

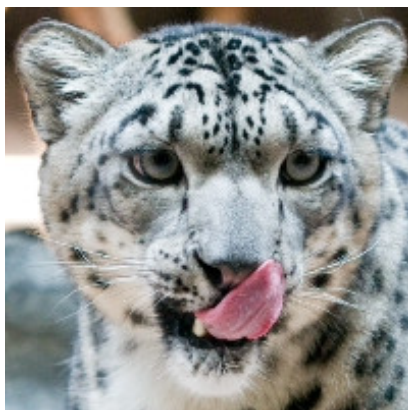


The Tower

An Assasinorum Short Story from "Let the Galaxy Burn"

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HE NARROW, DARK corridor that led out of the ciphers' bloc was filthy. Little piles of dust were pushed up against the walls, congealed into paste as they mixed with whatever liquid seeped down the damp stone. In front of each doorway along the length of the passage, Lexio could see wedges of floor swept clean by the outward-opening doors themselves, and orderly footprints left in the dust as the other ciphers had hurried off to their duties. The marks were in the same place every day, and Lexio had memorised them all - memory was his special skill, after all. Just from the marks on the floor, Lexio could tell whether anyone was sick, missing, or merely running late. Not that they ever were.

The menials in this quadrant of the tower always started their day in the corridors immediately adjacent to the Hall of Historical Correction. It was the mysterious centre of their world - for they could never enter it - around which revolved an entire unexplored universe of passageways and chambers that they would never see. They would fuss and shuffle in their own special, inexplicable manner, working their way out from the great hall in concentric rings of meek bustle, never looking up from the dusty flagstones at their feet. By the end of their working day, they would have passed through the realms of the ordinates and prefects, and would have reached the habitation area of the ciphers, buried deep in the subterranean realms of the tower's foundations, tucked under the rather decrepit western wing of the immense edifice. The menials themselves lived another two storeys down, in a sector of the tower that never got cleaned. The professional sanitisers of the legendary Tower of Idols lived in the dustiest, most squalid conditions imaginable.

The cleaning timetable had been designed to ensure that the most important parts of the tower got sanitised first. It would not do for the Historicus to arrive at the great hall in the morning only to find it covered in the layers of dust and industrial grime that

quickly accumulated during the day and night in the sleepless tower. To permit such a thing would be tantamount to the most unimaginable heresy. In fact, in an effort to avoid insulting the greater agents of the Emperor, a junior ordinate had struck upon the idea of making the menials' working day slightly longer than a calendar day. This had the advantage of making the menials think that they were always behind schedule, forcing them to work in relay teams so that one was always cleaning the corridors outside the Hall of Historical Correction before another had reached the ciphers' bloc. The relay teams shared a single salary between them, and none would dare complain because of the tremendous honour accorded to them; menials were recruited from the population outside the tower and were the only non-hereditary members of the Administratum to be granted the title of adept. The ordinate responsible for this stroke of genius was destined for the ranks of the prefectus.

As he did every morning, Lexio shook his head and ran his delicate fingers through the cobwebs that had collected around the doorway to his hab-unit overnight. For some reason, despite the intricate genius of the cleaning routine, his doorway was perpetually filthy. He resented having to walk through the grime - he was a hereditary cipher, not some scurrying menial. But, like an obsessive compulsive, he ran his well-scrubbed fingers through the dirt every morning, collecting gloopy sediment under his nails, and cursed under his breath at the incompetence of the lowly, salaried workers: adepts, indeed.

Lifting his feet carefully into neat little steps, avoiding the cracks between the flagstones and deliberately treading into as many of the existing footprints as possible, Lexio made his way through the half-light of the corridor. He had done this so often that an onlooker would no longer think that he looked unnatural as he shortened and lengthened his stride to fall in with the patterns on the floor. Indeed, he didn't even have to look down at his feet - he knew where all the markings were and could make this precise

journey in pitch darkness if he had to; a four-dimensional map of the route between the ciphers' bloc and the Hall of Historical Correction was etched indelibly into his memory. He knew exactly where to place his feet at any given time, in any given location along the way, depending on the esoteric vagaries of the menials' routines and the movements of the other officials in the quadrant.

Of course, Lexio didn't know that he knew the route in such intricate, perfect detail. He had simply repeated the journey so often that he no longer had to think about it. It had seeped into his muscle-memory, bypassing his cognitive faculties altogether. Indeed, on a traumatic

occasion a number of years before, Lexio's walk to work had been dramatically interrupted by the exhausted collapse of a menial in the passage way in front of him. The man had fallen off a ladder and broken his neck as he thudded into the stone floor before Lexio's feet. Suddenly jolted out of his routine and unsure about which way to turn next, it had taken the cipher nearly half an hour to retrace his steps back to his hab-unit in order to start the journey again. He lived in mortal dread of this happening again.

It was one of the ironies of his vocation, reflected Lexio as he lapsed into reverie once more, letting his feet take him up the first flight of steps towards the cleaner air of the ordinates' sector of the western wing itself, that he was fated to remember everything and yet have no conscious access to his memories. It was a unique skill, and one that was highly prized by the Administratum. The ciphers of the Tower of Idols were carefully selected from specific bloodlines, which were interbred under rigorously controlled conditions, and the special verbatim talent was meticulously cultivated in dedicated academies. Tests were conducted each year. The traditional families would prepare their children for the tests for years before; fathers and grandfathers passed on the secret arts of self-hypnosis which enabled the child to memorise

dictation without showing any knowledge of the message that they were carrying. Some families had been in service since the time of the Emperor himself, and they were exceedingly proud of their honourable lineage as Imperial adepts.

Lexio stopped abruptly and took one step back. He was not feeling very relaxed this morning, and he had already made a mistake - overshooting this leg of his journey by a full stride. Somewhere in the depths of his consciousness, a whispering voice started to chant his family's memory mantra, calming his mind so that he would make no more mistakes of this nature in the day to come.

As he stepped back automatically and a heavy vehicle rumbled past his face without stopping, obliterating the footprints that he had erroneously left in the dust in front of him. As it did every morning, the vehicle carried the *prefectus secundus* on his way to the Hall of Historical Correction. Without giving the matter any thought at all, Lexio turned sharply and walked along the wide corridor in the wake of the *prefectus*, keeping his feet neatly in the track-marks of the vehicle.

This wide, low corridor connected the ordinates' wing to the more elaborate sector inhabited by the prefects. It was wide enough for fifty ordinates to walk side by side in the busiest times of the day, but its ceiling was so low that any one of them could reach up and touch it if they cared to. Above the passageway was another, exactly the same. And above that was another. If he listened very hard, Lexio could hear the footfalls of the officials on other levels bustling through the wide corridors on

their way to their stations. The sound formed part of the familiar background noise of the tower, and it reassured everyone that they had a special place in a huge, magnificent machine. Lexio, of course, hardly noticed it at all anymore. He simply knew what tone he should hear and what volume it should be at different times of the day. Today, it sounded perfect, which was a relief.

As the passageway ran through the prefects' sector, getting closer and closer to the Hall of Historical Correction, it grew steadily more impressive. The ceiling started to withdraw into the heavens and pillars began to rise out of the ground to support the suggestion of vaulted details. By the time the corridor left the prefects' realm and reached the edge of the Historicus's district, it was more like a cathedral, with a great vaulted ceiling soaring into the invisible heights. But Lexio never looked up. Instead, he recognised this location by the increased traffic and by the sudden cleanliness of the floor - it was as though this end of the corridor was cleaned and polished constantly. Without thinking about it, Lexio could feel the tension drop out of his shoulders as his muscle-memory realised that he no longer had to be so careful about where he put his feet - there were no dusty footprints for him to follow here, only cracks to be avoided.

After two hundred and seventy-four steps, Lexio turned sharply to his right and ducked into a low, dark passage that sloped upwards towards the next level. This little tunnel was clearly never cleaned at all - presumably the Historicus never had cause to stoop into these service tunnels and thus the menials had no incentive to clean them - and the angled ground squelched and slid slightly as Lexio's feet compressed the accumulated grime. It was too dark for him to see where the cracks or other footprints were, and he had never been able to see the ground to learn their position, so he shuffled nervously and rapidly through the confined space, emerging into a gloriously lit hallway on the other side, after twenty-eight slippery steps. Pale morning sunlight streamed into the ornate, gothic space through giant circular windows that ran the entire length of the hallway, casting long shadows across the shiny white floor. Each window depicted a scene from the glorious history of the Imperium, beginning even before the Horus Heresy and reaching up to the present day with the last stained-glass image. Visitors to the Historical Correction Unit would walk along the resplendent timeline, over immaculately polished white

marble, before reaching the great doors at the end of the hallway. The picture was certainly one of a heroic and sanitary Imperium.

Lexio's walk changed slightly as he made his way down this impressive historical line. It was not that he was intimidated by the weight of history itself, since he never looked up at the icons emblazoned on the windows, nor even by the responsibilities that awaited him when he reached the great doors. Rather, he was conscious that his feet were dirty and that he would leave grimy footprints on the pristine marble. He lifted his feet

high and only touched the balls of his feet to the ground with each step, keeping away from the cracks between the huge slabs of stone. According to his four-dimensional mental map, Lexio should have timed his arrival perfectly to coincide with the start of the next cleaning relay, so his footprints would be eradicated within fifteen minutes.

Today, something was different about this grand hallway, and the trauma of difference shivered its way into Lexio's consciousness like a maggot into an overripe fruit. As his higher functions wrested control from his muscle-memory, he looked around and found himself in the middle of the Procession of History. It took a moment for him to calm his nerves, as he realised that he could actually see the great doors ahead of him - there would be no need to return to his hab-unit and make the journey all over again. Thus calmed, Lexio cast his eyes back down onto the shimmering white marble at his feet and he struggled to work out what was different. What had disturbed him so much that it had broken his automatic, daily routine? There were no menials with broken necks lying across his path this time.

After a few minutes of focussed concentration, the picture began to resolve itself in Lexio's mind. He studied the pristine floor and watched the gradually shifting forms of the shadows creeping across the marble. One of those dark smudges on the ground was

slightly different from the previous day... from all previous days. It was just a tiny difference, just the hint of a protrusion where there should have been smooth uniformity.

Lexio gingerly raised his eyes from the ground and looked up at the glorious image on the window, blazing in reds and golds in the sunlight. The picture showed a giant red Space Marine with the wings of an angel, flourishing a great sword but contorted in agony. This was the first time that Lexio had ever seen the visage of the Adeptus Astartes, and a pang of guilt plucked at his soul, as though the powerful images were supposed to be reserved for those greater and better than him. But he mustered his courage and narrowed his eyes, concentrating on the pillar that rose at the edge of the great window. The intricate stonework sported an array of icons and the swirling form of High Gothic script. Right up near the arch that folded back over the top of the glorious window, Lexio could see a small gargoyle with a sneering face and two long horns. He traced the line of light from the hideous sculpture to the ground, and realised that the erroneous shadow was being cast from that ugly face. Squinting against the light and straining his eyes, he saw a tiny fleck of black between the gargoyle's horns. It was almost nothing -almost not there at all - but its tiny shadow betrayed it to the perfect memory of Lexio.

Now what am I supposed to do, thought Lexio, wringing his hands anxiously and looking around at the busde of other officials in the Procession of History, hoping that one of them might notice the flaw in the morning routine.

* * *

THE FEET MADE him stop moving. They were directly in his path, blocking the route of his broom and apparently unwilling to move aside. Gingerly, Cregg prodded at them with the harsh bristles of his brush, half hoping that they were not connected to anything, so that he could simply sweep them up and continue with his

rounds. He was running a little late already this morning, and he really wanted to make up some time in the gleaming Procession of History - it was always so sparkling clean that he was sure he could get away with a cursory sanitization just this once.

The feet didn't budge. Instead, a whispering cough sounded down from above them, as though somebody was trying to attract Cregg's attention. For a moment, he wondered whether this was some kind of test. He had been warned about such things by the veteran menials: prefects lying in wait for an unsuspecting menial and then tricking him into looking into their eyes. The results of an errant glance depended upon who was telling the story. In the depths under the western wing, huddled around a spluttering, oily fire during the short, cold off-hours, Cregg had heard about how the gaze of a prefectus could turn a menial to stone, or wipe his memory so that he forgot who he was. He had even heard of menials being dragged out of the tower altogether and thrown back amongst the non-adepts outside, for daring to look into the eyes of a superior, hereditary official. Whatever the truth of it, Cregg had never once looked up from the floor outside the dungeon-like confines of the menials' sector, and he didn't mean to break that practice now.

After a couple of experimental prods, Cregg manoeuvred the broom around the feet and attempted to continue on his route. But the feet moved, stepping carefully over the crack between the marble slabs and coming to rest again directly in front of Cregg's sanitizer. It seemed that the feet were determined to prevent Cregg from successfully performing his Emperor-given duties. In a flash of anger, Cregg's mind boiled with sudden resentment at the heresy being performed, and his knuckles whitened as his hands tensed around the handle of his broom. He pushed the brush forcefully against the feet, without looking up.

'Excuse me, my lord,' he whispered, barely audible. 'I must press on... for the Emperor,' he added, hoping that the hallowed name might budge the feet through sheer resonance.

There was another vague cough from above the feet, and then a thin, stuttering voice. 'Urn, look, erm, t... there's a b... bit of a p... problem h... here.'

Cregg stopped jamming his sanitizer against the feet, hardly able to hear the weak voice above the sounds of its bristles against the stone. That really didn't sound like the voice of an adept who could turn him to stone or wipe his memory with a single word. He looked again at the feet. They were wrapped in simple, unadorned, dark grey cloth, soled in thick rubber. Coating the heels, Cregg could distinctly see the unpleasant,

granulated sheen of grime. Then, looking back to where the feet had been only seconds before, Cregg winced as he saw the sticky suggestion of a pair of footprints polluting the marble.

Where in the world could a hereditary official have so sullied their feet, wondered Cregg? Unless, Brother Greek had completely failed with his cycle of cleaning before him, Cregg could see no way that these could be the feet of a prefectus.

Slowly, and with great trepidation, Cregg lifted his eyes slightly. The grey feet were connected to grey leggings, which were buried beneath the long folds of a plain, featureless grey smock. Squinting his eyes and feeling faintly nauseous with tension, Cregg lifted his glance the last few centimetres and saw the face of a hereditary official for the first time since he was selected for service in the tower, five years earlier.

The face was pale to the point of whiteness, with a thin sprinkling of grey stubble over its jaw and scalp. Etched into the sickly, sunless skin were a series of complicated lexiographs, written in neat, black vertical lines down the side of the face and neck,

disappearing under the featureless material of the smock. But, after all of his fear about the petrifying gaze, Cregg could not see the man's eyes, since they were averted - they seemed to be staring up towards something on the huge window at the side of the Procession of History. Indeed, the man was pointing in that direction with his hand and muttering something inaudible under his breath, as though talking to himself.

THE SENTRIES STOOD in silence, half hidden in the deep shadows of the ornate, arched doorway. There were no windows in the corridor that led into the Great Hall of Vindicare, and no lights shone out of the cavernous space beyond. The entire temple was cloaked in darkness, as though shimmering on the edge of existence. The endless, labyrinthine corridors twisted and snaked in tortuously indirect patterns, turning back on themselves and suddenly stopping in abrupt dead-ends. Some of the flagstones were wired with explosives, and others did not really exist at all, hiding pits of excruciating pain beneath their silent charade. In places, there simply was no floor, and the unwary risked falling into the unspeakable abyss below the ancient temple, where forgotten horrors lay waiting to feast on the careless and the stupid.

Even if an assailant were stupid enough to attempt unauthorised access into the Vindicare temple, it would be a rare individual indeed who could make it through the maze of tunnels, around the myriad traps, and live to confront the sentries who seemed to haze into translucence at the entrance to the Great Hall. And these were no ordinary sentries - they were amongst the most honoured and exalted of the Vindicare brethren, standing a tireless vigil before the most sacred site of their faith. They were enwrapped in the ritual synskin of their

creed, which seemed to absorb the faint light and render them almost invisible, and were armed with an incredible array of

exotic blades, many of which had never seen the light of the sun outside the temple's confines.

On this particular morning, a svelte and graceful figure flicked through the darkness of the Vindicare temple, sweeping through the web of passageways with practiced ease, stepping around the false flagstones and vaulting the moments of yawning abyss without giving them a second thought. She seemed to know where they were before she reached them, springing up to swing from a well-placed handrail or to walk the thinnest of ledges set into the black stone walls. All the time, her simple black robes fluttered and billowed behind her; thanks to the unique way in which the fabric had been folded, the flowing material made no noise as it rushed in her wake.

Without hesitation, the mysterious figure vaulted into the air as she emerged into the darkness of the corridor that led to the Great Hall. Reaching up with her slim arms, she grasped hold of the tails of a hanging, black banner and hoisted herself up behind it, climbing it with arachnoid ease. She could feel the attention of the sentries focused along the long, narrow corridor below her, but she didn't stop moving.

Reaching the top of the banner, she pulled herself up onto the thin horizontal pole from which it was suspended, and stood motionless for a moment, hidden in the vaults of the ceiling. With a sudden spring, she threw herself forward into space, catching the detail of a delicate carving in one hand just as her momentum failed and she started to fall. Pivoting around her arm, her fall was transformed into a flowing arc that flung her across the ceiling.

Landing softly above the arch of the doorway that led into the hall, she could see the tops of the heads of the two sentries only four metres below her. Bending down to touch her hands to her toes, she gripped hold of the ledge at the apex of the arch and let herself fall forward, swooping through the doorway like a pendulum and

up into the Great Hall on the other side, coming to rest on the equivalent ledge on that side, facing the wall.

Scanning the dark expanse of the hall, she could see nothing at all. The walls had been constructed out of vividium - a stone amalgam that actually soaked up light, rendering any space that it enclosed into complete blackness.

Having expected no less, the figure was unsurprised. She climbed silently up the wall, digging her fingernails into the tiny cracks between the great blocks of stone and pulling herself towards the invisible ceiling. After a few moments, she reached a thick ledge which supported a row of black gargoyles. Melting into the space behind one of them, she settled in to wait, unseen and utterly alone.

'Ah, Nyjia, I have been waiting for you. There is something that you must do.' came an even voice from the darkness beside her.

THE SCRIPT IN the book had been etched in an obscure and ancient language, and it made Thucydia's head spin when she looked at it. It was almost as though it had been designed to be difficult, even painful to read. In the dim light around her desk in vault 47589x3 of the Histori-cus Librarium, Thucydia rubbed her forehead and rocked back into her chair. She looked along the aisle on either side of her at the hundreds of other desks receding off into vanishing points in both directions, each at the head of a perpendicular aisle of book stacks, and she shook her head in awe at the scholarship going on around her. Each of the curators at those desks was descended from one of the finest scholar-families in the segmentum. Some of them could trace their lineages all the way back into the very pages that they were studying.

Pushing her palms into her eyes and rubbing them dryly, Thucydia leaned back over the manuscript in front of her and forced herself to focus once again. The language was an archaic form of Vindracum, itself a perverted form of an early version of

the Imperium's Gothic script, dating from the time of the Wars of Vindication. Thucydia was probably one of only a handful of people in the galaxy who could still read this text, with all of its spidery contortions and unvoiced ideographs. It was an unusual written language, since it had no sound at all, as though the agents of the ancient Vindicare temple who employed it had no use for noise.

Like her father before her, Thucydia was chasing a loophole in the history of the Imperium, struggling to find one of the thousands of missing pieces from die immense, sprawling jigsaw that was the story of man's conquest of the stars. She had inherited her position in the Tower of Idols from her father, just as he had passed on his rare linguistic sense together with mountains of notes about the aftermath of the Wars of Vindication. Thucydia herself had managed to narrow the scope of her research to the machinations of the early Vindicare Masters. It seemed to her mat their sinister and stealthy hands lurked behind many of the catalytic events of that time, but she could find no record of them at all. It was almost as though they had done nothing for millennia. Even the most cursory glance along the great windows in the Procession of History would reveal the profound absence of the entire Officio Assassinorum. It had an invisible history, which was both incredible and unbelievable - two of the most intriguing characteristics of a historical puzzle.

THREE MENIALS WERE fussing around the base of the ladder, one holding onto each side and the third standing on the bottom step, acting as a dead weight. The highly polished marble floor was not the best surface on

which to erect such a crude climbing device, but it was the first thing available at hand, and the most sophisticated technology available to adepts at the level of menial. The feet of the ladder slipped and skidded on the cold stone as the three menials

struggled to keep it in place, stumbling and tripping over each other as they did so. Part of the problem was their refusal to look up from the ground, so none of them really knew what was going on above them or around them.

Meanwhile, nearing the top of the ladder was the excited and trembling form of Cregg, his hands uncertain on each new rung and his feet shaking under his own weight. He was studiously looking down towards the ground, but realising with increasing excitement that looking down from such a height widened his horizons significantly. He could see, for example, the image of the winged warrior emblazoned on the window itself, and, standing anxiously on the ground next to the bottom of the ladder, he could see the cipher wringing his hands and muttering to himself, looking nervously up and down the Procession of History.

Taking a few more steps, Cregg reached up his hand to grasp the next rung only to find that there wasn't one. With his gaze still trained diligently on the ground, he moved his hand from side to side experimentally, as though believing that the next step on the ladder might have moved slightly. With the creeping dread of realisation, Cregg slowly raised his eyes from the ground - he had reached the top.

As his eye-line finally drew level with his head, Cregg found himself staring into the face of a muted grey, granite gargoyle. He flinched as he saw it - never having been so close to such a thing before. The three menials at the base of the ladder groaned with the effort of keeping the fidgeting Cregg upright, but he quickly regained his composure in the face of the inanimate stone horror.

For a few moments, Cregg stared at the ugly sculpture in front of him, wondering why anyone would want to decorate a glorious, clean procession with such polluted forms. Then he wondered how long it must have been since anyone had cleaned it. Automatically, he pulled the sleeve of his smock over his hand and

spat onto the cloth, before proceeding to buff the hideous face into a faint gleam.

Ah, y... yesss.' came the uneven voice of the cipher from the ground. 'P... perhaps you m... might fet... bring down the t... tube?'

Cregg shook his head, jolted out of his sanitization reflexes by the stuttering anxiety of the grey cipher below him. Then he nodded with determination and reached out his hand to feel behind the head of the gargoyle. There did certainly seem to be something lodged in the thin gap at the back. His fingers quested around the metallic tube, scraping at its almost frictionless surface with little effect. He needed more purchase on it. Leaning forward still further, Cregg levered himself a little higher by wrapping his left arm over the top of the gargoyle and reaching round

behind it with his right. His fingers poked at the cold, slick tube on the other side, and he could feel it starting to work free of the stonework.

Lexio saw it all happen at once, as a yelp of desperation sounded from one of the menials holding the ladder. The ladder slipped out of the menials' grasps and its base skidded out towards the centre of the hallway, knocking a number of officials over and sending others scurrying out of their regular routines. Meanwhile, Cregg was left hanging by one arm from the gargoyle's neck, whimpering and crying in fear. Most importantly, however, the little tube slipped out of the masonry and fell end over end towards the ground, clinking and clattering as it struck the marble.

'Um, you should h... help him, please.' said Lexio to the other menials as he hopped from one marble slab to the next, heading towards the fallen tube - the aberration that had caused so much trouble already. When he reached it, he pulled his sleeves down over his hands so that he wouldn't have to touch the offending article with his skin, and picked it up. Peering inside, he saw a

small roll of paper, covered in strange spidery squiggles that he could not recognise.

BACK IN THE familiar darkness of her chambers in one of the outer towers of the temple precinct, Nyjia unfastened the clasp that held her cloak secured around her shoulders and let the layered material slip to the ground into a pile around her ankles. Those luxurious robes were only suitable for the deference required within the Temple of Vindicare itself, and she would have no need for such false humility once she arrived in the Tower of Idols to perform her duty. The Vindicare Master in the Great Hall had been very clear about the importance of secrecy, and she was not about to take any chances with a direct order from the grand master of her temple.

Her small, circular room was lit only by the tiny javelins of light that shot through the cracks in the windowless walls of the spire. In fact, there were no windows at all in the Vindicare temple, giving the interior the atmosphere of perpetual night. Every year, some of the new initiates - all of them orphans of Imperial officials fostered in the Schola Progenium - would go insane because of the lack of daylight. They were the lucky ones, since they would be removed from the temple before the serious conditioning began and the others started dying. A class of twenty pre-selected, would-be assassins might be reduced to two before the end of the third year of training. One of those would inevitably die in the final initiation ceremony nine years later, when the two would confront each other in their last trial - as much a test of their will to kill as of their technical ability to do so. Given that there were only one or two classes started in each year, this meant that the temple produced only one or two fully developed assassins each year - something that placed a huge responsibility

onto the shoulders of each, and something which made them extraordinarily valuable to those rich or powerful enough to

employ their services. In the long, shrouded history of the Vindicare temple, these patrons had not always been agents of the Emperor. This was not something that they cared to advertise.

The tiny threads of light from the walls flicked at her pale, scarred skin as she pulled back the curtain that surrounded the synth-shower that occupied nearly a quarter of the room. It was a complicated device, used in some form by each of the temples under the auspices of the Officio Assassinorum, although each used a unique chemical mix of its own.

Nyjia adjusted the valve-array that set the mixture for the spray, checking each dial carefully to ensure that there were no errors. It was a matter of life and death, since an incorrect setting could lead to asphyxiation as the synskin was applied or simply to death afterwards if the armoured properties of the membrane were inadequate.

Selecting three exotic blades from the rack beside the shower, Nyjia pulled a series of levers and then flicked a switch as she stepped up onto the pedestal at the focus of the various nozzles and jets, tugging the curtain closed behind her. Closing her eyes, she could feel the delicate spray accumulating in layers over her body, clinging to her limbs like coats of rubberised paint. The pattern of the rain was specifically programmed for her body, focusing around the major muscle groups to augment their strength, and around her vital organs to provide maximum protection. Thin layers sealed the bladed weapons into place on her thighs and calf. The Vindicare synskin also contained reservoirs of oxygen and metabolic suppressor chemicals, in case the assassin had to stay in hiding for long periods of time.

Sliding the shower curtain back with a snap, Nyjia stood glistening in the speckled light of her dark room, her body shimmering in the slick, membranous armour that hugged her figure like a second skin. She paused for a moment as the synskin dried, letting the fingers of light dance over her perfect form, before vaulting down

from the pedestal and snatching her long-barrelled rifle from its fittings on the wall. She spun it once in her hands, checking its balance, and then flipped it over her shoulder into the harness moulded into her back. Without a moment's hesitation, she stalked out of the chamber and slipped invisibly out of the temple precincts.

'YOU'RE ELEVEN MINUTES late, cipher,' hissed Kayle, looking Lexio up and down and trying to work out what was different about him this morning. All these ciphers look the same, he thought agitatedly.

Lexio shuffled from one foot to the other, twisting his hands anxiously around the metallic tube that he had found in the Procession of History outside the hall. He was looking down at his feet, keeping his eyes fixed

on the join between the two flagstones and concentrating on keeping his feet away from it. He knew better than to look up at the face of a *prefectus*, especially a *secundus* who was in the process of reprimanding him.

'Stop fidgeting!' snapped Kayle.' unable to abide the pathological peregrinations any further. 'Report to your station and wait to be summoned. The *Historicus* himself will be here shortly, and I am sure that he will have use for you.'

'B... but sir...' began Lexio, still staring at the ground.

'What!' clipped the *prefectus*, his impatience with this underling reaching breaking point.

Lexio found himself simply unable to speak. He had often reflected that it was strange that he could never find any words of his own when confronted with a senior official, but that he could recite long, intricate messages for hours without fumbling even a single syllable. Today of all days, with such dramatic events to report, he had no words at all. Instead, he just stared at the ground and

pushed his hands forward with the little black tube balanced in his up-turned palms.

^What! What? What's this?' bleated Kayle, snatching the object from Lexio's shaking hands. Without ceremony or appreciation for the significance of this item in Lexio's traumatic day, Kayle tugged the roll of paper out of the tube and cast the metal aside. He casually cast his eyes over the spider ideographs etched into the paper and then nodded, as though it all suddenly made sense.

'I see,' he said, handing the paper back to Lexio without looking at him. 'I presume that this is a document from the Archeotechium? A new find?' he continued, without waiting for confirmation from the cipher.

Lexio shuffled and spluttered slightly, unable to articulate himself, but Kayle pressed on, ignoring him. 'You should take it down to vault 47589x3, curator 14.259. Wait there for the translation and then bring it back to me - your memory key will be my face. Do you understand?'

Lexio nodded uncertainly, his mouth working soundlessly. 'N... not... ar... arch... not from there...' he managed, finally.

Kayle's eyes snapped round to inspect the gibbering cipher. 'What? Not from where? What are you talking about? Just go and get it translated and bring the translation back to me.' he said sharply, shaking his head at the very concept of an orally-challenged cipher.

A commotion erupted outside the hall as a number of menials crashed about carrying a ladder. 'What's going on this morning - it's a disaster,' muttered Kayle as he realised that he was the ranking prefectus in the vicinity. He turned and strode towards the Procession of History, leaving Lexio wringing his hands in the middle of the great hall.

THE BRIGHT LIGHT streamed through the stained glass windows, casting long shadows and sending hazy colours kaleidoscoping across the white marble

floor. Nyjia lay back against the ceiling with her legs and arms spread out by her side, the fabric of her suit finding purchase in the intricately worked stone. She watched the commotion in the Procession of History below her die down, as an important-looking official strode out of the huge doorway at the end of the hall and barked some commands at the scurrying menials. Three of them ran off with a ladder, and one shuffled over to the official, muttering something that Nyjia could not make out - she couldn't even read his lips because his face was turned towards the ground. He was gesticulating nervously and pointing up towards the little statues around the top of one of the great windows. The official's face was contorted and twisted in disgust as he listened to the menial speak, as though repulsed by his very presence. Then he nodded abruptly and dismissed the lowly adept, a look of relief washing over his face as the scruffy man shuffled away down the hallway.

Nyjia didn't even breathe as she held her motionless position against the ceiling, watching the people passing backwards and forwards along the Procession. She was obscured in the deep shadow of one of the wide vaulted domes that ran the length of the hallway, and she knew that nobody would be able to see her from the ground even if they looked up from their own feet, which they never seemed to do.

After a few hours, she could see a pattern emerging in the traffic below her, as menials, ciphers and ordinates busded through the Procession in the course of executing their duties. She watched the ebb and flow of the life blood of the Tower of Idols and realised how perfectly predictable everything was, as the officials

pulsed through the corridors of the Administratum, utterly oblivious to her unexpected presence.

She waited for the lull in traffic that occurred every twenty-three minutes, and then she dropped down from her vantage point on the ceiling, catching hold of one of the elaborate chandeliers that hung in the Procession, swinging underneath it and turning a neat somersault before landing lightly on the ledge above one of the stained glass windows. She edged silently along the thin protrusion of rock until she reached the gargoyle's head - the traditional drop point of the Vindicare agents inside the tower. Reaching her hand down behind the sculpture, Nyjia realised that the Vindicare Master had been right - somebody in the tower had discovered too much. The small, metallic message tube was gone.

Climbing back up into the shadows on the ceiling, Nyjia crept, crawled and leapt her way over towards the great doors at the end of the hallway. The second part of her mission now initiated.

THUCYDIA LOOKED UP irritably from her desk and squinted through the lamplight. A grey-robed cipher stood uneasily next to her table, looking up and down the aisle as though worried that somebody might see him. He had a small roll of paper in his clasped hands, and he was rocking agitatedly from one foot to the other.

'Yes?' said Thucydia simply.

'Please translate this. I'll wait.' said Lexio, clearly chanting the words he had said to innumerable curators on numberless occasions in the past.

The curator snatched the little scroll from Lexio's grasp and flipped it back and forth, quickly scanning both sides of the paper before pressing it flat against the surface of her desk. There were only a couple of lines of text scribbled onto it, but the dialect was quite unusual, and Thucydia scrunched up her face as her brain

raced to recall the correct words. The Archeotechium was always uncovering new documents, but most of them were useless - worthy merely of being filed.

When the content of the message finally seeped through into her consciousness, Thucydia could hardly contain her excitement. She leapt up from her chair and paced backwards and forwards, muttering under her breath as she tried to work out its precise significance for her inquiries into the machinations of the Vindicare Masters. It seemed to fit exactly into the historical hole - it was a ready-made explanation for how the Vindicare temple had kept itself out of the official histories.

She rushed off down one of the aisles of bookshelves, searching for the most closely associated documents in the collection, leaving Lexio standing alone by her desk. He had no idea why the curator was so excited, and he didn't really care. His own excitement about the events of the morning had already been squashed by the prefectus secundus's matter-of-fact, routine response to his discovery, so he would simply wait for the curator to dictate the translation, just as he did every day.

Suddenly Thucydia yelped and tugged down a giant box of documents. Straggling under its weight, she hurried back to her desk and thumped it down on the table, already starting to rifle through the thousands of pieces of paper within. As though remembering something incidental, she abruptly stopped and looked up at Lexio. For a moment, she wondered why anyone else would be interested in the translation of this document - as far as she knew, Vindraccum was a dead language, and the note could be of only historical interest. But it was not her place to ask such questions, and a cipher would certainly not know the answers - he was a virtual automaton. She gave a level three memory key, so that the cipher would not have access to the content of the message, and then dictated the translation.

Lexio blinked a couple of times, always slightly disorientated by the process of initialising his verbatim. His consciousness literally switched off for the duration of the dictation, and the message went straight into the lower, subconscious reaches of his mind. When he came back to normal consciousness, it took him a while to realise how much time had passed. In this case, just a few seconds, it seemed. Already, however, the curator had her head stuck in the box of papers and she was quite clearly finished with him.

Lowering his eyes back to the flagstones on the ground, Lexio walked slowly down the main aisle of vault 47589x3, heading for the huge, spiralling stone staircase that would take him back up into the Great Hall, after forty-seven floors of historical vaults. For a moment he wondered about the content of the message lurking in his mind, but then he resigned himself to the long, routine trudge up the stairs. Perhaps today wasn't so exciting after all.

PANTING AND DRIPPING with sweat, Lexio carefully lifted his foot over the last stair and placed it deliberately into the very centre of the first level flagstone. Drawing himself up after his advanced foot, he straightened his smock, smoothing out the creases and breathing heavily.

The Hall of Historical Correction opened out before him, riddled with reading desks and kilometres of document stacks. The huge domed ceiling was nearly three hundred metres away - it was actually the roof of the great tower itself - and the frescoes painted onto it over the centuries were barely visible - just vague blurs of colour in amongst the dancing shadows. For a moment, Lexio paused and cast his gaze up into the heavens, watching the distant forms swim in reflection of the bustling commotion on the ground. He wondered whether it was quiet up there. Sometimes, in moments of heretical weakness, he even wondered what lay beyond that huge dome.

The vast hall was circular in shape, since it stretched all the way to the external walls of the great spire in each direction. The single, circular wall was covered in tapestries, banners, and icons dedicated to the great scholars of the Imperium. Their harsh, disapproving eyes stared down at the officials of the Historical Correction Unit, suffering no indolence.

On the far side of the hall, opposite the magnificent winding staircase that provided access to the research vaults below, were the twin doors that led out into the Procession of History. And in the very centre of the hall was the glorious throne of the Historicus himself, sparkling with gold and hoisted fifty metres into the air. It was supported on a complex matrix of platforms, each fashioned into the shape of one of the great classic tomes of the Imperium. The elaborate pedestal had been designed so that envoys and messengers from the other parts of the tower would all have designated platforms on which to await the attentions of the Historicus. For Lexio, this meant twenty-seven paces short of the bottom platform on the left-hand side. After all, he was not awaiting the Historicus himself, but his *prefectus secundus*.

As he shuffled across the flagstones towards the throne, lifting his feet carefully over the cracks and skipping occasionally to avoid stepping onto a pile of papers, Lexio realised that the Historicus had already arrived for the day. He was enthroned and dispensing directions to the most senior prefects. Looking up, Lexio saw that the *prefectus secundus* was standing

at the left shoulder of the Historicus, looking very pleased with himself. He seemed to see Lexio approaching the designated interview point, but his face snarled in displeasure at the thought of having to descend from his pedestal to interact with the snivelling cipher. Quite used to this response, Lexio came to a halt exactly twenty-seven paces short of the base of the pedestal, and resigned himself to wait patiently for the *prefectus* to

acknowledge him. After his long journey and his troublesome morning, he was glad of the rest.

NYJIA SPRANG FROM the head of one gargoyle, just catching hold of another with one hand, letting the momentum swing her into a vertical arc. She flipped soundlessly through the air, landing softly and precisely on one foot, balanced perfectly on the tiny rock protrusion of an engraving in the wall. After a quick glance around and down, she dove headlong from the wall, plummeting ten metres before catching hold of a banner-pole and spinning herself across to the other side of the huge dome. She landed neatly at the base of a near-vertical flagpole, and wrapped herself around it, tugging her long rifle free of its harness on her back as she did so.

This was the perfect angle, she thought, as she brought the reticule into focus on the head of the fat official, sitting in the gaudy, golden throne far below her. He was surrounded by petty administrators, and only a near-vertical shot like this would make a clean kill.

Holding her breath, Nyjia brought her metabolism almost to a standstill, letting the chemicals in her synskin bleed into her system to keep her alive while all of her muscles locked into position, giving her perfect stability. The fat man in her sights rocked and laughed, stuffing his face with food and spitting it at his assistants as he bellowed and cackled orders at them.

Nyjia thought about the trigger and visualised the man's head exploding in the reticule. And then it happened.

THIS IS IT, thought Thucydia, pulling out a bunch of yellowing, old documents from the bottom of the pile. It all suddenly made sense, as she read the accounts of how various Historicuses had met untimely deaths throughout the history of the Tower of Idols. They had all been engaged in research into the Vindicare temple, which just happened to be located on the same planet, but they had all died without leaving any significant documentation on the affairs of the mysterious assassins.

She turned the little scroll in her hands, reading the message over again, as though unable to believe that the text was so simple and straightforward. It explained everything.

Shaking her head and chuckling slightly at the wonderful simplicity of historical conundrums, she clipped the message scroll to the front of the pile of documents and stuffed them all back into their box. Then she

picked the box up and walked off down the long aisle in front of her desk in vault 47589x3. Finding the correct shelf amongst the kilometres of stacks, she pushed the box back into place and shuffled off back to her desk.

Looking along the endless line of curators at their desks in the 589th reading room of level 47, she smiled to herself with the knowledge of a job well done. Her father would be proud of her, as the history of the Imperium took one small step closer to completion. Case closed.

PANDEMONIUM WAS LOOSED in the great hall, as the Historicus's head exploded into a rain of bony shards and splattered mush. Lexio looked hesitantly up from his position twenty-seven paces shy of the throne, fearful that one of the senior officials would see him stealing a glimpse at the Historicus. Instead, he saw the face of the prefectus secundus stretched into a scream and covered in ichor as he scrambled down off the matrix of platforms towards the ground.

The face of the prefectus was exactly what Lexio had been waiting for, and he closed his eyes as the memory trigger activated his verbatimem. His conscious mind receded and he chanted the translation of the message scroll without any awareness of what he was saying. The message made Kayle skid to a halt next to the cipher and stare at him in disbelief.

'You must kill the Historicus today - they know too much.'

