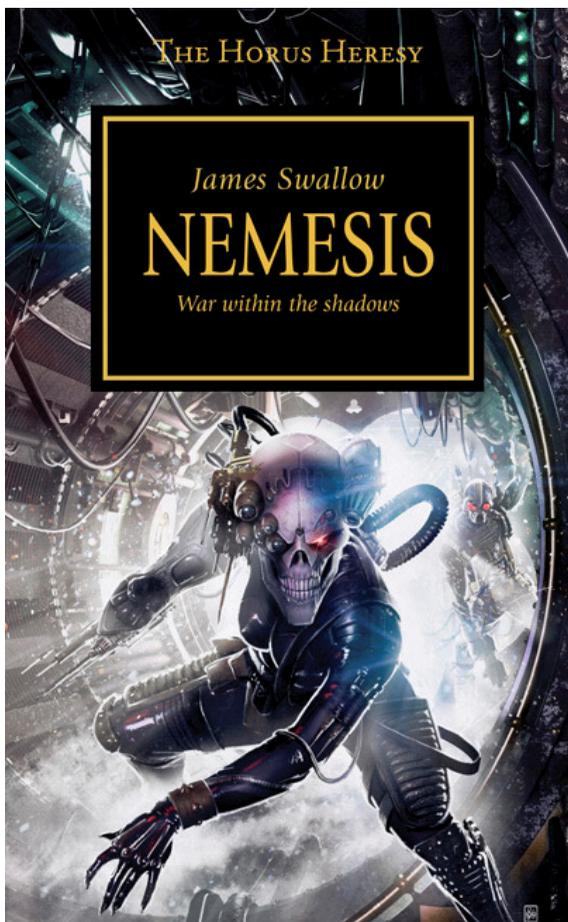




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NEMESIS

A Horus Heresy novel

By James Swallow

After the horrors of Istvaan V, Horus declares outright war against the Imperium. In the shadows of the Emperor's Palace, powerful figures convene. Their plan is to send a team of assassins to execute the arch-traitor Horus and end the war for the galaxy of mankind before it's even begun. But what they cannot know is that another assassin is abroad already, with his sights firmly set on killing the Emperor.



About the Author

James Swallow's stories from the dark worlds of Warhammer 40,000 include *Faith & Fire*, the Blood Angels series as well as two Horus Heresy novels. James's other credits include writing for Star Trek Voyager, scripts for videogames and audio dramas. He lives in London.

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The following is an excerpt from *Nemesis* by James Swallow.

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VALDOR SNAPPED BACK to awareness with a jerk, and he stifled a reflexive cough. He felt a heavy weight across his torso and thick drifts of sandy matter all around him. There was heat, too, close and intense, searing his skin. He tasted the stink of burning fuel on his lips.

Checking himself, the Custodian found nothing more serious than a minor dislocation among the contusions he had suffered in the crash. With care, he rotated his forearm back into its socket and tested it, the flash of pain ebbing. Valdor placed both hands against the weight holding him down – a section of hull plate, he noted – and forced it up and away.

He came to his feet surrounded by flames and grey smoke. Valdor remembered the moment of the impact only in fleeting impressions; sparks of pain and the spinning of the cargo bay all around him as the wounded flyer slammed into the sand. He had heard Tariel cry out; there was no sign of the infocyte nearby. Valdor moved forward, picking his way over steaming mounds of wreckage, heated by the blazing slick of liquid promethium that had spilled out across the landscape. Sections of the transport lay in a line that vanished off across the ruddy plains, surrounding a black trail carved in the dirt by the craft as it had skidded to a halt, losing pieces of itself along the way.

He saw something that looked familiar; the cockpit pod, the egg-shape of it stove in and crumpled. Blood painted the canopy from the inside, and Valdor knew that the pilot would not have survived the landing. He turned this way and that. The encroaching flames were high and swift, and he had little room to manoeuvre. Sweeping around, he found what seemed

to be the thinnest part in the wall of fire and ran at it, his legs pumping. At the last possible second, Valdor leapt into the flames and punched through, the sandcloak around him catching alight.

He landed hard on the other side of the wreckage and came up in a crouch. Snatching at the cloak, he tore it from himself as the fire took hold and threw it as hard as he could. Panting, Valdor looked up; and it was then he realised he was not alone.

‘Well,’ said a rough voice, ‘what have we got here?’

He counted eight of them. They wore the patchwork gear of a junkhunter gang, armour cobbled together from a dozen disparate sources, faces hidden behind breath filters and hoods. All of them were armed with large-gauge weapons – different varieties of stubber guns mostly, but he also spied a couple with twin-barrelled laser carbines, and one with the distinctive shape of a plasma gun held at the ready. Their collection of vehicles was as motley as everything else, a pair of four-legged walker platforms along with fast duneriders on fat knobbed tires, and a single ground-effect truck.

Valdor considered them with the cold tactical precision of a trained warrior. Only eight, eight humans, some of them likely to have reflex enhancements, perhaps even dermal plating, but still only eight. He knew with complete certainty that he would be able to kill them all in less than sixty seconds, and that was if he took his time about it.

There were only two things that gave him a moment’s pause. The first was the figure standing up through a hatch in the GEV’s cab, behind the pintle mount of a quin-barrel multilaser. The gunner had an unobstructed arc of fire that was directly centred on Valdor, and as resilient as he was, without his usual wargear to protect him the heavy weapon would put the Custodian down before he took ten paces.

The second thing was Fon Taniel, his face a mess of blood and bruises, on his knees in front of one of the walkers, with the muzzle of a junkhunter’s rifle pressed to his back.

‘Hah,’ he heard the infocyte say, labouring the words up past his injuries. ‘You’re all going to be sorry now.’

Valdor frowned, and continued to glance around, ignoring the gang and looking off in all directions, squinting towards the near horizon. It was difficult through the low sheen of rust-sand in the air, but his eyes were gene-altered for acuity.

‘Put up your hands,’ buzzed the junkhunter with the plasma gun. Valdor had guessed possession of the powerful weapon made that one the leader, and this confirmed it. He ignored the command, still looking away. ‘Are you deaf, freak?’

In the distance, perhaps a kilometre away, maybe more, the Custodian thought he saw something brief and bright. A glint off a metallic object atop a low butte. He resisted the urge to smile and turned back to the junkhunters, casually positioning himself in such a way that he could see both the flat-topped hill and the bandit crew. ‘I hear you,’ he told the gang leader.

‘He’s a big one,’ ventured one of the riflemen. ‘Some kinda aberrant?’

‘Could be,’ said the leader. ‘That what you are, freak?’

Tariel shouted at him, his voice high with fright. ‘What are you waiting for, man? Help me!’

‘Yeah, help him,’ mocked the GEV gunner. ‘I dare you.’

‘You’ve made a very serious error,’ Valdor began, speaking slowly and carefully. ‘I had hoped we could make a landing in the erg, scout you out for ourselves. But you took the initiative, and I must admire that. You saw prey and you attacked.’ Looking again, the Custodian could see a second, unmanned weapon mount on the rear of the hover-truck. Untended, it pointed the mouth of a surface-to-air missile tube skyward. ‘Lucky shot.’

‘Nothing lucky about it,’ said the leader. ‘You’re not the first. Won’t be the last.’

‘I beg to differ,’ Valdor told him. ‘As I said, you made an error. You’ve drawn the attention of the Emperor.’

The use of the name sent a ripple of fear through the group, but the gang leader stamped on it quickly. ‘Rust and shit, you’re some kind of liar, freak. No one cares what goes on out

here, not a one, not a man, not the bloody Emperor himself. If he cared, he'd come here and share a little of that glory of his with us.'

'Let's just kill them,' said the gunner.

'Valdor!' Tariel blurted out his name in fear. 'Please!'

Unseen by everyone else, the glimmer from the distant hill blinked once, then twice. 'Let me tell you who I am,' said the Custodian. 'My name is Constantin Valdor, Captain-General of the Legio Custodes, and I hold the power of the Emperor's displeasure in my hands.'

The gang leader snorted with cold amusement. 'Your brain is broke, that's what you have!'

'I will prove it to you.' Valdor raised his arm and pointed a finger at the gunner behind the multilaser. 'In the Emperor's name,' he said, his tone calm and conversational, 'death.'

A heartbeat later, the gunner's upper torso exploded into chunks of meat on a blast of pink fluids.

The fear that the Emperor's name had briefly conjured returned tenfold. Valdor pointed to the rifleman standing over Tariel. 'And death,' he went on. The junkhunter's body bifurcated at the spine with a wet chug, collapsing to the sand. 'And death, and death, and death...' The Custodian let his arm fall, and stood still as three more of the gang were torn apart where they stood.

Tariel dived into the dirt and the rest of the junkhunters broke apart in a terrified scramble, some of them racing towards a vehicle, others desperately trying to find cover. Valdor saw one of them leap into a dunerider and gun the engine, the vehicle surging away. The windscreen shattered in a red blink of blood and the rover bounded into a shallow gully, crashing to a halt. The others died as they ran.

A furious snarl drew Valdor's attention back and he looked up as the gang leader came speeding towards him – too fast for a normal human, quite clearly nerve-jacked as he had first suspected. The junkhunter had the plasma gun aimed at the Custodian's chest; at this close a range, a blast from it would be a mortal wound.

Valdor did nothing, stood his ground. Then, like the work of an invisible trickster god, the gun was ripped from the gang leader's hand and it spun away into the air, the mechanism torn open and spitting great licks of blue-white sparks.

Only then did Valdor step in and break the man's neck with a short chopping motion to his throat. The last of the junkhunter band dropped and was still.

THE SUN WAS dipping towards the horizon when a piece of the desert seemed to detach itself and transform into the shape of a man. A cameoline cloak shimmered from the colours of the rust-sand to a deep night-black, revealing a muscular figure in a stealthsuit that was faceless behind a gunmetal spy mask. The mask's green eye-band studied Valdor and Tariel, where the two of them had sought shelter in the lee of the parked GEV truck. A spindly rifle, easily as long as the man was tall, lay across his back.

Valdor gave him a nod. 'Eristede Kell, I presume?'

'You are out of uniform, Captain-General,' said the marksman. 'I hardly recognised you.' His voice was low.

Valdor raised an eyebrow. 'Have we met before?'

The sniper shook his head. 'No. But I know you. And your work.' He glanced at the infocyte.

'Vindicare,' said Tariel, by way of terse greeting.

'Vanus,' came the reply.

'I'm curious,' said Kell. 'How did you know I would be watching?'

'You've been in this sector for some time. It stood to reason you would have seen the crash.' The Custodian gestured around. 'I had intended to find some of your prey in order to find you. It seems events altered the order of that but not the result.'

Tariel shot Valdor a look. 'That's why you didn't attack them? You could have dealt with them all, but you did nothing.' He grimaced. 'I might have been killed!'

'I considered letting that happen,' said the sniper, with a casual sniff. 'But I dismissed the idea. If a pair as unlikely as

you two had come out here, I knew there had to be good reason.'

'You almost missed that thug with the plasma gun!' snapped the infocyte.

'No,' said Valdor, with a half-smile, 'he did not.'

The sniper cocked his head. 'I never miss.'

'You came to the Atalantic zone without your vox rig,' Valdor went on.

'Comm transmissions would have been detected,' said Kell. 'It would have given me away to the bandits.'

'Hence our somewhat unconventional method of locating you,' continued the Custodian.

Tariel's eyes narrowed. 'How did you know when to fire?'

'His weapon's scope contains a lip-reading auspex,' Valdor answered for the sniper. 'Your assignment was open-ended, I believe.'

'I've been systematically terminating the raider gangs as I find them,' said Kell. 'I still have work to do. And it makes good exercise.'

'You have a new mission now,' said Tariel. 'We both do.'

'Is that so?' Kell reached up and took off the spy mask, revealing a craggy face with close-cut black hair, sharp eyes and hawkish nose. 'Who is the target?'

Valdor stood up, and pulled a mag-flare tube from a compartment in his chest plate, aiming it into the sky. 'All in good time,' he said, and fired.

Kell's eyes narrowed. 'You are leading this mystery mission then, Captain-General?'

'Not I,' said the Custodian, shaking his head as the flare ignited, casting jumping shadows all around them. 'You, Eristede.'

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