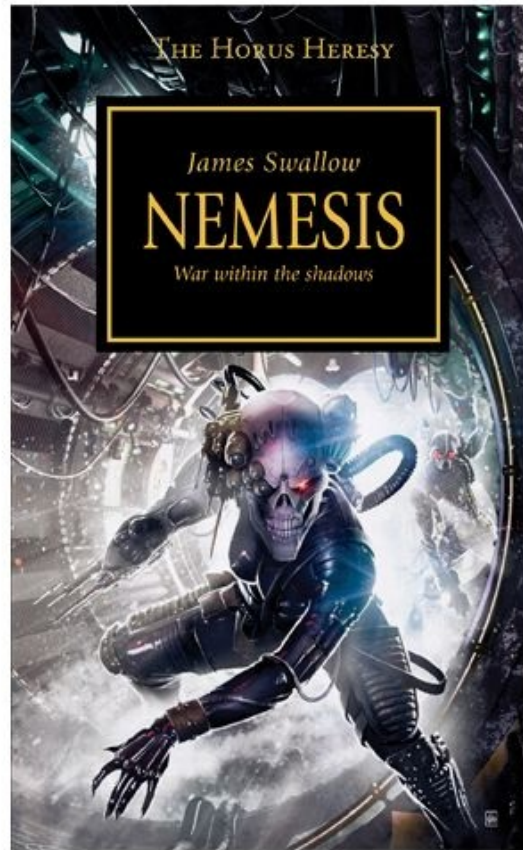
A pistol, made of glass and blood and hatred.

*If you are ever in doubt, look to your weapon and see the words inscribed upon it. Know them and know you are certain. This singular truth will never alter.  
The outcome justifies the deed.*

## 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 four 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*.

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First published in *Death and Defiance* in 2014.

This eBook edition published in Great Britain in 2015 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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