

WARHAMMER
40,000



**WITHIN
THESE
WALLS**

C Z DUNN

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I

Though he knew the explosion was coming, having planted the device that caused it himself, it still took Gathrite Pound by surprise.

One moment he was talking to one of the contractors supplied to him by the governor – a pleasant enough man but not as skilled as Pound would have liked and no doubt the lowest bidder – then the next he was rocked backwards, grasping hold of the doorway he sheltered within in an attempt to retain his footing. The full fury of the blast ripped up into the bright midday sky of Niebuhr, smoke and dust rising high above the desert floor and into the cloudless blue vista. The noise of the blast assailed them an instant later, the sound delayed on its near eight mile journey to reach their ears.

Sister Agentha, some two hundred miles further away in the capital, also heard the sound and felt the shockwave, briefly looking up from her work to acknowledge it, but it was only later that she realised what the cause of it had been and what the precise implications were for her.

His composure and balance regained, Pound stared out from the ancient ruins he and his demolition team had hunkered down in over to the ancient ruins he had been paid to destroy. He scowled in puzzlement.

‘Is something wrong, Meister Pound?’ the cheap, under-trained workman said from beside him. The unfortunate fellow had not been as quick to react to the explosion and was dusting himself down, having landed roughly on the debris

strewn floor of what thousands of years ago would have been the foyer of an opulent hab building.

Pound ignored him and reached for the magnoculars stashed at his waist, a memento from his service days that, like the snub-nosed laspistol secreted in the waistband of his trousers, never left his side. As the smoke dissipated and the dust and fine particles of brick and stone fell like rain over the desert and ruins, he placed them to his eyes and manipulated them into focus. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong, but he wasn't about to share that with a lowly contractor who barely knew one end of a fuse wire from another.

Gathrite Pound had been the instigator of so many explosions during his lifetime that he had long ago lost count. As a younger man he had blown things up to hinder and destroy the foes of the Imperium, risking his life and his luck behind enemy lines in the name of the Mydraskian 17th and the God-Emperor of Mankind. In his later years, after his luck had finally run out and his usefulness to the regiment was negated, he put his aptitude with explosives to a different use, aiding the Imperium's expansion by clearing the way for human settlement and habitation. In all that time, in both phases of his life, he had never witnessed an explosion like the one he had just set off on Niebuhr.

The charges had been planted low in the structure and shaped in such a manner that the ruins should have collapsed in on themselves. Instead, all of the energy of the blast had been projected skywards, the debris lying on the surface instead of in a pit of hardcore that could be built upon with minimal clearance and preparation. The noise of the explosion was just as unnatural, as if the sound had been sucked in before being spat out, the delay in it reaching the ears of Pound and his workers being closer to what the Demolition Meister would have expected if they were fifty miles away from the blast site rather than half a dozen. He placed the magnoculars back at his hip and turned to the contractor.

'Get me over there,' he said, retrieving his crutches. 'Now.'

Pound's progress through the debris field was painfully slow, his crutches sinking deep into the fine sand of the desert as he picked his way through the scattered and charred remnants of what had once been home to Niebuhr's original settlers. Not for the first time since he had left the Mydraskian 17th, he cursed that his body had rejected the crude augmetic leg that had been grafted to him following his final mission, that the metal sticks jammed uncomfortably under his armpits were now his only means of getting around. Twice the contractor attempted to aid the older man in traversing the silt and detritus and

twice he was rudely rebuked. On his third attempt, Pound grudgingly accepted his aid.

‘What’s your name, son?’ Pound asked, letting the contractor slip a burly arm around his torso. He shifted both crutch poles into one hand, allowing himself to be supported and guided through the jagged remains of what was once a city.

‘It’s Fenacy, meister,’ the man said with a wide grin. ‘Jerro Fenacy. And let me say it’s a pleasure to work with an artist such as yourself. The things you can do with a shaped charge make me and my boys look like rank amateurs.’

Pound snorted. He should have realised that Jerro was related to the governor. Those same tiny eyes spaced just too far apart. The same greasy shock of jet black hair. The same weasely tone that would no doubt turn nasty should Jerro not feel like he was getting his own way or gaining some form of advantage in any given situation. Pound was just about to ask how low a branch on the Fenacy family tree Jerro sprouted from when something grabbed his attention in the middle distance. Something that most definitely should not have been there.

‘Over there, Jerro,’ Pound said, raising his crutches to point at a dark structure, stark against the greys and reds of shattered masonry. ‘Quickly. Help me.’

The two men stumbled and tripped over the broken landscape, Pound’s haste at times almost dragging them both to the ground. The closer they got, the less densely packed the rubble became until, eventually, there was no debris at all carpeting the desert floor, just a moat of sand encircling a black structure sunk into Niebuhr’s surface. Both men stopped dead in their tracks, incredulity getting the better of them.

‘I don’t... How...?’ Jerro stammered, his tiny eyes widening.

‘Under the surface,’ Pound whispered, his voice as dry as the sand he stood upon. ‘They must have built the city right on top of it.’

‘Is that...’ Jerro began before swallowing hard to get some moisture in his throat. ‘Is that an entrance over there?’

Pound followed the younger man’s gaze to where the perimeter of sand broke from its smooth, regular pattern, instead giving way to what looked from where he was standing to be a pit.

Jerro made to put his arm around the Demolition Meister once more but Pound had both sticks under his arms and was dragging himself towards the anomaly before the contractor had chance. As Pound reached the edge of the pit he realised that Jerro had been right. Instead of it being a mere hole in the ground, the sand gave way to a set of steps that led down to a door made of the same black stone as the rest of the sunken building.

‘That’s not possible,’ Pound said hoarsely. ‘The blast should have destroyed everything. This should not be.’ As if in a trance, he descended the steps, barely noticing that they were crafted from the desert sand. He stood in front of the door, transfixed. Pound considered it for a moment before reaching out a hand to touch it.

‘Stop. Don’t,’ Jerro tried to call out, but his tiny voice caught in his throat, failing to carry over the sound of the desert breeze and the half-track idling in the distance.

Pound’s fingers brushed against the onyx stone, shocking him out of his reverie. Where he had expected the structure to be cold after being buried underground for what he could only assume was millennia, perhaps even longer, it was instead hot. Red hot. He jerked his fingers away, instantly placing them on the cold metal of one of his crutches in an attempt to soothe them. Biting his lip to stifle the pain, he closed his eyes.

When he opened them, there was something on the door that hadn’t been there before. Writing. The door was covered in it, pearlescent white script covering every inch of its surface.

Pound could read Low Gothic. He had taught himself after leaving the Imperial Guard, in part to aid him in attaining contracts in his new line of work, in part to ensure that he could read instructions and warnings on explosives and detonators in an attempt to avoid accidents like the one that had left him bereft of a leg. Unfortunately, the words on the door were not written in Low Gothic, or High Gothic, or any other language that Pound could recognise, let alone read.

‘Jerro!’ Pound called. Seconds later, the contractor appeared at the top of the sand steps. ‘Take the half-track back to the capital. Bring me the scribe.’

Agentha had been on Niebuhr for almost a year but she was still not used to it.

The heat she could cope with, despite growing up on an ice world and her order’s convent world only being blessed by the Emperor’s light for scant weeks in each of its rotations. Even the dryness of the air did not bother her, having spent most of her formative years in buildings with artificial heating and, more lately, in the processed, moisture-free atmospheres of spacecraft.

What was really getting Agentha down was the gravity. Just as she had been so used to the heating and ship-board atmosphere prior to finding herself on Niebuhr, Agentha had grown accustomed to living under gravitic conditions similar to those on humanity’s cradleworld.

To the natives of Niebuhr the higher gravity wasn’t an issue; they had adapted

over generations to it. The only adverse effect was that the indigenous peoples were markedly shorter than humanity's average, to the point where the crews of the off-world ships that periodically dropped into orbit to fill their holds with semi-precious stones cruelly referred to Niebuhrians as 'ratlings'.

To Agentha, with her six-foot frame, it felt like the world itself was constantly bearing down upon her, though hopefully not for much longer.

She pulled herself out of her chair and stretched, locking her fingers together and throwing her arms out in front of her, the low ceiling of her spartan quarters preventing her from extending them upwards. She unclasped her hands, pushed her eyeglasses back up the bridge of her nose and stepped over to a shelf unit groaning under the weight of myriad leather-bound tomes, hand-printed chapbooks and loose-leaf folios. Instantly locating the volume she was looking for, she slid it from between a book pertaining to the history of the Draconian Sub-sector she had acquired on Stern's Remembrance, and one of the several books she had liberated from the *Herald of Piety* before it stopped off at Niebuhr and she took her leave of the pilgrim craft.

Agentha's long fingers flicked through the yellowed pages with practised ease and she soon found what she was looking for. Carefully replacing the book on the shelf, she returned to her chair at the small candlelit desk in the corner of her chamber, picked up her stylus and began writing again.

Though still thousands of light years from her order, Agentha was determined to make it back to the convent world and retake her place among her sisters. From the moment she had set foot on Niebuhr she had put her linguistic skills to good use, starting out as a translator for the gem merchants in the trade quarter before plying her trade as a scribe once she had amassed enough coin to secure lodgings and workspace of her own.

Though unswervingly loyal to the Imperium, Niebuhr was of little importance in the grand scheme of humanity's empire – the gems mined from under its surface had no military application beyond providing epaulet decoration for a handful of un-notable regiments – and as such none of the august bodies in service to the Emperor maintained a presence on the world. Its population was too small in size and stature to provide a worthwhile tithe to the *Astra Militarum*, and the comparatively few souls who called it home required no Ecclesiarchy presence. The sole figure of Imperial authority – aside from the governor – was an Administratum clerk who oversaw the payments of the not inconsiderable taxes that flowed from Niebuhr into Imperial coffers, but the previous holder of that office had died three years before Agentha had arrived on-world and his

replacement had yet to arrive. It was Agentha's hope that when the new clerk finally made it here she would be able to leave on the ship that brought them and continue on her journey back to her order.

Ever the pragmatist, Agentha was not placing all of her hopes on the idea that someday an Administratum ship would whisk her away, which is why she took whatever scribe work she could get. In the main, this involved drafting contracts for use between the various trade guilds that represented the miners, gem cutters, merchants, shippers and other factions with interests in the planet's stone trade. Occasionally the work would be a little more interesting: transcribing the memoir of a wealthy tradesman, rewriting historical documents for the governor's office, or translating letters between lovers.

Agentha was just about to pick up the stylus when there was an urgent knock at the door of her single-room quarters.

It was after dark and her hours of business were long since over. Agentha did not socialise so she had no idea who could be on the other side of the thin wooden door.

Another knock, louder, more frantic.

'Who is it?' Agentha asked sternly, retrieving her laspistol from beneath the bare bed and pointing it at the door.

'It is Jerro Fenacy, the governor's second cousin,' said a reedy voice, muffled by the wood. Agentha lowered her weapon. She had done business with Jerro before, some contract or other for a big demolition job.

'What business do you have here at this Emperor-forsaken hour?' Agentha said, her tone pitched to leave Jerro in no doubt regarding her level of annoyance.

'Forgive me, my lady. The ruins in the desert. We tried to clear them to make way for new manufactories.' Jerro was out of breath. 'Underneath. We found something.'

'You found something? What did you find?'

'Structure. Black stone. And a doorway. Got writing on it. Strange writing. Don't know what it is.'

Agentha tucked her laspistol into the belt of her orange robes and took down her hide jacket from the hook beside the door. Putting her hand inside her pocket, she checked that the metal orb was where it should be and, satisfied that it was, slid back the bolt of the door. Jerro Fenacy was hunched over before her, his hands on his thighs as he fought to draw air into his hungry lungs. The light from the candles in Agentha's chamber lit her from behind, making her shadow flicker crazily over Jerro and the staircase behind him.

‘Take me there,’ Agentha said. ‘Now.’

The ride to the ruins was long, hot and, for Agentha, very cramped. The half-track had been designed and constructed with the native population of Niebuhr in mind, not to transport a sister of the Adepta Sororitas over long distances. Agentha spent the entire journey with her legs tucked up against her chest and her head crooked over to one side as Jerro gunned the transport over the dunes. Initially, she had wanted to travel in the rear compartment of the half-track but when Jerro had pointed out that it was full of demolition equipment she was left with no alternative other than to ride up front.

‘Nearly there,’ Jerro said with some sympathy, as the vehicle crested the top of a particularly steep dune and a clump of ruins hove into view. Beyond them, in the distance, something caught Agentha’s eye: the roof of a black structure, the heat haze emanating from it more intense than that of the surrounding desert. Unnaturally so.

‘Can this thing go any faster?’ she said, gritting her teeth and pulling her legs in ever tighter to her chest.

Minutes later, she emerged from the cab, her entire body a tapestry of bruises. Ignoring the aches, she paused only to slide her spectacles back into position and set off at a run towards the dark building that had recently been unearthed. A figure waved to her from her peripheral vision and she headed towards him. As she got closer to the stranger, she realised that he was an off-worlder, at least a head taller than the average Niebuhrian, although still much shorter than Agentha. He rested two metal crutches under one arm as he waved, swaying as he struggled to maintain his balance on his sole remaining leg.

‘You must be Pound,’ Agentha said, slowing as she approached him. ‘I am Sister Agentha Castarno of the Order of the Fractured—’

‘No time for all that,’ Pound snapped. ‘This way. Quickly, before the writing fades.’

Agentha had become accustomed to brusqueness and ill manners – the sister superiors of her order were no paragons of social comportment and she had spent many months in the company of Adeptus Astartes of the Black Templars Chapter– but to be spoken to like this by a common citizen of the Imperium took her aback. She was carefully considering her rebuke when Pound spun on his heel and scrambled across the sand at speed, his crutches sinking deep through the fine grains. Agentha soon drew level with him but before she could speak, Pound threw out an arm, gesturing.

‘There. The doorway,’ he blurted impatiently, before losing his footing and sprawling face-first into the desert floor.

Ignoring Pound, Agentha continued to where he had pointed, pausing briefly to regard the steps down to the obsidian construct, perfectly formed from dry sand that by rights should have been blowing in the not inconsiderable desert wind.

‘Did you make these?’ she called back to Jerro, who had caught up with Pound and was helping to lift him onto his crutches. Both men were pale, all colour drained from their cheeks.

‘No... No, my lady,’ Jerro said, his mouth suddenly becoming as dry as his surroundings. ‘They were like that after the explosion.’

Agentha turned her attention to the door, cautiously taking the unnaturally formed steps lest the laws of nature and physics reaffirm themselves and the desert consume her. Reaching the bottom, her eyes widened as they fell upon the shimmering, pearlescent script, perfectly formed and stark upon the black of the stone. Since Jerro had first stammered that a structure had been uncovered below the planet’s surface, Agentha’s only thought had been it was of Necrontyr origin. She had witnessed first hand what that ancient evil was capable of and if the xenos were here, lying in wait beneath Niebuhr, then the world was surely doomed. But the script she was looking at was not of alien origin, but Terran. Ancient Terran. She held out a hand to brush the lettering with her fingertip.

‘Don’t!’ yelled Pound from behind her. ‘It’s hot to the touch.’ Much to his irritation, Jerro was helping him to stand, his crutches devoured by the sands.

Instinctively, at the mention of ‘hot to the touch’, Agentha pulled her hand back and grasped the orb in the folds of her orange robes. Ice cold, its very presence brought her comfort.

Burrowing deep into her memory to recall the archaic Terran languages she had studied long ago, first at the Schola Progenium on Kholorn, then at her order’s convent, she began to translate.

The first three words were relatively simple, the context of their location aiding her understanding.

‘Within these walls...’ she whispered, leaning in, careful not to brush her flesh against the surface of the door. She stopped abruptly. The next three words were complex, difficult to translate, but she had already skipped ahead to the seventh word, a word she recognised instantly, a word that was common to many human dialects and tongues that had formed over the last ten millennia.

Daemon.

‘Fetch me a quill and parchment,’ Agentha said, turning to the two men waiting

at the top of the steps. 'But most importantly, fetch me the governor.'

II

The ranked masses of half a company of Space Marines stood arrayed before the entrance of the black structure, now designated MA616, their pristine red armour stark against the dull beige of the desert and the dark walls of what, for operational purposes, they presumed was a prison. Fifty bolters were aimed at a doorway barely high and wide enough to allow a power-armoured figure passage while one of their number, his armour bright blue as opposed to blood red, chanted. Occasionally he would pause, draw sigils in the air with his staff, before continuing his chant at a different rhythm in an entirely different language.

From her position behind them, Agentha stood at the entrance of her tent and listened to his words as they carried on the twilight breeze. She understood none of them but marvelled at the cadence and the dark beauty of these strange tongues that simultaneously filled her with wonder and nausea.

‘What is he doing?’ asked Pound, seated at a small table in the tent, his hands wrapped around a mug of recaff to fend off the late evening chill. Though the daytime temperatures on Niebuhr could reach the upper limits of human endurance, once the sun went down the surface became cold enough for frost to form before it rose again.

‘He’s breaking the wards,’ Agentha said, pulling her hide jacket tighter around her. ‘They’re trying to get in there.’

‘Get in?’ Jerro said, almost spitting out the mouthful of drink he was about to swallow. He was seated opposite Pound, a deck of cards placed between them.

‘Are they deranged?’

‘I don’t know what they are,’ said Agentha.

It had taken less than three weeks, Terran standard, from when the governor had requested aid, for the fifty or so Space Marines to make planetfall on Niebuhr, and in the mere hours since they had taken control of MA616, not a single one of them had made any effort to identify their Chapter affiliation. Agentha prided herself on the knowledge she had gleaned about the Adeptus Astartes from the texts she had worked on over the years, and from her service alongside the Black Templars, but these red-armoured warriors were not a Chapter she could identify. The figure in blue she knew to be a Librarian, one of the psyker brethren of the Space Marines, and he sported a horned skull insignia on his pauldron, mirrored by each of his non-warptouched brothers. He had been the one who had spoken to her once their convoy of Rhinos and Land Speeders had reached the ruins, asking her to turn over her documentation and translations before ordering the rest of the company to secure the dark structure’s perimeter.

The Librarian’s chant built to a crescendo, the voices of his brothers joining him for the final verse of the litany. Jerro and Pound abandoned their game and their drinks and joined Agentha at the entrance to the tent, peering out across the sandy expanse to where Rhino searchlights lit up the black stone construct. At the Librarian’s final utterance – a string of vile syllables that made Agentha and the two men retch dryly – there was an almighty crack accompanied by a bright flash that seared their vision.

When their sight returned to normal moments later, the last of the mysterious Space Marines was disappearing into the now open door of MA616.

Although Agentha was not certain what to expect once the door had been breached, what happened next was entirely unforeseen.

Nothing.

There was no sound of bolter fire issuing from the breached prison, no screams of the dying or words of banishment, just silence. Eerie silence. For what seemed like an eternity, the three of them stood there, not daring to take their eyes from the door just in case something unholy and corrupted emerged from the darkness within. Eventually something did step through the portal, though to the relief of all it was the Librarian, followed in short order by the rest of his battle-brothers. Even at a distance, Agentha could tell that orders were being barked and terse words exchanged. Most of the Space Marines returned to their vehicles, leaving a single squad to guard the breached entrance. The Librarian, flanked by what appeared to be a Captain and a sergeant, purposefully set off in the direction of

the tent. Jerro and Pound hurriedly retook their places at the table, dealing new hands and pretending that they had been sitting there all along. Agentha remained in the entrance to the tent, her outline silhouetted by the guttering candles within.

‘Your translation seems to be incorrect, sister,’ the Librarian said once he was close enough to be heard. His tone was assertive rather than annoyed. ‘The vault is empty.’

The three power armoured figures continued to advance upon the tent, their gait implying no menace other than the constant threat of violence that exuded from all Space Marines.

‘My translation was entirely correct, lord,’ Agentha said, “‘Within these walls is interred the daemon—”

‘I know what you think it said, sister, but the vault was empty. I could find no trace of any daemon ever having being imprisoned there. Are you sure the word you translated as ‘daemon’ was literal?’

‘My translation was entirely correct, lord,’ Agentha repeated, looking the unhelmeted Librarian square in the eyes, not blinking. The psyker’s eyes were of the palest green, set deep within a face that was lined with a thousand battles. The grey flecks in his beard would have been indicative of middle age in a normal human, but in a Space Marine could be the sign of centuries rather than decades of existence. ‘If there was no daemon in that vault it was not because I made an error in deciphering the ward.’

‘I appreciate your conviction, sister, and also your faith in your own abilities. I yet have need of them. Please accompany Sergeant Cth to the vault. He will instruct you what to do once you are inside.’ He took a step to the side and peered around Agentha, who was still blocking the entrance, to address the two men within. ‘You were the two who first discovered the construct, yes?’

Both men stared blankly back at the Space Marine, awestruck. After a few seconds, Pound composed himself enough to speak. ‘We are, my lord.’

‘Good. I would like you to accompany Captain Lath and myself.’

Jerro helped Pound from his chair and passed him his crutches. Both men moved to exit the tent but found that Agentha was still standing her ground.

‘Where are you taking them?’ she asked. Despite getting off on bad terms with the pair of them, especially Pound, a camaraderie had formed between the trio in the intervening weeks. Jerro had not complained once about the many, many trips he had made back to the capital to retrieve the contents of Agentha’s hab and transport them to the makeshift camp in the desert. Pound had been

instrumental in securing the demolition site, his Imperial Guard training rising to the fore when the governor gave him the authority to raise a militia to protect it until aid arrived. Agentha had heard tales, even translated documents pertaining to, human auxiliaries being mindwiped, or worse, by Space Marine Chapters eager to keep secrets buried.

‘That is none of your concern, sister,’ the Librarian said, growing impatient.

‘I am making it my concern. As one servant of the Emperor to another, I would like to know where you are taking them.’

The sergeant and the Captain exchanged uneasy glances. The Librarian looked as if he was going to explode in rage when suddenly his features relaxed and the hint of a smile formed on his lips.

‘Your will is as admirable as your conviction. Had we more time, I would wish to know which non-militant order produced such tenacious sisters.’

Even in the face of such flattery, Agentha remained resolute.

‘When we made orbit around this world our scans indicated five more sites potentially similar to this one buried beneath the surface,’ the Librarian continued. ‘I need your two companions to aid us in uncovering these other sites so we can make sure this entire world is not a tomb for daemons. I would do it myself but I find orbital bombardment to be overkill in these matters, particularly on inhabited worlds. Don’t you agree, sister?’

Agentha relaxed. ‘I meant no offence, my lord. It’s just I’ve heard tales...’

‘All true, no doubt, and no offence was taken. Come now, we are wasting time standing here talking.’

Jerro and Pound slipped past Agentha, hurried goodbyes exchanged as they followed Lath to an idling Rhino that had pulled up fifty yards from their camp.

The last she ever saw of them was their excited faces beaming back at her as they disappeared into the rear compartment of the massive Space Marine troop carrier.

‘Watch this one closely, Cth,’ the Librarian said, setting off after the Captain. ‘She could be trouble.’

He watched the young woman half smile, half breathe a sigh of relief as she pushed her glasses back onto her nose with clammy hands.

‘Follow me, sister,’ Cth said, as the desert sands whipped up around Agentha in the wake of Rhinos and Land Speeders already becoming red specks in the distance.

The short walk across the freezing desert commenced in silence. There was no

cloud to obscure the night sky and as she slowly trudged through the shifting sands, Agentha looked to the heavens and wondered which of the bright pinpricks in the blanket of darkness was the Space Marines' craft. For a moment she considered the possibility that she might gain passage with them once their mission had concluded but the thought soon passed; the strangers in red had not even revealed their Chapter affiliation so it was unlikely they would welcome a stray Sister Dialogus on board their strike cruiser.

'Pardon me, lord,' Agentha said, fastening the clasps on her jacket. 'I do not recognise the markings on your armour. To which Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes do you belong?'

The sergeant ignored Agentha, not breaking stride as he marched with purpose towards the entrance to the subterranean tomb. There was something about this Space Marine that made her feel uncomfortable, an aura he gave off that she couldn't quite identify. Being in the presence of the Librarian had felt like the air around was charged, as if he was a conductor for the warp, his psychic fury suppressed so that it did not consume him and all around him. Cth was different. Whatever emanated from him was latent, buried deep within, and manifested as a malaise, a sense of being on the cusp of a nauseous lethargy.

The feeling only intensified the closer she got to the dark structure and the nine other Space Marines standing guard over the open doorway. Not one of them paid her any heed as she passed by, instead looking far into the desert for any sign of threat. As she moved past them, Agentha started to shiver involuntarily – though not from the cold – and forced down the burning vomit that rose in her gorge. Thoughts occurred to her now, dark thoughts. Not all those who wore power armour and carried bolters swore allegiance to the God-Emperor of Mankind. Could they be traitors? Former loyalists who now followed new masters and worshipped the Ruinous Powers?

No. They wore the aquila on their cuirasses and their armour was adorned with a multitude of purity seals, more even than Gerataus, the Black Templars Chaplain she had been unfortunate enough to have encountered several years earlier. These Space Marines remained loyal to the Imperium, of that she was certain, but she could not shake the sense that there was something more to them, something they were determined to keep hidden from all but themselves.

'Lead on, sister,' Cth said, coming to a halt at the top of the impossible stairway. So eager to get away from whatever was making her feel so ill, she practically slid down each step, stumbling forwards into the long sealed tomb.

The first thing that struck Agentha was how bright it was inside the

underground structure. There were no windows – not that it would have made any difference with the sun down – but it was illuminated as brightly as if it were noon. The second thing she observed was that every surface – walls, floor and ceiling – was covered in writing, uniform handwritten script in numerous different languages. The third, final and strangest thing was that the letters themselves were the source of the light.

‘How...?’ Agentha said, looking around the vast chamber and trying to take it all in.

‘That is unimportant,’ said Cth without any hint of irony. ‘Your orders are to transcribe every single word within the chamber. Can you do that?’

‘What...? Yes, I think so,’ Agentha replied, still trying to comprehend what she was seeing. ‘Is the structure smaller on the outside? And a different shape?’

‘Yes,’ said Cth, impatiently. ‘It is two hundred and sixty-five feet by one hundred and forty-seven feet on the exterior, two hundred and ninety-five feet square on the interior. But that too is unimportant.’

Agentha looked at Cth incredulously.

‘We are inside a chamber that is bigger than the structure surrounding it, lit up by hundreds of thousands of words carved into every surface and you think it’s “unimportant”?’

Cth ignored her. ‘The transcription. Do you require any materials to allow you to perform the task?’

Agentha sighed. The Space Marine sergeant was obviously not going to give her any answers, but perhaps the writing on the walls would. She pushed her eyeglasses back onto her nose with one hand and fished out a small pad of parchment and a stylus from within her robes with her other.

‘This should be enough to get me going,’ she said. ‘But I’ll need the blank pads from my tent before long.’ She flipped open the book of parchment to the first blank page and put the stylus to her lips, wetting the tip to activate it.

‘Brother Iz,’ Cth said, activating his helmet vox. ‘Go to the sister’s tent and retrieve her parchment pads.’

‘And my books!’ Agentha called. ‘They may assist me with translating the text.’

‘Just bring everything over,’ Cth said, killing the link. Then, as if it was the most casual thing in the world, he drew the bolter maglocked to his thigh and aimed it at Agentha’s head. ‘You may begin, sister.’

Agentha hailed from a non-militant order of the Adepta Sororitas but had received extensive combat training during her time in the convent. Though this

was not the first time a bolter had been pointed at her, it was the first time a Space Marine had been the one with his finger poised over the firing stud.

‘Is that absolutely necessary, lord?’ Agentha asked, motioning to the weapon gripped tightly in Cth’s massive hand.

He drew the weapon in closer to his shoulder, sighting down the body of the bolter through the right lens of his helmet.

‘Yes.’

III

For the next week, Agentha laboured in silence from sunrise to nightfall, a bolter constantly trained upon her. The Space Marines rotated their watch every couple of hours but not a single one of them ever spoke to her, or each other, as they switched duties. Thankfully for the Sister Dialogus, there were never more than two present in the chamber at any time and when she was marched back to her tent every night at the end of her shift, the squad fanned out and kept their distance from her as if sensing her unease in their presence.

The work itself was fascinating to Agentha. For the first few hours after she was allowed into the chamber she paced around it in wonder, making copious notes about the glowing script. Then she mapped the chamber, marking down where one language ended and another began, annotating it where she recognised the alphabet or script. To her initial dismay, she could only identify a little over half of the languages and read only a handful. With her preparation work completed, she set about the task of translation, tackling the languages she knew best before attempting the unfamiliar dialects. By the end of the second day she had filled an entire pad, learning the rudiments of two entirely new languages in the process.

As the days wore on, her progress slowed, each new tongue proving more difficult than the last. Where an unfamiliar section was bordered by already translated sections, Agentha found herself at an advantage, as the script would often switch language in mid-sentence, allowing her to identify common

markers and repeated words and generate a base upon which to build. Where vast tracts were strung together from at times dozens of strange languages, Agentha had to rely upon the forensic linguistics skills drilled into her at the convent.

The nature of what she was translating, once it became apparent, also aided her work and piqued her interest. The opening screed mirrored the text that had been placed upon the door – ‘Within these walls...’ – but beyond that, the text continued with a list of the names that the daemon, identified as Litherax, was also known by. This continued for most of the length of the first wall before transitioning into a narrative of the numerous misdeeds and atrocities carried out by the many-named entity. In most instances, where one of the daemon’s aliases had been carved in a particular dialect, it would be followed later on in the story with a section of text in the same language but, frustratingly, this did not hold true in all cases, leading Agentha down several blind alleys before she could carry out an accurate translation.

As the narrative built, so did her revulsion. Each new language she deciphered revealed yet darker acts performed either by Litherax or in his name by acolytes, deluded worshippers or, sometimes, the entire population of worlds that had come under his sway. At times, what she was reading became too much for Agentha and she would back away from the portable lectern on which her pad rested and breathe deeply to prevent herself from vomiting or being overcome by uncontrollable shivering. Every time she did so, the bolter in her guard’s hands would rise ever so slightly, and be gripped a little tighter.

By the start of the seventh day, the bulk of the writing was translated, including a particularly tricky piece of a Commorraghan assassin’s cant that Agentha had initially believed to be a dialect of Saim-Hann, leaving only the final hundred or so characters of the narrative to be deciphered. She had not been working through the text in order but Agentha had left the final sentences of the text until last for a reason: she did not know where to begin. With every other language she had learned, she at least had a starting point – alphabets that were demonstrably xenos in origin, derivatives of High and Low Gothic, high frequency characters to denote vowels or vowel analogues – but this final script offered no such clues. It was unlike anything she had ever seen before. Each character was made up of triangular shapes and straight lines, positioned horizontally, vertically and diagonally, leaving Agentha in some doubt as to whether each was an individual letter or an entire word. She couldn’t even tell in which direction the language was supposed to be read and there was no spacing

whatsoever to denote where one word or sentence ended and another began.

For an hour, she sat deep in contemplation, staring at the section of wall just above the floor next to the entrance to the chamber, hoping that divine inspiration would strike her. Eventually, she was roused from her study by the sound of armoured feet descending the steps into the vault as Brother Iz came to relieve his counterpart of guard duty. Temporarily conceding defeat, Agentha stood up and went to retrieve two fresh tomes from the other side of the chamber, Iz's weapon following her every step.

Placing the first of the leather-bound volumes atop her lectern, she opened it up to reveal the first of scores of blank pages before gathering together the loose leaves she had used to record the translations of each individual section. Hoping that the mundane task of simply copying her fragmented translations would allow her subconscious to unlock the mystery of the final paragraph, she picked up her quill and started to write in immaculate High Gothic. Though she maintained almost perfect accuracy, so practised had she become during her time on Niebuhr that in the space of only a few hours she was able to copy the entire translation – minus the final section – complete with annotations and footnotes where specific words and phrases allowed for multiple meanings and interpretations. After making one final notation, crediting herself and her order for the translation, she put down the stylus and looked back to where the last few enigmatic words silently taunted her.

To her surprise, the ever-present bolter was no longer being wielded by Brother Iz but by another of the red armoured Space Marines. Though they all looked alike with their helmets on, Agentha had learned to differentiate between them by the placement of their purity seals and the barely perceptible differences in height and build. Iz's replacement was a good few inches taller as well as a few pounds heavier. She had been so engrossed in her work that she had failed to notice the changing of the guard. Still no closer to understanding what the final few sentences meant, she closed the volume containing the complete translation and replaced it on the lectern with the second of the blank books. This time, instead of quickly transcribing High Gothic letters, she carefully copied the original glowing characters carved into the walls, stopping occasionally to correct a minute error in her penmanship.

It was slow going, and two more guard changeovers occurred unnoticed by Agentha before her task was finally complete. Unlike the first volume, which lacked the final part of the inscription, the ink was still drying on the unfathomable wording and, almost as an afterthought, Agentha found a blank

leaf of parchment and made a second copy. It was only now, at the second time of painstakingly copying the lines and wedge-like shapes that any semblance of recognition formed. One word – or perhaps sentence – stood out over all the others, a string of five characters that she felt certain she had seen before. She had already discounted all of the xenos languages she was familiar with, so that meant this was from a species she, and possibly the Imperium as a whole, had never encountered, or it was some forgotten human dialect. Carefully placing the sheet between the final page and the back cover of the translation, she moved closer to the wall, crouching down and leaning in so close to the lettering that her nose almost touched the glowing stone.

‘Is your work complete, sister?’

So unused to hearing a voice other than her own quietly mouthing the words she had been writing down, Agentha stumbled backwards in shock, her feet giving way beneath her squatting form, leaving her sprawling on her back on the cold stone floor.

‘I did not mean to alarm you, sister.’ It was not an apology from Cth, merely a statement. Agentha had been so engrossed in the text that she had failed to acknowledge yet another change in her overseer. ‘I have received word from the Brother-Librarian that the survey of the other sites is complete and that we are to take our leave of the planet at first light. Have you completed your translation?’

Though this was more information than she had been given since she had embarked upon this venture, it seemed as if Cth was going out of his way not to reveal anything he didn’t have to. Disregarding the fact that he didn’t refer to the Librarian by name, he had also chosen not to mention whether anything had actually been found at any of the other sites. Agentha lay there on the floor for a moment, waiting for the Space Marine to offer her a hand to help lift her up. When it was not forthcoming, she pulled herself awkwardly to her feet, pushing her glasses back up her nose as she did so.

‘I have a complete transcription of the original text but the final section eludes me. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before but at the same time seems strikingly familiar.’ She gestured to the writing by the door.

Cth tilted his head to one side, evaluating the text for himself. He took a stride forwards before crouching in front of the writing and removing his helmet with a hiss of releasing pressure. His hair was cropped close on top and virtually non-existent along the side of his head, exposing a latticework of scar tissue.

‘I recognise this writing,’ he said, turning to Agentha and revealing a face that was even more scarred than his head. But the lines of lightened flesh that

contoured his visage were not his most striking feature. He looked upon the Sister Dialogus with eyes of the brightest blue, taking her aback with their unnatural hue.

‘I thought that too,’ she said after taking several seconds to compose herself. ‘But I cannot place it.’

‘I can,’ Cth said, putting his helmet on the floor beside him and placing his gauntlet beneath the parchment of one of the numerous purity seals that adorned his red armour. ‘Look here.’

The same lines and shapes on the wall were also delineated on the crisp vellum firmly attached to the ceramite by a large wax seal. Agentha’s eyes grew larger behind her spectacles as they fell upon one word in particular. ‘This word,’ she said, pointing at a string of characters on the purity seal before motioning to their exact duplicate on the chamber wall. ‘Do you know what it means?’

‘The language is unfamiliar to me. All I know is that it predates the Imperium and has been used for millennia as a script of warding, a defence against those that lurk beyond the veil and anathema to all those that are birthed from the warp.’

Agentha sighed at the news. Translation would not be impossible now that she had a comparative text but a keyword would have made her task easier and faster.

‘But that word I do know. It means “protection”,’ Cth said. He rose to his feet, retrieving his helmet as he did so. ‘Time is against us. My squad are to return to the capital immediately and we are to follow once you have recovered your belongings from your tent.’

‘But what about the translation? I have the means to complete it now.’

‘You can finish it once we are back in the capital. A sandstorm is blowing in fast and we must be away from here before it strikes.’

‘Very well, but please allow me to do just one thing before we leave.’

‘My orders are—’

‘Please. It is important and it won’t take long.’

Cth’s piercing eyes bored into her, causing a sensation to rise up in her not unlike the one she had felt when she had encountered the mysterious Space Marine in black, flame-wreathed armour on board the pilgrim ship that had brought her to Niebuhr. ‘Very well. You have a few minutes.’

She hurriedly gathered the books and parchment that were strewn about the chamber and threw them into a large wooden crate that Fenacy had procured for her. She hefted it over to the doorway and placed it on the ground next to Cth.

‘Are we done here?’ he said.

‘Not quite.’ Agentha reached into the crate and pulled out another blank sheet of parchment along with a stub of graphite. ‘This won’t take long,’ she said, duplicating the words from Cth’s purity seal.

Long minutes went by as Agentha carefully copied each mark, Cth’s features becoming ever sterner. Just when it looked likely that he was going to angrily demand she cease, she gave a forced smile and said, ‘all done,’ before tucking the sheet into the tome containing the transcription.

Replacing his helmet, Cth led her up the stairs. Neither of them noticed the glowing letters slowly fading away in the vault behind them.

‘The storm is very nearly upon us,’ Cth called out from where he was making pre-takeoff checks on the Land Speeder. ‘We need to be airborne in the next few minutes.’

‘Almost done here,’ Agentha shouted back, struggling to be heard against the whipping wind that was lifting the flaps of the tent and depositing sand among her already packed belongings. Her response wasn’t a complete lie; she was almost done with the translation of the final block of text.

Held down with heavy volumes from her collection to prevent the wind from blowing them away, Agentha looked back and forth from the two pieces of parchment she had spread across the table. A third sheet rested under her left hand as the graphite in her right scratched out far from perfect High Gothic, many words crossed out as more were deciphered and the meaning of the text began to take shape. Some of the words she had made an educated guess at, filling in the gaps based on the words she was sure were accurate around them, while others she knew she might never be able to fathom the meaning of. Not that it mattered. She had enough of the text translated now to understand what it meant and its wider implications.

‘And thus do I, Inquisitor _____ of the Ordo Malleus, condemn _____, scourge of _____, _____ of _____ and enslaver of _____ to forever be interred, for the protection of all Humanity, within these walls. These are the words that bind; these are the words that bond.’

She cursed herself for missing it in the first place, for not spotting it when she arrived at MA616. A single word with two subtly different interpretations.

Within.

Agentha had taken it at face value, that ‘within’ referred to the space bounded by the walls of the chamber, but that’s not what it meant at all. If it had, then

why didn't this unknown inquisitor use the phrase 'within this chamber' or 'within this vault'? 'Within these walls' was meant exactly how it read; it meant *within* the very walls themselves. But there was more to it than that – the final sentence referred to the words themselves binding and bonding.

Pulling her robes over her mouth and nose to protect her face from the swirling sand, she ran over to where Cth was inspecting the Land Speeder. As she approached, he spun on his heel, raising the bolter so it was in line with her head.

'We have to go back inside the vault,' she yelled.

'No. We don't,' he called back, lowering his weapon. 'If we leave now then we can still outrun the storm.'

'You don't understand,' she pleaded. 'There was a daemon in there all along and I think I've set it free.'

'Stay back,' Cth cautioned as he descended the sand steps. In the weeks since the chamber had been uncovered, the unnatural formation had remained intact through both wind and unseasonal desert rains. Now, under the combined barrage of the sandstorm and Cth's bulk, they crumbled under his every footfall.

'It's no longer illuminated,' he said, activating a lume beam attached to his bolter before cutting through the darkness with it. Agentha began to descend the steps after him, causing him to growl, 'I told you to stay back,' before plunging into the benighted vault.

She pulled her robes tighter around her, the sand biting where it sprayed against exposed flesh, the blackness of the night broken only by the infrequent shaft of light from Cth's bolter escaping from the chamber.

'It is safe to enter, sister,' Cth called eventually.

Agentha had hoped that she had been wrong, hoped that the daemon had been physically imprisoned in the vault so long ago and had withered or been vanquished in the intervening centuries. When she crossed the threshold, all hope fled.

Cth passed the beam of light over each square foot of wall, now entirely smooth and devoid of any scripture. Every single word that had been etched there until just hours ago had disappeared.

'Where is the book containing the transcription, sergeant?' Agentha said nervously. She had given it to Cth when she returned to her tent earlier and had not seen it since.

'I gave it to Brother Iz to take back to the capital with him.' He paused,

realisation hitting him like a power fist. 'I have to warn the rest of the company,' he said, heading off at speed towards the doorway, the light from the lume flicking erratically from wall to ceiling as he did so.

'Wait!' Agentha called after him, mustering as much authority as she could. It worked, and Cth stopped dead in his tracks just as he was about to ascend the disintegrating steps. 'Shine the light onto the ceiling. I thought I saw something.'

Cautiously, as if he expected some daemonic entity to pounce down upon him, Cth raised the bolter with both hands and panned the light over the stone roof of the subterranean vault. He stopped when something became apparent, something that wasn't there earlier. There was a single High Gothic word daubed on the ceiling in what looked like dried black blood.

'What is that?' he said, holding the bolter steady. Agentha fished a stick of graphite out from among the folds of her robes along with a scrap of parchment and quickly copied it down.

'I'm not sure,' she said, adjusting her spectacles.

IV

The passenger seat of the Land Speeder provided more room for Agentha than the half-track but her journey away from the remote dark structure was no more comfortable than the one that had brought her there. The vehicle was built to accommodate the bulk of a fully armoured Space Marine and came with no restraining strap to hold the riders in place. For Cth, this wasn't a problem, his frame fitting snugly in the pilot's seat as he gripped the controls, but Agentha was tossed about like flotsam on the tide every time he banked or swerved to avoid a choking sand cloud that could clog the thrusters and drop them out of the sky. In the end, Agentha gripped the handles of the heavy bolter in front of her to anchor herself in the oversized seat.

'Do you know how to use that?' Cth called over to her, shouting to be heard over the cacophony of screaming engines and howling wind.

'It's been a while since I fired one but I'm sure it'll come back to me.' The Order of the Fractured Cipher was not under arms but all of its sisters were trained to operate a variety of weapons and fight in a number of different but effective close combat styles. Primarily, a Sister Dialogus' role was one of support, normally away from the battlefield, but if Agentha was called upon to fight and to kill she would do so without hesitation, as she had already proved several times before.

Cth simply nodded in response, swinging the control stick hard left to avoid a swirling funnel of sand that sprang out of nowhere on their right flank. Agentha

slammed hard into the bulkhead, her grip on the heavy weapon the only thing keeping her in the craft. 'It's getting worse,' she said, grimacing through the pain of the two ribs she was certain she had just broken.

'We're caught between two fronts. We've outrun one storm only to fly straight into another,' Cth said, righting the Land Speeder and gaining altitude to rise above smaller sand funnels spinning upwards from the desert floor. He flicked a switch to open up the Land Speeder's vox link, more powerful and with a greater range than the system hardwired into his power armour. 'This is Sergeant Cth to Captain Lath. Acknowledge. Over.' There was no response, just like on every other occasion he had tried to raise the rest of his company since they had taken off from MA616. Then, seemingly unprompted, he jerked the controls hard left again and increased the throttle.

'What is it?' Agentha asked, gasping from the impact of this latest turn.

'Look dead ahead,' he said, wrestling hard with the flight stick as they ploughed directly through strong headwinds.

Lifting herself up by the handles of the heavy bolter, she rose to her feet and peered out over the front of the red liveried skimmer. 'Sweet Emperor...' she gasped, barely suppressing a shudder. Through the raging sandstorm obscuring her view, she could just make out the silhouette of... something. Something terrible. Something debased and corrupt.

Something daemonic.

Dark outlines of bulbous tentacles rose and fell, simultaneously thrashing and propelling, dragging its bloated body across the sand. With nothing to use as visual reference, Agentha could not tell exactly how big the thing was.

'I can hear bolter fire. My brothers are already engaging it,' Cth said.

She had spent months in the presence of Space Marines but Agentha was still astounded at how keen their sight and hearing was. She could barely hear Cth talking alongside her yet he could make out bolter fire at Emperor knows how many hundred yards away. 'Be ready.'

Agentha gripped the heavy bolter even tighter now, planting her feet wide apart for stability. She experimentally swung the weapon on its pintle, every fibre of muscle in her arms, chest and shoulders burning as she brought its weight to bear. The Land Speeder was racing towards its target at near full speed, the daemon looming ever larger in her sights.

'Now!' Cth yelled, the sandstorm suddenly parting to give Agentha a glimpse of the warp entity. Its flesh was smooth, glistening and shimmering like oil on water, purples, greens and pinks coalescing and swirling almost hypnotically.

This close to it, she could make out a noise, too, like words but dark and abhorrent. A primal noise formed of fear, hatred and spite. She fought down her revulsion and squeezed hard on the firing stud, unleashing a volley of bolt shells at the huge, slow-moving target.

Even struggling to aim the weapon, Agentha could not miss at such close range and as Cth yanked back on the controls to guide the Land Speeder higher into the storm-swept sky, she saw one of the beast's tentacles shear away, thick dark ooze pouring from the stump.

'I'm going around again,' Cth said, throwing the craft into a steep banking dive that brought it around to face the daemon once more. The noise it was making had changed and Agentha recognised it as definitely being language this time, albeit a tongue she could not identify. Fighting against the turn of the Land Speeder, she remained on her feet and laboriously aimed the gun again. Without waiting for an order from Cth, she opened up at range, concentrating her fire on another of the thick tubers protruding from what passed for the thing's torso. The result was the same as before, a still-writhing appendage hitting the sand in a slick of ichor, but Agentha did not relinquish her hold of the heavy bolter, peppering the daemon's hide with mass-reactive rounds as they flew in close.

Once again, Cth sought to fly them above the danger zone but, with alarming speed, the warp fiend threw out a tentacle with the intention of knocking the craft to the ground. His Space Marine reflexes kicking in, Cth reversed the ascent, dipping under the swinging arm and banking away. As though anticipating his move, the daemon lashed out another tentacle, seeking to capture the skimmer in its prehensile grasp. Cth corrected course once more, evading the beast's clutches. Just when it seemed that the Land Speeder was clear, the tip of the limb grew several smaller facsimiles that latched onto a wing and tore it from the craft as it sped away from the daemon.

Agentha dropped to her knees as they entered an uncontrolled barrel roll, her knuckles white as she clung onto the bolter to prevent herself from being thrown from the bucking skimmer. Alongside her, Cth struggled vainly to regain control, the flight stick unresponsive in his hands. 'It's no use. We're going down,' he shouted.

As part of her training at the convent, Agentha had been schooled in the basics of vehicular combat, not only how to operate the weapons systems but also how to drive or pilot various tanks and sub-orbital flyers. The course was short, a matter of only a few days, and they had never actually got behind the wheel or stick of any vehicle, but now, as all sense of direction left her and the ground

loomed large before her, her mind went back to the very first lesson she had received, before she had even been told how to start an Exorcist or put an Immolator into reverse.

Though she could not remember the name of the tutor, she could clearly remember her first words: ‘No matter how skilled you become, at some point it is inevitable that you will need to leave a vehicle in a hurry to escape injury or death’. She had gone on to explain that in the case of a tank or troop carrier, this was simply a case of finding the nearest hatch, opening it and exiting. With flyers, however, things were different.

Unless you were unfortunate enough to be hit by the shot that brought the craft down, or the resulting shrapnel, the crash would likely kill you. ‘But if the crash is inevitable, how can you avoid it?’ one of Agentha’s novitiate sisters had asked.

‘Simple,’ had come the smiling tutor’s response. ‘Make sure you’re not in the craft when it crashes.’

Whispering those words like a catechism learned at the altar, Agentha waited as long as she dared before relinquishing her grip on the heavy bolter.

V

‘Are you hurt, sister?’

Agentha opened her eyes but was momentarily confused when instead of seeing a single, red-armoured Space Marine crouched before her, she instead saw myriad copies. She attempted to lift her right arm but a searing pain surged along its length and into her shoulder. Instead using her left hand, she removed her glasses and inspected them, only to find one of the lenses had yet again cracked.

‘My arm is broken but other than that I’m fine, I think.’ She replaced her spectacles and tried to focus on the speaker. The placement of the purity seals told her it was Iz. ‘Sergeant Cth is he...?’

‘The sergeant lives. He pulled you into cover after the crash before joining the fight against the daemon,’ Iz said, getting to his feet.

Still trying to get her bearings, Agentha moved her head from side to side. The storm was still raging and from within the swirling sands she could hear the crack of bolter fire over the vile utterings of the daemon. Her back felt cold and she realised that she was propped up against an overturned Rhino. ‘The daemon...?’

‘It manifested from nowhere on the way back to the capital and slaughtered a dozen of my brothers before we could react.’

‘No. It didn’t manifest from nowhere. It came from the book.’

‘I don’t follow, sister.’

‘The book. My translation. The daemon was literally bound into the walls of

the chamber by the words that were carved there. Whoever imprisoned him had the foresight to use dozens of languages in the binding knowing that it would be impossible for anybody to undo it. Almost impossible. When I translated the inscription the daemon was no longer bound into the chamber walls but into the pages instead.'

'But if he was bound there, how could he escape?'

She sighed regretfully. 'The translation and therefore the binding was incomplete. For the prison to hold the daemon, all of the bars must be in place. At least that's my theory.'

'Its time imprisoned has made it strong. In truth, we are only just containing it.' Iz loaded a fresh clip into the magazine of his bolter before heading into the storm. 'I must rejoin my brothers.'

Agentha struggled to her feet, right arm hanging limply at her side. Through the blizzard of sand the dark shape loped ominously, occasional muzzle flashes lighting up its slick flesh. As she watched, a fat tentacle lashed downwards, rising again with one of the Space Marines in its grasp. Staccato blasts rang out but soon fell silent as the daemon allowed the two halves of its would-be slayer to tumble to the ground. Its dirge continued like a plaintive lamentation delivered in hundreds of different languages. At one point it sounded to Agentha like it was saying the word 'brethren' as a question in accented High Gothic.

Unconsciously, Agentha's hand reached into the folds of her robe, her fingers caressing the metal of the orb secreted there. Unlike the last time she had faced such peril, the globe remained cold to the touch. The mysterious dark-armoured Space Marines would not be their saviours this day. She pulled her hand away but brushed against something else stored in the pocket, a piece of paper which she retrieved and held out before her. On it was written the single word she had copied down from the prison vault.

'Brother Iz?' Agentha shouted. Even over the noise of storm and battle his enhanced hearing picked out her words. 'I must speak with the Librarian.'

'And you're certain you can do this?' Captain Lath said, leaving Agentha uncertain as to whether he was questioning her ability or resolve.

'Positive,' she replied without hesitation.

'It is out of the question,' the Librarian interjected. 'The task falls to me.'

'With the greatest of respect,' Agentha lied, 'I think you will need all of your concentration just to maintain the psychic shield.'

The Librarian scowled at her. 'Very well. Then Lath will do it.'

‘The word is from a language that has been dead for more than six millennia. The number of people in the Imperium who have even heard of the language would fit comfortably on this planet. The number of people who can understand it could populate its capital. The number of people who can actually speak it? You could fit us in this Rhino.’ She tapped the hull of the overturned vehicle they were hunkering behind for emphasis.

‘Space Marines have eidetic memories, sister. If you pronounce the word, Lath will repeat it.’

Shrugging, Agentha said the word. After a moment’s thought, Lath repeated it.

‘Your vowel sounds are too flat and the last syllable sounded more like a growl than actual language. We have one chance at this so we have to get it right. Let me do it.’

‘How do you even know about the power of such words?’ the Librarian asked, annoyance impinging on his tone. ‘You’re just a Dialogus, after all.’

Agentha snorted. ‘My work for the order was diverse. One day I would translate an eldar text to find it was simply a children’s story, the next I might decipher an inscription from a necron tomb to discover it was graffiti scrawled there millennia after entombment. But sometimes, just sometimes, what I translated would turn out to be of vital importance. Intercepted troop movements broadcast in obscure xenos tongues, cargo manifests from captured archenemy transport ships or tomes obtained by the Ordo Malleus detailing the power of true names and words of banishment.’

‘You are full of surprises aren’t you, sister?’ the Librarian said, threatening to crack his stern visage. ‘Very well. I am convinced that you can do this but I forbid you to do it alone.’

‘I’ll accompany her.’ Agentha, the Librarian and Lath turned to find Cth striding purposefully towards them. ‘Iz told me what she’s planning and I want to be a part of it. I feel as much blame as she does for what’s happened.’

‘Hold on,’ Agentha began, allowing her ever constant veneer of cool to lapse. ‘I never said I—’

‘Very well,’ said the Librarian, ignoring her protest. ‘If the sister believes she can vanquish the daemon then let her prove it.’

Agentha defiantly pushed her damaged glasses back along the bridge of her nose.

‘But I’m contacting the strike cruiser,’ he continued. ‘If this fails, we are to teleport back aboard and take out the entire planet from orbit.’

With the vox link nearly useless thanks to the sandstorm, the Librarian communicated the plan to the survivors of the company over a psychic link. Within minutes of the decision being made, in excess of forty red-clad Space Marines had fallen back to maintain a holding perimeter.

+Are you ready, sister?+

The Librarian's voice invading her mind shocked her and all she could muster was a weakly muttered 'yes' once she had composed herself sufficiently. With Cth leading the way, she pulled her robes tight around her face and followed him through the abrasive wind-tossed sand. Even with the protection of the fabric, and sheltering in the lee of the power-armoured sergeant, Agentha could feel her skin tear in places, small patches of crimson staining the bright orange of her order's garb. Just when she felt as if the flesh could be entirely stripped from her skeleton, the storm suddenly abated, the howl of wind giving way to the sound of the daemon.

Agentha looked behind her to find that the storm was still raging outside of the psychic cocoon the Librarian had raised. She felt like an insect trapped under glass.

+I'm not sure how long I can hold this. I can already feel the daemon fighting against it.+

The second time the Librarian's voice entered her mind unbidden was no less unsettling than the first but Agentha maintained her composure this time. Only fifty yards away from the daemon and with no other noise to act as interference, she could clearly hear the words it was mouthlessly speaking. Most of it was still unintelligible to her, some of it downright painful to listen to, but a smattering of it she could understand. The khansu dynasty word for 'same'; a variation of the Iyanden word for 'kindred'; a vespid sound made to identify an individual to another of its tribe.

Following in Cth's footsteps, Agentha found that the daemon's attention was not on them but instead seemed preoccupied with the psychic shield that contained it. It flailed at the invisible barrier with meaty tentacles, noiselessly banging against it. As they got closer, Cth signalled that he was going to peel off to the flank. Agentha continued to walk in a straight line.

The daemon turned its attention away from its new cage and towards Agentha. No longer in proximity to Cth, a wave of relief replaced the nausea she felt whenever she was close to him, but she also felt exposed. It was as if standing so closely behind him had prevented the daemon from being able to see her, but she knew the notion was ridiculous. Even though the creature had no eyes – no

discernable facial features at all – she could tell that it was watching her. Cth continued to flank it, apparently unseen.

The full horror of what she was looking at dawned upon her and her pace slackened, a malaise rising within her that engulfed her in complete and utter despair. The narrative she had translated raced through her mind, the deeds and atrocities performed by, and in the name of, an entity from beyond that was both ubiquitous and should not be. For an instant she felt like submitting to its will, prostrating herself before its base majesty lest her soul be consumed and spat out.

Whether sensing her plight or at some unspoken order from the Librarian, Cth opened fire on the daemon, gobbets of oily flesh spattering against the unseen wall of the shield. Within its confines, the noise of the bolter discharge sounded impossibly loud, shocking Agentha from her trance and rousing her to action once again. The daemon thrashed wildly at the position where Cth had fired from but the sergeant had long since shifted position. He fired again, two shots into the flab of the thing's body, and rolled back to his original firing position, diving still unseen under the swinging appendages.

Certain that the madness that had threatened to overtake her had passed and that she was close enough to be heard, Agentha took a deep breath and began to speak the word of banishment. Her perception of time slowed, as if seconds were being lived over a lifetime, and each syllable felt as if it was taking an eternity to emerge from her throat. The daemon's noise was no longer audible, it was directly in her mind, every language in creation, and yet more that were not, being spoken all at once. She understood every word but some were louder and clearer than others.

Parley. Leniency. Mercy.

Ignoring the voices, she continued to speak, her enunciation precise and perfect. Resorting to a different tack, the daemon raised an appendage to strike down Agentha but Cth spotted the danger early and shot the limb away at its source, dark liquid splashing the Sister Dialogus' robes, black stains mingling with red. Ejecting the clip from his bolter, Cth slotted another in place and raised the weapon in one fluid motion, pointing it at yet another tentacle that was threatening to neutralise Agentha.

He was too late. Agentha had already finished uttering the word of banishment.

The air within the shield dome grew thick and greasy and the daemon began to turn to bright, searing light. Agentha closed her eyes but the brightness seeped through the flesh of her eyelids, forcing her to throw her arm over her face.

Blinded, the next thing she felt was an armoured shoulder hitting her in the back followed by unimaginable pain as she landed on her broken arm, and, for the second time in the space of less than an hour, she blacked out.

When she came to this time, the red armoured Space Marines standing over her were all very real. And they were staring at her.

The storm had abated, revealing the wrecks of Rhinos and Land Speeders and corpses dotted about the desert landscape. But their dead battle-brothers seemed to be of little importance to the living. Even the Librarian was looking at Agentha with what she could only describe as concern.

In a panic, she checked that her robes were still about her person. Satisfied that her modesty was still intact, she checked to see if all of her limbs were in the same state. Despite her broken left arm, they were all present and – mostly – correct.

‘What is it?’ she said in exasperation. ‘Why are you all staring at me?’

The Librarian looked to Lath who in turn looked to Cth. The buck passed no further.

‘It’s your hair, sister.’

‘What do you mean it’s my...’ she began, grabbing a clump in her hand and holding it out in front of the unbroken lens of her eyeglasses. What she saw stunned her into silence. Where her hair had once been of the brightest auburn, almost the match of her robes, it was now the purest, most pristine white.

VI

‘Very well, sister. I am satisfied there is no residual taint. You may go now,’ said the Librarian. Cth and Lath lowered the bolters that had been pointed at her for the past few hours. In response, Agentha vomited, expanding the pool soaking into the sand at the foot of the table she was sat upon.

‘Just give me a moment,’ she said, wiping her mouth. Her head throbbed, her entire body ached as if she had just finished a one hundred mile race, and her heart pounded in her chest at twice its normal rate. The only positive was that these new pains dulled those in her broken arm, bandaged and splinted before the Librarian had begun his psychic probe to evaluate the effects of her encounter with the daemon.

Lath opened the flap to her tent, allowing the Librarian to exit before following him out into the quiet desert dawn. The smell of burning fuel wafted in after them, the Space Marines’ damaged yet unrecoverable vehicles set alight so that scavengers, or worse, could not glean the secrets of their construction. They had been towed back to MA616 by the operational Rhinos and positioned around the impossible tomb, forming a pyre that, when lit, consumed the black stone daemon prison.

‘What are you going to do now?’ Cth asked, lingering in the storm-damaged shelter. Much to Agentha’s delight, the tough fabric and solid frame of the tent had remained largely intact during the sandstorm, protecting her meagre belongings and precious collection of books.

‘Return to the capital. Carry on working as a scribe. Keep praying to the Emperor that a warp-capable ship stops by someday and that I can somehow gather enough coin to pay for passage back to my order.’

The scars on Cth’s face tightened, lending him a mean aspect. It took Agentha a moment to realise that he was smiling. ‘Wait here,’ he said before following Lath and the Librarian out of the tent.

‘It’s not like I’m going anywhere,’ she said quietly, slipping off the table and peeking out of the flaps that served as a door. She saw Cth hail Lath and the Librarian and commence what appeared to be a heated exchange. This went on for about a minute or so, Cth trying to convince the Librarian of something and Lath backing up his sergeant. Seeming to bow to pressure, the Librarian marched off in the direction of one of the working Rhinos and disappeared into the rear troop hatch, emerging shortly after with a roll of parchment in his hand, which he handed to Cth. Seeing that he was heading back to the tent, Agentha carefully lifted herself back onto the table with her one good arm and pretended as if she had been sitting there all along.

‘The Librarian has drafted you a letter of passage,’ Cth said, entering the tent. ‘A rogue trader vessel is operating in this area and should dock here within the next year. When it does, you are to present this to the ship’s captain, who will take you as far the edge of the segmentum. After that, you’ll have to find other means of returning to your order.’ He passed the rolled up sheet to Agentha.

‘Thank you,’ she said.

Cth’s scars tightened again and he nodded as he made his exit. Agentha sat on the edge of the table and unfurled the parchment, revealing immaculately formed High Gothic vouching for her good character and ordering Captain Sameena Varleigh of the ship *Uncommon Grace* to grant her safe passage to the fringes of the segmentum. At the foot of the letter, in the same script that the last passage of the vault inscription and Cth’s purity seal had been written in, the Librarian had signed it.

‘And thank you,’ Agentha added. ‘Librarian Zoth of the Exorcists Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes.’

She rolled the sheet up, placed it carefully in her robes, then got down from the table and stuck her head out through the flaps. ‘Sergeant Cth?’ she called.

The Exorcist halted his progress back to his waiting squad and turned.

‘Any chance of a ride back to the capital?’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Domiciled in the East Midlands, **C Z Dunn** is the author of the Space Marine Battles novel *Pandorax*, the novellas *Crimson Dawn* and *Dark Vengeance* and the audio dramas *Trials of Azrael*, *Ascension of Balthasar*, *Terror Nihil*, *Bloodspire* and *Malediction*, as well as several short stories.

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