

THE HORUS HERESY®

THE SERPENT'S  
DANCE

*Mike Brooks*



AN AMENDERA KENDEL SHORT STORY

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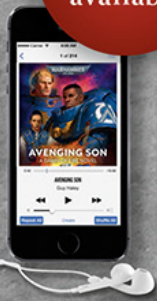
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# THE SERPENT'S DANCE

Mike Brooks

Jovian security was just as alert as Amendera Kendel had expected. Every challenge was heavy with the potential for violence if it was not answered correctly; every automated check required the correct code to be transmitted at the correct moment, lest her ship be targeted by the massive gun barrels of orbital defence stations, or the weapons of the patrol fleet. Behind and beneath it all lurked the planet itself: a monstrous swirling eye, under whose baleful gaze everything was scrutinised.

Yet Amendera Kendel was not telling the truth, and still she was allowed to proceed.

'I don't like this,' she said flatly, watching the planet begin to loom up underneath them.

'Why?' Qelvyn Bura asked. The former soldier was cleaning the blade of her knife. 'You don't want to pull rank on them – there's no point trying to be subtle if you've already announced to the entire security system that the Regent's Agentia Tertius is approaching.'

'I *know* that,' Amendera replied testily. Qelvyn's attitude was generally irreverent at best, but she'd been with Amendera since Proxima Majoris, and Amendera trusted her. More than that, Qelvyn had seen Amendera unleash Exterminatus upon that world, and still stood with her. 'But if I had to resort to it, at least I'd have fewer fears about these defences being

penetrated by hostile agents.’

The Warmaster was coming; that much was undeniable. At some point – tomorrow, next month, next year – the full force of his betrayal was going to strike towards Terra, but those commanding its defence knew better than to think the galaxy’s greatest general would approach without laying the groundwork. The Jovian shipyards were essential to the war effort, and the planet’s defences would be a fearsome bastion against any attacker... assuming they were not compromised. There had already been betrayals in the Sol System; who knew what others might lie in wait?

That was what Amendera was here to find out. Hopefully.

‘You need to work on your charm,’ Ruvier Dall commented. He was a quicksilver rogue – a trickster and conman who’d made a living playing the edges of the Imperium’s rule, at the heart of its power. Qelvyn had found him in a penitentiary, and recruited him to be a part of Amendera’s slowly forming team. Amendera hadn’t understood why, until Qelvyn had pointed out that no one knew weak points like someone who exploited them. She’d also explained that no one liked laws and rules so much as the people who made a living by breaking them in ways that others could not, or did not dare. If everyone could do it, who would pay the criminal? The Imperium’s stability and legislation suited people like Ruvier very well.

The uncertainty of a warzone, let alone the unthinkable aftermath of Horus’ victory? Not so much.

‘I’m not trying to be charming,’ Amendera snapped.

‘Well, you should start,’ Ruvier told her. His face held the same easy smile regardless of what situation he was in, or who he was speaking to, and it ground at Amendera’s nerves. ‘You’re supposed to be a noble.’

‘You ever met any nobles?’ Qelvyn asked him. ‘I have. “Charming” is not exactly the word I’d use.’

‘Not to people like us,’ Ruvier conceded. ‘But to other nobles...’

‘I’m not a noble,’ Amendera said softly. ‘I’m a soldier, fighting a war she wasn’t made for.’ She wasn’t sure if she was talking to Ruvier or herself. She might not have been born into a position of power, but she now held more of it than virtually any other human in the galaxy. She answered, theoretically, only to Malcador and the Emperor, and that was a worm that gnawed at her heart.

‘None of us were made for this,’ Ruvier said, and his voice was

uncharacteristically sober, even if his smile remained. ‘We’ll just have to make the best of it.’

Jupiter’s ruling elite lived on the polar Shoal city-stations: massive floating plates, within the gas giant’s tenuous upper atmosphere but far enough from its gravity’s grip not to be pulled into the thick, roiling clouds of hydrogen and helium below. The clan masters and mistresses of the enormous planet wielded great power, even now that the Sol System was increasingly ordered by the demands of Rogal Dorn, and they were privy to highly sensitive information.

They also, however, had not yet given up on their extravagant lifestyles. Exotic delicacies might be harder to source, and the sky above them might be lit up by the drive trails of patrol boats, but that was not enough to truly disrupt the Jovian social calendar. After all, it had been argued, was it not the first stage of defeat, to fear your enemy so much that you ceased to live as you wished? Dorn, who had torn down the Imperial Palace’s glories in the name of defence, or walled them up inside adamantium, might have disagreed with that statement, but the void clans would not be denied. The Sapphire Ball was taking place over the next three days, and there would be no better opportunity to examine the collected nobility of Jupiter, and those guests who could still travel here, to see if any canker lurked within the jewel of the Sol System.

Qelvyn had suggested her own homeworld of Shenlong as Amendera’s cover, but Amendera had refused, since the possibility of encountering someone who would know her story to be false was low, but not impossible. So it was that the noblewoman who strode into the grand hall of the Telenak clan was announced as Lady Voltar of the fictional planet Mollita, which, if questioned, Amendera would claim existed in the Segmentum Pacificus.

The sight that greeted her was almost enough to rob her once again of the speech she’d once foresworn.

The hall was enormous, and easily the largest chamber into which she’d set foot outside of the Imperial Palace itself. It was in shadow, punctuated with mirrored pillars that receded into the distance like the mighty trunks of a particularly regular, widely spaced forest, and the roof far above was of crystalflex, through which faint points of light could just be made out. Scattered here and there were artful rockeries so beautifully designed they

almost appeared to be naturally occurring, with plants both taken from the biome of Terra and imported from the far reaches of the Imperium. Graceful automata in the shape of long-extinct ungulates stepped delicately on long, slender legs, broadcasting gentle music from pipes in their metallic antlers and bearing refreshment platters on their backs, while sporadic illumination was cast by hanging or free-floating clusters of lumens.

One of those floating lights drifted towards Amendera and took up station approximately a metre above her head. She looked up at it, then enquiringly at the major-domo standing to one side of the main doors.

‘Please, your ladyship,’ he said with a smile. ‘It is merely to light your way.’

‘This is going to make me nervous,’ Qelvyn muttered as they moved off.

‘It’s going to make *you* nervous?’ Ruvier replied quietly. ‘I’m a criminal, I’m not used to being picked out like this.’

‘Oh, and you think a soldier likes a giant glowing target following her around?’

‘Quiet,’ Amendera chided them softly. ‘Keep your eyes open, and tell me what you see.’

They paused to subtly inspect the constellations around them. Each group had its own light: as Amendera watched, one would break away from another and drift towards a third, as nobles, governors and other wealthy or influential people finished exchanging pleasantries with one peer and began the process with another.

‘You’re going to have to get involved,’ Ruvier said to her. ‘First rule of a con is to look like you belong. Nobles always think people want to talk to them. And for the love of the Emperor, smile more – you’re hard enough to like as it is.’

Amendera fingered the engraved torc around her neck. It had been a gift from Malcador, although it was far more tool than frippery, for it suppressed the null aura of a pariah. The emptiness that made others so desperately uncomfortable around her was diminished by it, but not removed: Qelvyn still said she felt uneasy, just rather less so. Amendera would need to counteract the effect of her pariah gene with charm, lest everyone avoid her, and their fact-finding mission come to nothing. It was a task more alien and more daunting than virtually any she had been set in her years serving the Somnus Citadel.



She took a deep breath, checked that the half-mask she wore on her upper face to obscure the aquila tattoo on her forehead was still in place, and headed for the nearest light.

Nobles, Amendera had found, were fond of using an abundance of words to say very little. It seemed almost wasteful to a soldier used to the concise clarity of battlemark, and even thoughtmark would not have been used in such garrulous fashion: there were no chatterers amongst the Sisters of Silence. After an hour, she was feeling as though she'd been buffeted by a turbulent river of inanities.

'Do these people not have a single thing of import to say?' she muttered in frustration, in the aftermath of the latest baron excusing himself from the circle of her illumination.

'You're paying attention to the wrong conversations,' Ruvier said from beside her. 'The opening words are a blind. It's tone of voice, posture, little mannerisms – that's how they're communicating. You're not responding to the right cues, so they don't know what to make of you – that's why they're not saying anything worthwhile.'

'And you can tell this how?' Amendera demanded. Ruvier shrugged.

'I've spent my life playing people. You were a soldier – if you walk into a firefight, I imagine you can tell at a glance who's where, who's shooting at who, where your allies are?'

'Yes,' Amendera said, somewhat offended. 'I'd be dead, otherwise.'

'That's how it is for me and people,' Ruvier said. 'There are times I've been dropped into a situation and had to decide instantly who my allies are, and whether to charge or take cover, if you'll pardon the analogy.'

'Perhaps I should have given you the role of noble,' Amendera muttered, shifting her shoulders. Fao and Kye, the twin dressers who were safely back on the ship, had made her a beautiful yet practical outfit based around a bodysuit that would allow her to kick someone in the head, with just enough flowing fabric in the right locations to make it look like she could not. She still felt uncomfortable and exposed in it, despite the concealed armour mesh, and would have vastly preferred something like the far more sober, utilitarian tunic and leggings worn by Qelvyn. Ruvier, on the other hand, would probably have been quite at home in fake finery. 'Qelvyn?'

'Everyone here has at least one bodyguard,' the Shenlongan replied. 'The

usuals – discreet combat servitors, feral-world killers with behavioural implants, and I think I’ve seen a Lucifer Black. No obvious weapons, but if there aren’t a dozen concealed blades in this room, then I’m a ratling.’

‘How can you tell they’re bodyguards if they don’t have weapons?’ Ruvier asked dubiously.

‘The same way you can read the nobles,’ Qelvyn replied. ‘I understand people too, just in terms of who’s likely to be hard to kill.’ She took a sip of a strong, fragrant alcohol that was apparently distilled from Sigman plerries. ‘No one’s truly comfortable here, either – no one’s moving far from their minders. *Except...*’

She turned towards Amendera, and took another sip of her drink while leaning closer. ‘Over my right shoulder. Blue-and-green robes, dark beard. He goes to speak with others, then returns to his little retinue after he’s done – they don’t go with him.’

Amendera focused on the man Qelvyn had indicated. He was tall and broad, and his bluffly handsome face held a naturally jovial expression. His beard was pointed and oiled, and his hair fell in soft waves past his shoulders.

‘So why is he so much more comfortable than everyone else?’ she wondered aloud. Sure enough, he was chatting merrily with the archduchess of Merillia – a round-faced woman with whom Amendera had spent an excruciating ten minutes talking about the impact of windblown ammonia crystals on the city-station’s gravitic plates – while his two retainers stood under their light some distance away. ‘Who is he?’

‘According to this,’ Ruvier said, consulting his data-slate, ‘he’s Durian Jarandille, merchant prince of somewhere I’m not even going to try to pronounce while I’m this sober. Aides are Kristanna Moristat and Jorud Gevaz.’

Amendera frowned. He didn’t sound a likely candidate to be careless with his own safety, when others were so cautious. She tapped her chin thoughtfully.

The music filling the hall was becoming very slightly louder, and a few of the guests were starting to dance with each other between the mirrored columns. Amendera took a decision.

‘I think we’ve achieved all we can with our initial approach,’ she told the other two. ‘I don’t know how to talk to these people. Time to let the mask

drop a little.’

‘Are you sure?’ Qelvyn asked uncertainly. ‘That could get—’

‘The next time we try subterfuge, I’m letting Ruvier lead,’ Amendera said, cutting her off. ‘For now, head-on is best. Stay here, and watch my back.’

She set off across the floor towards Jarandille with a far more natural and purposeful gait than the largely aimless wandering she’d been doing until now, but she never got there. Kristanna Moristat – young, slim and dark-haired – stepped forward to intercept her, while Jorud Gevaz – taller and plumper, with a completely bald head – remained where he was, watching with only mild interest.

‘Pardon me, milady,’ Kristanna said, performing a curtsey. ‘May I ask—’

‘I intend to request a dance from Lord Durian,’ Amendera told her briskly. She didn’t know how to dance, but she didn’t know how to make small talk either. Given a choice of the two, she’d take the one which involved movement: that, at least, she had not spent decades avoiding.

‘Milady, Lord Durian is, as you can see, currently occupied,’ Kristanna said. She kept her eyes lowered, and Amendera didn’t think it was just out of respect for her supposed rank. Kristanna looked to be trembling a little. Fear of offending a noble? Or of something else?

If she was already on edge in some way, then unsettling her further might shake something loose.

‘Well,’ Amendera said, ‘I intend to have a dance. Lord Durian may be occupied, but you are not.’

She reached out, took hold of Kristanna’s wrist and shoulder, and swung her away.

Kristanna gasped and tried to resist, but Amendera was taller and stronger, and well versed in the physics of how bodies could be made to move in directions they did not wish to go. Even when deployed as a Silent Sister, she had on occasion needed to haul someone away for questioning: this was merely a variation on the theme, although it was true that she’d never interrogated someone to the lilting strains of wind instruments being played by automata.

She’d barely begun to pivot Kristanna towards a clear area of floor when a shock of recognition ran through her, and had her captive been paying attention, she likely could have wriggled free from Amendera’s grasp. However, Amendera saw from the widening of Kristanna’s eyes that she’d

been struck by the same sensation.

‘You’re a blank,’ Amendera muttered, recovering herself and sweeping Kristanna farther away from Jorud, who was looking on in apparent confusion.

‘You’re like me?’ the other woman husked. ‘I think? I didn’t know... How...’

Kristanna’s pariah influence wasn’t large, or particularly strong. She would nullify psykana powers in her immediate area, but she didn’t have anything close to the kind of void Amendera projected when her capabilities weren’t being suppressed. When talking with other nobles, Durian would have been well outside the range of the natural unease Kristanna caused.

‘What is your purpose here?’ Amendera demanded. ‘You shield him from psychic probes or attacks when he’s with you, but stay away from him when he’s socialising, so they don’t take a dislike to him because of your aura?’ Was Durian simply paranoid about his mind being invaded? In which case, why would he move away from Kristanna to talk with others? Or was he expecting a general psychic attack on the entire ball, of which he would have sufficient warning to hide behind his blank?

‘Please, milady!’ Kristanna begged, her eyes wide with alarm. ‘I don’t know what you mean!’

Amendera was no expert, but she knew that this was a place of honeyed smiles and sleek sentences, where words and glances could mean many things, or nothing at all. Kristanna was entirely too ill at ease, even for someone swept into a dance by an unknown noble. She had no smoothness, no guile; even her politeness was the product of fear, not experience. No dignitary would have such a person in their retinue.

Unless, of course, the dignitary was no such thing.

Amendera swung Kristanna behind a pillar, shielded from the view of their respective companions, and raised her hand to pull down her half-mask. She saw Kristanna’s eyes travel up to the revealed aquila tattoo on her forehead, a common enough marking amongst the Silent Sisterhood. If Kristanna knew what it signified, which judging by the widening of her eyes, she did, then she would believe that Amendera’s speech marked her as an oathbreaker.

An oathbreaker, like the renegade forces that had sworn themselves to the Warmaster. Amendera knew her vows had been changed rather than broken,

no matter what certain of her former sisters might believe, but she had no compunction about using that perception to shake loose the tongue of someone who might be looking for such a kindred spirit.

‘Tell me, Kristanna,’ she said softly, catching the other woman’s gaze and holding it. ‘What is it that you are doing here?’

Kristanna’s lip trembled for a moment, and then she spoke in a hurried, furtive rush. ‘Milady, we must flee! We must get away – please, help me get away!’

Amendera frowned. ‘Get away from where? And why?’

‘From the *war!*’ Kristanna urged, her expression clouded by fear. ‘He is using me, and if you have turned your face from the Emperor then he will use you too! But we can escape!’

*Of course we are used,* Amendera wanted to tell her. *Our nature is our purpose.* And what life was there for a pariah, without purpose? Merely scorn, and solitude.

‘Who is using you?’ she asked instead, although she had already guessed the answer.

Kristanna looked back, as though to check the pillar was still between her and Lord Durian, which gave Amendera all she needed. She kept hold of Kristanna’s hand and pulled the other woman after her, back the way they’d come.

Durian was now talking to Qelvyn and Ruvier, apparently in deep and earnest conversation. However, as Amendera approached she saw that Qelvyn’s eyes had lost their sharpness, and Ruvier’s face lacked his permanent smirk. Amendera reached up with her free hand, and removed her suppression torc.

She couldn’t feel her null zone rolling out as her full aura was unleashed, but she could hear the murmurs of discomfort from the surrounding nobles as it reached them. Most notably, Durian turned towards her with a look of sick horror, and Qelvyn and Ruvier seemed to snap out of a trance.

‘Lord Durian’ wasn’t expecting a psychic attack; he was a psyker himself, and he had been manipulating the minds of some of the most influential people in the Sol System.

He recovered well: far more quickly than most that Amendera had faced, but then he’d been moving in and out of a blank’s aura in any case. He lunged at her, all pretence gone, seeking to achieve with physical force what

he had no hope of managing through his warp-tainted gifts. However, Amendera had been training in combat since before she was fully grown.

She punched him in the throat.

Her knuckles met his larynx with a sickening crunch. He staggered backwards, hands flying uselessly to his neck, and Qelvyn swept his legs out from under him. Durian fell backwards and landed hard on the floor; Amendera reached out and caught Qelvyn's wrist before the knife that had suddenly appeared in her hand could bury itself in the psyker's chest.

'He will need to be questioned,' she told her armswoman, looking down at the helpless, wheezing man. The brief scuffle had drawn shocked gasps, and the major-domo was hurrying over, but Amendera had no time for the sensibilities of the nobility. 'What were you doing here?' she demanded of Kristanna, whose eyes were wide. 'What was the purpose?'

'Milady, I don't know!' Kristanna began to sob. 'Durian was to speak to others, and I was to be his cover so he was not detected as a psyker, that is all I know...'

'Lady Voltar!' the major-domo cried as he approached, four armed guards at his back. 'Lady Voltar, I—'

Amendera saw when he entered her aura, as his expression of alarm and outrage shifted to include disgust as well. She stepped forward, to put him on the back foot: her untouchable nature meant she would never be liked, but it had the advantage that people were more likely to agree with her just to make her go away.

These days, of course, she theoretically had no need of any such advantage, but she would take what she could get.

'I am an agent of the Sigillite,' she said bluntly, stripping off her left glove and holding up her hand so the metallic scars on her palm were visible to him. 'This man is a witch and an imposter – he is currently subdued, but no one who has been in conversation with him is to leave this hall until they have been examined for psychic influence.'

'Lady Voltar, that is impossible!' the major-domo protested. 'It is beyond my authority to—'

'I have just commanded it, so that is no longer the case,' Amendera said, interrupting him. 'You have guards with guns – ensure it happens, or you will answer to the Regent's displeasure.'

The major-domo swallowed visibly, but looked again at Malcador's mark

on her palm, and managed a shaky nod.

Kristanna tugged at Amendera's arm with a sudden cry of alarm. 'Jorud! Where did Jorud go?'

Amendera glanced at Qelvyn and Ruvier, who shook their heads.

'Sorry, milady,' Ruvier said, sounding contrite for once, and not a little shaken. 'This bastard had his fingers in my brain, I didn't see—'

'That way,' Qelvyn said, pointing towards a door in the far wall of the huge hall. 'I'm sure he went that way.'

'He is the dangerous one,' Kristanna hissed at Amendera. 'Jorud!'

'Not Durian?' Amendera looked down again at the psyker, but the desperation in Kristanna's voice held its own truth. Amendera was used to hunting rogue witches, people who had trampled over the laws of humanity and reality in the service of their own interests. She'd assumed, once he had been revealed, that Durian was behind whatever scheme they'd uncovered here.

Perhaps he too was merely a tool.

She shoved Kristanna at Qelvyn. 'This girl is a blank, so she'll keep Durian suppressed. Get what answers you can from them. If either gives you any trouble, kill them both. Him first.' She turned to the major-domo. 'What is beyond those doors?'

The major-domo seemed to have recognised that she held authority over him, for his reply was prompt. 'Many things, milady, but it is possible to access the chambers of the High Thane.'

Amendera cursed. 'Then you may have an intruder.' She began to run towards the door.

'Lady, should I call for reinforcements?' the major-domo shouted after her.

'No need!' Amendera replied. She touched the micro-bead in her ear, activating a vox transmission to the ship on which she'd arrived. 'Come with all speed.'

The time for subtlety was over.

The two guards on the other side of the door were dead, each killed by the slash of a powerblade that had cut through their beautifully engraved gorgets. Amendera took in the sight with the dispassionate expertise of a seasoned killer: the right-hand guard had fallen backwards from the force of a backhanded blow; the other had lunged for Jorud, who had... ducked?

Slipped behind the guard, opened his throat, snatched his shotgun, and pushed him forwards to die. Which meant Jorud had gone left. And yes, there was a short trail of dark ash, as the guards' blood had flash-dried on the power knife that had ended their lives, then flaked off it.

Amendera prised the other guard's shotgun loose from their dead fingers, and tucked their combat blade into the sash around her waist for good measure. She had a concealed boot-blade, but there was no sense in not taking these weapons now that the time for subtlety was over. Nothing she had available was as familiar as the great, two-handed sword she'd wielded as an Oblivion Knight, but she would have to make do.

She moved quickly but cautiously, slipping past reinforced crystalflex panels that looked out over the great bulge of Jupiter below, so large that its horizon barely curved, even at this altitude. There were no servants around, but these were clearly service areas: they lacked the ostentatiousness of the corridors Amendera had been ushered through on the way to the grand hall, with their gilded frescoes and towering works of hololithic art. This part of the complex was where the food was made, the laundry was washed, the accounts were run, and all the other myriad tasks that allowed the Jovian high clans to live in such effortless, unthinking luxury. It would also cut between different areas of the palace, ensuring that the menials could come and go without polluting the hallways of their betters.

The boom of a shotgun reverberated through the corridors, quickly followed by shouts. Amendera hastened her pace, cutting right at the next junction. Here was a servant, in a pool of his own blood and half-propped against the wall where he'd fallen. A shotgun fired again, closer now: Amendera stepped past the dying man, and went around the next turn with her weapon raised.

She came out into a larger hall, where corridors met and stairs ran up to another level. Jorud Gevaz was standing over another dead man in servant's livery: he whirled towards her, raising his stolen gun, and Amendera dived forwards into a roll. The shot missed her, and she came up onto one knee, braced her own weapon against her shoulder, and pulled the trigger.

The weapon's kick pulled her aim off, and her return shot flew wide to shatter part of the stone bannister of the stairs beyond Gevaz. He fired again, but Amendera knew better than to remain in one spot, and was already up and darting to her left. She changed direction as he swung his



weapon's muzzle towards her once more; the disturbance in the air caused by that shell's passage kissed her cheek, and then she was on him before he could fire again.

Gevaz swung the stock of his gun at her head, wielding it in both hands like a short staff, but Amendera blocked it with her left arm and aimed her shotgun at his body with her right. It was a bulky weapon, and Gevaz smashed his own left arm down into the gun's barrel before she could bring it properly to bear. The impact caused her to discharge the next shell into the floor, throwing up sparks, so Amendera dropped it, grabbed the barrel of Gevaz's shotgun with her left hand to force it upwards, and drew the combat blade from her sash with her right. He knocked her first stab at his face wide and kicked at her left knee, sending a jolt of pain through it, but she didn't fall.

'Malcador has sent you to your death,' Gevaz hissed, seizing the wrist of her knife arm. Perhaps he hoped his words would intimidate or shake her, but Amendera Kendel had accepted the possibility of death in service long before she'd ever taken the Oath of Tranquillity. If Terra needed her life, she would give it unquestioningly.

She let go of his shotgun and stepped in before he could react, slamming her left elbow into his cheek and then clamping her arm down on his to trap it in place with the gun pointing uselessly past her. He staggered and she followed, looking to pin him against the wall behind him, but he shifted his weight towards her left and her knee buckled slightly, allowing him to spin her around.

He slammed his head forwards, and Amendera's face exploded into pain as her nose snapped with the sharp *crack* of breaking cartilage. Eyes watering and half-blinded, she lashed out with her good knee and felt it connect. Gevaz doubled over, the breath blasted from his body, and she felt his grip on her knife hand slacken slightly. She twisted, trying to free it and blink her eyes clear of involuntary tears—

*'Intruders detected. Eliminating...'*

The mechanical voice from behind Gevaz was accompanied by the whine of a rapid-charging melta weapon. The heretic launched himself to his right, releasing Amendera's wrist and abandoning his shotgun to be trapped under her arm, and leaving Amendera in the sights of the two Crusader-class guardian automata who had clearly responded to the commotion. She

leaped the other way from him, pursued by a thermal bloom as the air where she'd just been standing was superheated.

Both insectoid robots pivoted to follow her movement, perhaps because she was the only one with an obvious weapon. Amendera managed to juggle the shotgun into her grasp and fired a snap shot, but the solid slug only left a dent in the foremost automaton's carapace. Both meltas were powering up again. Amendera tensed, trying to pick the right moment to dodge or duck, and well aware that it would likely be futile.

The distinctive *crump-roar* of bolter shells filled the air, and the rearmost Crusader came apart under remorseless and deadly accurate fire. Its companion turned like a hunting beast, ready to eliminate this higher priority threat, but its meltagun was obliterated before it could fire, and its cranial unit followed a moment later.

Helig Gallor strode through the smoke and twisted metal in the unmarked grey power armour of Malcador's chosen. The former Death Guard had been waiting on Amendera's ship in case of emergencies, for an Astartes warrior would have not gone unremarked even in such cosmopolitan company as had been present in the grand hall. Amendera suspected that given the speed of his arrival, there were now fewer intact doors within the palace than there had been.

Gallor turned his helm towards Jorud Gevaz and raised his bolter. Gevaz smiled at him.

'Hydra Dominatus.'

Amendera saw him press his palm to his ornate belt buckle a moment before Gallor pulled the trigger. The traitor's head and upper body disappeared as the bolter shell obliterated flesh and bone, but the roar of that shot was followed by a judder in the floor, and the faint boom of something that sounded almost like an echo of it, but was not.

Amendera looked upwards instinctively, as though she could see through the ceiling towards the stars. 'Were those shots? A bombardment?' Surely the Warmaster couldn't have arrived while they'd been here?

'No,' Gallor replied, with the certainty of a warrior who not only had enhanced senses, but had also witnessed many bombardments in his existence. 'Multiple simultaneous detonations. Explosive charges.'

An emptiness opened up inside Amendera's stomach. 'The great hall. Now!'

Not everyone in the grand hall had died when Gevaz had activated his remote detonator, but roughly two-thirds had: all of them held there under Amendera's personal order. Jovian security had clearly suspected that she'd been involved with the scheme in some way by corralling the guests, but Amendera had turned her quiet fury on them. When it came down to it, they hadn't dared stand against the authority of the Sigillite, especially not when it was backed by a grey-armoured Astartes. Amendera had left unmolested, with the knowledge that she was no traitor.

Merely a failure.

She stared down at the shredded body of Ruvier Dall while rage lashed around inside her, seeking an outlet. The explosives had been concealed in the deer automata, and their shattered metallic bodies had reaped a heavy toll.

'Why try to get to the High Thane, then?' she asked quietly.

'A decoy? Multiple targets? Perhaps this was a backup, should that attempt fail,' Gallor rumbled. 'This was the work of the Twentieth. With them, there is always more in play than can be seen.'

'But the High Thane still lives,' Qelvyn pointed out, prodding at the dressing on her ribs and right arm. 'So there's that.' The blast had killed Kristanna, and Qelvyn had executed Durian while the first blood of her own shrapnel injuries had been staining her clothes, before the psyker could threaten them. The trail had gone cold before Amendera had had a chance to start following it.

'This is a war that I don't know how to fight,' Amendera said. The admission removed no weight from her soul; instead it seemed to crush her a little more.

'I believe the war that is coming will be the same for us all,' Gallor said. 'This is just one aspect of it. We must endure.'

'Easy for you to say,' Qelvyn told him. 'The rest of us aren't like you.'

Amendera took a breath and closed her eyes, looking inwards for the peace of tranquillity. She had left the oath of the Silent Sisterhood behind her, but the discipline still remained.

*This task, this duty, is greater than I can comprehend. And yet I will attempt it, for this is now my purpose. To abandon it would be to have abandoned my Sisterhood for nothing. This is the task the Emperor has set me.*

*I am not Astartes, but I too will endure. I will make this battlefield my own.*

She opened her eyes again. There were lines of attack: the source of the automata, the compromised security protocols that had allowed them into the palace, the manufacture of Gevaz's belt detonator... All things that might lead back to the minds behind this. Perhaps this was yet another distraction; perhaps by following these trails, she was taking her eye off another, more pressing threat. Yet she could not stand still and do nothing, waiting wide-eyed for the real enemy to show its face in its own time.

'We have work to do.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Mike Brooks** is a science fiction and fantasy author who lives in Nottingham, UK. His work for Black Library includes the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Rites of Passage*, the Necromunda novella *Wanted: Dead*, and various short stories. When not writing, he plays guitar and sings in a punk band, and DJs wherever anyone will tolerate him.

An extract from *The Solar War*.



On the first of Primus the sirens rang across Terra.

On the myriad worlds conquered and ruled by the Imperium of Man, they talked of year divisions, of time sliced into a thousand equal slivers. First division, second division, third, and so on, without variation or character, until the weight of counting reached a thousand, and one year tipped over into the next. On worlds of endless night or blinding days, a year was the same. In an empire spanning a galaxy, anything else would have been meaningless.

0000014.M31 was how surviving records would mark the first moment of that day, stamped and corrected for temporal accuracy, standardised and stripped of any meaning. But, here, on the world whose night and day and seasons had given mankind its concept of time, the old counting still meant something and so did the moment that one year died and another was born: the Feast of Two Faces, the Day of New Light, the Renewal – on and on went its names. But for longer than memory it had been the first of Primus, firstborn of the three hundred and sixty-five days that would follow, a day of hope and new beginnings.

The turning of that year began with snow on the northern battlements of the Imperial Palace, where three brother demigods watched the night skies above. It began with the dawn light and icy chill reaching into a tower-top chamber and stirring the painted cards dealt by a man who was older than any knew. It began with the sirens calling out, one at first, high on the Palace spires, before the cry was picked up by others, on and on across the turning globe. The sound echoed through the mountain-sized space ports and rasped from vox-horns in the deep strata of the Atlantean Hives.

On and on it went, stilling the hands of people as they ate and worked.

They looked up. In caves beneath the earth, and hive vaults, and under the smog drifts, they looked up. Of those that could see the sky, a few thought they could make out new stars amongst the firmament and froze at the promise of each pinprick of light: a promise of fire and ash and an age of loss. And with the sound of sirens, fear spread, unnamed but still spoken.

‘He is here,’ they said.

*Prison ship Aeacus, Uranus high orbit*

*‘I understand you have a story...’ she said. The wolf stood before her, the fur of its back silver beneath the moonlight. ‘A particularly entertaining one. I’d like to remember it, for posterity.’*

*The wolf turned, its teeth a smile of sorrow.*

*‘Which story?’*

*‘Horus killing the Emperor.’*

Mersadie Oliton woke from the memory-dream with sweat on her face. She breathed, and pulled the blanket over her from where it had slipped onto the floor. The air was cool and dank in the cell, scented with the tang of air that had been exhaled too much. She blinked for a second. Something was different. She reached out a hand and touched the metal wall. Moisture clung to the rivets and rust scabs. The thrum of the ship’s engines had gone. Wherever they were, they were stationary in the void.

She let her hand drop and let out a breath. The tatters of the memory-dream still clung to her eyelids. She focused, trying to pull back the threads of the dream even as they slid into darkness.

‘I must remember...’ she said to herself.

‘The prisoner will stand and face the wall.’ The voice boomed out of the speaker set above the cell door.

She stood instinctively. She wore a grey jumpsuit, worn and faded. She put her hands on the wall, fingers splayed. The door unlocked with a clang, and footsteps sounded on the grated floor. The guard would be one just like the rest: crimson-clad and silver-masked, the humanity in its voice concealed by vox distortion. All the gaolers were the same, as constant as the ticking of a clock that never struck the hour.

Small spaces, locked doors, questions and suspicions – such had been her



world for the seven years since she had come back to the Solar System. That was the price for what she had seen, for what she remembered. She had been a remembrancer, one of the thousands of artists, writers and scholars sent out to witness the Great Crusade as it brought the light of reason to a reunited humanity. That had been her purpose: to see, to remember. Like many clear purposes and shining futures, it had not worked out that way.

She heard the footsteps stop behind her, and knew the guard would be placing a bowl of water and a fresh jumpsuit on the floor.

‘Where are we?’ she asked, hearing the question come from her mouth before she could stop it.

Silence.

She waited. There would not be a punishment for her asking, no beatings, no withdrawal of food or humiliation – that was not how this imprisonment worked. The punishment was silence. She had no doubt that other, more visceral methods were used on other prisoners – she had heard the screams. But for her there had only been silence. Seven years of silence. They did not need to ask her questions, after all. They had taken the memory spools out of her skull, and those recordings would have told them everything they wanted and more.

‘We are still in the void, aren’t we,’ she said, still facing the wall. ‘The engine vibrations have stopped, you see. No way of missing it if you have spent any time on ships... I spent time on a warship once. You never lose the sense of it.’ She paused, waiting for a response, even if it was just the sound of retreating footsteps and the door shutting.

Silence again.

That was strange. She had tried talking to guards in the early years, and their response had been to leave her without reply. After a while, that had felt worse than if they had struck a whip across her back. They had never beaten her, though, or even touched her. Even when they opened her skull to remove the memory spools, they had sedated her, as though that made the violation that followed more acceptable.

She supposed that such small mercies had to do with Qruze or Loken. The former Luna Wolves had watched over her as much as they could. But that had still left her a prisoner of the greatest and darkest prison in the Imperium. Loken had said that he would free her, but she had refused. Even

while it pained her, she understood why she had to remain locked up. How could she not? After all, had she not seen the true face of the enemy? Four years of life on the *Vengeful Spirit* amongst the Sons of Horus, in the shadow of their father, who now had set the galaxy alight with civil war. What other reward could there be for remembering those days? A galaxy shrunk to silence and plasteel walls, with only dreams and memories to speak to her.

She had begun to dream memories after a few months, dreams of her home on Terra, of the sunlight shattering across the edge of the Arcus orbital plate, her mother laughing and calling after her as she ran through the hydro-gardens. And she had dreamed of her time amongst the Luna Wolves, and the Sons of Horus, of people now long dead. She had asked for parchment and pen, but none had been given to her. She had gone back to the old games her mind-nurse had taught her, ways of tucking memories away when she woke from sleep, ways of remembering the past even as it fled into the distance. In the silence, she had found that memories and dreams were all she had, all she was.

‘Are we still somewhere in the Solar System?’ she asked, and twitched her neck to look behind her. Why was she still talking? But then why had the guard not left? ‘The ship doesn’t feel like it’s preparing for translation. Where are we?’

They had come for her in her cell on the Nameless Fortress three nights ago. They had loaded her into a box barely big enough to stand upright in. She had felt the box judder and sway as machines had lifted it and her. They had let her out into this cell, and she had recognised the vibration of a void-ship under power. It had been comforting at first, but her dreams had not been, and now the silence of this moment was feeling stranger with each elongating second.

‘Why was I taken away from the fortress?’ she asked. ‘Where am I going?’

‘Where we all wish we could go, Mistress Oliton,’ said Garviel Loken. She whirled, and the end of her cell was gone and a wolf was rising from a pool of dark water beneath the moon. Its eyes were black spheres, and its bared-teeth grin was wide as it spoke. ‘You are going home.’

In the dark of her cell, Mersadie Oliton woke to silence and lay still, waiting for the dream to fade or for herself to wake again.

*Strike Frigate Lachrymae, Trans-Plutonian Gulf*

The first ship of the onslaught died as it breached the veil of reality. Streams of plasma reached out from gun platforms. White fire smashed into the ship's prow. Lightning and glowing ectoplasm streamed behind its hull. Macro shells detonated amongst the molten wounds already cut into its skin. Turrets and spires sheared from its bulk. Towers broke from its spine. It kept coming even as its bows were torn apart. The burning wreck struck the first of the mines scattered across the dark. Explosions burst around it. The front portion of the ship sheared from the back. Prow and gun decks hinged down. Atmosphere vented from the exposed interior. Debris scattered, burning for an eye-blink before the flames ate the air trapped in the wreckage.

'Ship kill,' called a sensor adept from across the bridge of the *Lachrymae*.

Sigismund watched the intruder's death as it spread across the pict screens above the command dais. He was armoured, his sword chained to his wrist and resting point down on the deck at his feet. He did not blink or move as the dying ship tumbled across his sight. In the still depths of his mind he heard the words that had brought him to this place and time.

*'You must choose where to stand. By the words of your duty, or by your father's side at the end.'*

Around him the command crew was silent. Eyes fixed on instruments and screens. This was the beginning of the moment they had all known would end the years of waiting. Some, perhaps, had thought or hoped that it would never come. But here it was, marked with fire.

*I chose, Keeler,* he thought, and in his mind, he heard again the words that Dorn had spoken in judgement of that choice.

*'You will continue in rank and position as you have, and you will never speak to any other of this. The Legion and the Imperium will not know of my judgement. Your duty will be to never let your weakness taint those who have more strength and honour than you.'*

*'As you will, father.'*

*'I am not your father!' roared Dorn, his anger suddenly filling the air, his face swallowed by dusk shadows. 'You are not my son,' he said quietly. 'And no matter what your future holds, you never will be.'*

'I chose,' he whispered to himself, 'and here I stand at the end.'

The fire from the dead warship spread across the displays.

*'If they come at us like this, the slaughter will barely be worth the sweat,'* growled Fafnir Rann.

*'They will not give us that luxury,'* replied Boreas from further back on the platform. Sigismund did not look around at where the holo-projections of the Assault captain or his lieutenant hovered at his shoulders. Each of them stood on the command deck of one of the *Lachrymae's* sister ships.

Rann wore void-hardened Mark III armour, with reinforcing studs bonded to his shins and left shoulder. The scars of battles fought here, at the edge of the system, ran beneath the fresh yellow lacquer. His tall boarding shield hung in his right hand, the twin axes mag-locked to its back echoed in the heraldry painted on the shield's face. Sigismund imagined he could see the warped smile on Rann's face as he turned to Boreas and shrugged.

The holo-image of the First Lieutenant of the Templars did not move. Unhelmed, his face was a single twisted scar, and if there was any emotion beyond cold fury behind his eyes, Sigismund could not see it. Boreas' sword of office stood almost as tall as he did, its guard the cross of the Templars, its blade etched with the names of the dead.

*'All ships, stand by,'* said Sigismund softly, and heard the orders ripple out.

The vibration in the deck rose in pitch. The dull ache that had been building in his skull for the last hours was sharpening. He noticed one of the human deck crew shiver and wipe a hand across a bead of blood forming in her nose.

*'Hold to our oaths and the strength of our purpose,'* he called.

Whispers buzzed at the edge of his thoughts, razor tips scratching over metal. They had needed to sedate every astropath in the fleet two hours before, as a wave of psychic pressure had sent them babbling and screaming. It had become more intense with every passing moment, and it presaged one thing: it was the bow wave of a truly vast armada coming through the warp, bearing down on the Solar System like a storm front. Horus and the traitors were coming.

*'Etheric surge detected!'* shouted a sensor officer.

*'Here it comes,'* said Rann, and brought his fist to his chest. *'Honour and death.'*

*'For the primarch and Terra,'* said Boreas.

‘For our oaths,’ said Sigismund. The images of his two brothers blinked out.

He reached down and pulled his own helm from his belt and locked it in place over his head. ‘May my strength be equal to this moment,’ he said to himself as the helm display lit in his eyes. The data of the battle sphere overlaid his sight.

The Plutonian Gulf glittered with weapon platforms, torpedo shoals and mine drifts. Together they formed a great web, tens of thousands of kilometres deep, stretching from the very edge of night to the orbits of Pluto itself. Ships glinted amongst the defences: fast gun-sloops and monitor ships that were little more than engines and weaponry. They had been built in the orbital forges of Luna, Jupiter and Uranus and dragged to the edge of the sun’s light. Alongside them lay the fleet of the First Sphere: hundreds of warships, all in motion. And beyond the warships, the moons of Pluto waited. Studded with weapons and hollow with tunnels, each was a fortress that could have stood against a fleet.

The sheet of stars erupted with lightning. Rents opened in the vacuum. Nauseating colours and dazzling light poured out as ship after ship surged from nothing into being. Tens, and then hundreds. The sensor servitors in the *Lachrymae* twitched and gabbled as targets multiplied faster than they could vocalise updates.

Mines detonated, explosions leaping from one to another in chains that stretched across the dark. Gun platforms opened up. Macro shells, rockets and plasma struck metal and stone, bored in and exploded. Ships died even as they tasted reality, armour stripped by fire, guts spilled into the dark. In the first ten seconds, over a hundred vessels burned to wreckage. Most had been former warships of the Imperial Army, crewed by humans who had given their oath to Horus and been rewarded with the honour of being the first to draw their blades in this battle. They died for that honour, burning too in the ruin of their ships, hulls shredded around them.

But they kept coming.

Ship after ship, tearing reality like flags waving in front of a gun-line. The first Legionis Astartes warship surfaced from the warp. It was named the *Erinyes*, and it was a bombardment galleon of the IV Legion: a five-kilometre-long hull wrapped around a trio of nova cannon barrels. She loosed all three shots as the void kissed her skin. Each nova cannon shell

was the size of a Battle Titan, its core filled with unstable plasma. They had no target, but they needed none. They ran straight into the heart of the defences and exploded with the force and light of a star's birth. Gun platforms vanished. Mines lit off in spheres of red flame. Fire poured from the defences as more ships rammed past the debris of their dead kin.

The light of the blaze flooded through the *Lachrymae*'s screens and viewports. Sigismund's helm display dimmed.

'Engage,' he said, and the *Lachrymae* leapt forwards. Twenty strike cruisers and fast destroyers followed in tight formation. Lance fire speared out from them, slicing into ships as they cut across the front of the enemy fleet. Plumes of ghost-light and ectoplasm stretched like arms through the dark as more ships punched through from the warp.

A backwash of etheric lightning struck the Imperial Fists cruiser *Solar Son*. It spun, its hull cracking and crumpling as the laws of reality went into flux. The *Lachrymae* and its sisters did not pause but plunged on. They had one purpose in this moment: to kill as many of the enemy as possible while they clawed from the warp onto the shore of reality. For the moment, the Imperial Fists' prey was vulnerable, and the First Sphere fleet were predators.

The *Lachrymae*'s guns found the skin of the gun-barge *Fire Oath* before it could light its void shields. Macro shells punched through gun decks and exploded. Munitions cooked off in loading hoists. The *Fire Oath*'s hull bulged, then burst. Building-sized pieces of hull scythed out, caught the flank of a battle cruiser as it emerged from the warp and tore its command castle from its back. The warp breach it had emerged from pulsed and swallowed the wreckage.

'Hold,' called Sigismund, his voice passing through the ships of his command via crackling vox-link. 'For our oaths, we hold true.'

The *Lachrymae* sliced on while its mortal crew screamed as ghosts and nightmares flooded their sight. Reality in the battle sphere was now little more than tattered scraps blowing in the night. The *Lachrymae* rolled, her guns finding enemy after enemy. But for each one that died, another three came from the warp.

Deadfall torpedoes set in the void triggered and speared forwards. Carcasses of ships split and burned. Pluto's fortress-moons found their range to the first of the invaders and spoke. Newly lit void shields flashed

as they collapsed. Volleys answered. The reserve fleets holding close to the moons powered forwards and began to kill and die. The light of battle swelled, blurring with the glow of thousands of warp transitions, until which side was firing and which was burning was lost in a rippling blaze tens of thousands of kilometres across. Hours later, the light of that fire would glimmer in the night above the battlements of the Imperial Palace as the sirens called and alarums rang to tell that Horus had, at last, brought his war to the birth system of humanity.

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