

# DAMOCLES™

## IN SERVICE TO SHADOWS



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

AN APOCALYPSE SHORT STORY  
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Joe Parrino

‘How did he take it?’ Sikrun Talow asked. Even now, months later, questions and doubts still plagued him.

The White Scars commander had just stormed past him. Anger had burned off the Space Marine in waves. Talow’s Chapter Master, Corvin Severax, grimaced. ‘Not well.’ He closed a heavy book that lay across the desk.

Smoke drifted lazily past the plasteel windows, curling upwards in the volcanic heat. Talow, sergeant in the Raven Guard’s Sixth Company, could barely hear the forge clangour of the hive below.

Voltoris, knight world and site of the most recent Imperial ‘victory’, still burned. Isolated tau forces were still being excised from the jungles by hunting parties of Catachans and their Space Marine allies. The battle was nearly two months old. Starships filled the heavens, troop transports, Imperial Navy cruisers and the baroque glory of Adeptus Astartes vessels plying her near orbit. They were restocking and refuelling before departing from Voltoris to other fronts in the Damocles Gulf. The bodies were still being recovered and reclaimed.

The two Raven Guard stood side by side, sergeant to Chapter Master.

‘It is never an easy thing,’ Severax said, the grimace not once leaving his face. His features were unhealthily pale and clean-shaven. Close-cropped hair crouched atop his head. His appearance was unremarkable for a Space Marine. His armour was devoid of ornament, kept simple and austere. The overall effect was calculated to make the Chapter Master appear almost nondescript. His black eyes missed nothing, noting and judging.

‘They place so much stock on their honour and their freedom. To be informed of failure and the death of brothers... Is it any wonder he didn’t take it well?’ Talow asked. ‘Would you have?’

He coughed, the last remnant of a wound taken in the jungles below. The victory, such as it was, and the wound, were months old. The scar that marked his pale face stood out against the combined darkness of Talow’s hair, beard and

eyes. His wounds were minor, as such things were measured, and he had foregone treatment in favour of brothers who needed the Apothecary's attention more.

Severax shook his head. 'No, I don't fault him. He thinks we're to blame.'

'Of course he does,' Talow sighed. 'They place no blame on the Hidden?'

'You spend too much time around them, Sikrun. You're using their idioms now. But I suspect they do blame the ordos. We're just easier to focus on.'

'It seems their own Librarian's words were not enough.'

'The stormseer, Checheg?'

Talow shook his head. 'Abandoned,' he mused, his black eyes unfocused and far away. 'So single-minded. So focused on their hunt. Why?'

Severax shrugged. 'Who knows? They pride themselves on being inscrutable and mysterious. I even offered him the records you gathered, the transcripts of Checheg's monologue.' The grimace slipped from his features like it had never been there. The Chapter Master's voice lost any trace of emotion. It became a dry statement of fact.

'Regardless of my esteemed colleague's thoughts, this campaign is far from over. The xenos have adopted a two-pronged means of attack. They are seeking to consolidate their gains through fortification and indoctrination. This is the first part of their strategy. The second is altogether more insidious. Agents are being dispatched to Imperial worlds along the newly claimed tau zones. Through subversion, the Empire seeks to cozen Imperial worlds into falling to the Greater Good with minimal bloodshed. We must accommodate this new phase of the war and deny their aims.'

Severax paced. The footfalls of his armour made no sound against the granite floor. It was a wonder, even to Talow.

'I'm ordering a decentralisation of our forces. We'll let the Scars and their ilk occupy themselves with the tau strongholds on Agrellan and Halfus. Our Chapter will be dispersing, denying the tau clandestine units, and bolstering Imperial morale amongst those who waver in the cause.'

'Understood, sir.'

'Assemble your squad and report to the *Sins of the Lost* for transportation to the planet Sarej. Ensure, through whatever means necessary, that the planet remains in Imperial hands.' Severax paused. He fixed Talow's gaze. 'Walk in the primarch's shadow, Sikrun.'

Talow's only answer was a nod of obeisance. The Chapter Master expected nothing else.

The *Sins of the Lost*, the dark-hulled strike cruiser of the Raven Guard's Sixth Company, shook as it plowed through the warp. The ship was old. The years lay heavy on her bones and she was filled with her fair share of ghosts. Talow paid no heed. He sat in the dark, staring at the walls, reading the names. Every wall, every bare surface of the ship was carved with the names of the Raven Guard's fallen.

The names belonged to heroes, those who had fallen through the long millennia of the Chapter's history. Some names were familiar, famous exemplars and leaders from a time when the primarchs had spread mankind's empire across the stars. Others had left nothing to their descendants beyond their names. Each was a lesson.

Talow's black eyes focused on the names and lingered on one, a Librarian who had fallen a century before. Then they drifted away and lost focus. Another name burned through his mind, lurking like a formless spectre. *Checheg*. Dredged from the months-old memories, the name and the ideas associated with it, burned.

Talow brought himself back to the present. He thought and planned. He was not alone.

A shadow detached from the wall. Robed and hooded, black as death, the shadow lowered its hood. Beneath, a mask of alabaster, carved in facsimile of an exaggerated weeping face, was revealed.

The figure cocked its head to the side. 'Sergeant Talow,' it said.

The voice was familiar, feminine. The same voice had guided him to the White Scars fallen on Voltoris. Anger smouldered, low and fierce, at the sound of her voice. He ignored the feeling. She seemed to have abandoned her one word questions. In person, she sounded young. Far younger than Talow expected.

'Inquisitor.' He inclined his head.

'I see the famed observational skill of your Chapter is exaggerated,' she said sardonically.

Talow smiled. 'With respect inquisitor, I knew you were there the whole time. I've been waiting, indulging you this moment. Your stealthcraft is decent, but far from perfect. Your acolytes are worse.' He nodded at spots in the room. Further shadows detached from the walls, each robed and masked like their master. 'Shadows swim in my blood, inquisitor. Speak. Say what you mean to say and, in future, keep this posturing—' He waved towards her acolytes. '—out of the conversation. I am no mortal to be cowed by shows of force.'

She nodded, quick and birdlike. 'As you wish, sergeant.' There was no

contrition in her tone. If she felt any guilt at being caught, she hid it behind her mask.

Talow shifted. A near inaudible buzz issued from his active power pack. Modified and customised by generations of tech-adepts and Techmarines from Mars, the armour was almost silent. He circled her, an affectation he had never shaken.

‘To what do we owe the pleasure, Inquisitor Adelia Myre?’

She paused for a moment. When she continued, there was surprise in her voice. ‘How do you know my name?’

Talow tutted. A derisive hiss emerged from his mouth. ‘Knowledge is power,’ he mocked. The mantra of the Inquisition had been taken to heart by the Raven Guard before the Holy Ordos had even come into existence.

‘What did Severax tell you about Sarej and your mission there?’ Inquisitor Myre asked, recovering her composure quickly.

The Raven Guard sergeant’s eyes grew cold. ‘You’ll refer to the Chapter Master by his title.’ There was steel in his voice.

Inquisitor Myre bobbed her head once. Her attendants murmured, whether at the Space Marine’s rebuke or the inquisitor’s impertinence, Talow neither knew nor cared.

‘Fine then,’ the inquisitor resumed. ‘What did your Chapter Master tell you about Sarej?’

‘The world’s loyalty wavers. The xenos covet it. That is all.’ He shrugged. The gesture was false, but he made it anyway. He knew more, details, plans and secrets, but he kept them to himself.

Myre laughed, an oddly musical sound, organic and human. To naive human ears it would have been beautiful. To Talow, it was merely noise. ‘Nothing is ever that simple, sergeant,’ she said. The ghost of her laughter haunted her voice.

‘Tell me the truth then.’

‘Peace,’ the inquisitor said. She hissed the word. It echoed around them, bouncing through the shadows. The word was unwelcome, the concept nearly alien. She shuddered, a subconscious response neatly captured by Talow’s eyes.

‘A lie and a false promise,’ Talow insisted. ‘There is no such thing. Not here, not now.’

‘You think as we do,’ Inquisitor Myre agreed. ‘But there are those too deluded to face reality. Someone seeks to negotiate peace with the tau. Someone has grown tired of this war.’

‘Something tells me you have a suspect.’

‘Yes,’ she paused before breathing out her next response. ‘A high ranking member of the Imperial Guard. A lord militant, no less.’

Talow said nothing. What could he say? He was stunned. The sergeant recovered. His breathing normalised. The threat hormones swimming through his blood dissipated. ‘Name?’

‘Alberekt Lhozdt.’ Two words. Two words that spelled a target, a threat and an asset to the tau to be denied. They, and the man they described, were unfamiliar. For now. He leaned forward.

‘Tell me of this man who believes in peace.’

‘The sons of Chogoris call you the Hidden, you know?’ Talow said to Myre’s back. Months had passed as they travelled the tides of the warp, but even now, the White Scars’ fate still marked Talow’s soul. They had been broken by their own nature, cast aside by their unwillingness to conform. Abandoned by their allies, they had died fulfilling what they believed was their duty. On Voltoris they had ridden, wild and proud, across the plains in the hunt for the xenos commander.

The Raven Guard were famous for their autonomy, famous for their independence. Something in Talow responded to the White Scars abandonment, to their single-minded devotion to their deluded hunt.

‘We are aware of their idiosyncrasies.’

‘You let them die.’ The accusation slipped from his voice without heat or malice. It lingered in the air between them.

‘We were otherwise occupied,’ Myre responded.

Talow could hear the lie for what it was. Her next words emerged as a whisper, barely audible. It was a thought given voice, made all the more glaring for its admission. ‘Freedom must be curbed.’

He watched as she turned and left the room.

A figure, armoured like Talow in black, emerged from the shadows to his left.

‘Did you see?’ the sergeant asked.

The figure, champion of the Sixth Company, Talow’s oldest friend, Lomas Kascander, nodded. They had been raised together in the broken warrens of Kiavahr, forged together, fought together and killed together.

Each served as the other’s dark shadow. They followed different paths, one slated for command, the other a paragon of martial excellence.

‘Did *you*?’ Kascander asked.

‘They’re nervous’ Talow bared his teeth. He hissed the words. ‘They’re

afraid.'

Kascander's response was a single word.

'Mortals.'

It was all that needed to be said.

Talow's squad, and the company champion, gathered. Each stared with unblinking focus at Talow. Their sergeant was smiling. It was a grim thing, a primate's threat exposure of teeth.

He waited. Confirmation sounded in his ear. 'The inquisitor has disembarked, my lord.' The serf's voice was quiet and reverent.

Talow nodded to his squad. 'We may proceed,' the sergeant said. 'Our mission has changed in scope.'

He tapped on the console before him. A stuttering green light banished the shadows. The head and torso of a man rotated before the gathered Space Marines. His face was old and lined, scarred and broken by the augmetic replacement of his jaw. From what could be seen, the figure wore a military uniform, high-ranking and bedecked with so many medals they nearly formed a breastplate of shining metal.

'This is Lord Militant Alberekt Lhozdt,' Talow stated. 'Lately of the Brindleweld Twentieth Corps. A decorated veteran, he has led the armies of his home world, and other Imperial Guard forces, for one hundred and three years. The Inquisition has been keeping the Lord Militant under standard surveillance for much of that time. Ten years ago, they increased their observation regimen under suspicion of sedition. He was an exemplary figure. That has changed.'

'He has defected,' one of his brothers, Tyrr, rumbled. Others in the squad murmured. Anger brewed. The Space Marines hunched their shoulders and exposed their teeth.

'No,' Talow said, calming then. 'Close, but no. Lhozdt has decided that he will bring peace to this war. He has made overtures to the xenos. They have accepted. The Inquisition tried to apprehend him during the fighting on Voltoris. They failed. Lhozdt escaped during the distraction provided by our White Scars brothers' deluded hunt.'

'The tau have taken him to Sarej. We'll find Lhozdt and grant him the peace he desires.'

'We'll be splitting into fire teams for the duration of the mission. Standard hunter/killer protocols will apply. While Lhozdt has become our primary target, the original mission parameters, as stated by Chapter Master Severax, remain.'

One fire team will remain in the governor's palace and act as a visible presence to reinforce morale. The other will search for Lhozdt. I will lead one team, Kascander the other. Questions?'

Another of the squad, Harl Eder, spoke up. 'Will we be achieving insertion together via Thunderhawk?'

Kascander answered, 'No, not you. The fire teams will deploy separately. The populace must believe that only five Space Marines are active on world. The first team will arrive with pomp and circumstance, a visual reminder of the power of the Imperium. The other will deploy clandestinely and begin recon operations immediately. As the sergeant said, we find Lhozdt and we eliminate him.'

'Anonymity will be key for this mission,' Talow stated. 'All distinguishing adornment will be removed from armour for the duration of our time on Sarej. Furthermore, helmets will be worn at all times when we are on planet.'

His squad acquiesced with nary a murmur. They knew their business.

The first thing Talow noticed about Sarej was the smell. The world stank of industrial and human effluent. He was thankful that his helmet filtered out the worst.

The next thing he noticed was the quality of the light. Sarej's sun, a weak, pitiful thing, barely broke through the clouds that crowded its atmosphere.

Talow stepped from the Thunderhawk gunship. His bolter was locked to his chest, held tight in muscled arms. The fire team marched in lockstep. Only a handful of figures met them.

One was a sallow, jaundiced man in overlarge robes of fur and a ridiculous headdress that appeared to be descended from the unholy union of a cushion and a brightly coloured bird. Talow recognised him from his briefing files as the planetary governor, Kismet Yazid. The others who clustered around the governor like clucking hens were functionaries of the court. They were all known to the Raven Guard and all dismissed as unimportant.

All save one. The last stood apart. It wore a smile across its features. The gesture even appeared natural, almost human. But from the moment Talow noticed the creature's presence, every sense he had screamed and rebelled against the alien being. Grey-green robes cascaded from its slender form, but did little to hide its xenos nature. The Space Marines ignored the tau envoy and focused on the humans. Inwardly, Talow was alarmed that the xenos were able to operate so openly.

The tau made to speak, blue flesh crinkling quietly as its mouth opened. Talow and the Raven Guard ignored the alien.

Yazid saluted with an awkward gesture. It was half-Imperial aquila, half-some strange, fluid xenos hand motion. The salute left the governor breathless. Coloured smoke, redolent of tabac, snorted from his mouth in a series of slight coughs.

Ceramite crashed on ceramite as the Raven Guard Space Marines made the sign of the aquila. The clicking of picters accompanied the noise.

Talow's vox flared with a squall of static and then alternated with silence. The sergeant smiled behind the black mask of his helmet. The static was code, innocuous to even the most patient and observant of listeners. It was a message from Kascander.

They had made planetfall.

'Governor,' Talow intoned.

The word emerged as a savage sound, broken and made bestial by his helmet's vocalisers. It buffeted at the gathered mortals. Yazid flashed an awkward smile. His eyes kept drifting over Talow's shoulder, to the grim figure of Myre standing behind the Space Marines. She had insisted on accompanying the Raven Guard as they made their introductions.

Yazid extended his hand, palm down. The imperious gesture was broken by its constant trembling.

'You may bow and kiss my ring,' the governor said, directing the words at the inquisitor.

'Not likely,' said Eder over the squad vox.

Talow ignored him. He ignored the governor too.

'We will do no such thing,' Myre said. Scorn dripped from every syllable.

The battle for the soul of Sarej began.

Diplomacy was a new type of war, one unfamiliar to the Space Marines of the Raven Guard. It was waged not on battlefields, not with bolter and blade, but with words. The stakes were no less high. Talow sat through dozens of meetings, introductions and ceremonies. This was but the latest. Music, droning, buzzing and halting filled the room and grated on his ears. Even filtered through his helmet, the sound irked.

The Raven Guard stood at attention, declining to sit at the polished marble table. Smoke of a dozen different colours drifted through the air, the result of functionary exhalations. A derivative of intoxicants that were common

throughout Imperial society, the Sareji fashion appeared to favour internal consumption. It stung at his throat but posed no threat. It, like much else in this feast, was an annoyance.

The governor's braying laugh sparked through the room and was taken up by the sycophants of his court. Only seven figures refused to join in. Five of them were Space Marines. Another was Inquisitor Myre. The inquisitor stood apart, given wide berth by the other attendants. All seemed too fearful to approach her. She barely moved, barely gave any indication that she was alive and not some grim statue brought to lower the mood.

The final figure was the tau Water Caste envoy. It had given its name as Erun'alal. It stood apart from the mortals. The same smile it had worn on the landing pad was plastered across its face. Its eyes panned across the room, searching back and forth with the slow, measured pace of a sniper scanning for targets.

It was not for the first time that evening that its eyes fell upon the five Space Marines. Its smile widened as it glided towards them with unnatural smoothness. Somehow it knew to address itself to Talow.

'Sergeant of the Adeptus Astartes,' it intoned.

Talow ignored it for minutes, but the xenos refused to leave. Refused to move.

'Xenos,' Talow finally said.

'Let us be frank,' Erun'alal said. 'This world subscribes to the Greater Good in all but name. We have no desire to entertain any contestations you will seek to provide. Abandon this place. Survive to fight elsewhere. Go in peace.'

What Talow did next destroyed its smile, wiping it from the gloating xenos's face. He laughed. It was magnified by his helmet, made deafening by the vox-caster. The ironic sound echoed, cutting through the smoke, overwhelming the music. His squad joined him.

'Peace?' he said. 'We were never made for peace. This is the Imperium of Man. There is only war.'

The xenos blinked in confusion before it regained its composure. That composure was lost a second later as Inquisitor Myre appeared behind it. Like a hooded spectre of death, she stood and stared. The mask wept, but her eyes were hard.

With a screeching, discordant sound, the music stopped. The talking stopped. An atmosphere of nervous discomfort descended upon the room. Hands drifted towards dainty, ceremonial weapons.

'Your words and your opinion are noted, xenos,' the inquisitor said. You have

been frank with us, so we shall return the favour.'

Talow could hear the disdain that broke her words and lent them an air of menace. He could also hear a faint undercurrent of exhaustion, subtly masked.

'This world and these people—' She held her arms out. '—are, and ever shall be, human. Their souls belong to the God-Emperor. Their lives belong to the God-Emperor. There is no place for your "Greater Good". There is no place for peace.'

A wheeze announced the planetary governor. With a furtive gesture, he tugged on Myre's sleeve. She wheeled on him.

Yazid tried to speak, But his words were stolen by the knife that parted his lips. The headdress he wore slipped off, gently landing on the marble below. Tears stood out in his eyes.

'Kismet Yazid,' Myre said. 'You have been judged guilty in the sight of the holy God-Emperor.' She never articulated his crimes, but Talow could guess what they were. Collaboration. Dereliction of duty.

'The sentence is death.' She leaned forward, a slight motion, her black robes barely rustling. Blood flashed through the smoke and dribbled from Yazid's mouth.

Three economical motions saw the blade retracted, cleaned and returned to its sheath. Her unblinking stare, hidden behind the weeping features of her alabaster mask, centred once more upon Erun'alal.

'I suspect my point has been made,' she said. 'You may leave.'

Uproar followed in the wake of her words. Shots sparked, weapons erupting into bursts of flame. Myre moved with near inhuman reflexes. She dropped to the floor and hissed in displeasure. 'Cease and desist!' she yelled.

No one listened. Madness reigned.

Ceremonial functionaries of the court were tugging out swords or revealing antique pistols.

Talow and his men wasted no time. They flowed through the smoke. Boltguns barked with a deep booming noise. They aimed up into the ceiling lights, which exploded. It would have been deafening to the humans at such close range.

Swords, knives, close combat weapons flashed and sparked through the smoke.

Darkness fell.

A knot of women in uniform targeted Kascander. Solid shots from their old blackpowder pistols plunked off the champion's armour. His axes rose and fell. The champion moved on to hunt other targets.

Acrid gunsmoke joined the smoky fug. Improbably, the music restarted with a

plaintive wailing.

The Raven Guard culled. They cut. They killed.

One man came screaming out of the smoke, fear driving him straight at Talow. The sergeant's sword caught the man in the chest, piercing the medals and flimsy uniform that guarded him.

Three hulking, turbaned guards in black silks whirled curved swords at Talow. Tears danced in their eyes, but drugged courage drove them towards the Space Marine.

Eder's pistol barked from behind them. Three shots. Three kills.

The ruined bodies collapsed to the floor.

The fight, if such it could be called, lasted seconds.

With swift motions, boltguns were reholstered and weapons returned to their scabbards.

Erun'alal was gone, fleeing during the violence.

Talow sketched an aquilan salute to Inquisitor Myre. She smoothed her robes and returned the gesture.

'My thanks, sergeant,' she said.

The inquisitor collapsed in a chair as the adrenaline of the encounter faded. She swept off her heavy robe and her alabaster mask.

'We are finished, sergeant,' she breathed. Exhaustion broke her words. Sweat dripped from her pale brow.

The Raven Guard sergeant coughed, politely. She was addressing Tyrr. Talow removed his helmet.

Embarrassment momentarily blazed red on her cheeks. She waved it away with her hand.

'Ma'am?' Talow asked. 'Your words with the tau...'

'Were for show. This planet has chosen its fate. We don't have the forces to convince them otherwise.'

'You're just going to give it to them?' Kascander spat. 'We have a saying that is at the core of who we are and what we do. It defines our Chapter: "Victory or Death". Our Chapter Master told us to hold this world and we will do so.'

'Your naïveté is touching. I've sent word to divert troops, but that will take time.'

Talow almost protested, but he knew what was practical and what was not. This was what distinguished him from the dead Stormseer, he reflected uneasily.

Myre misread his hesitance. 'Remember Voltoris, sergeant. Be smart, don't

make me exert my authority.’

Talow nodded. ‘What do you propose we do?’

Kascander spoke up. ‘Lhozdt,’ he said. The name sounded like a curse from his lips.

‘Just so,’ Myre agreed. ‘We can’t keep this world, but we can still censure the Lord Militant.’

‘Our orders—’ Tyrr began.

Myre glared daggers at the Space Marine. ‘Are rescinded and revised.’ She flashed her rosette and a quick smile.

‘You have that authority?’ Kascander asked.

Talow replied. ‘You know she does.’

‘Fine then, inquisitor. We’ll dance to your tune.’

‘How do you know Lhozdt is still here?’ Tyrr asked.

She sighed. ‘I have contacts among the xenos. Not all of their “human helpers” are as helpful as they seem. They’ve been collecting rumours for me. He’s even been spotted. The tau appear in no rush to get him off-world.’

Myre cocked her head to the side, musing to herself. ‘Perhaps they hope to use Sarej as the negotiation site for peace?’ The inquisitor shook her head, banishing the question and doubts away. ‘I am almost certain he remains on this planet. We cannot hold this world, gentlemen.’

Kascander chuckled darkly at the honorific.

Myre glared at him until he stopped.

‘But we can stop Alberekt Lhozdt from negotiating his peace.’

Weeks of interminable meetings and propaganda functions passed. Despite Myre’s actions, the Imperium’s grip on Sarej continued to falter. Unrest set in among the populace. Unrest and outright protest. It seemed that Yazid and his policies had been popular. In all that time, no sign of Lhozdt appeared. Myre, like the spectre she so consciously resembled, continued to assert that the lord militant was present on the world.

Talow could neither tell from where this intelligence emerged nor corroborate it with information gathered by his own men. But Myre was convinced. Her agents among the tau continued to insist that Lhozdt remained on the planet.

So the Raven Guard were forced to wait and continue the search.

Sarej, in a way, facilitated this. The planet hosted only one city. The place was old and venerable, marked by the crumbling edifices that afflicted this region of the Imperium. Crafted of marble and other stone variants that Talow was

unfamiliar with, the buildings shouted of the grandiosity and wealth that had once flowed through Sarej. Those days were past.

It seemed the governor had hoped they would come again, filled with the whispers and hopes for trade that alliance with the xenos' empire would bring. Talow cared nothing for those hopes. Whether Sarej's decay continued or it entered a golden age likewise mattered little to the Raven Guard sergeant.

But it was only one city, marked by strange, convoluted city streets. Its territory was fixed and finite.

The fire teams rotated their duty. They trusted in the anonymity offered by their armour. While they stood out as paragons of the Imperium, they kept hidden, locked away behind identical helmets and the shadows afforded by the dark legacy of their primarch.

The shadows suited their nature, their soul and their chosen roles. Birthed in the darkness of Kiavahr, raised in the image of Corax and with ten thousand years of history, the ten Raven Guard Space Marines active on Sarej lurked, hunted and observed.

Lhozdt, with a skill that nearly beggared belief, eluded them. His tau minders did not.

Talow crouched behind crumbling crenellations of rockcrete. His gaze was focused at a nearby hab unit's roof. Gutter curses from the pits of Deliverance hissed past his pale lips. They were harsh words, dredged from a half-feral past.

'Throne of Terra,' he finished.

Kascander laughed over the vox. It was a dark and eerie thing, but honest. A dark flicker of memory threatened to emerge at the sound. Talow had never become used to it. Duty and discipline shut it down.

'Where have you been, brother? They've been at this for a week or more,' Kascander said.

'Our esteemed sergeant has been too busy being hosted by this planet's finest and plied with their wine,' Eder joked.

Talow ignored them. 'This is repeating across the city?'

'Aye. The xenos have been arriving at the spaceport and dispersing. Half the rooftops in the city look like fortresses now. They've even begun their own building projects. The local authorities have been letting them do this.'

'Cowards,' Talow spat. As much as it galled him to say it, they could not fight this. Nor would they throw their lives away in some pointless gesture like some of their cousins. A memory tugged at his mind. White armour. Blood. Grass.

The others agreed.

On the opposite roof, with industrious motions and hideous efficiency, a tau squad was setting up weapon emplacements. Drones buzzed and flitted about, driven by some abominable intelligence.

Talow sent a coded message to Inquisitor Myre. He was sure she already knew what was happening, but protocol was to be followed.

It was time for contingency plans to take effect.

Riots consumed half the city. Fires raged. Citizens died. Martial law failed, broken by unrest and rebellion.

The Raven Guard found the original parameters of their mission impracticable. Inquisitor Myre superseded their Chapter Master's authority. Their only function was to find Lhozdt.

Talow's squad had melted into the shadows. The planetary uncertainty aided them. They no longer haunted the halls of the governor's palace. They searched the streets, gathering information, weakening the tau where they could. They became ghosts, striking from the shadows and melting away as they had been bred to do.

Actionable intelligence had finally been found. Tyr's ceaseless vigilance in monitoring the security pict feeds throughout the city had paid off. Lhozdt, or someone who looked so like Lhozdt as to be indistinguishable, was being led by tau minders on a jaunt through one of the big market halls in the city. The Raven Guard wasted no time in tracking him down, waiting only to inform Myre and ensure that this was no trap.

The graffiti adorned walls glowed with a lurid light as Talow moved.

'Approaching the marketplace,' Talow voxed.

'Acknowledged,' Kascander crackled back.

Alien voices barked from outside the alley mouth. The tau squads were moving openly now, clamping down on any nascent resistance. Talow held up a fist and the fire team froze.

The moment, and the xenos, passed.

The Space Marines flashed into motion. It took a blink for them to cross the street and back into the comforting darkness. Foreign smells, the rotting detritus of abandoned food stalls and mouldering market goods, drifted into Talow's armour atmosphere. Echoes filtered from inside the bazaar.

'Vagrants moving,' Talow voxed as he listened.

He breathed deep. ‘No xenos detected.’

Kascander’s response was curt and familiar. ‘Acknowledged.’

Their footsteps barely echoed through the old market.

The building was huge, grand and broken. Tiled mosaics, picked out in gold and other precious metals, depicted unfamiliar scenes of religious iconography along its walls. Most were broken or vandalised, painted over by odd slogans.

‘Peace and prosperity,’ declared one snippet of graffiti covering a grinning skull.

‘Working for the common good,’ asserted another, this time a poster of aliens and humans marching together. Some even displayed the angular script of the tau.

Crowds roared ahead as the squad approached one of the few functioning sectors. Talow could hear the desperation in their voices.

With swift movements, Talow climbed up above the stalls. It would not do to break concealment now, to reveal their presence to those who looked and watched. The squad flowed across the rooftops, negotiating the gantries and gaps between broken stall ceilings and the marble roof up above. Here, among the cobwebs and drifting dust, the Raven Guard hunted.

‘Kascander, where’s the target?’ Talow voxed.

‘Two hundred metres, moving slow. He’s taking his sweet time.’

Talow could almost see the wicked smile in Kascander’s words.

Combat weapons were readied. Their blades were a matte black, the tips sharp enough to cut through steel.

A steady stream of humanity burbled beneath them. They were oblivious to the Space Marines that stalked above their heads.

Static suddenly washed through the vox network in a squall of white noise. Curses slipped from Talow’s lips. He removed his helmet and motioned for the rest of the fire team to do the same.

‘We’re being jammed.’ His voice was grim.

A strange whine danced through the halls of the market. People began to scream and run, panicking as their mortal instincts prompted flight.

‘Those are xenos weapons. That pulsing whine? Those are tau infantry rifles,’ hissed Eder.

A few seconds later came the broken, pounding bass of active bolter fire.

‘Kascander’s been discovered,’ Talow said.

Eder chuckled. ‘He’s not going to like that.’

A question stole into Talow’s mind. How? How had they been uncovered?

Another stab of memories stole through his body, slipping into his mind like a dagger in the night. Overcast sky. One word questions. The stink of blood. Broken bikes strewn across the pain. Whispers of drums and defiance. Another time, another hunt gone awry.

Gunfire tore through the gantries, little plasma bursts from xenos rifles melting through the metal. Short bodies in matte grey armour moved through the crowd. Some were even trying to funnel the civilians out of the way.

The heady stink of superheated metal filled the air. Heat flares flash-burned Talow's pale skin, left it red before his enhanced body neutralised the superficial damage.

Talow's men returned fire. Each bolter round thudded into alien flesh. Each tore a xenos into whatever afterlife the things thought awaited them.

He was given a second's warning. The air rippled in front of Talow. His black eyes widened in shock as a form materialised, squat and bulky in its upper torso. Lenses winked at him, dilating and whirring. A multi-barrelled gun spooled into life on one of its arms.

He hurled his sword. Sparks exploded from a pierced eye lens as the machine slumped. Blood and machine oil spurting from the wound as he tore the weapon back out. The stealth suit juddered against the metal of the gantry, dull gong-like sounds drumming.

More shimmered into existence as they moved.

Blue fire erupted from the spinning gun barrel arms. It stitched into one of Talow's fire team, tearing down the Raven Guard Space Marine.

Plasma rounds continued to stab up from below.

'We need to move!' Eder screamed. Holes in his armour ejected smoke and hydraulic fluid.

Knives and swords studded into alien flesh and broke their armoured suits. Three of the Space Marines focused their attention on the immediate threat of the stealth suit teams. They tore into their enemies, whirling like dervishes. No sounds left their mouths; they fought in near silence. Only the growl of their power armour filled the darkness, kicked into buzzing life by their agitated assault.

War cries were not their way. Brash posturing had never suited them. Deliverers of their home world and countless others, they took the pragmatic and practical approach to war. Where others threw themselves with screaming cries into battle, obvious and unsubtle, they were different, set apart by their dark

ways and their dark thoughts.

The other two aimed below and kept the tau squads occupied.

They were surrounded by the stealth suits, hemmed in and struggling. But that was proving a boon as well as a hindrance. The stealth suits could not fire as one, for fear of hitting their allies.

Talow grunted as he drove through the stealth suits, breaking a gap in their ranks. His bolter roared, spitting rounds and tearing aliens apart. His squad moved with him, breaking away.

They ran through the gantries, manoeuvring through the dark metal supports and shadows.

The marketplace emptied below them. Voices barked back into existence across the vox network.

‘Three are down, repeat three are down. Damn it, Talow, where the hell are you?’ Kascander yelled.

‘En route, champion.’ The bolter fire died in the distance. ‘What’s going on?’

‘What do you think is going on? It was a trap.’

Talow ignored him. ‘Where is Lhozdt?’

‘Lhozdt was bait.’

‘I understand the concept of a trap, Kascander. But he was here. He can’t have gone far.’

Kascander’s response was a simple acknowledging blip of static.

Talow reloaded his bolter.

Tyrr was the first to spot their target. The mortal was close to panicking. Even if his tau minders had underestimated the determination of the Adeptus Astartes, the lord militant had not. He had shed his heavy overcoat, the sky-blue garment clunking to the ground under the weight of his medals.

Tyrr took aim and opened fire. Tau reacted to the sharp reports and threw themselves between Lhozdt and the Space Marines.

An open door yawned, sunlight streaming from beyond. Lhozdt hurried, breaking into a sprint.

The tau set up a staggered firing line to keep the Space Marines at bay. Four of the Raven Guard hung back, blasting a hole for the rest.

Talow and Kascander surged forward. The company champion carried two axes. The blades sparked as their power fields ignited on dust in the air.

Shoulder lowered, Talow barged into the breaking tau. He went from the shadows of the market hall into bright light, crouched over a broken fire warrior,

knife slowly sliding out.

‘Alberekt Lhozdt!’ Talow yelled. He dropped his knife and sighted along his bolter.

The lord militant didn’t turn. He kept running in zigzags, hoping against hope that it would spoil the Space Marine’s aim. The mortal’s footsteps echoed against the marble.

Tau were barking in their alien tongue, directing orders, directing troops. Their trap was failing. A hum broke through the plaza. Dust danced up from between the cracks in the flagstones. Bright streams of light seared across Talow’s vision, forcing the Space Marines back into the shadows. Tyrre was struck in the chest and ceased to exist. Wave-prowed tanks descended on smooth jets of flame.

‘Soldiers of the Imperium!’ Erun’alal’s voice shouted from loud speakers. ‘Lay down your weapons. You have fought valiantly, and the Greater Good respects such tenacity. But this war is over. Lord Militant Alberekt Lhozdt is under the protection of the Tau Empire. Submit to the Greater Good. Join us in peace.’

Flagstones cracked as tau Dreadnought equivalents, their ‘Riptide’ battlesuits, thundered down around Lhozdt.

Talow hissed.

‘We’re leaving,’ he told his squad.

There were only four now. Four Raven Guard Space Marines still active on Sarej. The rest were dead, or wounded and departed with Myre.

Their armour was no longer the pristine black it had once been. It was pitted and scarred, the grey ceramite showing through. Sparks showered when they moved. Ammunition for their bolters was gone. They had taken to scavenging weapons meant for smaller mortal hands, shotguns and lasrifles.

The *Sins of the Lost* no longer orbited Sarej. It had left, conceding system space to the tau. Myre had left with it. She had ordered a team to remain behind. Her operatives amongst the tau continued to filter reports to Talow.

Talow had called her a coward. He exhorted her to continue the hunt.

She had flashed a smile, bright and irritating. One eyebrow arched. ‘You are learning the wrong lessons, sergeant,’ she had said. ‘I would have thought that the example had already been made on Voltoris.’

Talow glowered in response. Her smile slipped away. ‘We will return. Lhozdt will face justice, eventually.’

The Raven Guard sergeant shook his head. ‘He will face justice now.’

‘No. His dreams of peace were never more than a token. He is deluded. He can’t negotiate anything. Lhozdt is only a lord militant.’

‘He is a symbol,’ Talow had growled.

She had shrugged, donned her mask and left without another word.

Talow’s squad remained on Sarej.

They knew the shape of this hunt. The origin of that phrase was not lost on Talow.

Four moons shone in Sarej’s night sky. Each was a burnished orange.

Spotlights stabbed into the sky, their glow a light blue.

Subdued music, the tone soothing and calm, suffused the night air. It grated on Talow’s ears. The music was xenos, its beat off-putting and *other*. It emerged from a building made in the xenos’ architectural style. It was all rounded edges and soft planes. It had been crafted on one of the worlds belonging to the tau and dropped onto the planet.

The buildings were appearing everywhere, sprouting across Sarej’s city like mushrooms after rain. This one served as a communications hub, a minor bastion in the network that crisscrossed the city and helped ensure that tau culture spread. This one also supposedly held records.

The Space Marines stood in the shadows. They watched. They waited.

It had been Talow’s idea – find the records, find Lhozdt. With Myre gone, the Raven Guard were free to act without Inquisitorial ‘supervision’. They no longer played nursemaids to the Inquisition. They were free to hunt.

Talow felt a strange kinship with the White Scars. He had begun to understand what had driven them on Voltoris. Lessons must be taught, even if it meant sacrifice. To those who served alongside, to those they faced, examples would be made. Freedom was precious, even if it meant death. The last was familiar,

It echoed the teachings of Corax, the Raven Guard’s own bloody past.

The moment came. Knives flashed. Blood splashed. Xenos died.

A gaggle of humans stood and watched, mouths agape.

‘Take us inside now,’ Talow barked.

The mortals, dressed like a mix of tau and Imperial Guard, nodded. They sketched an awkward version of the Imperial aquila. One man coughed and quietly vomited.

Spotlights flashed quickly, dipping low and then jumping back on.

Doors slid open. The Raven Guard entered.

The humans shuffled ahead, casting nervous looks at the Space Marines

behind them.

The hallways were emptied. The building seemed deserted.

Talow could smell the nervous sweat on the humans. The hormones in their blood lent the air a noxious metal reek. For all that these 'human helpers' were twice-traitors, they seemed uncomfortable in actually acting on their intelligence. What's more, they were slowing the Space Marines down.

'Stop,' the sergeant ordered.

Confusion reigned among the mortals. 'Sir? My lord?' The honorifics tumbled awkwardly from the mouth of the woman who led them.

'You are too slow,' Kascander told them.

'Describe the route to the records. Give us your access codes,' Talow said.

'Of course, my lords,' the woman stammered. 'Will that be all?'

Kascander answered. 'Provide us with a distraction.'

The four Space Marines left the humans behind.

Talow was amazed at the level of confidence entrusted to the humans by the tau. Their route had been accurate. Their access codes had worked.

Distant shouting and cries of Imperial devotion could be heard, echoing down the halls. Talow felt a moment's pang of regret for the lives of the humans who had aided them. The feeling faded quickly, drowned in duty and discipline.

Cogitators, their design alien but their function familiar, winked and chattered at the Space Marines. The machines crouched low to the floor, made for bodies shorter even than the tau. Each input device featured broad buttons for thick fingers.

'Kascander, guard the door,' Talow ordered. 'Eder, secure the machines.'

Gunshots echoed. Screaming and whispered, half-remembered prayers to the Emperor drifted through the air. They ripped the cogitators from the wall, hoping that the remaining Inquisitorial agents had some means of decoding the information.

An interrogator was waiting for them. The man was dressed in the colourful silks of the Sareji fashion. Smoke puffed from his mouth.

There was a smile plastered across his face, dispelling the exhaustion that lurked there. It was banished to the lines around his eyes.

'It worked then?' he asked.

Kascander answered. 'That remains to be seen. We've no idea what are in these.'

He ignored the champion and gestured to the yawning darkness behind him. Hushed chatter, conducted in Inquisitorial ciphers and intel-cants, burbled away into the darkness. The green glow of cogitator screens scratched at the gloom.

They moved deeper into the building's sub-levels. More cogitators chattered away, diligently attended by the mortal servants of the Inquisition.

The interrogator snapped his fingers and shadows peeled off from the walls. Robed and masked as the inquisitor had been, her former attendants hovered. The attendants relieved the Space Marines of their burden.

'Let us see what we can find,' he said.

'We've found him,' the interrogator said. He clutched papers, a mix of xenos script and Gothic letters. Three days had passed. Three days in the darkness. Three days of preparation.

'Where?' Talow asked. His knife was already in his hand. Kascander, ever his shadow, toyed with one of his axes. The champion kept toggling the power field on and off.

One of the other acolytes brought a map. The man could scarcely contain his excitement. He stabbed at the map with a knife.

'There,' he said. 'The tau have Lhozdt there.'

The street was quiet and empty. No pedestrians ambled along the pavement. No auto-conveyances clattered down the worn flagstones. Lights shone from within the frosted hab windows, but no shadows crossed them.

To unobservant eyes, the street seemed like any other residential neighbourhood across Sarej. To Talow's eyes it was glaringly deserted, an omission of life and a screamed warning. Something was hidden here. Someone was trying to draw away prying eyes, trying to divert attention.

The tau had succeeded, for a while. But now, the Raven Guard knew what was here, they knew what was kept guarded and locked away in this broken hab block.

The Imperium had found the man who wanted peace. They had found Lord Militant Alberekt Lhozdt.

Four Space Marines of the Raven Guard prepared to assault the building. Talow trusted in speed, surprise and ferocity to carry through with the mission.

Swift strides began their assault, sprinting across the street in a flash. They relied on their speed to grant them time, to surprise the tau who watched.

Blood spurted, drawing an arc across the cheap clapboard walls. Improbably, a stately Imperial waltz warbled in the background, echoing from some old sonophone. Talow had blown through one of the first storey windows, punching holes into the hab's walls and kicking through the glass. He had abandoned subtlety. The weeks of silence and war from the shadows were over.

Confusion had met them, tau soldiers caught unawares, doing whatever they did to relax.

Talow slid his knife from the tau's throat, taking care to clean it across a scrap of fabric.

He sent a pulse of static across the vox, short and succinct.

Kascander burst into the room, axe blades coated in xenos blood. He was smiling, the expression full of dark intent and threat. The other two Space Marines remaining under Talow's command followed.

'Ingress achieved,' the champion reported.

Talow nodded. 'Let's find the traitor.'

The whine of tau weapons fire sounded. Holes appeared in the walls, cutting through the cheap materials. Kell slumped, his life cut short by lucky shots. A hole smoked in his temple. Blood, already clotting, oozed from burned rents in his black armour.

The Raven Guard sergeant did not even bother to use the door. He bull-rushed forward, bursting through the wall and into a knot of surprised tau. He bore them to the ground, ignoring the brief stabbing pain of breached armour. Alien bones broke, shattering beneath his bulk.

Kascander's axes wailed as they impacted, breaking tau to pieces.

Talow sprang to his feet, knife already licking out, cutting into xenos flesh.

Eder grunted as he fired his bolt pistol, expending the last of his precious ammunition.

The melee lasted seconds. The tau stood no chance. Cornered at close range, they were notoriously fragile and easily broken by the sustained fury of the Adeptus Astartes.

Soon, only the tinny trilling of the waltz and the steady dripping of blood remained.

They stalked through the darkness, Kascander's ignited axeheads providing feeble light.

Talow could hear words in the xenos tongue, frantic, whispering. What's more, he could hear the fear beneath, the panic that sought to undermine alien efficiency, to steal away their composure, their safety. The shadows did nothing

to hide the grim smiles that rode the Raven Guards features.

After so long, they were close, close to Lhozdt, close to fulfilling their duty.

Denied the very humanity they served, the Space Marines took solace in their work, assured that they furthered the cause of their species and their Emperor.

The waltz drove them onwards, plaintive in its sad splendour.

Whispering from the tau stopped and he could no longer hear them trying to relay orders. Talow could only hear them breathing, hear their mortal hearts beating a frantic refrain of fear and anxiety. Flakboard doors flashed to either side, stretching down the corridor and into the dusty darkness.

Talow knew his companions heard as he did, but he gave the orders anyway. The Space Marines froze, weapons held ready. They slid into the feeble shadows, trusting in their primarch's legacy to offer some concealment.

The panicked breaths increased in speed, a slip on the road to hyperventilation. The xenos heartbeats picked up in speed, pounding away. Talow fancied he could hear their thoughts, hear the questions forming.

Where were the interlopers? Where were the sounds of their coming?

He could almost hear the internal debate, almost hear the desire to do something, to move, to scream, to get this ordeal over and dealt with.

Doors banged open. Soldiers stepped out into the dark corridor, rifles held, checking corners, checking shadows.

Kascander dropped from the ceiling into their midst. His axes flashed again and again, chopping with dull meaty thuds into the xenos.

Talow was seconds behind. He took the tau leader by the throat, knife sliding through the thin armour there. He threw the body aside as it kicked its last flashes of life into the air.

Bones snapped as their leader bowled into them, hurled like a missile into a mass of fire warriors. Talow followed. He made no sound as he moved. No words fell from his lips.

Pain, blunt and overwhelmed by his physiology, bloomed in his shoulder. He grunted as he tore out a xenos close-combat weapon. His backhand broke the offending tau's helmet and neck.

The waltz, stately and so very human, provided the counterpoint to the savagery.

In moments the fighting ended, the tau force broken like the first.

The smooth thrum of xenos engines filled the night, filtering in through the rotted hulk of the hab.

'Secure the ground floor,' Talow told Eder. He met the warrior's gaze and

fixed the black eyes in his memory. The sergeant and the battle-brother both knew that this was a death order. 'Hold them for as long as you can.'

Eder smiled. 'I'll hold them longer than that.' His eyes grew wide as Kascander tossed him one of the axes.

'You'll need that,' the champion said.

Talow blinked and Eder was gone.

The hallways stretched, blurring into one another. Stairwells led up into the darkness. The Space Marines flowed, like shadows, like water, through the hab. The tau continued to throw themselves at the Raven Guard. Twice more the xenos met the Raven Guard in desperate ambush. Twice more the Raven Guard savaged the tau.

Talow could hear the distant echo of gunfire, could hear the screams of dying xenos. Then the sounds stopped, replaced by pounding footsteps. The sergeant sighed. Eder was dead.

The music stopped. The silence that remained, broken only by distant echoes, ate into the gloom.

On the penultimate floor, Talow heard something creak on the landing above. It was the only warning they had. Time slowed.

Grenades floated down, drifting almost lazily through the air. Talow could see flashing pulses of alien symbols.

Sound erupted. Light blinded.

A scream nearly burst from between his lips, broken away by the sights and sounds assaulting his senses. Gunfire followed. Talow could not dodge. He could not tell which way to move. He guessed, throwing himself into the direction of an open hallway.

He fell into a wall instead. Then he was through it, into a broken room filled with rotting furniture and rotten life, separated from Kascander.

The rain of fire stopped. Silence reimposed itself. Talow blinked, trying to clear the seared afterimages from his eyes.

Creaking sounded again. Then hushed xenos words. A question. A response from another voice.

Screaming erupted, high and alien. Kascander countered with the war cry of the Raven Guard. 'Victory or death!' the company champion yelled.

The screaming stopped.

'Brother?' Kascander called. He sounded worried, concerned. 'Alive?' he asked.

‘Alive,’ Talow confirmed. He emerged from the broken wall like an ursid leaving its winter haunt.

‘They are growing smarter,’ Kascander observed. He paused, weighing his next words with care. ‘What was this?’

Talow bared his teeth. ‘Desperation. They are trying to delay us.’ He sprang up the stairs, taking the crude wooden steps three at a time. ‘Let us not oblige them.’

Every one of the walls on the top floor had been removed, leaving a huge empty room at the top. Comfort had been accommodated for, a uniquely human taste manifested. A roaring fire cast dancing shadows through the room.

The room was nearly empty. Two chairs crouched near the fire. A small table played host to a burnished antique sonophone.

The chairs were occupied.

Erun’alal met the two stalking Raven Guard with a smile. The xenos waved its hand, a gesture of welcome. ‘Hello,’ it said. If it felt discomfort at the desperate odds, it did not betray it. ‘I believe you know my colleague.’

Lord Militant Alberekt Lhozdt had the good sense to look nervous. What’s more, the room reeked of his fear response.

Erun’alal sighed. ‘We had hoped, the good general and I, that it would not come to this. That you would see reason. That you would see the Greater Good. There is no profit, there is no sense in war.’

Lhozdt nodded along, eyes shining with the conviction of the true zealot. The Raven Guard gave no response. Talow’s senses strained, scanning the room. All was not as it seemed.

Erun’alal sighed again. ‘I am sorry,’ it said.

Talow was already moving as it spoke, knife poised to strike. Metal, then flesh, met the blade. The manifested stealth suit burred, then died. More shimmered into being.

They opened fire.

Talow dropped to the ground. His armour growled at the sudden motion. Kascander fell beside him, whether dead or thinking like Talow, the sergeant could not tell.

He shoved off the ground and flung his knife in the same moment. He was seconds behind it, fists swinging.

Kascander’s axe followed, cracking through the metal of one of the tau

helmets.

Erun'alal was yelling, fear stealing into its voice. The confidence was gone. It backed away, leaving Lhozdt.

The lord militant didn't move. He didn't even leave his chair. He watched the stealth suits die. He watched as the Space Marines fought through wounds that would have killed any of his men ten times over.

Erun'alal fled, jumping out through a window.

It was over in moments. Lhozdt looked tired, deflated, far distant from the proud general he had once been.

'Peace--' Lhozdt tried to say. There were tears in the lord militant's eyes. The bright idealism still burned within him, sustaining him even now.

'No,' Talow cut him off. 'No such thing.'

When it was over, when the knife was cleaned and sheathed, Talow left without another word. He left the sad corpse of Alberekt Lhozdt, the man who believed in peace, propped in his chair. His dreams died with him. While his ideas would never have amounted to anything, they could not be allowed to spread.

Alberekt Lhozdt was dead.

His dreams of peace had died with him.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOE PARRINO is the author of the audio drama *The Shape of the Hunt* and the short stories 'Witness', 'The Patient Hunter', 'Nightspear' and 'No Worse Sin'. He lives, writes and works in the American Pacific Northwest. When not writing, Joe can be found skulking through the rain-lashed forests of the region. Like the elusive sasquatch, he enjoys reading, writing, pestering friends, travelling and other assorted activities.



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