



VIGILUS ABLAZE

KILL SHOT

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The xenocultist hissed and scrabbled at Sergeant Kasmen's vambrace, its fingernails splintering as it tried to prise its way free. The Space Marine pressed down until he felt the thing's windpipe collapse with a wet crunch, then picked it up and hurled it into another trio of onrushing cultists. The corpse smashed two of the Paupers from their feet, but the remaining figure came on screaming, blasting away with a drum-barrelled autopistol. Kasmen ignored the rounds screeching off his ceramite plate, and grabbed the wretch by the back of the neck. He forced its head down, and at the same time brought his knee up in a vicious blow that pulverised the cultist's face.

Brother Samion dispatched the remaining Paupers with swift downward strokes of his combat blade. The Reiver's armour was now a slick mess of crimson, rather than the sea green and white of the Necropolis Hawks, but it appeared otherwise unscarred. A minor miracle, considering the past seventy-two hours of unceasing, close-quarters butchery. Samion always was a lucky one.

'Clear,' said Brother Deimos.

Of the sixteen Hawks who had entered Block 718, only three remained. Intel had suggested that this place housed a cell of the Pauper Princes, the xenocult that had spread throughout Dontoria Hivesprawl like a plague of pox-rats. Intel had been correct in that estimation, and hopelessly inaccurate with regards to enemy disposition and preparedness. No sooner had the Necropolis Hawks cleared the first twelve levels than reinforced dimanthium shutters had slammed down around Block 718, sealing the Reivers into this lightless tomb. No vox signals in or out. A trap, and one that had been deployed with uncanny precision.

Kasmen leaned against the hab wall, one hand pressed against the rent in his

power armour, torn open by a Genestealer's slashing claw. It was still seeping blood. Some form of xenos bio-acid was preventing his Larraman cells from clotting the wound and sealing his flesh. His gauntlet was currently the only thing holding his innards in. It made killing frustratingly difficult.



‘We are close,’ said Deimos, scanning his auspex and pointing forwards through the swirl of dust and smoke. The passage ended in a caged platform, with a hexagonal shaft at its centre.

‘The central accessway,’ Deimos continued. ‘That should take us as far as the upper maintenance levels. From there we might be able to reach the roof and send a priority vox to the *Kavanya*.’

‘Ammo check,’ said Kasmien, wincing as the words sent a flare of pain through his lungs. His own pistol had run dry long ago.

‘Two bolts left,’ said Brother Samion.

‘Empty,’ said Deimos. ‘And I mislaid my blade in that last skirmish. Down to fists and boots now, brother-sergeant.’

‘How careless,’ said Samion. ‘Abandoning one’s weapon in battle is a dereliction of duty, brother. Chaplain Lannator will have much to say on this.’

‘Doubtless. Perhaps the abomination that carries the broken shards of my knife in its stomach can be persuaded to speak on my behalf.’

Samion’s chuckle crackled over the vox.

‘Quiet,’ said Sergeant Kasmien.

Rattles and the shuffle of scampering feet echoed all around the Hawks; in the walls, in the ceiling, even the cramped ventwork beneath their feet.

‘Here they come again,’ said Samion, eagerness evident in his voice.

‘Move,’ Kasmien said, and as one the Hawks rushed forwards along the corridor. The sergeant switched his knife to a backwards grip, blade flat against his plated forearm.

Sirens split the air. Ahead, a circle of red stablights began to blare, heralding the descent of a maglift.

‘Kind of them to summon it for us,’ said Deimos. He had found himself a length of rebar, a chunk of ferrocrete still clinging to one end. Hardly a weapon prescribed by the Codex, but Kasmien was not about to censure his comrade. Necropolis Hawks made use of what they had to in order to complete the mission.

The walls on either side exploded in a shower of dust and pale flesh. Bodies surged into the corridor, scrambling out of hidden hatchways and outflow hatches to fall upon the Hawks. Kasmien felt the stirring of revulsion as he looked once more upon the enemy. These things wore the mask of humanity, but it had split open to reveal the hateful essence beneath; chinitous, wiry arms grasped blades and flamers, and too-wide mouths seeped acidic drool.

Brother Deimos swung his makeshift weapon with two hands, shattering the spine of one of the hideous creatures. He reversed the weapon and thrust it back, driving it straight through the belly of another cultist, which wriggled and squirmed like a stuck beetle before Deimos kicked it loose. Kasmien fought as well as he could manage with one free hand, opening throats and piercing lungs with his blade. He ducked the wild swing of an industrial saw-grinder, kicked the back of the cultist wielder’s knee with force enough to shatter the joint, and stabbed down into the squealing thing’s skull.



Through the tide of flesh, the Reiver sergeant saw the maglift slam down at the far end of the corridor, and spill forth another host of sickly-looking cultists. Standing tall at their centre was a striking figure clad in flowing crimson robes. He clutched a staff of gold, capped with the squatting form of some alien

abomination. Its gaze locked with Kasmen's, and the Space Marine felt the sickening caress of psychic energy probing at his skull.

'Psyker!' he roared. 'Samion, bring it down.'

Kasmen charged forwards, driving his shoulder into a mass of cultists, trying to clear space for his battle-brother to take the shot. Knives scraped across his ceramite, and fingers scrabbled to pull his death-mask free. He stabbed and punched with his free hand, and foul-smelling black blood splattered across his face. He could see the mutant psyker striding majestically through the throng, an imperious smile upon its skull-like face.

'I have the shot,' said Samion, resting his bolt pistol on his knife hand. He fired, the thunderous retort of the mass-reactive round deafening in such tight confines.

It should have been a kill-shot. Samion's aim was true as ever. Yet as soon as the xenos filth saw the Space Marine raise his weapon, they swarmed around the witchkin like a living shield. Samion's round struck the wall of flesh and detonated, and a cultist came apart in a splatter of entrails.

The psyker emerged, drenched from head to toe in blood, but otherwise unharmed. It hissed a phrase in some blasphemous alien tongue, and a spear of utter blackness screamed from the tip of its staff. The shadowy emanation struck Brother Deimos in the chest, and he staggered backwards, twitching and jerking, clutching his skull as forks of black light rippled across his body.

The Reiver screamed, a maddened bellow amplified by his mask's vox cowl.

Then Deimos' head exploded in a shower of blood and gristle.

The xenocultists howled in triumph, and several fell upon the remains of the fallen warrior, tearing at his corpse.

'One bolt left, brother-sergeant,' said Samion.

Not enough. The barrier of flesh had reformed around the witchkin. In the chaotic confines of the passageway, there would be no clear shot.

Kasmen's eyes scanned the chaos, searching for something, anything that could give them a tactical edge.

Like a gift from the Emperor himself, he saw just what he needed. A three-armed

xeno-spawn, its loathsome body wrapped in a bandolier of improvised explosives, a manual trigger grasped in one clawed hand and a bundle of theracite det-charges in the other. It was screaming something as it charged them, yellow eyes rolling back into an elongated skull in some crazed display of exultation.

‘Be ready, brother,’ Kasmien roared.

The Pauper was perhaps a dozen feet away when Kasmien hurled his blade. The combat knife whipped through the air and sliced the thing’s trigger arm off at the elbow, robbing it of the ability to detonate its payload. The Reiver sergeant was already moving, head down, ignoring the blades and claws that scraped across his armour. As the creature reeled, an arcing arterial spray pouring from its torn limb, Kasmien reached it, grabbed hold of its head in one hand and twisted. There was a satisfying splinter of bone, and the thing went limp. Releasing his grip on his ruptured gut, Kasmien gritted his teeth and took hold of the corpse with two hands. As more searching knives sank into his innards like slivers of ice-cold agony, he turned to the xenos witchkin.

‘One shot, Samion,’ he said. ‘Make it count.’



Summoning one last burst of strength from flagging muscles, Kasmien hurled the dead cultist bodily towards the psyker’s entourage. The corpse ragdolled through the air, trailing blood.

The Reiver sergeant had time enough to savour the look of horrified realisation upon the face of the robed psyker, before Samion fired his last round.

His aim was true. The bolt struck the packed bundle of explosives on the dead cultist’s body, which detonated with cataclysmic force. Tongues of orange flame swept across the ceiling and walls, and a thunderous blastwave punched Kasmien in the chest, sending him flying backwards into the wall of the passageway, which crumpled under his weight.

The chattering of alien voices ceased. Now there was only the continuous blare of hazard sirens, and a painful ringing in his ears.

Kasmen dragged himself upright, feeling blood seeping into the armoured bodyglove beneath his ceramite plating. Cultist knives had deepened the wound, but he could still walk despite the lancing agony that came with each step.

Dust-covered alien bodies littered the hallway, a carpet of ruptured meat and severed limbs. Most of the cultists had been reduced to charred ruin by the blast. Others had been impaled by flying shards of debris, or crushed by the flying bodies of their fellows. There was nothing left of the psyker or his retinue but a large, purplish smear across the ceiling. Brackish water poured from a burst pipe above.

‘I’m all out, brother-sergeant,’ came a voice from behind Kasmen. He turned to see Samion limping out of the dust.

‘Fine shot,’ said Sergeant Kasmen, approvingly.

‘Just the two of us now then,’ said Samion, softly. He knelt by the body of their fallen comrade, buried beneath a dozen slain foes. ‘Deimos was a fine warrior. Better with the blade than I ever was. A grave loss to the Chapter.’

‘He died as a Hawk should,’ said Sergeant Kasmen, retrieving his combat blade from amidst a tangle of smoking cultist corpses. ‘We shall honour him by getting out of this place alive. And by calling in the artillery on this whole damned hab block.’

With that, Kasmen began to pick his way through the sea of smoking flesh towards the waiting maglift and, perhaps, a way out of this tomb.

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