



VIGILUS DEFIANT
TO KILL A DARK KING

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Emeret Klotec, seventy-first executioner of the Black Lance Vindicare Temple, hung motionless in the dust-caked rafters of the cult's subterranean cathedral. He had been in position for weeks, limbs in a state of voluntary bio-paralysis so that he could remain flat against the ceiling. Muscles locked, his mind had been in a trance that was only now coming to an end.

It had taken every iota of his skill to infiltrate this stronghold of the damned. The place had been so painstakingly maintained as a safe haven from prying eyes that despite its decrepitude, breaking in had been harder than gaining entrance to a Proteus-class battle bunker. Layers of misdirection, industrial espionage, cultured redundancy, blackmail, extortion and simple murder had kept the Cult of the Pauper Princes gene-sect in Megaborealis a closely guarded secret. They had infiltrated that troubled, earthquake-racked continent with such skill that even the knowledge-obsessed Machine Priests high above had no conception of their existence. They guarded their heartlands with vile hybrids so disgusting in form and faith that Klotec found them repulsive, and many of them had senses so sharp he had thought on more than one occasion they would sniff him out. He was almost impressed.

It would likely take months, if not years, for the other five operatives detailed in Klotec's remote briefing from Neo-vellum to make planetfall. His old comrade, Elixia de Mornay of the Vanus temple, was amongst them. She would have been fascinated by the way the xenos cultists wielded propaganda and misinformation as a weapon. With their psychic gestalt to coordinate them, the Genestealer Cultists were uncannily good at it. On Vigilus the hybrids had mingled with the machine slaves of the populace, sowing the seeds of their eventual uprising and escaping notice until the greenskin planetary assault had forced their hand.

But no matter their disguises, some aspects of the cult remained immutable truths. There was always an inner circle, just like the one that was gradually revealing itself to him as its members walked, one by one, with great reverence down the processional underway leading to a colossal four-armed statue of their false god. Their fellow cultists chanted, low and insistent, proclaiming the glory of the star gods they revered above even their own lives. And there was always one they worshipped as their avatar – one, and only one: the spider at the centre of the web.



There was the robed Magus, bald and tall in the manner of all their war leaders save one. Then came the Primus, each of his three limbs holding a weapon that could kill with the merest scratch. In his wake came Acolytes and Neophytes, ranging from simple industrial miners to the engineers of the protean mutagens that were genetically altering the Vigilus underclasses as they drank the polluted water. Klotec knew that some amongst them considered themselves expert saboteurs, even assassins. The Vindicare allowed himself a sliver of mirth, but his face did not move a muscle. These xenos-struck fools had no idea just how lethal a true assassin could be.

He would educate them on behalf of the Officio Assassinorum soon enough.

There was a sound like scraping stone, and there it was – the mark he had been sent to kill. *Grandsire Wurm.*

The Genestealer Patriarch crawled from underneath the altar raised to its glory. First one limb emerged, as thick as Klotec's leg and capped with three vicious sickle-talons. Then came another, and another. The chanting, slow and insistent, gathered in pace and volume until dust trickled from the pipes and stanchions all around him. With a triumphant screech, the Patriarch stood up to its full height, casting its vile red gaze across the congregation. Then the Magus brought his rod of office down in a sharp gesture, and the room fell silent.

Klotec breathed out through his nose, releasing his biostasis with a flood of

warmth that tingled to every fingertip. Consulting his spymask, he adjusted his exitus rifle a fraction of a millimetre – no more – and took the shot.

The bullet that burst from the rifle's muzzle was more like a tank shell, as thick as three fingers held together and twice as long. In his marksman's trance, the Vindicare felt rather than saw the bullet as it travelled at extreme velocity towards the bulbous cranium of his prey. He already knew it was a perfect headshot; he would not need a second bullet.

Just before it struck home, the cult's Primus darted into its path, some uncanny prescience giving him forewarning enough to leap up like a bloodwasp suddenly taking flight. The bullet blasted straight through the cultist's torso. It slammed into the shoulder of the Patriarch behind, ripping its arm away in a spray of nameless matter – but the shot had been deflected by the Primus' selfless act, and did not slay its target. Klotec felt a moment of disbelief, almost terror. He had missed his kill, and the wounded Patriarch was already surrounded by enough cultists to spoil another shot.



The ceremonial chamber erupted into utter bedlam, filling with howls, shrieks and cries of despair. The most acutely perceptive of their number traced the trajectory of the shot and looked up into the darkness of the rafters. The Magus pointed a thin and crooked finger right at Klotec, screeching for his kindred to attack. Stowing his rifle across his back with a practiced motion, the assassin was already moving for the sole exit. He saw dozens of the hybrid creatures scurrying beneath him, yet more climbing with simian dexterity up the ribbed scaffolds of the walls.

Klotec had almost made it to the platforms at the back of the chamber when three bulge-eyed hybrid freaks swung hand over hand towards him, their third arms clutching autopistols that fired wildly in his general direction. He pulled his exitus pistol and shot them in their grotesque faces, one after another. Two of them dropped, limbs flailing, but the last was locked to the rafters by a death grip to dangle like a broken marionette.

Making a leap for the scaffolds at the back of the chamber, Klotec landed with

easy grace, tucked, and hand-sprung away so as to spare his rifle taking any damage from the industrial grate below. He ran hard for the corridor beyond, only to see the shape of something terrible rise up from the shadows. It was huge, far bigger than a Purestrain specimen – and it was unharmed. Its massive form seemed to expand as it spread its four arms and extruded a long, bulbous cranium. One of its limbs backhanded his pistol from his grip. Another shot out, grabbing him around the throat.

A second Patriarch.

‘No...’ choked out Klotec. ‘Not... possible...’

Then the Tyranid squeezed hard, and Emeret Klotec’s life ended in a spray of blood and shattered bone.

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