



SHADOWSPEAR

THE MESSENGER

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Lex-Adept Venastra Ghorrod walked across the narrow, enclosed glasscrete bridge with her attendant quill-servitor dogging her steps. They took a sharp turn at the hub of the southern wheel-nexus between the astropathic choir and Neo-vellum's famous Hall of the Datasaint. Venastra focused her mind, taking care to concentrate on the walkway rather than the bubbling swamp of acid beneath it and the sound of Rhombdu-5li following her every footstep. Despite her diverted attention, she had no concerns at all about delivering the message that had been entrusted to her; as a scriptorium adept, she could no more have forgotten it than she could her own name. The Astropath's chants and warnings, received in-system from Nemendghast, still lingered in her mind.

The Dark King is coming. His blade has two edges.

Venastra scowled, then told herself for the fiftieth time to focus on her duty, and on getting to the Datasaint in good time. It was not given to her to decipher the message, to parse it, or to react in any way other than to deliver it to the Vigilus Senate via scrolltube relay. Yet even after all these years, she could not help but try.

The sentinels must not fall. The blood of Terra must be kept sacred.

For a second, Venastra heard skittering. She cocked her head. It had been made by something too large to be a macrosquito or a sump rat, that much was certain. Thoughts of heretics' blades in the gloom rose unbidden to her mind. The battle on Vigilus, barely visible through Neo-vellum's eternal shroud of swamp gas, had entered a new phase, and the rumour was that the forces of the Despoiler had already made their play. It was theoretically possible that agents of the enemy had found their way to Neo-vellum. Extremely unlikely, but possible.

The way must be kept open.

Venastra sighed heavily, and made her way into the great hall. The stunning impact of its grandeur filled her with a feeling of insignificance, the import of her message diminished by the sheer scale of Neo-vellum's clicking, thrumming heart. On its raised dais, the Datasaint growled, displeased by the volume of information it was being forced to process and the incompetence of the supplicants already ranged around it.



The massive cogitator engine had become even more truculent of late, mused Venastra. She nibbled at the ink-stained hangnail on her little finger as the machine's organ-like tubes spurted warbles of machine cant. Little pools of ink and oil mingled on the cold tiles beneath its superstructure, the Datasaint's complex under-rig a tangle of pneumatic tubes and girders like the spilling intestines of some mortally wounded god-machine. Venastra knew the building-sized thing well enough to know the timbres of its engines. Its machine spirit was disturbed by the phenomenon that had split the sky, and it had been in a strange mood ever since.

She glanced around herself, checking that her busybody superior Proctor van Scraass was nowhere to be seen, then looked up to catch a glimpse of the purplish stain upon the stars. It was a guilty pleasure of hers, beholding the Rift – strictly illegal, but strangely addictive. Though it was barely visible through the incense-fogged stained glass of the ceiling, it was fascinating to her. Fascinating and disturbing in equal measure.

The nightmares had come thick and fast since the Great Rift had polluted the heavens above Neo-vellum. They had brought a lack of focus that the scribes of its scriptorums could ill afford. The Administratum moon's part in the war effort for Vigilus was critical. Even a single Datasaint message cylinder arriving at the

right time and the right place could swing the balance of one of the theatres of war; that much had been drummed into them by the proctors. Should any of them receive an astropathic message bound for Vigilus high command, there was no way out of it – it had to be made a priority, and a sacrifice would have to be made. One human fingernail, torn from the quick.

Placed just so, her carefully shaped nail would be ripped free by the Datasaint's cogs, causing a long burst of agony that would eventually subside to a dull throb. Such was the cost of the machine's compliance. Taken into the gears and hissing pistons, the sliver of keratin would appease the device's machine spirit for a time. The Datasaint's fine platinum cogs would recalibrate the orrery, and give the correct firing solution to compensate for the planet's spin against that of the moon. They had known that was the cost of the Datasaint's true complicity ever since the Missive of Sangua Terra. Back in M39, before the notion of previo and post had come to redefine their calendars, a scroll tube had reached the Aquilarian Council right on time, and in the intended place to within a tolerance of less than a foot. It had arrived precisely as the debate over the shipping lane rights of the Nachmund Gauntlet was at a critical point. It had seen a costly and potentially heretical war averted, and ever since, the scribes of Neo-vellum had paid for their most vital messages with the same small sacrifice. Venastra had two expendables left, and planned to make each of them count.



Today was that day. This Dark King brought fire and damnation, that much was becoming clear. But he could be stopped, whoever he was, and his double-edged sword blunted. The message was as imprecise as a reading of the Emperor's Tarot, but Venastra had enough experience in transmitting them that she was pretty sure it spoke of not one attack, but two. Sentinels, plural, it had said, and Vigilus was known as a sentinel world. As vague as it was, it could still be vital intel.

With her quill-servitor Rhombdu-5li at her back, Venastra approached the vast eyesore of the Datasaint reverentially, curtseying before its might. Climbing the spiral stairs that ranged around its vast girth, she felt the thing shudder as if in some grand mal seizure. Catching herself, she looked back at Rhombdu-5li in alarm. The servitor's gormless slab of a face read much the same; its constancy was somehow reassuring.

Venastra made the rest of the journey to the translation pulpit, and lit the black candles as she had done so many times before. She heard the skittering sound on the cusp of hearing again – a strange scratching noise, and a rustle of cloth – and redoubled her pace. Squinting, she depressed each of the appropriate meaning-runes on the cogitator's many-flanged dial apparatus until the first sentence of the Nemendghast message was before her in black and white.

The rustling noises were suddenly close, terrifyingly so. Scratching, tapping, and heavy breathing, as if something was crawling under the gantry.

She looked down, and saw a nightmare.

A purple, dome-headed creature with ridges along its cranium stared back with beady black eyes. It reached up a pair of three-taloned claws, and bodily yanked the servitor Rhombdu-5li down into the workings of the cogitator machine. That night, the Datasaint feasted on far more than fingernails. Too scared to scream, Venastra Ghorrod leapt onto the gantry below, and ran for her life.

Behind her, the Datasaint growled, the message from Nemendghast blinking and the rune of sending's inactivity lumen flashing bright. Then the message reset, and the machine fell still and silent as the void.

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