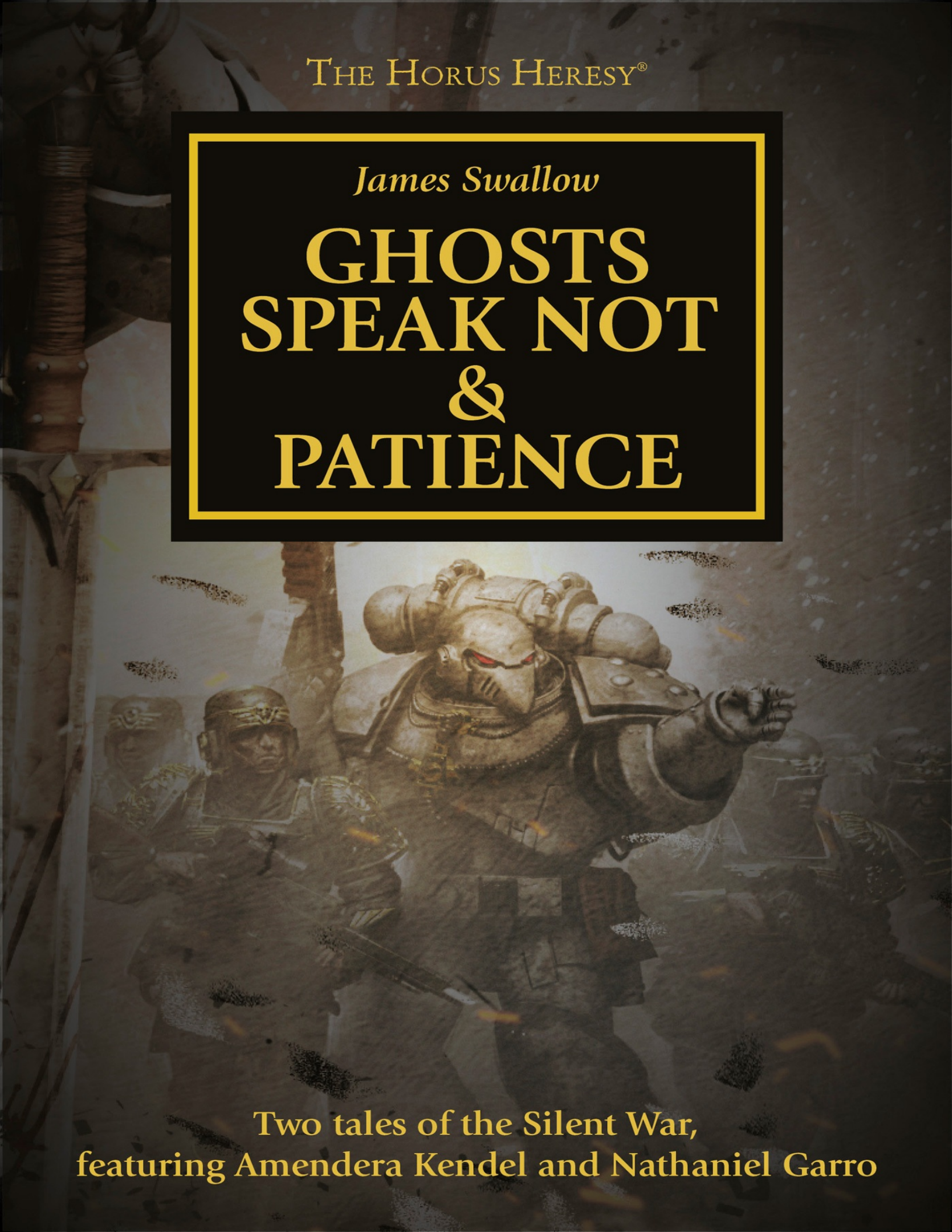


THE HORUS HERESY®

James Swallow

GHOSTS SPEAK NOT & PATIENCE



Two tales of the Silent War,
featuring Amendera Kendel and Nathaniel Garro

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Two tales of the Silent War,
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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.**

GHOSTS SPEAK NOT

James Swallow

Made crystal and pewter by monochrome light, the *Velox* dropped silently into the bowl of Crater Swift, settling on the surface of Terra's moon. Puffs of lunar dust billowed gently in the low gravity, scattered by the retro-thrusters on the underside of the heavy gun-cutter.

Despite a name that in High Gothic conjured thoughts of speed and sleekness, the *Velox* was more akin in its design to a bolter or an engine part. She was not a lovely vessel, and did not have grace about her. The ship was a lesser cousin to the massive frigates that patrolled Terra's LaGrange points, a bulky craft that resembled an ingot of battered steel. But the *Velox* was carefully nondescript, forgettable, and that in itself was a kind of perfection.

Two halves of a thick dome emerged from the edges of Crater Swift, quickly rising to meet and form a roof over the basin. As they came together, air flooded into the sealed space. It was a wasteful, showy use of atmosphere, but as in many things so close to the seat of the Imperium, the presentation of these details was sometimes more important than the reality behind them.

A ramp unrolled from the *Velox*'s ventral hull, and presently three figures disembarked. Bringing up the rear were a man and a woman clad in tactical carapace shells, their armour not the dull green of the Emperor's army but a slate tone darker than the surrounding lunar regolith, highlighted with gold detail.

They carried themselves like professional soldiers, with a measure of swagger leavened by wariness, their hands never straying too far from the high-spec laspistols holstered at their hips. Both would have been more at ease carrying their usual shoulder arms, but their mission commander had insisted that they were to show decorum on Luna. Coming armed for war did not communicate the required degree of respect.

The woman's name was Qelvyn; born on distant Shenlong, she was still new to the glitter and majesty of the inner Imperium, and she could not stop herself

from looking through the dome to see the great tower rising up from the Sea of Crises beyond it. The Somnus Citadel shone like a bright dagger against the black sky.

Vasado was her male compatriot, and he too was daunted by what lay around him. But unlike Qelvyn, Vasado concealed his misgivings beneath a layer of practised disdain.

They exchanged looks as they reached the foot of the ramp and took defensive positions around the figure beneath the hooded black cloak who had led them here.

From the folds of that velvet mantle emerged strong, athletic hands. The head beneath the hood rose and the dark material rolled back of its own accord to reveal a woman's face.

In other circumstances, some would have called her a beauty, even with the faint tracery of a sword-cut scar visible across her cheek. But her eyes – dark chips of amber, forever narrowed in dismay – were those of a killer. Purple-black hair, once long and flowing but now close-cropped, framed her face. She wore a band of metallic cloth that sat across her high forehead.

The woman knew this place intimately. For years, it had been the closest thing she had to a home. In the halls of the Somnus Citadel, she had found something close to a family.

All gone now. Swept away in a tide of change forced upon her by circumstance, by her own sense of right and wrong. Coming back stirred a peculiar mix of emotions, all marbled with regret.

She did not allow any of that to show. She kept it locked away behind a schooled, steady expression, because she knew that they were being watched. A bow, then; she went down on one knee to the great red-gold sigil of the Imperial aquila that dominated the far wall of the crater-bay.

A moment later, a hatch in the stone wall spat vapour and rumbled open, to reveal a cohort of women in golden armour and chainmail. Many showed only the upper half or a quarter section of their faces behind gorget-grilles that resembled castle gates. All had swords and ornate guns at rest upon their hips.

The Sisters of Silence had decided to grace them with their presence.

They were the Emperor's most fearsome witch-seekers. A cadre of women recruited from across known space, taken from orphanages and trained to be superlative killers. Their name came from their Oath of Tranquillity, a vow given freely on ascension from novice to full Sisterhood, never to speak aloud until their duty ended.

They were as vital to the Imperium as the great warlords of the Legiones Astartes, but for different reasons.

Each of the Sisters was the possessor of the Pariah gene, each a psychic null whose existence made no impact on the great unseen ocean of the warp, where the inchoate energy of all living spirits was said to reside. They were the antithesis to the gifted psykers who served as Navigators, astropaths and Librarians in the Emperor's name; their presence alone was enough to torment a being with psionic talents. Thus, they were the best equipped to hunt down and terminate any mind-witches and renegade psykers who might threaten the stability of the Imperium.

A few detached from the group and approached the *Velox*. Their leader sauntered more than she walked, a cruel smile playing on her lips. Her left eye was a bionic construct of azure glass and brassy metal, protruding from a face puckered by fire scarring. While the White Talon Sister-Vigilators who escorted her bore few items denoting rank, their leader had a heavy necklet and black steel torcs about her arms indicating high status. She was a Sister-Excrutiatus, one of the silent order's most zealous and ruthless agents. Her cadre were called when whole worlds needed to be scoured, in the extreme cases when a handful of deaths were not enough to purge the taint of witchery.

The scarred Sister halted in front of the hooded woman as she rose, and in a gesture that could be nothing other than mockery, tapped two fingers to the tip of her chin. The sign meant 'give voice.'

A callow novice, who until this moment had been out of sight behind one of the Vigilators, slipped into view and cleared her throat. 'You are asked—'

I know what that means, child, the woman in the cloak responded. She gestured in thoughtmark, the intricate sign language used by the Sisterhood to communicate concepts of depth and import. *You are not needed here.*

'I...'

The novice faltered. As she had not yet taken her oath, Sisters of her rank were often used as interpreters for the Silent Sisterhood to communicate with those outside their order. It was clear that the young woman had not been informed of who would be arriving aboard the *Velox*. 'You know our speech?'

She used to be one of us, signed the novice's commander. *Before her strength failed and she became an oath-breaker.*

'My strength is as firm as it ever was.' The words left the hooded woman's lips, and she felt a strange thrill at speaking aloud in this place, after so many mute years of her life spent here. 'My oath was altered, renewed... Never broken.' Her voice had a rough, cracked quality to it, perhaps a legacy of decades of disuse.

She reached up and tugged the headband away, revealing the same blood-red aquila tattoo on her forehead as that shared by the Vigilators. ‘My name is Amendera Kendel, and I come with the authority of Malcador the Sigillite and the right of my own actions. You would do well to remember that, Emrilia.’

The Sister-Excrutiatus glared at her for daring to use her forename in so casual a manner. A long time ago, Amendera Kendel and Emrilia Herkaaze had been friends, both plucked from worlds in the Belladone Reach, both excelling in their training as Silent Sisters.

But the passage of time and the constant struggle against witch-kind had put them on different paths. Where Kendel sought to perform her duties with honour and compassion, Herkaaze became consumed by a militant intensity beyond the secular remit of their order.

You should not have come back. Herkaaze’s hand tensed on the hilt of her sword, the other dancing in front of her face as she snapped out the words through her gestures. *You are not welcome here.* She glanced at the two soldiers at the foot of the gun-cutter’s ramp. *You or... Malcador’s Chosen.*

‘You are the lost one,’ murmured the novice, shock written across her face. ‘The Oblivion Knight who willingly departed the order to serve the Sigillite...’

‘There is a great deal more to it than that,’ Kendel said grimly.

The young Sister blurted out a question before she could stop herself. ‘Why did you do it?’

Kendel looked away, briefly meeting Herkaaze’s gaze. ‘Things change. Deeds are done and words are spoken that can never be called back.’ She closed her eyes, remembering another novice, another unanswerable question... And Herkaaze’s remorseless sword cutting down that young life to deny an unmade future. ‘It matters not. The only fact of importance is that I am here now with a mission of the utmost consequence.’

Herkaaze eyed her. *What errand has Malcador sent you on? The Sisterhood will not participate in his elaborate schemes.*

Kendel hesitated. Although the Sigillite was the Regent of Terra and the Emperor’s right hand, there were many who distrusted him, and some – like the Sister-Excrutiatus – who secretly considered the Emperor a divine being and Malcador as some kind of usurper-in-waiting. She frowned. ‘I am not here to engage with you,’ said Kendel. ‘I have need of the guests you hold in the citadel. Take me to them.’

A noise escaped Herkaaze; a low grunt of derision. *I see no reason to accede to your demand.*

‘Perhaps this will change your mind.’

Kendel pulled off the heavy battle glove on her left hand and held it up, palm facing the Sisters. On her pale skin there was a shimmering brand, scars made of liquid metal. The icon rendered there was a stylised letter ‘I’, with the suggestion of an all-seeing eye upon it.

‘This is the mark and the authority of the Regent of Terra. I am his Agentia Tertius, and his words echo through mine.’ She steeled herself, for the path she was about to start down would be hers alone if it brought failure. ‘This matter bears the mantle of *tacitus bellum*, of a need most pressing and covert in nature. So I say once more, do as I ask... Or accept the consequences your obstruction will bring.’

Her former sister-in-arms took a step closer, until they were eye to eye. *You shamed the Storm Dagger cadre when you deserted us. But I was not sorry to see you go. If it were my choice, I would have you executed for your temerity.* Herkaaze leaned back, retreating. *We are the Emperor’s blades, and we do His will. If this is wished, so be it. And if not...* She paused, then pointed up at the dome, directly towards the half-globe of Terra visible in the lunar sky. *He sees all.*

The Sister-Vigilators closed ranks and moved with Herkaaze as she strode away. Only the novice remained.

‘What is your name, child?’ asked Kendel.

The girl was plainly quite afraid of her. ‘Novice-Sister Gathé Soteria.’

‘Well, Gathé. My time is limited.’ She nodded towards the hatchway that led to the Somnus Citadel. ‘Show me to the Seventy.’

With the novice taking the lead, Kendel and the soldiers boarded a pneumatic tram that ferried them through dark tunnels to the Sisterhood’s fortress. As they dropped into the catacombs beneath the citadel, Vasado leaned over and muttered to Qelvyn. ‘You know what that was about?’ He nodded towards Kendel and Soteria at the far end of the tram car.

Qelvyn gave him an arch look. ‘I know bad blood when I see it.’

Vasado shivered. ‘This place gives me the creeps.’ He glanced out of a portal. ‘Something here doesn’t feel right.’

‘I hear you,’ the other soldier nodded. ‘It’s them. They’re all *blanks*. The Sisters are pariahs, and you know what that means.’

‘They don’t have souls.’

‘If you believe in that kind of thing,’ added the woman. ‘Or it could just be the

mind playing tricks.’

Vasado bristled. ‘You look me in the eye and tell me your gut doesn’t sit badly, being in this place.’ When Qelvyn didn’t counter, he nodded. ‘Thought so.’ He had seen the way that the *Velox*’s psyker pair – the demure astropath and the ship’s Navigator – had reacted with open aversion to the arrival of Kendel aboard the gun-cutter. Both of them could barely stand to be in the same cabin as the former Oblivion Knight, and he wondered if the constant, slightly sickening sensation he felt now was a pale shade of whatever those with psionic gifts would experience.

Vasado was no stranger to discomfort. During his time in the *Auxilia*, he had spent months knee-deep in inhospitable places no sane person would ever have visited. But the constant, ominous pressure in the back of his head made him want to run back to the *Velox* where he could lock himself away along with the psykers. He took a long breath and shook it off.

The tram slowed to a halt, and he followed Qelvyn to her feet as a hatch slid back.

‘They have annexed this level,’ the novice was telling Kendel. ‘It seemed the best solution to simply allow them to have it and interfere as little as possible in their affairs. For everyone’s sake.’

The soldiers exited first, and Vasado’s nostrils twitched. He smelt cordite and blood in the air. His hand was on his laspistol in an instant. ‘Careful...’

The sound of steel on steel reached them, and Vasado realised that they had arrived in the middle of a fight.

The chamber before them was partly a vast natural cavern, partly an excavation cut by heavy industrial lasers. Someone had set up clusters of prefabricated habitat modules in groupings best suited to a forward military outpost. He saw a parade ground, a makeshift shooting range, dormitory blocks and the like. The ringing clamour of blades was coming from a fighting pit dug out of the rock, and about it Vasado saw a ring of great, hulking figures in body-gloves and robes.

‘Legionaries...’ murmured Qelvyn. ‘Here?’

‘The Seventy,’ Kendel told her, stepping past. ‘Although there are fewer left now. The name remains, as they have nothing else to designate them.’ She marched towards the giant warriors and the duel they were spectating.

Qelvyn and Vasado quickly fell in step with Kendel, and Soteria came too, wringing her hands and fretting as they went.

Vasado sized up the Space Marines with all the wariness of a scavenger canid

approaching a pack of apex predators. Even out of their powered armour, the Emperor's Angels of Death were impressive specimens. He had seen them many times growing up, and never lost the instinctive sense of respect that their kind instilled in him.

And yet, with the rebellion of Warmaster Horus and the turning of several of the Emperor's Legions to sedition's black banner, Vasado was acutely aware that there were many of these gene-engineered beings who were now his enemy. As his gaze raked over the ranks of the assembled warriors, he glimpsed something that made him freeze in his tracks.

Kendel turned back to him as Vasado pulled his gun, the weapon whining as it went into active mode. The sound caught the attention of a couple of the legionaries, who eyed him coldly.

'What are you doing?' said Qelvyn, her own hand on her pistol.

'You see what they are?' he hissed. 'Look there, the brands and Legion icons on their flesh!' As clear as day, many of the warriors had simple tattoos visible on their massive biceps that repeated the same symbol – a six-pointed star-burst crested by a white skull. 'The Fourteenth Legion! The *Death Guard!*'

Kendel stepped in front of Vasado. 'Aye, these are Mortarion's sons. They are warriors from a Legion that turned against Terra and bent the knee to the Warmaster... But they are not traitors.'

'Explain.' Vasado retreated a step, sensing Qelvyn at his side.

His thoughts raced. *What kind of madness has the ex-Sister dragged us into?* Since becoming one of Malcador's Chosen, he had come to understand that the Sigillite's missions were atypical – but until now, his only contact with those having fealty to Horus had been to kill them.

One of the legionaries detached from the group and surveyed them. 'The woman speaks the truth. We are loyal to the Emperor, as we have always been. Seventy of us, at first. We escaped the betrayal at Isstvan to bring word of the Warmaster's treachery to Terra.'

'And what of your brethren and your primarch?' Qelvyn rocked on her heels, ready to flee if she had to. 'What allegiance do you have to them?'

The warrior's eyes narrowed. 'Are we still of the Death Guard?' He shook his head. 'In all honesty, I do not know. That has been taken away from us.'

Kendel glanced at the soldiers. 'I was here at the end of their flight from horror. I tell you, these men are right and true – perhaps the last of their Legion who are.'

'So *you* say,' Vasado retorted. 'If that's so, then why are *those* here?' He jerked

a thumb back towards the pneumatic tram. Flanking the platform were two dormant gun-servitors, their cannons lowered for now but clearly placed to prevent anyone leaving the cavern.

The legionary's narrow, scarred face twisted in a grim sneer. 'In this day and age, trust is in short supply.'

'Put away your weapon,' Kendel ordered Vasado. 'Before you embarrass us further.'

He reluctantly complied, although the Death Guard seemed unconcerned by the whole exchange. As the heat of the moment faded, the soldier imagined how it might have gone if he had fired a shot. *Not in our favour*, he thought.

'I remember you.' The Death Guard addressed Kendel, no longer interested in the blade fight behind him. From the tempo of the clash, it seemed to be close to a violent climax. 'Now you speak. Much has changed.'

'For all of us.' Kendel looked around. 'I regret that Luna has become a prison for you and your battle-brothers.'

The warrior shrugged his broad shoulders. 'We have decided to look upon it as a form of detached duty. A sentinel watch that must be stood, if you will. We train and we meditate. But the Silent Sisters allow us only limited contact with the galaxy at large. So we wait.'

'For what?' asked Qelvyn.

'For the time when we are needed.' The Death Guard gave her a strange look, as if his answer was as obvious as the grey stone surrounding them. 'Our primarch will come to Terra, sooner or later. We will be there to greet our father and our errant kinsmen. On that day, we will have words.'

Vasado almost laughed at the warrior's dour understatement, but a healthy sense of self-preservation kept him quiet.

The warrior looked back at Kendel. 'I would ask, what news is there of our captain, and our kinsman Voyen? The Sisters say nothing.'

A frown grew on the woman's face. 'Nathaniel Garro now serves the Emperor and the Regent of Terra as I do, in missions of secrecy and import. Meric Voyen...' She trailed off.

'He left with a few of our number,' prompted the warrior. 'They did not return.'

'They will not,' said Kendel, after a moment.

'Ah.' The Death Guard gave a solemn nod, taking the bleak meaning from her words. Vasado expected him to press for more information, but the legionary simply accepted the cold reality of the loss.

From the fighting pit there came a final, thunderous exchange of blows,

followed by a great crunch of stone, and dust kicked up by the duel slowly settled. Even under the effect of the citadel's gravity-normalising field, the powdery lunar soil ghosted through the air like mist.

The spectating legionaries tapped their fists on their chests in a gesture of approval to the fighters, breaking ranks as the two combatants climbed out. The first of them, dark-skinned with a heavy brow, rose into view. Vasado winced as the legionary snapped his dislocated jaw back into place with a dull crack. He stalked away, and by his manner, the soldier knew immediately that this one had been the loser of the bout. The victor emerged – thickset and bull-necked, even by Space Marine standards – and gave a bellicose snort, a savage smirk playing on his lips.

But the expression fell away when he saw the new arrivals. ‘Gallor! What are these?’

The Death Guard pushed past his brothers and strode over. Sweat still coated his bare arms and chest, and in his hand he carried a short sword with a serrated edge. ‘Short’ was a relative term, Vasado reflected – the weapon was easily the equivalent of a hand-and-a-half blade for normal human.

The first legionary inclined his head. ‘Brother Kyda. Another win for you, I see. How many is that now?’

‘Not enough,’ said Kyda, glaring at the soldiers. ‘Answer me.’

‘Th-this is Amendera Kendel, of Malcador's Chosen...’ Novice Soteria began, her voice quavering. ‘She has come here to speak with you, lords.’

Kyda ignored the girl, turning his attention on Kendel. ‘The Sigillite sends a lackey, after letting us rot here for years? I hope your words begin with an apology, else you may take them and tell the Regent to—’

‘Decorum, brother,’ insisted Gallor.

Kyda cursed in a tongue that Vasado didn't understand, but Qelvyn paled a little, making it clear that she did. ‘It's Barbarusian,’ she muttered. ‘It implies the liquefaction of one's internal organs.’

‘Charming.’ Vasado made the mistake of catching Kyda's eye, and the legionary pointed his blade at him.

‘Go away,’ he hissed. ‘Unless you want to join me in the practice pit for my next bout.’

‘The Imperium needs your help,’ said Kendel, cutting through the conversation. She said it with enough firmness that everyone fell silent. ‘A threat has arisen close to the heart of the Imperium, and for my sins, I have been ordered to expunge it. The Warmaster's insurrection grows more dangerous with each

passing day, and the well of the Emperor's resources is not infinite. Horus will invade, and so little in the way of men and materiel can be spared from the preparations.' She opened her hands. 'I have a ship. I have a small crew. But I need strength.' Kendel nodded towards Kyda. '*Legion* strength.'

'What kind of threat?' asked Gallor.

'Traitors,' she replied. 'Of that there is no doubt.'

Kyda's sneer deepened. 'Ask the Fists to do it. Or are they too busy standing on battlements and marking the time?'

'Yes, they are,' said Kendel. 'The fact is, every loyal warrior of the *Legiones Astartes* across the segmentum has a place and a mission. None can be spared.'

Gallor frowned. 'So you come to us.' He paused, thinking it over. 'And perhaps, you are here for another reason... To let us prove our loyalty again.'

Kyda gave a rough chuckle. 'Ah, brother. Your lack of cynicism is always refreshing.' He pointed at Kendel. 'She wants us not because of the fidelity we have proven, but because of the very nature of our circumstance! We are troubling to the Council of Terra. They know not what to do with us. No one will trust us to fight, and no one dares to try and eradicate us. So we sit in this cave waiting for the choice to go one way or the other!' He turned his head and spat. 'You came here, Kendel, because we are *expendable*. Because we can perish on Malcador's mission and no one will notice.'

'Yes,' she repeated. 'All that is so. The discretionary powers granted me allow a wide degree of latitude in their execution. I am making the best use of available resources.' Kendel's voice rose again. 'I seek assistance in this. Two souls. Who of the Death Guard Legion will accompany me against the enemies of the Emperor?'

None of the other legionaries appeared to hear her.

Kyda planted his sword in the dirt at his feet. 'Do you really believe that any of us will take to your command?'

And then Kendel did something that Vasado wasn't expecting. She smiled.

'Your name is Bajun Kyda. They call you the Bull of the Seventh.' She glanced at the other warrior. 'And you are Helig Gallor, known to be grave but of strong character. Yes, lords, I know the names of all of the Seventy, alive and dead. And I understand what it is like to be cut away from something you have dedicated your life to, lost to it because of one person's toxic choices.' Kendel's gaze passed over the Novice-Sister, and her expression was softened by sadness. Then the moment was gone. 'Tell me, Kyda. Is there a day that passes in which you do *not* thirst for the sting of battle? How much longer will you be willing to chafe

under the mantle of inaction?’ She indicated the other legionary Kyda had bested in the pit. ‘How long do you think it will be before your temper snaps and you take it out on one of your brethren?’

The soldier saw the truth of all Kendel said unfolding on the legionary’s face. It was a gift, he thought. The woman had a way of getting under your skin, an insight that was almost uncanny.

‘And you, Brother Gallor.’ Kendel turned to the other warrior. ‘You have said little, but from the moment I arrived here, you have hoped that it would be with a way out of this hole in the ground.’

‘I thought you were a blank, not a mind-reader,’ said Gallor.

‘I am an exceptionally good judge of character,’ Kendel replied. ‘When you have hunted as many fugitives as I have, you learn to see past the surface to what people are really thinking. Even transhumans like you.’

Kyda made a rough, snarling noise, and for a second, Vasado thought the Death Guard was growling like an animal. But then he realised the warrior was *laughing*.

‘Mark me, the Sigillite is cunning to choose you as his agent,’ he said, giving a slow nod. ‘Very well. I’ll join you. Or I may well end up killing someone. Better it be a traitor.’

‘Good choice,’ said Kendel.

‘Do we get any of that new wargear, like Garro and the others?’

She shook her head. ‘Not for the moment, I’m afraid.’

Gallor shot a look across at the other legionaries, who had put distance between themselves and Kendel’s group. ‘You only need two of us,’ he said. ‘Someone will have to counterbalance my battle-brother’s quick temper.’

‘Is that a yes?’ said Vasado.

‘No one else will follow,’ said Gallor, by way of a reply.

In short order, the *Velox* left Luna and powered away from the plane of the ecliptic. Seeking a system Mandeville point, the vessel pierced the veil of the warp and screamed into the realm of non-space, hurtling across vast distances towards one of Sol’s closest stellar neighbours.

Kendel climbed the length of the corridor tube that followed the gun-cutter’s spine until she reached the cramped command deck. It reminded her of the interior of an ornate clock, all complex mechanisms and devices ticking and spinning, the elements whirring as they worked.

Interstellar ships of this tonnage were a rare commodity in the Imperium.

Typically, warp-capable craft were kilometres long, with engine cores alone that would have dwarfed the entire mass of the *Velox*. But the handful that did exist – many of them using ancient, irreplaceable archeotech from before Old Night – were largely in the hands of Malcador the Sigillite. The ship was the one vital resource that Kendel had been able to wrest from the Regent of Terra for this mission. The rest of her tools were those that she had been able to source through guile and ingenuity.

The thick windows at the front of the flight station were blind for now, closed off from the madness of warp space by black iron shutters that blotted out the sea of insanity. All but one of the *Velox*'s command stations were occupied by quiet automata or servitors; unlike a human crew, the machines and mind-wiped helots would never question – or even *remember* – their secretive missions, no matter where they took them.

The sole human on the command deck was a taciturn male of Nordafrik descent named Sorkad, who never left the compartment, even for sleep or refreshment. He peered owlishly over his shoulder at Kendel as she entered, a rig of multifaceted optic lenses over his face snapping back so he could look at her.

‘Agentia,’ he said, by way of greeting.

‘Time to translation?’ Kendel had quickly learned that Sorkad had no interest in conversation beyond the most basic interactions. She liked the simplicity and directness of that.

‘Thirty-eight hours.’ He turned back to his panel.

She looked away, finding the bulbous hemisphere set into the flight deck’s ceiling. A heavy hatch covered with psychometric wards protruded from the curved surface. This was the lower part of a bell chamber where the *Velox*'s Navigator Mazone drifted in null-gravity and did his strange work guiding the gun-cutter through the immaterium. Kendel had not laid eyes on the Navigator since boarding the ship, and Mazone had made it clear that he did not want to be in the same room as the pariah – *or even aboard the same vessel*, she noted.

She didn’t want to tarry. Even with walls of dense psi-dampeners between Mazone and Kendel’s innate anti-psionic qualities, the former Oblivion Knight feared that she might cloud the Navigator’s ability and cause the *Velox* to drift off-course.

She heard gentle footsteps behind her, and a sound that was half gasp, half retch. Kendel turned to see the ship’s other psyker, the blind astropath, retreating back into the corridor. The woman’s olive skin paled and her long-fingered hand went to her mouth.

‘Milady Pau Yei,’ Kendel began, trying to soften the moment with the use of the honorific. ‘Please, wait. I would speak with you.’ She followed the astropath off the bridge, and the other woman kept backing away, almost stumbling. One hand rose in an unconscious gesture of warding, the other desperately feeling the way along the curved walls of the corridor.

‘Stop. *Stop.*’ Pau Yei shook her head. ‘Don’t come any closer. It is most distressing.’ A sheen of fear-sweat made her dulled complexion shimmer. ‘Oh.’ She snatched at an atomiser on her belt and sprayed it in her face, inhaling a sweet calmative mist to steady her nerve. ‘Forgive me. I do not wish to be rude, but...’

‘I understand. But please appreciate that this mission requires all of us to make sacrifices. Your comfort, I am afraid, is one of them.’

‘Indeed.’

‘I was looking for you,’ Kendel went on. ‘Your insight is required.’

‘For what?’ Pau Yei appeared as if she wanted to be anywhere in the universe but here in this moment.

‘The others need to be briefed before we translate back into normal space. Better we do it now, to give everyone time to prepare.’

The astropath gave a nod. ‘Could I not speak to them over the vox from my—’

‘Follow me, milady,’ Kendel insisted.

They assembled in the *Velox*’s cargo bay. Wide enough to accommodate a pair of Land Speeders side by side, it was empty except for the portable arming racks the Death Guard had set up against the inner hull wall. Qelvyn was fascinated by the pair of them, watching discreetly as they prepared their power armour and their massive, oversized bolters for whatever threats might await the ship at the end of its journey.

Vasado nudged her. ‘Take a pict, it will last longer.’

‘Maybe I will,’ she said. ‘I’ve never seen anything like them.’

‘That’s the idea,’ said the other soldier. ‘They were made that way.’ He grunted to himself. ‘But believe me, you may think a Space Marine is impressive, but you haven’t seen anything until you’ve laid eyes on a primarch.’

She shot him a look. ‘You’ve never seen one of them.’

‘Not *one*,’ countered Vasado. ‘A *few*. I was at the Triumph at Ullanor.’

‘Liar,’ she replied, without malice. ‘Every trooper and their dog says that! Let me guess, you were right at the front, too?’

‘There *were* eight million of us.’ Vasado looked affronted. ‘It’s the truth! And

no, I was a few miles back. Still saw them, though.’ He paused, recalling the moment, losing himself in it. ‘The Emperor was there.’

‘Our gene-father too,’ rumbled the legionary called Gallor. He’d clearly heard every word they had uttered.

‘And Horus,’ added the other Death Guard, Kyda. He replaced his gun on the rack and tossed a cleaning cloth into a bucket. ‘I wonder if that’s where the rot began.’

Gallor glanced at the two soldiers. ‘Forgive my brother. We have had little to occupy us of late, and during inaction our thoughts dwell on bleak questions.’

Kyda advanced on Vasado, looking him up and down. ‘You were there. So were we.’ The Space Marine placed a giant hand on his shoulder. ‘There will be less marching this time.’ He turned away once more.

Qelvyn and Vasado shared a look. *What the hell does that mean?*

The hatch behind them clanked open and the astropath Pau Yei flitted into the compartment, moving as quickly as she was capable to the very farthest corner of the cargo bay, hand over hand along a guide rail. A second later, Kendel entered and gave them all a nod. She sat atop a storage crate and ran a hand through the short fuzz of her hair.

‘Well, now,’ she began. ‘Time for explanations. We’re under way, so the full scope of this mission can be detailed.’

‘You promised me traitors,’ said Kyda. ‘Do not renege.’

‘The enemy are waiting at our destination.’ Kendel fished in the pocket of the heavy, brocaded surcoat she wore. ‘We are on course for Proxima Centauri.’

‘That’s a loyalist system,’ said Kyda, with a sniff.

‘Is it?’ Gallor raised an eyebrow.

Vasado gave a start. ‘I... I was born on Proxima Secundus.’

‘Yes, it’s almost like Malcador had some sort of plan when he picked you,’ Kendel replied dryly. ‘Trooper Vasado’s local knowledge will be of use to us when we arrive at the capital world of Proxima Majoris.’

The soldier’s expression soured. ‘I’ll do what I can. But I never had much time for all the First Family nabobs and rich preeners on Majoris.’

‘Noted.’ Kendel went on, then began her briefing in earnest. ‘I’ve been granted clearance to tell you the following. Over the past few months, the astropathic choir in the City of Sight on Terra have been intercepting strange psionic messages from beyond the solar system. At first, they thought these were ghost echoes or some other empyreal phenomena, but investigation has shown otherwise.’

‘Who is sending the messages?’ said Gallor.

‘We don’t know.’

The Death Guard frowned. ‘Where are they going?’

‘Out.’ Kendel gestured at the air. ‘Into the Ruinstorm.’

‘To Horus, then?’

Kendel’s lips thinned. ‘That is the most likely explanation.’ She turned to Pau Yei. ‘Milady, if you would be so kind as to illuminate us further?’

‘Of-of course.’ The demure little astropath’s head flicked up at the sound of her name. She gulped down water from a jewelled bottle chained to her belt and took a shuddering breath. ‘You may have heard the rumours. Some time ago, a cadre of Word Bearers led by the dread centurion Sor Talgron committed grievous sabotage on Terra. One such action was an attempt to destroy the psionic levees in place around the City of Sight. It left us open to... a far greater intrusion.’

‘Psionic what?’ Qelvyn’s eyes narrowed. All this witch-talk was beyond her.

‘Telepathic barriers,’ said Gallor. ‘Go on, milady.’

Pau Yei nodded to herself, the empty sockets in her face looking at nothing. ‘Perhaps the full details are not germane to this conversation. The important point is, during the reconstruction of those levees, we detected the echo-imprint of unauthorised psionic arias coming from Proxima Majoris. It was pure chance. Had the barriers been in full effect, we might never have known...’ She halted again, reframing her thoughts. ‘The prognostics have confirmed that someone on Proxima Majoris is secretly transmitting data to the enemy through the song of a suborned astropath.’

Kyda considered Pau Yei’s words. ‘A spy based on Proxima could monitor ship movements coming in from across the segmentum. They would be able to track the transfer of hardware and manpower to and from Terra, if correctly embedded. It’s a sound deployment.’

‘Malcador thinks so,’ said Kendel. ‘The Sigillite’s orders are clear and unequivocal – we are to find and terminate the rogue astropath, along with whoever is controlling them. But it must be done carefully.’

Pau Yei gave a curt nod. ‘Hence our enforced cooperation.’ She gestured in Kendel’s direction. ‘We are, for the duration, the witch-seeker’s retinue in this matter.’

‘We’ll try to make it less of a chore for you, milady,’ Qelvyn deadpanned.

‘I see why this mission was not granted to Lord Dorn’s warriors,’ added Gallor. ‘Kendel has her status as a null and her expertise in hunting psykers, aye, but

more than that, the deployment of a visible legionary force would raise panic in the local populace.'

'The Imperial Fists don't know how to walk quietly,' Kyda noted.

'Exactly,' said Kendel. 'We don't want the government of a system of Proxima's tactical value to be divided by accusations of treachery.'

Kendel didn't expand on that, but Qelvyn had heard talk of some Imperial colonies falling into anarchy and in-fighting when loyalties were directly challenged. The last thing the Imperium needed on the eve of invasion was witch-hunts and pogroms.

'Vasado.' Gallor turned to Qelvyn's companion. 'What is the character of this world, its people?'

The trooper frowned. 'Stuffed shirts, the lot of them.' The Death Guard's quizzical look made it clear he didn't understand the reference, and Vasado went on. 'Majoris is run by a cabal of nobles descended from the first colonists to arrive in the system, and if you'll pardon my bluntness, they think their sewage doesn't stink. It's a very regimented, narrow-minded society with a strong military component. Everyone on the planet claims to be related to some war hero or another. Proxima's supplied men and women to the ranks of the Imperial Army since the First Expedition. Take it deadly serious, they do. We walk in there cracking off about a spy in their midst to all and sundry, and it won't end well.'

'It would be shameful to them,' said Gallor, grasping the trooper's meaning. 'So any investigation – and accusation – will need to be discreet.' He paused. 'Not my usual sort of battlefield.'

Kyda made a spitting noise. 'This sounds unpleasantly like a diplomatic mission.'

'Oh, there'll be blood to be shed,' Vasado corrected. 'Proximans don't do anything by halves, and a traitor won't go quiet, not on that planet.'

Kendel got to her feet. 'I've had data-slates programmed with all the available intelligence we have on Proxima Majoris and the reports from the prognostics. I advise everyone to review them.'

'Are we dismissed?' Pau Yei said quickly, sensing the briefing's conclusion.

'Aye–' Kendel had barely started speaking before the astropath bolted from the room as best she could and disappeared into the corridor.

'Something we said?' muttered Vasado.

Qelvyn caught his eye and shot a look towards the witch-seeker.

'Oh. Right.'

The group broke up and Kendel decided to walk the length of the *Velox* once more, to gather her thoughts. But she had barely gone a few metres when she heard the heavy footfalls of one of the legionaries behind her.

She turned to find Gallor filling the corridor. ‘Agentia. I would speak with you.’ The Space Marine was hunched forwards so that his head would not touch what for him had to be an intolerably low ceiling. The gun-cutter was not built for those of legionary stature.

‘What is it, Brother Gallor?’

‘You do not recall me, then?’

Kendel paused. ‘I’m sorry... Have we met before?’

He nodded. ‘Aye. Years ago. I should not expect you to recollect, we were both clad in armour, masked at the time. But we passed within arm’s length of one another, in the rush of battle.’

A flash of memory came to her. ‘The castigation of the Jorgall at Iota Horologii? Of course. The Sisterhood fought alongside the Seventh Company of the Death Guard there.’

‘You were quite impressive, for a non-modified.’

‘That action did test the Sisters of Silence,’ she noted. Once upon a time, she might never have dared to admit such a thing, but it was true. The Jorgall – a species of telepathic cyborg xenos – had invaded Imperial space inside a vast bottle-world, and they were targeted for purging. The mission had succeeded, but in the combat, many of Kendel’s fellow Storm Daggers had been killed or maimed.

‘It seems so long ago,’ said Gallor. ‘I miss the purity of knowing who my enemy was. But this arena you are taking us into... There, our foe wears the same face as us.’

Momentarily, Kendel found herself lost for a reply. Gallor’s statement chimed with the same sense of melancholy that had taken hold of her the moment she set foot on Luna. ‘That is so,’ she told him, at length. ‘I think perhaps both of us have been forced to confront a hard reality in recent times.’

‘*Betrayal.*’ Gallor spoke the word with grim fortitude. ‘It is a powerful thing, to know that those who shared your oaths have chosen a path that makes them your foe.’

Emrilia Herkaaze’s face rose and fell in Kendel’s thoughts. ‘True enough, legionary.’

‘You do understand, then.’ Gallor nodded to himself, and Kendel had the sense that she had passed some kind of test with the Death Guard, that now he

considered her worthy of his loyalty and not just his duty. ‘We have both become ghosts haunting our former lives. It would be well to feel... *useful* once again.’

The Velox’s atmospheric shuttle was a stripped-down Eridani-pattern variant of the workhorse Arvus-class lighter. Little more than a cramped metal box with engines and winglets, it was still more aerodynamic than its mothership, and while Sorkad, Mazone and Pau Yei remained in orbit with the gun-cutter, Kendel flew the rest of her group down through the clouds towards Proxima Majoris’ largest metropolis.

The Sigillite’s authority granted them an expedited approach over the towers of the great city. In typically egotistical Proximan fashion, the capital was named Majesty, and it spread out across hundreds of tiny islets over a shallow sea. Each fragment of land was filled by tall castle-like constructs, and the myriad canals threading between them were busy with watercraft.

Two fighter flyers escorted them down to the courtyard of a massive ziggurat festooned with coloured pennants.

Vasado and Qelvyn disembarked first, and made a show of military precision in their stride and posture. On Vasado’s suggestion, they had polished their boots and spit-shined their carapace armour to parade-ground perfection, and it seemed to have the right effect on the local officers, who looked on in admiration. Kendel herself walked out with the two Death Guard warriors flanking her, in a calculated moment of theatre.

There was bowing and nodding and a great amount of empty platitudes, and Kendel soon tired of it. She demanded to proceed to her meeting with the Exalted Governor of Majoris, the High Minister and Aristarch Bakaro Proge.

That earned her some sharp intakes of breath – *a break in protocol*, one of the Proximan officers called it – but Kendel wanted to keep them off-balance.

Leaving the troopers with the lighter, Kendel and the legionaries began a lengthy trek around the ziggurat castle and its corridors. Serviles and soldiers alike bowed or hastened away as her party passed. On many of their faces she saw the same kind of awe that most humans experienced on seeing a Space Marine. A special sort of *shock* at laying eyes on a being bred only for war, a scion of the Emperor himself.

But in each of them, Kendel searched for a glimmer of something else – a truer fear, of the variety that those who kept a secret would exhibit.

Somebody here, perhaps in this very building, knows why we have come.

At each turn, she saw more evidence of the militaristic culture that Vasado had

spoken of. Not just the lionising monuments to soldiery and ancient battles, but an all-pervasive propaganda machine in action through visual feeds and vox-horns. As they marched along an open gallery that looked out over the walls and into the streets beyond, Kendel noted that even the cut of civilian fashion was styled along quasi-military lines.

A sharp sound reached her, and she paused. Kyda and Gallor heard it too, both their helms turning to look in the same direction. *The crack of an electro-whip.* The noise of the weapon's discharge was very distinctive; then it came again, this time followed by a woman's cry.

'There,' Kyda pointed.

Kendel looked and saw a man in a variant of an Imperial Army uniform, specifically that of a discipline master. Usually, the masters were deployed to maintain control of penal battalions – but here the man was whipping a civilian, shouting at her for some infraction that Kendel could not determine. Now that she looked carefully, Kendel saw that there were more similarly dressed figures on every street corner.

'What is going on?' she demanded.

The Proximan officer leading them raised an eyebrow, and it took him a moment to realise what she was asking. The discipline master's actions were clearly so commonplace that he barely registered it. 'Encouragement,' he said simply. 'It is important for those who have not served to know they are a burden.'

'He's punishing that woman because she is not in the military?'

The officer gave her an indulgent smirk. 'No, Agentia. He's *encouraging* her to be grateful to those who are.'

Aristarch Proge was exactly the man Gallor had expected him to be. Fighting lamely against obesity, he was squeezed into a heavy uniform dripping with medals and honorific icons. He wore a stiff ceremonial kepi atop thinning hair, and he moved everywhere in a purposeful, if affected, stride.

The Death Guard legionaries took up stances in the middle of the room and stood sentinel as Kendel greeted the Proximan ruler. Impassive in their wargear, to Proge and his aides they resembled statues made of ceramite.

Gallor's gaze fixed on one particular member of the Aristarch's staff, a hard-faced woman with a single long tail of crimson hair emerging from the right side of her otherwise shaven head. The woman – a marshal of some kind, judging by her rank tabs – was momentarily open-mouthed at the sight of the two

legionaries. But Gallor got the sense that her reaction was not just because of what they were, but *who* they were. Her eyes kept straying to the skull sigil of the XIV Legion on their shoulders.

Proge's effusive greetings had come to an end, and the governor was giving orders to his people to bring refreshments. Unnoticed, the marshal took a wary step towards the Space Marines. 'You... were not expected,' she said, turning to address Kendel. She spoke quietly, so her words did not carry. 'Are they... I mean, has there been some problem?' The marshal was fumbling for the right words and failing to find them.

Kendel shook her head, giving a flat smile. 'Have no concern. Despite what stories you may have heard about the actions of Mortarion's sons, I vouch for *these* Death Guard. They are loyal to Terra and the Emperor.'

'Ah.' Colour drained from the marshal's face. 'Of course. *Of course.*' She bowed and made her excuses, slipping away as Proge returned with ornate cups of tisane.

'Agentia Kendel,' he began. His voice had a low, slightly nasal register. 'Please, join me in a drink and let us get down to cases. How may the people of Proxima serve the Imperium?'

Gallor noted that Kendel accepted the tisane but did not sip it. She settled into a chair as Proge sat across from her. His aides retreated to the corners of the room and stood stiffly at attention. 'I come with grave news,' Kendel replied. 'What I am about to say will upset you, sir. There is a dire threat on your world. A threat not only to Proxima Centauri's safety, but to that of the entire Imperium.'

Proge's permissive manner faltered at the grim tone of Kendel's words. 'That is no small claim.'

'Indeed.' Kendel fixed the Aristarch with a hard, unwavering gaze and unfolded the same narrative she had presented to Gallor and the others on board the *Velox*.

The Death Guard watched the progression of emotions that swarmed over Proge's florid face. At first shock, at the possibility that the Warmaster's agents were using a co-opted Imperial astropath for clandestine communications; but that swiftly reformed into slow-burning anger as Kendel made it clear that this misdeed was taking place on Proxima Majoris, right under the noses of Proge and his people. Some of his aides could not remain silent during the witch-seeker's explanation, and Gallor noted which of them decried her most stridently, sifting their reactions for signs of artifice.

But Kendel did not allow herself to be put off, and she relentlessly followed the accusations to their end, shooting down every denial with cold facts, answering

every question with clipped, direct replies. Gallor felt a growing admiration for the woman. She approached things in a manner very similar to Death Guard doctrine – methodical, unflinching, and forceful.

At last, Proge's manner fell towards dismay as he found there was no other path open to him but acceptance of the Agentia's revelations. The Aristarch sat back in his ornate chair and seemed to shrink beneath the weight of new truth. 'By the First, how could this happen?'

'The ways of the traitor are varied,' said Kendel, her smoky, rough tones hanging in the tense air. 'Rest assured that no stone will remain unturned in my investigation.'

'Of course!' barked Proge, and he summoned one of his people with a brisk wave. 'Habeth! You will give the Agentia everything she needs!'

'Your servant, Aristarch.' A man in a heavy brown coat with much bronze braiding stepped forwards and introduced himself to Kendel as Planetary Warden. A ranking law enforcement officer, Gallor guessed, but his first impression of Habeth was of someone too prim to dirty himself with the work of urban policing.

Kendel shot the Death Guard a brief look that communicated a similar disquiet. Later, both of them would recall how, in that moment, Agentia and legionary alike should have acted on their first instincts.

But by the time they understood that, too much blood had already been shed.

Four days later, Vasado was the first casualty of the investigation.

In scry-monitor footage from where the River of Exemplars met the Oval Palisade, Kendel watched him die in slow motion. The driver of a hover-lifter heading westwards suddenly appeared to lose control of his vehicle, and the fan-drive truck bounced off the churning waters of the canal in a howl of revving engines. In less than half a second, the hauler mounted the quay and bulled across the pavement, ploughing down three other civilians before flattening Vasado beneath its plenum skirt. Its path ended when it struck a wall and caught fire. By the time emergency responders arrived, the driver had burned to death. He made no attempt to exit the vehicle.

Dutifully, Warden Habeth poured a platoon of uniformed constables into the area to investigate, but every one of his detectives returned a report of happenstance.

'A tragic accident,' Habeth had told her, from behind the desk in his air-conditioned office. 'Majesty has overpopulation issues, and these things happen

more often than we would like.'

Any suggestion of conspiracy was met with polite denial. The reports pointed to the innocent civilians who had died in the incident; surely an assassin would not have struck against one of the Agentia's party in so blatant a way, with so much collateral damage? Habeth gently condescended that Kendel might be better to concentrate on the matter at hand rather than assume a connection where none existed.

Outwardly, she accepted his report with a rueful nod. Inwardly, she pushed Habeth up her list of suspects and ordered Qelvyn to begin surveillance on him.

Kendel ditched the official hydrofoil launch and pilot that the Aristarch had provided, and escaped into the backstreets of Majesty. Blending into the crowds, she reached the others over their encrypted vox-net and tersely gave new orders.

'Habeth is lying, then,' Kyda noted.

'Perhaps.' Kendel lost herself in the folds of her hood and hailed an automated water-taxi, scrambling inside. 'We'll need proof.'

Lady Pau Yei's words echoed down from orbit. *'Assuming Vasado was deliberately terminated, we must ask the question – why him?'*

'Soft target,' offered Gallor.

'A warning?' Qelvyn did a fine job keeping her emotions tamped down, Kendel noted. She had been friendly with the other trooper, and doubtless felt his death more keenly than anyone else.

The Agentia shook her head. 'I don't think so.' In her hands she cradled a compact personal auspex module that had been a favoured tool during her time hunting rogue psykers. She peered at its illuminated screen, studying an abstract map of Majesty. 'Vasado went into the city to follow a lead. I believe he found something, and was killed before he could communicate it to us.'

She heard the doubt in Kyda's voice. *'How will you be able to determine what he learned?'*

'I have an idea...' The water-taxi halted and Kendel jumped down from the passenger cabin. She was on the far side of the great waterway from where the 'accident' had taken place. Constables were still patrolling there, and nearby an imposing discipline master shouted at a gaggle of civilians for daring to loiter. 'I think I know what Vasado came here to observe.'

Kendel had studied the footage of the trooper's death dozens of times, and in each iteration she had become more certain that he was watching something. The scry-scan image did not show enough of the surroundings to make it clear what that was, but now she stood there, it was obvious.

It was a deliberately nondescript, heavily over-built pinnacle of thick stone. It had few windows, and those that were visible were opaque with stained glassaica. The exterior was covered with fine detail that at a distance looked like random patterns of aging; but close at hand, Kendel knew it would form into strings of symbols. She had seen the like upon the outer walls of the City of Sight and a hatch aboard the *Velox* – psychogrammetric wards to protect those within from the mental tumult of the world outside.

Like the City of Sight, this tower – the planet’s principal astropathic spire, home to its psyker cadre – was off-limits to anyone like Kendel. To allow a pariah into its environs would cause those within to suffer greatly.

Kendel’s hand slipped into her robes to rest upon the grip of a pistol, and she boldly marched across a connecting bridge, directly towards the spire’s entrance.

By the time Gallor and Kyda arrived at the astropaths’ citadel, the situation had deteriorated to the point that the Space Marines thought a weapon had been detonated in there.

After some consideration, Gallor realised that was not far off what *had* happened.

Amendera Kendel was as toxic to the astropaths in the spire as a choking gas would be to any ordinary human. As they crossed the building’s tiled atrium, the legionaries saw dozens of the blind psykers buckled at the knees or huddled together in corners. Many of them lay moaning with the extrasensory agony that the null’s presence inflicted, while their seer-automata stood patiently nearby, waiting to guide them away.

Ululating warning sirens were sounding, and shutters made of heavy psi-dampening materials had slammed down over entranceways leading deeper into the building. They found Kendel at the centre of the screaming and the panic, her weapon drawn. She was surrounded by a handful of the hardest of the psykers, and demi-human security servitors armed with stubber weapons and restraint net casters.

One of the astropaths, an angular meister with a high hat and sallow complexion, shouted at Kendel. Gallor saw he was bleeding from his nostrils and his ears. ‘Get out!’ he screamed. ‘You are burning us within, null! Leave now or we will destroy you!’

‘No,’ Kendel spat back, daring them to approach. ‘There is a rot at the heart of this place. You have a traitor here, and someone knows it. Reveal them to me!’

‘Lies.’ The astropath retorted. ‘Lies, lies, *lies!*’

During the voyage to Proxima, it had been Kyda who suggested that the corrupted psionic might not, as Kendel had first considered, have been working in secrecy and isolation. She had been uncertain of the legionary's implication that their target would hide in plain sight, but with Vasado's death it seemed the former witch-seeker had seen the reason in Kyda's words after all.

'No psionic signals could depart this world without leaving some trace. If our target is not among you, then one of you is covering for them.' She glared at the psykers, menacing them with a step forwards. Kendel didn't need her gun to kindle their fear.

'Enough,' wailed the meister as he reeled away, spitting pink froth from his lips. He snarled a command at the servitors. 'Kill the woman!'

'I think not.' Gallor intervened, he and Kyda making their presence known with heavy footfalls and the slides on their bolters. The gun-drones, intelligent enough to gauge the level of threat posed by two of the Legiones Astartes, showed programmed restraint and held back.

Kendel addressed the meister. 'Listen to me. I will return to this place day after day, night after night, I will torment you without ever raising a finger...'

Several of the astropaths began to wail like bereft widows.

'I will do this,' she promised, raising her hand to present the Mark of the Sigillite branded on her palm to the sensor eyes of the servitors. They bowed automatically and she went on. 'Neither your guardians nor your Aristarch will be able to prevent it. Unless you tell me what I want to know!'

The meister gave a keening screech and collapsed. 'There is... *no*... traitor here!'

But the words had barely left him before the rattle of an explosion echoed through the walls from the spire's exterior, and Gallor heard the clattering of shattered glassaic.

'Krak charge,' hissed Kyda. 'On the southern face of the building.'

Kendel shoved the meister out of her way and nodded to Gallor. 'Go!'

He took the order and broke into a sprint, thundering back out into the daylight.

Kendel ran as fast as she could, but the Space Marines left her behind in the blink of an eye as they powered away from her around the side of the spire. By the time she reached them, panting hard, her legs aching, a gun battle was already in progress.

Someone had blown a hole in the side of the building two storeys up, and cast down mono-cables from the ragged rent in the stone. The legionaries exchanged

fire with men in worker's overalls and breather masks, armed with lascarbines. She saw a handful of them hustling another figure – this one in the robes of an astropath – along a jetty towards a torpedo-shaped jet-skiff lying in the swell of the canal.

Crimson threads of energy crackled through the air around her, and Kendel ducked behind a nearby sculpture. Gallor and Kyda didn't bother with cover; they weathered the beam hits with stoic calm, taking their time over each bolt they fired. Every shot was a kill – with the huge mass-reactive rounds, it could be nothing else. On the unarmoured forms of the masked men, a hit was enough to blast them into unrecognisable meat.

Kyda shifted aim towards the escaping party. 'I have their range.'

'No!' Kendel shouted over the sounds of gunfire. 'We need the psyker *alive!*'

'We can't reach them before they get to the boat,' he grated.

'We'll find another way,' said Gallor, before Kendel could respond. 'But it may earn us the ire of the Aristarch...' The Death Guard advanced, pulling something from a pack clipped to his waist. A grenade, as big a child's skull. He hurled it in a low arc, and the device landed with a thud in the middle of the jetty. The hail of lasers faltered as the masked men realised what was happening, but it was too late.

The grenade detonated with a deep roar of concussion and threw up a pillar of river water into the air. Suddenly the jetty was matchwood, and of the shooters there was no sign.

For a moment, Kendel feared that Gallor had disobeyed her and killed them all, but then she heard the shriek of an aqua-jet engine and saw the low skiff rocking in the wake of the blast. A bloody, screaming man slipped off the side of the vessel and under the water, as it vaulted away towards one of the larger waterways.

'With me!' Kendel cried, and she scrambled up over a rail, dropping to a quay that had been partly swamped in the explosion. Tethered to the dock was a pilot's hydrofoil, and she splashed across the waterlogged jetty and onto its weather deck.

Kendel thumbed the starter, and the foil reacted.

She was aware of someone behind her calling out angrily, but then the vessel rocked hard as Kyda and Gallor leapt aboard. She heard Kyda say something indistinct, followed by a heavy splash. Her mind wasn't on that, her focus now solely on the jet-skiff. Under her hands, the controls bit into the river and the foil powered away. Gallor's combat blade flashed as he severed the stern line, and

Kendel pushed the throttle bar as far as it would go.

Brackish spray came over the bow before the vessel found its pace, soaking her coat, but she ignored it. Kendel aimed the hydrofoil into the wake of the fleeing jet-skiff and leaned forwards, as if the motion would grant them more velocity.

Red streaks whistled past, wide shots fired more to discourage pursuit than to damage them. Kyda fell to a knee and aimed down the iron sights of his bolter, but did not fire. The constant rising and falling of the skiff and the vibrations of the deck would make any shot a challenging one, even for a legionary.

‘We’ll catch them,’ said Gallor. ‘This vessel’s engine is more potent, if slower off the mark.’

‘As long as we don’t run out of room first,’ Kyda replied, nodding ahead. ‘Look there, brother.’

The canal leading from the astropathic spire opened out into a river, but this waterway was dense with massive cargo ships moving up and down it in long lines, each one like a skyscraper on its side. The jet-skiff snaked back and forth, and Kendel thought she saw panic in the way the helmsman was acting. Too slow to commit to a course that would take it through the wake of the nearest cargo vessel, the fleeing boat was racing straight towards the side of a slow-moving hulk, a wall of red-painted steel rising up to block its path.

‘Fools,’ Kyda offered. ‘They have nowhere to go.’

And for a moment, Kendel would have agreed with the legionary’s assessment. She glimpsed a flash of sunlight off curved plastic as the jet-skiff’s canopy slid shut, sealing the craft’s interior. Then, like a breaching cetacean, it leapt out of the waves and fell, nose down. The craft vanished under the surface and was gone.

‘Throne and blood!’ Kendel spat the curse and wrenched the hydrofoil’s steering yoke hard to port, before their vessel could be pulled into the turbulence left behind. It was a clever ploy – draw them close so that they might get sucked into the side-wake of the big cargo craft.

The hydrofoil lurched in a yawing turn that briefly put the deck at a steep angle, and had the legionaries not been braced, both would have gone overboard. Kendel gunned the engine and swore again as they raced along the side of the ship, losing precious seconds in their chase. The jet-skiff wasn’t a dedicated submersible, that was certain – but in taking a shallow dive beneath the keel of the cargo hauler, it had put them far behind.

She smelt smoke as they bounced over the wake and around the sluggish obstacle before them. Orange warning lights blinked on the display before her,

warning of an engine overheat in progress. 'Find them!' she barked.

'*Calm yourself, Agentia.*' Sorkad's dour voice crackled in her ear. '*I can assist.*'

'Where are you, pilot?' said Gallor, casting a look up into the pale blue sky.

'*Where I have been all along, in the cradle of space. But the Velox's orbit is directly over Majesty. And this ship's optics are very, very precise.*'

'You see the speeder?' A wolfish grin threatened to break out on Kendel's face. It was still new to her, this idea of having... What had Pau Yei called it, *a retinue*? It did not come naturally to the former witch-seeker to rely on the skills of others.

'*I do,*' Sorkad replied. '*Feeding you the positional data now.*'

Gallor placed a hand to his helmet as the information was relayed to his visor display. 'That way.' He pointed to an industrial zone on the far side of the wide river. 'They won't escape.'

The guards left on the dock by the disused refinery fell to pinpoint shots from Legion bolters, and in moments Gallor was striding down a set of iron stairs into a flooded, echoing under-space. Kyda was at his side, and the two of them moved at a deliberately slowed pace in order to let Kendel keep close. Kyda's body language expressed fully how little he enjoyed that, but they had both agreed to this mission and to the ex-Sister's authority. They waded forwards ankle-deep in the oily, cold waters.

'Thermal traces,' Gallor announced, spying blotches of colour through the imagers in his helmet. 'Fading with the chill. We're close.'

'When we find them... Only the astropath is to live, yes?' Kyda asked Kendel, a note of annoyance in his words.

'More than one prisoner would be useful,' she retorted. 'You may feel free to wound with abandon.'

Kyda made a dismissive noise as they reached a sealed hatchway, and with one swift motion, he planted his armoured boot in the door with enough force to knock it off its hinges. Gallor's battle-brother shouldered through, and he was a step behind him.

The chamber beyond might once have been a store-room, but now it was a bolt-hole, with suspended platforms above the flood-waters and makeshift dormitory spaces. Gallor took this in within an instant, as men with guns opened fire on the warriors of the Death Guard.

'For his glory!' screamed one of the shooters, and Gallor knew from the Eye of Horus daubed on one wall who *he* might be. Small calibre bullets rang

harmlessly off the legionary's sealed armour, some of the ricochets spinning back to strike down those who had fired them.

Kyda had already terminated five people in the time it took Gallor to draw a breath, and the other Death Guard stormed across the room to make a close-in kill with a heavysset man who died fumbling with a cut-down lascannon. Gallor advanced, moving and firing, aware of Kendel behind him and her desire for a prisoner or two.

But it seemed these traitors were unwilling to facilitate that end.

Through the melee, he caught sight of the robed astropath making a break for another exit across the compartment, and he shouted to the witch-seeker. The psyker stumbled under a roller-gate, which he slammed down into the shallow water as he passed, in the apparent hope of cutting off any pursuit. Gallor sneered at such foolishness.

Breaking another attacker with a back-hand blow from his gauntlet, Gallor went to the gate and wrenched it open again, enough for Kendel to pass through. She hesitated, jabbing a finger past his helm, her eyes widening. 'Behind you!'

He spun to face another of the assailants, this one dragging round a rotary autocannon to aim in his direction. He faced it, shielding Kendel as she moved.

The gun screamed, filling the chamber with cordite stink, and a torrent of armour-piercing rounds ate into Gallor's breastplate. Chips of ghost-white ceramite sheath were blasted away in seconds, exposing sections of metal beneath, but Gallor still ran *into* the stream of fire, one arm raised to protect the lenses of his helmet.

He destroyed the autocannon by stopping the spinning barrels dead with his armoured gauntlet, and then, without pause, the Death Guard rammed the sizzling weapon back into his attacker, caving in his chest with the force of the impact.

Silence fell.

Kendel sprinted up a ramp and emerged blinking into the sunshine, finding herself on a steel platform that led down to another jetty. The astropath was at the edge, shivering and clutching at the air, dithering over which direction to flee in. He sensed her approach and rounded on her. The man's face was heavy with age, nerves in his jaw trembling with panic. He took a step in her direction, raising his hands in talons.

'You won't take me to the Black Ships!' he screamed. 'I will tear out your throat before I let you!'

Kendel was aware of her laspistol's weight in her hand and she let it drop to the deck. 'I'm not here for you. I want to know who sent the messages.'

'Liar!' He spat the word at her, and Kendel remembered the same insult from the lips of his comrades in the spire. 'I had no choice in that, but they'll never believe me!' The psyker wanted to attack her, she could see it clearly, but the mental repulsion between them was too much for him to overcome. He coughed up bile. 'Curse you!' He reached out, as if he could somehow strangle her from a distance.

Then his lungs exploded out of his chest in a spurt of aerosolised crimson. The astropath staggered, pawing sightlessly at the open maw of parted ribs running from his sternum to his belly, before he came crashing down.

Sunlight flashed off the canopies of a dozen hovercraft out on the water, each flying the pennant of the City Wardens as they floated in to surround the platform. Kendel saw the sharpshooter who had killed the astropath rack the slide of a long-las and eject a spent powercell. Brown-jacketed wardens swarmed off the craft and flowed around Kendel as she stooped angrily to recover her gun.

When she looked up, there was Habeth, standing over the astropath's corpse with a virtuous cast to his face. As if he had slain some kind of monster.

He met her gaze and gave a theatrically overwrought bow. 'Death to all traitors,' he intoned.

The Aristarch's proclamation echoed from the speaker on the wall. On Kendel's orders, Sorkad piped the vox transmission to her cabin on the *Velox*, and she listened with growing dismay. Her eyes fixed on the planet below through a viewport in the hull, Kendel found the dark smudge where the city of Majesty was located on the surface, and glared at it.

Proge's speech was as florid as he was. On and on it went, circling around the subject and wandering off on tangents; but somewhere among all the words, he was declaring a victory. The Aristarch told his people of a terrible conspiracy that he had smashed with the help of Warden Habeth, promising them a planetwide day of celebration.

Before she had departed the city, Proge had declared effusive thanks to Kendel, and as she had found with the matter of Vasado's death, there was little opportunity to entertain the thought that Habeth might *not* be the hero of the day. There were many promises made, assurances about a purge of Proge's government to come, to root out any lingering taint across the planet – but it all

seemed too engineered, too well rehearsed to the former hunter.

The *Velox* had been granted priority to depart, but Kendel bid Sorkad to hold the ship where it was, encouraging him to fabricate a minor lie about repairs in progress.

Too easy, she told herself. *As if everything has been a kind of shadow play, conjured to guide us down a single path.* Habeth was hiding something, Kendel had no doubt of it, but would her gut feeling be enough to act upon? The Sigillite's authority allowed her a long enough leash to do so... But it would also prove more than enough to hang her with should she be mistaken.

She missed the precision of her witch-seeker days. Back in the Sisterhood, things had been clear-cut.

There was a hesitant knock at her hatch, and Kendel heard a faint choking sound. 'Enter.'

The hatch slid open and Pau Yei was outside, sweating and sickly from her proximity. 'I will remain here, if it pleases you.' She gripped a rail on the curved wall as if she were afraid some terrible gravity would drag her into the witch-seeker's cabin.

Kendel's eyebrow rose. For the astropath to seek her out, matters had to be dire. 'What is it, milady?'

'I have read the Warden's reports on what happened at the refinery.' Pau Yei spilled her words out in a rush, eager to say her piece as fast as she could. 'The astropath who was shot by the sniper. His name was Yaang. I knew him, Agentia. When I was an apprentice seer and he an instructor. But well enough, I declare, to know that he would *never* betray the Emperor. His service was his life.'

'How long ago?' asked Kendel.

'Seventeen years.'

'Long enough for a man to change his mind. How long did it take Horus to suborn his brother primarchs? And Yaang was only a man.'

Pau Yei didn't answer the question, her dead eye sockets turning towards Kendel instead. 'You have your doubts too. I know it.'

Kendel frowned. 'Go on.'

'Yaang was a highly trained and subtle psyker. And most importantly, too accomplished and fastidious in his ways to allow something so base as ghost echoes of his psionic signals to seep out. There is more to this matter,' she insisted. 'This is not the resolution.'

A sudden thought crystallised in Kendel's mind. 'Is it possible that Yaang's

“echoes”... the signals detected by the prognostics... may have been a *deliberate* attempt by him to cry for help?”

‘A warning?’ said another voice. Pau Yei retreated as Gallor’s bulk filled the corridor. ‘Forgive me. I have been walking the ship to settle my thoughts, and I overheard your conversation.’

‘I’ll warrant the Death Guard doubts the veracity of these events just as we do,’ said the astropath.

‘This is so.’ Kendel saw Gallor’s great head nod. ‘I am reminded of my own commander’s mission to carry word of perfidy back to the Emperor. What if Yaang was attempting to do the same?’

I had no choice. They’ll never believe me. Kendel picked over Yaang’s last words, wondering if she had unwittingly been part of the narrative at work on Proxima Majoris.

All psykers had a pathological fear of pariahs like her. Had she been manoeuvred into confronting him?

She rose to her feet and reached for her lasgun. ‘Gallor. You and Kyda are to rearm and make ready for immediate deployment.’

‘As you wish,’ said the legionary. ‘To what end?’

She didn’t answer him straight away, turning instead to Pau Yei. ‘Milady, will you summon Qelvyn to the airlock and join us there? I have need of you and what must be done cannot happen if you remain on the ship.’

The astropath paled, but forced a nod. ‘I know what is required of me. I’ll do it.’

Kendel shot Gallor a look. ‘This mission isn’t over.’

The first team was Gallor’s to command, much to Kyda’s irritation.

But then the other legionary had never been best suited to leading, and the task Kendel gave Gallor was one that required the ability to think with more than just a boltgun. The Arvus lighter dropped him off in the industrial district with the soldier Qelvyn and the astropath, before speeding away towards the precincts of the highborn.

Here it was dark and gloomy, an endless boulevard of pipes and towering fabricant works set well away from the pretty streets of Majesty. Workers toiled endlessly, none daring to look up as the unusual trio moved past them.

‘The discipline masters have done their work well,’ Gallor reflected. ‘These plebeians focus on their labour to the detriment of all else.’

‘Aye,’ noted Qelvyn. ‘Whipped dogs is what they are.’

‘If they raise no alarm, then that is in our favour,’ said Pau Yei, stepping awkwardly over the irregular ground beneath their feet, charting a path with the left-right-left motion of a sonic cane. She came to a sudden halt and pointed with one long finger. ‘There is death there. I sense the echo of it.’

The astropath indicated a narrow tower that at first glance Gallor had taken to be a colossal chimney. Grey smoke billowed from the top, and he saw what looked like dirty snow gathered at its base. ‘Ash-fall,’ he noted. ‘What are they burning in there?’

‘Corpses,’ said Qelvyn. ‘Vasado told me the Proximans cremate everyone. They call this place the Terminae, but it’s really nothing more than a giant furnace. If this man Yaang’s body is anywhere, it’ll be in there.’

Pau Yei gave a wooden nod. ‘We must move swiftly. His remains must be intact if I am to be sure.’

Gallor nodded, clamping his gun to the mag-plate on his back. ‘Fall in behind me and stay in the shadows.’ He set off again, avoiding the gaze of the pict-feed lenses.

Kendel landed the lighter in the gardens of the Aristarch’s mansion among flyers from all across the city, and with Kyda looming at her side, she marched through the throng gathered for the celebrations. They parted before her, whispering and giggling like amused children. None of the Wardens patrolling the area, nor Proge’s personal guards, dared even to consider waylaying them.

She climbed the stairs to the Planetary Governor’s reception chamber as they had days before, past myriad scented candles and festive banners, to the solid oaken doors that barred the way.

‘Aren’t you going to knock?’ muttered Kyda. It seemed the kills he had taken in the refinery had done nothing to lessen the constant simmering of his ire.

‘Do it for me,’ Kendel ordered, and that brought a brief, wolfish grin to the legionary’s face.

Kyda slammed open the doors and strode into the chamber, advancing on the nobles inside like the executioner he was. The Death Guard’s shocking entrance had the desired effect, and as Kendel stepped around him, she saw a sea of frightened faces before her.

Her gaze was immediately drawn to Proge, who sat bolt upright, frozen in mid-conversation with the marshal she recalled from their first day on the planet.

‘Agentia Kendel?’ Proge rose slowly to his feet, faltering. ‘What is the meaning of this?’

The marshal forced a false smile. ‘With respect, this is a gathering for Proximans, not off-worlders. Had you wished to attend—’

‘We’re not here for your little party,’ Kendel snapped. ‘I grew weary of the obstructions placed before my retinue. I am taking a more proactive approach.’

‘Your tone is disrespectful!’ retorted the woman, blinking furiously. ‘You have blundered around our city, witch-hunter, and for what? We were willing to turn a blind eye to the disorder you brought to Majesty if only to see your task here swiftly completed, but now you overstep your bounds!’

‘You think so?’ Kendel showed her the brand on her palm. ‘*My bounds*, as you call them, are where *I* decide them to be.’

‘Be calm,’ ordered Proge. ‘We are civilised. We will act like it.’ He gave Kendel a firm look. ‘Are you *quite sure* you have made the right decision here, Agentia?’

Something in his tone cut right into Kendel, and for a moment she felt like she were a Novice-Sister again, hauled up before her superiors to be chastised for some trivial infraction.

Then she crushed that emotion and looked Proge in the eye. This was a man used to being obeyed, and like these other nobles, used to being the unquestioned master of all he surveyed. Suddenly all she saw was arrogance, entitlement, condescension, and she wanted very badly to knock that out of him. A smile grew on her lips. ‘Quite sure, Aristarch,’ she echoed.

‘You have what you came here for,’ insisted the marshal, her eyes flicking to Kyda’s impassive bulk and then back again. ‘What more do you want of us?’

Proge’s expression softened and he tried a different tack. ‘Agentia Kendel. Do not judge us too harshly. I will admit to you that all Proxima was shamed by what you uncovered in the spire, but I believe it better to celebrate the success than to dwell on the errors of a few wayward renegades.’

‘Wayward?’ Kyda growled the word, silencing the room. ‘That is how you define a traitor on this planet? As if they have simply made a childish mistake in showing fealty to Horus?’

‘The Warmaster has...’ began the marshal, before she paused to reframe her words. ‘You must accept that no one on Proxima Majoris has seen the dark things we have been asked to believe about Horus Lupercal. He is remembered well by many. It is natural that some might still have a measure of devotion to him. That does not make them evil.’

‘No,’ agreed Kendel. ‘It makes them *fools*.’ She took a step towards the other woman. ‘Parochial, arrogant fools. And traitors still.’

Qelvyn grimaced at the scene that awaited them within the Terminae. This was no place for respecting the dead. It was an industrial facility for disposing of waste.

A vast conveyor belt studded with anchor spikes rolled endlessly towards the rumbling maw of an incinerator, carrying discarded human bodies into the fires. She averted her gaze, looking up, and found more to horrify her. Above, complex mechanisms of cables and racks were in constant motion. They ferried new bodies down to the belt, and along the way robotic claws plucked clothes, funeral goods and anything else of value from the corpses.

Pau Yei gave a cry of anguish and without waiting for the rest of them, scrambled wildly up a ramp to the sorting platform, her cane clattering and humming as she went. Gallor shot Qelvyn a look as they gave chase but he said nothing, his broad face unreadable.

The astropath tried to remove a cloth-wrapped body from a moving rack, cutting her hands in the process. Qelvyn saw a face frozen in death peering out of the shroud, an older male with the same style of ornamental electroos on his cheeks that Pau Yei sported on her face.

Gallor dragged the dead man to the floor and laid him down as gently as he could. Frowning, the legionary opened the cloth wrapping further, revealing the ugly remains of a lasgun wound. Qelvyn watched Pau Yei swallow her grief and push the Space Marine's hands away. Gallor let her, taking a step back and guiding her down with his hand. 'You are sure it is Yaang?'

'Aye.' Pau Yei's long, delicate fingers peeled back the shroud and ran over the dead man's flesh, the ruined sockets, the taut skin across his face. A gasp escaped her.

Qelvyn saw something – a glitter of metal embedded in the corpse's neck. 'What is that?'

'Mechanicum implant,' answered Gallor. 'An agoniser. I've seen them before, but rarely on a human.'

The soldier scowled. Such devices were made for domesticating animals, bionic modules half-buried in flesh. Operated by remote control, an overseer could use one to send a governing pulse to the nerve clusters of a wild beast, cracking it like a whip. But they had other uses; it wasn't unknown for them to be implanted in dangerous prisoners.

'Someone was tormenting Yaang,' Pau Yei insisted. 'Hurting him to ensure his compliance. Now they want his body destroyed so that this evidence is lost forever!' She leaned closer and clasped the dead man's skull in her hands, and

Qelvyn sensed a peculiar metallic tang in the air as the astropath's head tilted back, her mouth falling open.

‘What is she doing?’

‘Reading him,’ said the Death Guard. ‘It is said that the mind-speakers can read the psyches of their brethren as well as you or I would page through a...’ The warrior fell silent as something clanked off a nearby platform. He reached for his boltgun.

Qelvyn's laspistol was already in her hand, and she thumbed off the safety, her attention flicking between Pau Yei and her surroundings. ‘What is it?’

‘Company is coming,’ said Gallor, in a low voice.

Before he could elaborate, Pau Yei released a strangled sound deep in her throat, and let go of Yaang's head as if it had scalded her. Her face was pink and filmed with sweat.

‘What did you... see?’

‘Only pain and anguish,’ said the astropath, barely holding in a sob. ‘At the end... He was so lost and afraid. How *dare* they do that to him!’

More noise reached Qelvyn's ears and her head snapped around to look in the direction of the sound. Shadows were moving towards them.

The legionary reached for a manual tab on the neck ring of his armour and spoke into a vox-bead there. ‘Kendel, this is Gallor. Do you hear me?’ Static hissed back at him, and Qelvyn knew the sound of a jammer when she heard it. ‘Kyda? *Velox*? Anyone who reads this transmission, respond.’

‘They won't let us reveal what we have found,’ Pau Yei said darkly.

A flood of brilliant light washed over them from above and the approaching figures were made clear. Warden Habeth and a large force of his men moved in to surround them.

The Proximan noble aimed a richly decorated sword-gun at the trio. ‘I knew it from the start,’ he hissed. ‘Disloyalty in each and every one of you. And now you steal into our city like criminals, violating the dead!’

‘*No!*’ cried Pau Yei, staring blindly into the dazzling illumination. ‘This matter is not ended – there is untruth at work! Yaang was forced to do what he did, don't you understand? This is proof!’

‘This is *treachery!*’ he shot back.

Qelvyn saw a cold choice being made behind the Warden's gaze, and she knew that Kendel's instincts about Habeth had been right from the start. ‘He understands well enough,’ she told the astropath. ‘Better than anyone.’

A heartbeat later, Gallor opened fire.

Kendel waited for the explosion of fury and self-important bluster that she had come to expect from the Proximan highborn, but instead Proge showed her an oily smile. He glanced at the marshal and the other nobles in the room, and the witch-seeker felt a moment of doubt. Had she misjudged them?

As a former Silent Sister, she was an expert in understanding communications that were unspoken, and now she saw exactly that passing between the Proximans. Kendel suspected that Proge was holding something back, and chalked it up to his priggish nature, to his dislike at being forced to acknowledge her authority.

But it was more than that.

‘This conspiracy of lies, the astropath Yaang and the suborned signals...’ She eyed the Aristarch. ‘With a culture as byzantine as yours, it is credible that you were unaware of it occurring within the ranks of your underlings.’

‘Yes?’ he offered, willingly giving her an opening.

‘But that’s only one more lie atop the others, isn’t it? You were never ignorant of this sedition.’ At her side, Kyda raised his bolter. ‘I suspect you may be the author of it.’

The carefully pitched mask of pomposity and self-importance slipped as the smile from Proge’s thin lips widened. ‘I have never been party to treason,’ he replied. ‘My loyalty has been firm and unswerving from the very start.’ The Aristarch aimed a finger at Kyda. ‘Unlike *you*, legionary. You betrayed your father! You betrayed Lord Mortarion and the Warmaster!’

The marshal’s face twisted in a snarl. ‘Sickening. To see a warrior of such potency rotting and weak inside.’

Kyda growled, but Kendel held up a hand to halt him from any immediate act of violence – although she suspected the pause would not last long. ‘That explains what happened when we first arrived...’ She met the marshal’s gaze. ‘You thought that Gallor and Kyda were here on Horus’ orders, because they are Death Guard...’

‘She almost tipped our hand.’ Proge chuckled to himself, amused by the thought. ‘Yes. We await Lord Horus, for it is he we have sworn to, not an Emperor who ignores His closest neighbours, who plunders our world for its sons and daughters to be so much cannon fodder!’

‘What did he promise you?’ said Kyda.

Proge opened his hands. ‘Not power or riches. We have little need of those.’ He shook his head. ‘No, Death Guard, you do not see. The Warmaster is truly honourable. He is not consumed by dreams of empire like his father! He offered

us only *what we are due.*'

'How many years has Proxima served the needs of the Imperial war machine?' demanded the marshal, her eyes flaring. 'And what have we been given in return?'

'Never enough,' muttered Proge, and the others in room echoed his words. 'Never enough.'

'The Warmaster's triumph will be *our* triumph,' said the other woman. 'He values loyalty.'

Kendel slowly shook her head. 'You're wrong. Horus values victory... and any tool that will bring it to him.'

Something in the witch-seeker's tone made the marshal flinch, and the woman tore her ceremonial pistol from its holster, spinning it up to put a shot into Kendel's chest.

The weapon's muzzle never cleared the tooled leather. Kyda blew her apart with a single pull of his trigger, blood and jewels and splintered wood crashing across the room as the mass-reactive round tore through unprotected flesh and the ornate furniture beyond it. Outside in the courtyard, where the crowds were gathered, Kendel heard cries of alarm.

She drew her own weapon and aimed it at the Aristarch. 'Bakaro Proge,' she began, 'I name you traitor. The sentence is death.'

He continued to smile at her, ignoring the smoking ruin that had been his co-conspirator. 'You'll kill an unarmed man? Is that the Sigillite's idea of justice?'

'No,' she admitted. 'But this is.' Kendel turned to Kyda, keeping her gun on the others. 'Take him outside.'

Habeth was dead, lost on the Terminae's conveyor along with many more nameless corpses, cut down by Qelvyn's laspistol. His wardens did not perish so easily, however, and it tested Gallor to keep the soldier and the astropath alive while he returned fire. He wasn't used to playing the part of protector. It wasn't a role that the Death Guard had ever excelled at.

Gallor kept his kills metered and steady, moving and firing, firing and moving, until finally they broke out of the tower through a service duct and went across the rooftops of the nearby rendering works. He found himself constantly halting to allow the humans to catch up with him. The soldier did her best, but she was panting with effort and fear.

Finally she shouted at him. 'Make up your mind! Fight with us or abandon us! But just bloody well pick one!'

‘I...’ A reply began to form in his thoughts, but it was cut short as his enhanced senses picked up the scent of rich, arterial blood. ‘Who is wounded?’

Qelvyn’s face twisted in confusion; then in the next moment she was grabbing the astropath, pulling Pau Yei towards her. The other woman’s hand came away from her side and it was red and wet.

‘A glancing shot struck me as we fled,’ she gasped. ‘I can walk.’

‘Now you’re coming over all brave?’ Qelvyn grimaced. ‘Idiot. You’ll bleed white if we don’t stop that.’ The soldier set Pau Yei down in the lee of an air duct and set to work on dressing the wound.

Gallor shifted, trying to look in every direction at once. His keen hearing picked out the whine of hovercraft engines and the distant slap of approaching rotors. If they could not get off the roof, they would be killed up here.

Qelvyn shot him a questioning look. ‘Any change with the vox?’

He shook his head. ‘We are silenced. There is no way to communicate with Kendel or the ship.’

Pau Yei coughed and gave a mewling cry at the jolt of pain that came with it. ‘No...’ She managed. ‘That is not entirely accurate.’

The Death Guard saw movement at the far end of the roof and fired towards it, earning another kill as a warden was blown back. ‘Explain, quickly,’ he demanded. ‘The traitors are at our heels.’

‘I can reach Mazone. But it will cost me.’

‘The Navigator?’ Qelvyn blinked and tapped her temple. ‘You can... speak to him?’

‘I can try.’

‘You will,’ Gallor told her. ‘Or else we will perish here.’

No one dared to stand in Kyda’s way as he dragged Proge down the stairs and out onto the manicured lawns surrounding the building. A terrible, heavy silence fell, and the legionary scanned the faces of the crowd. Thousands of civilians, all genders and races and ages, but all robbed of their voices by the sight before them.

Good, he told himself. Let them see this and understand.

Kyda threw the Aristarch down and watched as he struggled back up to his knees. ‘The gun or the knife?’ asked Proge.

In reply, Kyda clamped his bolter to his hip and unsheathed his combat blade. ‘Bare your throat. If you refuse, it won’t be quick.’

‘You think this means you win?’ Proge looked at Kyda, then to Kendel. ‘I am

not the only one.'

'Your supporters will be expunged,' Kendel told him.

The Aristarch burst out laughing and he found Kyda's gaze again. A warning rang in the legionary's thoughts, like the sense of an unseen enemy at his back, a threat he couldn't parse.

'Everything we did was to make you go away,' said Proge, taking a breath. 'The hidden faction in the refinery, the incident at the spire, the execution of Yaang. All of it was to create the narrative that Malcador expected to find here. All so we could begin our efforts anew once your investigation was complete and you departed. But you just wouldn't *leave*.'

'What efforts?' demanded Kendel. 'Confess!'

Proge ignored her, concentrating on Kyda, as if he were trying to reach for some common kinship between them. 'It is not only *I* who has given my loyalty to Horus, Death Guard – we *all* have.' He opened his arms wide to take in his cohorts and his soldiers, and every single one of the Proximan civilians surrounding them. 'Proxima Majoris *itself* has sworn an oath to the Warmaster.'

Kyda looked out at the crowd. In each face he saw the same thing: determination, zeal, *belief*. The same thing, he realised, that he had once seen in himself, a lifetime ago on Barbarus.

The scope of the Proximan betrayal washed over him, snapping into perfect, damning focus. This star system was an ideal place from which to stage an attack on Terra. How deep could it go? How many forces were already here? The Aristarch could have been gathering forces loyal to the Warmaster from all across the segmentum for months. For *years*.

With a population sworn to Horus' banner, it could be done and never known by anyone across the light-years towards Terra.

'You can execute me,' Proge smiled, 'but do you have enough blades and bolt shells to execute an entire city?' He rose slowly to his feet. 'A whole planet?'

'We'll see,' said Kyda, and cut the Aristarch's throat.

Then, like the breaking of an ocean wave, the civilians in the crowd came screaming towards him. Before Proge's body hit the ground, Kyda was mobbed.

He reacted without thought, cutting and stabbing with his blade, his other hand drawing his bolter. A tide of furious faces rose up as the Proximans heedlessly threw themselves upon him, battering their fists against his armour, taking up anything that could be turned into a weapon.

He killed dozens in seconds, their blood sluicing across his wargear, but they kept on coming, ten more for every one he ended, and by sheer weight of

numbers they kept him pinned.

His bolter ran dry and still they came. Kyda caught a glimpse of Kendel vanishing behind a wall of screaming faces, the pariah pushed back towards the doors of the Aristarch's mansion, before a howling youth clambered over his back and beat at his head with a heavy stone. He broke the young man's neck throwing him off his shoulders, but lost his gun in the action. There were too many of them to fight, more and more piling atop one another with each passing moment.

It was said that one Space Marine was the equal of a hundred common men. Now a revelation, a question, came to him as the huge, riotous mob dragged him down.

How many more will it take to kill me?

The mansion was the only place that she could go.

Kendel fired as she ran, but the shots did little to stop the horde from pouring over the Death Guard, and as she shouldered the doors shut behind her, the final glimpse she had of the legionary was of his bloodied face disappearing beneath an overwhelming throng of men, women and children. As she sprinted up the ornamental stairs, she heard the sounds of tearing metal and ripping flesh.

What kind of zealotry would be enough to make a mortal throw themselves at a Space Marine? Was this the power of the Warmaster? It staggered Kendel to believe that such an impossible compulsion could exist.

The question beat at her as she fought her way past guards through chamber after chamber. Her laspistol grew hot in her hand as it raced towards a critical overheat, searing her skin until at last she had to discard it. The gun fell to the floor, sizzling where it lay, and Kendel kicked open another door to reveal an ascending spiral staircase.

She followed it to the top of a narrow watchtower that grew out of the mansion's higher floors, halting at the saw-tooth battlements that ringed it. Far below she could see the crowd gathered around a ruined man-shape of meat and ceramite. What was left of Bajun Kyda lay atop a hill of human carrion, a grotesque monument amidst all the delicate finery of the gardens and a poor death, even for one of such uneven temper. She saw the Arvus lighter nearby, already set alight and bleeding plumes of dark smoke.

The rising echo of voices reached her. Proge's guardsmen were searching the building, and they would not rest until she was dead. Did they already have a scheme, a set of lies engineered to cover up her death?

How would they explain it away, she wondered? Kendel imagined an account that painted her as a failure, one convincing enough to divert Malcador's attention away from the true treachery at Proxima.

And there was worse that could happen. Kendel had heard the rumours of the dark acts committed by Horus's cohorts, of unspeakable things that could warp the minds of the just and good.

Had that happened here? Could it happen to her?

She placed a hand on the stone battlement and considered throwing herself over it. Would it be a better death to die by her own hand, or was her end to suffer the same ignominious fate as Kyda? And what of Gallor and the others? The dead air from her vox-bead spoke ill.

A rare and unwelcome emotion came to her. *Doubt*.

Kendel could not stop herself from wondering if her kind of spirit – a secular, personal belief in one's self and a greater good – would *ever* be enough to fight back against the unquenchable zealotry of 'true believers' like the citizens of Majesty.

She imagined the face of Bakaro Proge, with his smiles and certainty; Emrilia Herkaaze, her hard eyes and unflinching conviction; and Horus Lupercal himself, that rising demigod whose rebellion had made him an unstoppable juggernaut.

Everything that Amendera Kendel drew strength from seemed very far away. She put one foot up on the battlements, then another, the breeze whipping at her cloak and caressing her cheeks.

She closed her eyes – and heard the heavy scream of thrusters.

The acrid stench of promethium fumes choked her and Kendel peered up, shielding her face with the blade of her hand. An ugly ingot of black shadow blotted out the Proximan sun as it dropped through the clouds, suspended on jets of white fire.

The *Velox* turned in place as figures on the ground opened up on it with small arms. Cannon cupolas on the ventral hull rotated with machine precision and strafed the crowd with las-bolts, ending all defiance.

A square of light appeared in the hull as a hatch opened, and Kendel saw a hulking figure appear. The ship drifted over to the watchtower and Gallor's armour caught the fire-glow from below. He beckoned her as a rescue tether played out.

Kendel grasped the cable as it swung low, and she left her doubts behind as it pulled her up and away.

Sorkad threaded them through a gauntlet of fire from the planet's automated gun-satellites, and the *Velox* took several hits along the way – but none were enough to wound the ship fatally, and it limped out to a holding orbit beyond the reach of the cannons.

Gallor took the news of his battle-brother Kyda's end with stoic calm, as if he had already known it to be so. In turn, he reported on Pau Yei's condition. The astropath was unconscious, clinging to life after being severely wounded and then exhausting herself with a psychic cry for help.

The Death Guard spoke of the slight little witch-kin with new-found respect. It was undeniable that Pau Yei had saved them all.

They entered the bridge to find Sorkad and Qelvyn waiting. 'We can make the Mandeville point and reach the warp,' said the pilot. 'If you wish it.'

'We have to warn Terra,' added the soldier. 'The Proximans will already be calling in ships to chase us down. We can't stay here.'

'Orders?' said Sorkad.

Kendel went to the canopy and peered out at the planet. 'An entire population turned to the Warmaster's banner,' she said aloud. 'So close to the Throneworld. And yet if we race home with word of this incident, we give them precious time to reinforce, to prepare a response.'

'Malcador will—'

She silenced Gallor with a look before he could finish the sentence. 'In this moment, in this place, I am the Sigillite. His authority is mine.'

Kendel recalled her old friend Emrilia's anger when they met on Luna: *If it were my choice, I would have you executed for your temerity.*

And with that, she realised she had only one more card to play.

'Agentia, what are your orders?' repeated Sorkad.

She glanced at the pilot, then to Gallor and Qelvyn. 'Where is the nearest Imperial warship of battle-barge tonnage?'

'An orbit distant,' said Sorkad. 'The vessels *Unfettered* and *Allegiant* are taking on supplies over Proxima Secundus.'

She held up her hand to show the brand on her palm. 'Bring them here, at best speed. Brook no disagreement, accept no refusal. You will invoke Lord Malcador's word and override all other orders they may have.'

'To what end?' said Gallor. 'The *Unfettered* and *Allegiant* are world-killers. They are not equipped for an invasion or a measured counter-strike.'

Kendel nodded and licked her lips, a single word pushing at her to be spoken aloud. Her heart was beating hard in her chest.

‘I have been granted the ultimate authority and I know now that it must be exercised. How can we defeat the zealous and the faithful? Not through words or hopes. Only by fire and death.’

She met the Death Guard’s gaze and saw a flicker of surprise there. He understood what she was about to say, and it horrified him as much as it did her. What she intended to do was beyond the remit of any ordinary soul.

‘No...’ he began. ‘It is unspeakable. You do not have the right. No human has ever...’ Gallor hesitated. ‘Not even a grand admiral. None less than a primarch, or the Emperor himself...’

But still he fell silent, finally accepting that there was no other choice to be made. There was a cost to taking the Warmaster’s side, and it was going to be paid. An example had to be made. An execution was required.

‘Bring them here,’ Kendel repeated, ‘and in Malcador’s name, give their captains this command.’

The witch-seeker raised her hand and pointed at Proxima Majoris.

‘Exterminatus.’

PATIENCE

James Swallow

It is not a lie to say that I expect to find my former commander dead amidst the wasteland we have made of Nolec Trinus.

The bombardment of the northern continent by twenty thousand Imperial artillery batteries has turned every inch of it into murdered grey earth and heaps of rubble, tilled by a week-long rain of ordnance. How must the Noleci have felt to see their sky blacken as a wall of shells descended? I wonder, in those brief seconds before the first of them landed, did the Noleci realise the depth of their betrayal? Did they understand that this was the consequence of their choice?

They all died, of course, as was fitting. The last of them – those few that managed to survive – emerged from deep-earth bunkers set many kilometres beneath the surface, and attacked us with all their might. We gave them the end they craved. We silenced their cries of hate with our guns.

This is not the first world I have stood upon where a populace has sided with the Arch-traitor Horus. I regret that it will not be the last.

We are walking now, up the hill of rubble that is all that remains of Nolec's First City. It weathered the attack best, having been protected by a massive void shield – but even that eventually failed under the iron rain. It is just as dead as everywhere else, but here you can actually make out the stubs of shattered buildings, where elsewhere the heaps of cracked stone hint at nothing.

I lead. Following me is the lieutenant and his platoon. They are as drab in their armour as I am in mine. It's the dust, you see. It coats everything.

I glance at him, the ruby eye-slits of my beaked helm scanning the hard planes of his face. The dust makes him a ghost. It flattens his features, rendering him nondescript. The dried blood from his wounds is caked with it too, as are the blood-smearred faces and breastplates of all his troopers. The Noleci tried very hard to take us with them to their graves.

Only the winged skull across the brow of the lieutenant's headgear seems to

stand out. Before landing here with me, he looked like a man. And before that, before he accepted the same bargain that I did, he looked like any other soldier of the Imperial Army.

But now he and I are different. Our colours have been bled from us. We are grey. The Regent of Terra plucked us from the continua of our lives; he made these men into his elect, dubbing them as his Chosen.

And I? There is no name for what I am. *Fallen son? Dusk Raider? Loyalist? Death Guard?* I am all and none of those things. I am only Helig Gallor.

The lieutenant and his soldiers call me a 'Knight Errant'. It suffices.

'Look there,' says one of the troopers. She's pointing through the wreathes of smoke that wash over the land. 'A ruin.'

I am almost amused by her words. This whole world is a ruin. But then my genhanced vision picks out what she has seen, clearer and sharper, and I understand. Against all possibility, something is still standing. Wary, I raise my bolter and approach.

It is not an illusion. Pieces of some great basilica actually remain. In fact, as I come closer, I see stained glass in the tall, arched window frames. The depictions there – impossibly, still intact – are full of idolatry and pious imagery of the Emperor of Mankind at his great works. They are intricate things, made with a zealot's love.

The Word Bearers built it, a lifetime ago when the XVII's devotion to the Master of Mankind was at its terrible height – before Khur, before Monarchia, and the chastisement of their primarch. I wonder how it was allowed to stand after that. Or indeed, how these remnants still stand now. It must have been at the very epicentre of the void shield, the most protected part of the most protected city on Nolec Trinus.

But no matter. It is a ruin now.

The troopers fall into a phalanx behind me. They are well trained, and we have done this before. Lasguns come to the ready and I direct them with silent battlesign gestures. We believe we are prepared for any advent of horrors.

And that is when I see him.

Alive, then. He stands there, as grey as the rest of us, as bleak and stony as the ashes about him. I have seen statues with more animation to them. A ripped cloak crackles briefly as the wind catches it, burned and torn as mute evidence of a battle hard-fought. That unvoiced story shows in scars over his armour and the dulled gold of the eagle cuirass that differentiates his wargear from mine. He rests upon a great sword that is streaked with the blood of monsters.

I know he hears us coming. I imagine he heard our approach long before we saw him. His head is bare and he is *listening*. For what, I am not certain, until the smoke rises like a curtain and the rest of the scene is revealed.

The Chosen of Malcador are hard souls, brave men and women gathered from some of the most brutal warzones in the galaxy.

And yet, as one, they balk at the sight of the *thing*.

I have no words for what the creature is. I will call it a *dragon*, because that is the name of a terror that I recall from legends of old. But it is not that. No logic of evolution or tale of fancy could ever have spawned something so grotesque, so utterly twisted and sickening. It is an assembly of talons and wings, eyes and teeth, scales and fur. Collected from a million nightmares, it should never exist. But mercifully, it appears to be quite dead.

The dragon-thing lies in a lake of its own ichor, and I gather from the myriad cuts upon the beast's flesh that it was the sword that ended it.

I have seen things like this before. I regret that this will not be the last.

I advance, warning the lieutenant to stay back with a nod of my head. I address the warrior we have come to find. 'My lord Battle-Captain—'

He does not let me finish.

'*Patience.*' The word is an admonishment. His tone is one of a tutor towards a novice acting out of turn. He sniffs the air. Is that a faint smile on his lips?

Despite myself, I hesitate. I draw a breath. I begin again.

'Captain Garro. I am Gallor, tasked by the Sigillite to ascertain your status. We have not heard from you in many days. Why did you not answer your vox, my lord?'

Garro does not look away from the dead monster. 'Damaged. The venom of the daemon corrodes like acid. It ruined my helm and I was forced to discard it.' One gauntleted hand leaves the top of his resting sword. He beckons me. 'I could not return. Not yet.'

'My lord? I do not understand.'

I was not there when the dragon first appeared, ripping its way out of a shrieking hole in reality, but I have been told of Captain Garro's response. Of how he alone teleported down here from a ship in orbit, the bombardment still in progress, to find it and kill it. He was not expected to survive, and the cannonade was not going to be stopped for one warrior of the Legiones Astartes, even if he was Malcador's Agentia Primus.

I came here out of duty, in search of proof of his death, in part because we are both Knights Errant, but also because he and I share more than that. We are...

We *were* Death Guard. Sons of Mortarion, scions of the XIV Legion in better days. I thought it fitting. Now he makes me feel foolish for assuming.

A scowl grows on my face. There is no time for this. The war goes on and we have no reason to be here. I stride to Garro's side and grab his arm. 'Captain. Our work is done on Nolec Trinus. Malcador's will has been met. We are to move on.'

'Is that so?' He looks at me for the first time. 'Helig Gallor. The mantle of the Errant fits you well. It has been a long time since we spoke. Before the flight from Isstvan, I believe.'

'Aye.' In truth, longer than that.

In my service to Garro's command of the Seventh Company of the Death Guard, I did little to draw the battle-captain's notice. It was only an accident of place that put me aboard the frigate *Eisenstein* when the Warmaster showed his treachery. And while I am grateful every day for being one of the seventy souls who escaped that madness, it has always seemed a quirk of fate that made it so.

He did not choose me. I was there because I was loyal.

I am here now for the same reason.

Garro was born of Terra, and I am a child of Barbarus, our primarch's adopted home world. It places distance between us, distance that the unity of Legion once masked. With that gone, with no connection between us but storm-grey armour, I feel less able to ignore the disparity.

'We will not leave here, not yet,' he says. 'The Death Guard have always been patient, brother. Exercise some of that patience now.'

My choler rises. I speak quietly, but with cold intent. 'I realise now that I stopped being a Death Guard when we were abandoned on Luna. When our Imperium declared us untrustworthy and made us prisoners in all but name. You were not there to see that, Captain Garro. Not all were given Malcador's blessing.'

'*You* were,' he says coolly. 'The Regent deemed you suitable, after a time.' The tone of his voice seems to suggest that Garro himself might not have made the same judgement.

And that is the end to whatever of my patience remains. I turn towards the lieutenant and cut the air with the blade of my hand. 'Break vox silence and contact the ship. Have them vector a Stormbird to this location. We have found what we are looking for.' My gaze drifts back to Garro. 'It's time to quit this place.'

The lieutenant doesn't answer me. He's looking away, into the smoke-haze. As

I see a creeping shock roll over the bloodied, battle-worn faces of the troopers at his side, I hear the sound of massive lungs taking a heavy, shuddering breath.

Garro moves, stepping back, the great sword coming up as if it weighs nothing. 'Patience rewarded,' he says, almost to himself.

I turn. The dragon-thing is coming back to life.

It was dead and now it is not. I am as certain of one state as I was of the other only a moment before.

My hands tense around my bolter. Once, I would have been shaken by such a thing.

Once. Not now. Not with all that I have seen.

It rises, shaking off the dust. Tentacles unfold from filth-caked orifices, mandibles snap and rheumy eyes blink open. A whip-like serpentine tongue invades the air, tasting it.

'It feasts on blood,' Garro explains, lecturing me once again. 'But it is greedy. One life is not enough to draw its interest.' He indicates the Chosen who have accompanied me, as they enter battle formation and charge their weapons. 'It will only fully inhabit its flesh vessel when there is a large enough mass of prey to attract it.'

I understand. One Space Marine is not enough to tempt the daemon's essence to manifest itself – but two of them, and a cohort of bloodstained Chosen, *are*. I see a warrior's need for battle in Garro's eyes.

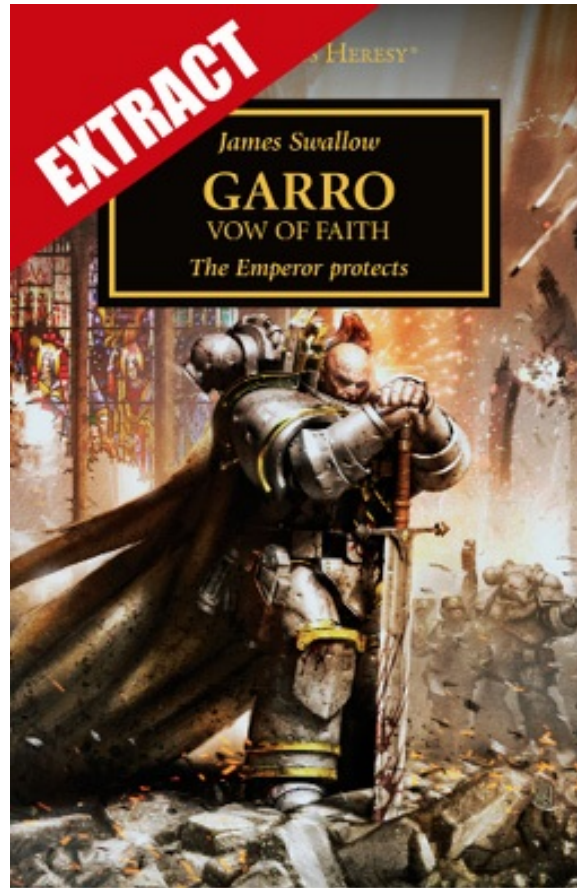
'Join me in this,' he says. It is not an order, but an invitation offered to an equal. I nod.

And, together, we kill the beast for the final time.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'How long have you served Horus?'

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

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

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

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

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

thoughts. It had not happened yet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Have faith, Nathaniel. You are of purpose.

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

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

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

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

most insignificant of the planet's creatures.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

dismissing the moment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

will remain until the day I die.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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