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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.



PROLOGUE

The Changer's symbol squirmed around the Black Legionnaire's right eye. Severin Drask, sorcerer lord of the Crimson Slaughter, could not take his eyes from the god's rune.

From the smile that Beraddon, sorcerer of the Black Legion, brutish and arrogant, offered to Drask, he knew it. Angular runes marred the man's stone teeth. One eye shone a dirty, muddled brown, while the other was a chunk of marble emblazoned with the Pantheon star.

'The Warmaster, praise be,' began Beraddon, 'will not see you. He will not indulge your request. His time is precious, now more than ever. Your request for assistance and consultation is denied.'

Drask made to protest, even as his hearts sank.

Beraddon's smile grew wider, feral, hulking, infuriating. 'I see the disappointment on your face, weakblood. Worry not. The Despoiler, honour to him, will not see you. But I will.'

'The Temple of Shades must be opened, my lord.' Gods of the watching warp, to call another lord was galling. 'We can open a new front in this war. No longer will we be bound to the Eye of Terror. No longer will the glorious hosts of the True Crusaders batter themselves against Cadia's walls. The Temple of Shades will give me the power to open a new warp rift, one large enough to vomit vast

armies into the Imperium's vulnerable core. This is a chance to end it. This is a chance to end the Long War.'

The pitch, rehearsed and recited so many times, flowed past Drask's lips, an entreaty, and an exhortation to action. The words were etched on his hearts, beating through his blood. He knew how precious this chance was. He knew the favour he would earn with the Warmaster. His would be the name lifted in unending praise to the watching gods, as the one who had broken the bloody stalemate that had so far prevented the victory of the Long War.

The Black Legionnaire's eyes narrowed. 'What do you know of the Long War? We have been fighting this crusade for countless aeons. Prattle not to me about it. For you, it is short. The conflict you fight in is but a weak hint of the trials we have endured and overcome.' His lip curled into a smirk, still mocking, but also thoughtful. Daemonic faces swam through the dirty silver of his mutated flesh. 'How do you know this will work?'

'I have seen it, lord. Much of the future is known and bestowed upon me through the glorious gifts of the patron we both serve.'

Beraddon paced, stomping through broken bodies. He snorted a laugh.

'I doubt that,' he said. 'How did you come to know of the Temple of Shades?'

'Certain daemons whispered of it. I followed the traces, the wisps of information across the Eye. In the great libraries of the Ahmen-Ahket, I found further proof. The Temple of Shades exists, I assure you. It exists and it will do all I have said.'

Darkness curled from Drask's mouth as he spoke, the echoes of the souls he had consumed on his quest for this knowledge. They wailed in time with his words.

Beraddon's ship, the *Seventh Edict*, was playing host to this meeting. Drask wished it had been otherwise. He wished to stalk the grand halls of his own ship, the *Liar's Gift*, where he could posture and threaten this arrogant son of failed Horus. There Drask would have been surrounded by the reassuring presence of his own warband. Instead, Beraddon had called him here, shortly after Drask had sent his request for an audience with the Warmaster.

The twilight halls of the *Seventh Edict* glowered down at the pair, pressing in at Drask's mind.

Here, Drask was forced to curry favour, to scurry beneath the notice of those who believed themselves better. The sneering princes of the Black Legion. He had killed many of them, proved the worth of his sorcery. And yet, Abaddon would not condescend to see him, to listen to his plan. He met with Beraddon,

this loathsome creature, in some forgotten court tucked away beneath towering angular glyphs and broken, mummified corpses.

The fire-blackened corpses coruscated with ghostly flames, their bodies shrouded and locked in foetal agony. Beraddon ignored them, but Drask could sense the memories of the fire that burned from his hands, the phantom echoes of dying warriors and the Black Legionnaire's laughter. The voices of the dead whispered at the edge of Drask's hearing.

'Why did you leave your brothers, weakblood?' Beraddon asked, idly stripping the flesh from a woman's shrivelled corpse. The Changer's sigil squirmed along his face again, dancing along the rugged contours of the Black Legionnaire's features. 'Kranon has been to the Warmaster's court. Your *Chapter Master*,' he sneered the title, 'has met with the Despoiler.'

'*Liar*,' whispered a dry voice in Drask's mind. It was one of the slain who dogged his steps, killed in ages past, whispering secrets. His Chapter's curse and its first steps on the path to damnation manifested most often when his choler rose. '*Ignorant worm. Strike him down. I never liked him. He is useless.*'

Drask felt his face flush with anger. Flames danced in his vision. The Crimson Slaughter sorcerer lord considered immolating Beraddon. He pictured the Black Legionnaire's flesh running like molten metal. His hands curled into fists, and tiny daemons, anger bright, skittered over the wrought iron.

'I have Abaddon's favour. He will not listen to your plan. He has no time for such things,' Beraddon continued. The chunk of marble in his left eye socket glowed with flickering witchlight.

Liar, Drask thought. This man was nothing, merely a veteran of a conflict that no longer held relevance. A son of the things that the Despoiler disavowed, Beraddon could only claim importance due to the quirks of fate. Warriors of Horus's Legion no longer mattered, not to Abaddon the Despoiler or the empire he was supposedly interested in building.

'The Warmaster will not see you. He will not grant his assent to this endeavor. But,' the Black Legionnaire said, 'do it anyway. Accomplish this thing and I will ensure that the Warmaster is made aware. We will both rise in glory. Forget the Ezekarion and the ruling power structure of the Warmaster's court. If we do this thing – if we break the deadlock of the Long War – our names will echo through eternity. The gods themselves will grant us unimaginable power. I will ensure that the right ears know of the Temple of Shades and what we did there.'

We, the Black Legionnaire had said. *We*, as if he would do anything to assist Drask. No, Drask thought. He will merely add his name to the glory I will write

upon the stars. We shall see when the balance of power shifts.

‘As you say, my lord,’ Drask acquiesced. The words tasted sour on his tongue; the contempt, the anger, barely held in check.

Beraddon nodded. ‘Good. Succeed or die, weakblood. I look forward to seeing *our* results.’

The audience ended. Drask left the room, fire sprites dripping from the cracks in his armour, his rage nearly incarnated as weak daemon-things.

The halls of the *Seventh Edict* were empty, nearly derelict, full of burned corpses.

Shadows pooled as he passed a recessed alcove marked with sharp runes. A horror manifested, armour wrought in bone and darkness. A horned helmet lowered in greeting.

‘Akkarnol,’ Drask said.

‘My lord,’ the shadow acknowledged. When the Crimson Slaughter warrior spoke, it was with a daemon’s whickering snarl. His voice had been warped, along with his body, by their journeys within the Eye. ‘What does the Black Legionnaire have to say?’

‘What they always do. They will watch and claim the glory.’

Akkarnol laughed, the sound deep and rasping.

‘It was ever thus,’ the warrior said. ‘They do not care for the achievements of us “weakbloods” until we accomplish something of note that they can claim for their own aggrandisement. We should just kill him and be done with it.’

‘Your words are wise, brother,’ Drask acknowledged. Where many of his broken Chapter had fallen to the mad blessings of the Blood God, Drask and others like him had sought a different master. Akkarnol’s horns creaked as they twisted into the Changer’s rune.

Their swift strides brought them to the bustling port of the embarkation bay. Servitors trundled past the cowed figures of the Dark Mechanicum. The burned corpses that filled the halls of the *Seventh Edict* were also present here, lying where they had fallen against the brushed steel.

‘But we need Beraddon’s support, however little he offers. If there is a chance he will bring this to the Warmaster’s attention, we must seize it. I will not return to the *Lost Hope*. I will not bow to Kranon’s madness again and call it wisdom.’

As they boarded the Thunderhawk Akkarnol asked, ‘What do we do? What are your orders, lord?’

The gunship rumbled around them as they left the *Seventh Edict* behind. Drask ignored the voices of the slain that whispered in his ears, taunting and

threatening him.

‘We open the Temple of Shades. We end the Long War.’

OPERATION



I

Chemical suppressants kept the kill-urge low. So long as the practice cages refilled with training servitors, Torq could actually think and reason.

Swords stabbed towards his body, whirling on four limbs. The servitor's dull, drooling face stared slackly from behind the cage of steel. The sharp, killing edge of the practice steel caught the dim light of the *Traduceum's* lumen globes.

Sylas Torq's own blade jumped in the spaces between, knocking some blades away, redirecting others. He parried them all, a blur of motion that drove the repetitive thoughts away and calmed the chemical mania that tainted his mind.

A haze covered his vision. Fever shapes and inhuman sounds crawled through the spaces of his mind. Cold and heat prickled along his limbs.

Bright thoughts danced in his head, painful and loud. Musings on the God-Emperor, the barely remembered faces of the dead and the damned, images of skull-masks – all these things and more flashed through his consciousness.

All of it was a discomfort. And a blessed distraction.

But the Eversor Assassin known as Torq would have traded none of it away. While he fought, his thoughts stretched through his mind, a personality unfolding. He relished the identity that had been reclaimed for him by the Vanus and Callidus operatives, stolen back from the dark chemicals that ruled him and his kind.

For now, while they travelled to the rendezvous point, and thence to Achyllus, Torq was, for the first time in a very long time, *himself*. A self that he had forgotten, a self that had been stolen and shaped into a killing machine. He was, for a short time, a human again rather than a weapon.

It was a glorious thing, to come back to oneself, Torq mused. To actually taste life, to speak and know the words that left his mouth, to frame questions and thoughts and ideas, were precious gifts.

It was nearly enough to fill the broken hole that crouched at the heart of his consciousness.

Even the failsafe that guaranteed his victims never survived was gone. The chemical cocktails that normally swam in his blood and triggered explosively on his death, had been temporarily suppressed by the knowledge and art of the Vanus operative.

Those other two Assassins were still smug, tainted by their training and service to another Temple of the Officio Assassinorum. Torq would never forget that, but he cherished them for the gift they had given him.

So Torq's mind focused on the combat servitor and ignored the pangs of withdrawal that removed the perfection of his conditioning. His attacks were still brutal, fuelled by training that defined him.

A slice and a stab saw blood and preservative fluid spilling from a servitor's mottled flesh. The automaton canted in distress, a stream of noise that meant nothing to the Eversor. Blood dribbled from the wound.

A grin flashed across Torq's scarred features, a mark of satisfaction.

Then cold came, flashing through him, setting his limbs to shivering. The symptoms of withdrawal frustrated Torq. Without the drugs that filled him with fury and stole away the man he was, he felt diminished.

The killing edges of blades lanced for his head and dived for his body. Torq dropped, barely writhing out of the way.

Bright pain stitched across his back as a servitor found its mark.

Torq ground his teeth together and tried to ignore the other presence in the room.

The Callidus watched him, as she always did. Her green eyes judged.

The black reflective walls of the *Traduceum*, the Officio Assassinorum vessel that had brought them to their target, absorbed the sound of his combat. His blades licked out, their edges dulled for training but made deadly by the force he exerted.

He thundered out with his fist and caught the segmented joint of the upper right

blade. Metal crumpled and pain burned across his knuckles as he drove his fist through the joint. The blade spun away and Torq grunted with effort and exhaustion as he broke apart another grey-fleshed machine-man.

‘We’re going to run out of those,’ came the Callidus’s voice. It was cultured in a way that his own voice could never be.

Torq gave her a nod. It was a thing of quiet dignity, a mark of respect and an offer of thanksgiving. Or so he meant it to be. She gave no acknowledgement of his gesture.

‘You keep breaking them. They were meant for all of us to train with.’

Torq grunted by way of response. In his head, a fear took root. Without the violence of the training cages, there would be nothing to keep the rage in check. He’d lose himself once more beneath the broken-glass pain of unfettered anger.

‘Don’t say that,’ he whispered.

‘Why not? It’s the truth. Control yourself, Eversor.’

‘Truth,’ Torq laughed. ‘That’s funny coming from a false face.’

He couldn’t help the insult, couldn’t keep it bottled in. He hadn’t meant to say it, but decades of service to his Temple, and the ingrained contempt for the other Temples who killed in different, lesser, ways, prompted it. He tried to take it back, thought of calling her name and softening the words. But nothing came.

Klara Rhasc shook her head. She flowed down towards the Eversor, crossing the space between them in an eyeblink, and with a predator’s grace. A sword flickered into her hand. Rhasc met Torq’s eyes then glanced pointedly down to the practice blade he carried.

Another voice interrupted, exasperation driving the words.

‘Oh, for the God-Emperor’s sake, this posturing serves no one, least of all the Temples or our mission. You are both Assassins of the Officio. Behave like it or I will thrash you both.’

There was the click of a flint striking and the stench of lho-smoke filled the practice chamber. This, more than the Vanus Assassin’s words, shocked Rhasc.

‘Kurei,’ she said, slowly turning. The Eversor stood behind her, irrelevant now in the face of this surprise.

‘None other,’ answered Kurei Adamta, a lho-stick dangling from his lips. A smile danced in his eyes.

Despite sharing a ship and collaborating on missions, Rhasc had never seen Adamta, an Assassin of the Vanus Temple, in the flesh. He kept his life hidden, shrouded in his own quarters on the ship. She only knew of him from his voice,

the low growl of the perpetual lho-addict. Her mind had painted him a thousand times, conjuring hundreds of appearances for the man she had come to call an ally, if never quite a friend.

In the flesh, he turned all her conjectures false. Kurei Adamta proved to be short. His skin was a dark walnut colour, common to worlds where the central system star burned bright. His face was a bulldog's scrunch, covered in scars.

'Good to see you too, Rhasc,' he said.

'Why are you here?' she asked.

'The same reason as you.'

'I mean, why now?'

'I know. We've arrived at the rendezvous point. We're receiving a guest shortly. I thought I'd let you both know. And keep you from killing each other.' He lit a lho-stick from the end of the old one.

'You had to do that in person, after all this time?'

'Ah,' he said. 'I thought it would be best to soften one surprise with a lesser one. I'm sorry, Klara.'

'That surprise being?' asked Torq.

'An unpleasant one for our Callidus friend here, Eversor.'

A chime sounded through the ship. A servitor's burbling voice drooled acknowledgement that another vessel was inbound.

'We'd best get it over with then,' said Torq. The Eversor left the training room, his posture growing increasingly hunched.



II

Achyllus burned in the fires of Severin Drask's will. The planet would be unwrought, broken, to drag the Long War from its stagnation, to prove to the Old Kinds that strength did not descend from lineage, and that one did not need to have built the Imperium to tear it down.

Severin Drask and his warriors brought destruction and doom to this miserable planet. Great Akkarnol, bearing Drask's bloody, glittering standard, punched through the struggling Cadian mortals. That they were present at all was an irritant. Why would the Imperium even bother to guard this world?

Achyllus Prime offered nothing of note to the wider Imperium, save the taxes and tithes that collared all within the hypocrite realm of man. Its turquoise skies stretched over shimmering fields of grain and scattered townships. Unbeknownst to all but the very wise, the Temple of Shades waited behind the veil here, crouched in the Sea of Souls for one with the power and the drive to tear it free, to bring it to purpose.

He could hear the Temple now, even as mortals screamed and died around him. It called to him in the fell voices of the daemonkind. Other voices clamoured for his attention too, his renegade brothers from the Crimson Slaughter. They streaked past him in armour of red and bronze. They were the ones who had rejected Kranon and his madness. Bound and sworn to the Changer of the Ways,

his warband had refused to follow the rest of his Chapter into the unheeding bloodlust of never-ending war.

Mutagenic fire whipped from Drask's hands. Cadians died with wet burbles, coughs of aspirated blood and broken spines.

He thrust his staff through the torso of a ranting commissar.

The troopers around the commissar barely had time to feel their morale shatter beneath the warp magic before Drask ended their pathetic lives with a sweeping spray from his storm bolter.

The gloaming turquoise sky exploded into sordid life, full of the crash and burn of detonating system defence ships. Achyllus's heavens were being slowly turned into hells, mirrors of the dark realm that provided haven to the Imperium's traitors. Strange witchlights, auroras built of shrieking souls, weaved through the clouds.

The ground itself was a weeping morass of mud and stone, churned by the countless dead of a butchered planetary population. The Crimson Slaughter had arrived swiftly, burning and killing. Their very presence heralded insurrection, wrought by Drask's manipulation of the warp and the spontaneous eruption of nightmares within the mortals' ranks. The people of the world had turned upon one another.

All around the sorcerer lord came the screams of the changing and the dying. Pieces of mortal flew, shifting and bubbling as they danced through the night air. Bat-winged globs of flesh wept tears of coal-coloured smoke while spinning spirals of blood and bone crashed into Guardsmen. Driven almost mad by the twisted remnants of their comrades, the Cadians faced a brutal assault and did not weather it. They broke. In ones and twos, faced with the blessings of the Great Changer, their minds burned and they fled.

The stench stained the air. Weak daemon-things, drawn by the slaughter and sworn to the High Maze, flickered through the air on sickening contrails of unlight.

Drask could hear the cries of countless more creatures of the warp demanding he let them run free and wild, fists and claws of raw soulstuff hammering against the veil.

For a moment, the sorcerer lord almost obliged them, but then he held on to his iron will. The voices of the slain that haunted him, all those he had once betrayed, crowed in disappointment. They waited for his failure. They longed to see the one who had broken them brought low. They would wait for all eternity for that to happen.

Drask's storm bolter chattered, carving through an advancing knot of Imperial Guardsmen.

'They always said that Cadians died hard,' Drask said. 'That they were the only force in the Imperium to rival the Adeptus Astartes in strength.'

'They must have lied,' chuckled Akkarnol. 'They die as other men die.' Blood streamed from the possessed Space Marine's maw. Wicked teeth drooled bright, noxious light.

Two Guardsmen sprinted forward, lasguns spitting their weak light.

Akkarnol roared, the entity within him stirring ever more from its slumber. The pair of Guardsmen tumbled through the air and landed with a sickening crack of broken bones and ruptured organs. The corrupted Crimson Slaughter warrior pounced on the bodies and tore into them, desperate to sate the appetite of the daemon bound within his flesh and soul.

Drask could feel the daemon swelling with unholy power, pressing at his brother's mind with tendrils of shadow and bile. Akkarnol had asked for a solution to keep his own voices at bay, to stifle the haunting cries of murdered victims. The solution was little better.

New voices joined the clamour in Drask's skull, the echoes of stolid soldiers. The shades of the dead Cadians wailed in terror as he tore through their living comrades.

Two Crimson Slaughter Space Marines, traitors bound and sworn to his warband, died as a lucky pulse of las-fire tore through one of their backpacks. The power reactor within went critical, erupting in a cloud of nuclear fire and unbridled energy.

Drask felt their souls shriek into the empyrean. He paused as a curious sadness washed through him. Those men had been brothers, bred from the same stock as him.

Purple-eyed men and women spat hate and defiance the deeper he ripped through them. Stubber rounds spanked off his armour. Prayers to the False Emperor were thrown at the sorcerer lord.

A priestess of the False Creed strode through their ranks, bellowing a paean to their dead god. Drask could see their morale stiffen, even in the face of all this horror.

He would not allow that to happen. The Cadians must die here. Achyllus would fall and Drask's star would rise. The Temple of Shades would open.

Drask could unmake the woman with a word, turning her soul to ash and dust. But no, he would make an example of her, draw out the pain and death.

His staff flicked forward, slicing through reality and emerging behind the buzzing blade of the woman's chainsword. The weapon slipped through her defences and into her flesh. He lifted, swinging the staff up. She tried to stay on the ground. Her prayers grew louder, and she screamed to the Corpse-Emperor.

Her comrades threw themselves at the sorcerer lord, trying to swarm him and bring him down by weight of numbers. Runes of fire dripped from Drask's mouth and he drew them upon the air in sickly flickerings of green and gold.

Frail arms wrapped around his, trying to pull him down. A man with a corporal's stripes threw himself at the staff, his flesh melting and burning even as he dragged the heavy gold weapon down.

None could resist the might of Drask's armoured form. He shoved his staff still further into the warp and impaled the priestess. She screamed then.

Her impending death resonated through the warp rift, down the length of his staff. Drask's eyes rolled into his skull as he supped on the feeling of it.

Panic rippled anew through the Cadian ranks.

Then Drask felt it, the presence of another mind murmuring through the warp. Through the murk of mortal minds and the bright stabs of hate and rage of his fellow Crimson Slaughter, the heavy soul of a psyker called into the aether.

He was attempting a sending. While not an astropath, the witchmind sought to cast what he saw, heard and felt into the void and bring warning to the Imperium. He could not be allowed to succeed.

+Achyllus lost,+ the psyker whispered frantically. +Traitors have come.+

Drask belatedly recognised the priestess's sacrifice for what it was, and his eyes narrowed in displeasure. 'A feint,' he murmured.

Here was the discipline of the sons and daughters of Cadia. That such guile had tricked him, that they had kept their purpose hidden at the expense of so many lives, stood testament to the resolve of the Cadian Imperial Guard.

The other mind's spoor grew louder in the warp, rippling across the battlefield. The Cadians spent their strength to keep the Crimson Slaughter distracted, while their primaris psyker called for aid.

Drask projected his mind outwards, relying on muscle memory and instinct to take care of the human dregs that swarmed him. He passed through the battlefield, leaving behind a ripple of hoarfrost and scorched earth.

+Where are you, psyker?+ Drask thundered. His psychic voice startled feasting daemons into sudden flight, squawking like disturbed carrion crows with nearly human voices.

The psyker's soul flared as he forced more of his message into the aether.

Then Drask snapped back into his body.

A casual gesture flung the Cadians around him aside, killing them before their bodies could hit the ground. A bow wave of thrown and burning mortals drove before the advancing sorcerer.

Half of his mind worked on clearing the path. The other tried to contain the psyker's message. Acrid sweat broke across Drask's brow, joining the sulphuric stink that circulated through the recycled atmosphere of his war-plate.

His vision blurred. Fatigue bloomed through his muscles while a headache pounded.

The words boomed in his mind, the psyker's strident, desperate calls reverberated against his every fibre.

+Send relief,+ the voice begged. +Major incursion.+

The words burned along his bones, thundered through his blood. He held them at bay, but barely.

+Traitor Space Marines.+

The psyker watched his approach, sagging against his staff of office. But he still did his duty and channelled the warning. His face was haggard, worn and bleached by his sending. A rictus of pain scarred him and coloured his aura in blooms of bruised purple and clotted red.

+Help!+

The psyker's warning slipped from Drask's mind and his lips formed the words. The message thundered into the aether, disjointed and disconnected.

+Achyllus Prime.+

Drask reached the primaris psyker and felt the air coalesce around him as he met the resistance of the man's guardian shield. +Servants of ruin. Unknown purpose. Achyllus falls.+

The sorcerer lord pressed forwards, stopping at the runes inscribed in the mud.

Rage filled Drask at the humans' impudence. He roared and called an order into the vox. 'To me!' His mind felt wretched, bereft of the warp's comfortable caress.

Akkarnol howled from across the battlefield. Bolter fire erupted around the psyker, stitching into the mud and bodies. Scraps of flesh and torn uniforms flapped into the air.

The psyker's barrier deflected the projectiles. Desperation was writ onto his features. His psychic voice grew weaker as he became more engrossed in saving his physical form.

Drask began incantations of his own. He knew his time was short and his skills

in the subtler paths of the Art limited. While he was a powerful pyrokinetic, and had a wide body of knowledge, his talents had always focused on the more martial gifts of his mind. He had to keep the message contained. He had to keep the Imperium ignorant of events on Achyllum until it was too late to effect change.

Akkarnol circled the psyker. The man stood his ground, driven past fear and into the arms of almighty duty. He seemed to come to some sort of conclusion, some resignation to his own fate. Resolve stiffened his features. Pride then took its place.

Then the psyker pushed. The mortal's mouth stretched wide, then wider still. Drask could hear his jaw break with brittle cracks as his mind-voice thundered into the warp. Tiny dimples appeared against his forehead, like finger marks pushing in.

His head deformed, squeezed from the sides as thought, ideas and, above all, the warning tore into the aether. The clouds burst above even as the psyker's brain case shattered. Vile obsidian rain fell, pounding into the battlefield. It streamed from the plates of the Crimson Slaughter, dyeing their armour black in the deluge.

Akkarnol pounced with a roar, clawed arms outstretched and maw opened wide.

Cadians were knocked flat. Reality split. Daemons poured into real space, weak, mewling wretches of the lower choirs. But they were still lethal. Mortals and Crimson Slaughter alike fell to the dripping claws of the neverborn.

The sorcerer lord's voice rose in pitch, shouting the words of containment, trying to cage the astropathic message. The psyker's mortal cry proved too strong.

The message, a blend of words, visions, feelings and horror slipped out from the bleeding husk of Achyllum, driven by the last gasp of a dying mind. It was bound, Drask knew, for the listening ears of the Imperium.



III

The *Traduceum*'s loading bay was a simple thing. There were no crates stacked within, no servitors bustling to prepare for the docking. There was just bare scuffed steel. A blue force field fuzzed at the end, locking the void away.

The three Assassins waited. Weapons were holstered at their hips. Their lethal bodies were tense, but none reacted as yet. Klara Rhasc felt the coiled-spring tension that came before combat. Even Adamta, short and compact, was a thing of hard muscles – weaponised humanity. While the trio lacked the physical uniformity of the Adeptus Astartes, there was something that bound the three together. It was in the way they stood and in the manner in which they carried themselves.

A massive shudder rocked the *Traduceum*. Metal boomed and wailed. An umbilicus broke through the blue haze. Air and vapour gusted forth, trailing like dense fog into the *Traduceum*'s landing bay.

Klara's keen hearing caught the muffled hint of footsteps. The near silent rustle of cloth ghosted through the vapour. She felt the cold grasp of recognition crawl up her spine.

Pain darted up her side, driving into her spine. The old wound in her flank burned with sudden heat. With it came memories.

Klara Rhasc lies on a snow-covered street. Adamta is yelling in her ear through

the vox, confused, angry, concerned. All these flavours war in his voice. But Klara can barely hear him, can barely feel anything except the warmth stealing from her body. Centimetres from her outstretched hand lies a fallen knife, poisoned tip melting through the snow. She hears the sound, over and over. A muffled crack of noise, the crunch of bone and the tearing of flesh. She should know the sound, but she cannot think as the warmth leaves her, fleeing her body to lie red against the white. Bright pain and shame; for the first time in her life, she has failed a mission.

Footsteps crunch, light and muffled.

Flakes fall from a sky pregnant with grey clouds.

A masked face looks down, lenses whirring. A black cloak stirs in a gentle breeze. Wisps of smoke curl from a sniper rifle.

She hears another voice, a man's voice, and she feels nothing but hatred.

‘No,’ she whispered. Rhasc drew a knife from the sheath on her hip. Adamta steadied her with a light touch. She shied away from him, twitching at the foreign feeling.

From out of the umbilicus emerged a masked figure, covered from head to toe in a black bodyglove and swaddled in a dark cloak. Slung over one shoulder was a long rifle. She knew the silhouette, had been haunted by it in her dreams. A Vindicare. Adamta had hinted as much, but seeing the other Assassin in the flesh was too much.

The masked figure's face panned from Assassin to Assassin. The gesture was slow, inexorable and somehow judgemental. His gaze lingered on Klara.

Without even consciously realising it, Rhasc hurled the knife. A flash of silver spun through the air.

Quick as lightning and with a sudden whine, the Vindicare pulled his pistol, pressed the trigger and vaporised the knife in one smooth motion. Then he returned the pistol to its holster. Never once did his masked gaze slip from Klara Rhasc.

Klara became dimly aware of shouting around her. Adamta was yelling for calm, cursing about some improbable aspect of the God-Emperor. Torq was hunched, in the corner, clutching his head. He mouthed nonsense words.

The Vindicare never broke his stare. Instead, he spoke for Klara's benefit. The words were calm, utterly devoid of emotion.

‘I have always found that restraint is the greatest virtue,’ he said.

He removed his mask, revealing skin the warm colour of honeyed amber and a

head utterly bare of hair. A proud nose hooked out from the man's face while thin lips concealed a mouth that seemed built for smiling. Judging by the frown lines that surrounded it, the gesture never graced his features. His grey eyes were dispassionate and clinical.

Rhasc focused on his features, mnemonics drifting through her mind. She committed it to memory, ready to shape her own features accordingly.

Quick strides, almost silent, brought him to the other three. He held his hand out to Adamta in a perfunctory shake.

'Viktor Zhau,' the Vindicare offered. His tone never altered, never shifted. It was so calm it bordered on infuriating.

He repeated the same gesture to the Eversor, repeated his name. Still huddling in the corner, Torq met his gaze, snarled at him and ignored the handshake.

More quick strides brought him to Klara. Here he broke his ritual, moved away from the handshake and the name. His eyes drifted down to her side, to the wound hidden beneath her bodyglove, then flickered back to meet her gaze. It was a quick thing, so fast a lesser being would not have noticed. But Klara, raised and trained by the Callidus Temple to be a keen student of the microgestures that betrayed the human face, took notice.

Her hand rested on the sword at her hip. 'Do not offer me your hand, cretin,' she snarled, 'or I will cut it off.'

Something like confirmation dawned in the Vindicare's eyes. He nodded once. 'Viktor Zhau,' he told her, his voice no different than the times he had spoken to the other Assassins. His eyes darted back to Adamta while Zhau smoothed the drape of his cloak with the quick efficiency of a habitual gesture. 'Am I the last to arrive?' he asked.

'Yes,' Adamta said. He took a long pull on his lho-stick and refused to meet anyone's eyes.



IV

The journey from the rendezvous point to the Achyllus System was a matter of days, an almost inconsequential distance in the grand reckoning of warp travel and the Imperium.

The *Traduceum*'s halls were still silent, but now they had taken on a tense atmosphere. There was none of the camaraderie expected of lesser beings marching to war. The Assassins were solitary creatures, used to working alone. To gather them together spoke to the true scale of the threat.

Chromed machines gurgled and lights winked. Tubes stretched from Rhasc's back and neck, injecting polymorphine and other chemicals necessary to sculpt her body. She felt heavier. A vid-screen recessed into the table before her and flickered through identities she might need, backstories that might prove useful.

She was already in her bodyglove, weapons prepared. The gene-replenishment was the last preparation she required. Rhasc liked to hold on to her identity for as long as possible, to retain the features and face that met her gaze whenever she looked in a mirror for as long as possible. The ritual was a simple thing, by Imperial standards. There was no incense, no chanting and no murmured prayers. She was alone with the faces of her trade, mantras reverberating through her subconscious as she readied for the mission. Her mind danced through different identities, subsuming her own, one by one.

I am Klara Rhasc, she told herself. Her voice grew deeper as the syllables left her throat.

She shifted her accent and rolled her tongue. A man's voice emerged in another dialect of Gothic from a heavy browed face thick with care and years. *An ataal Hovtalk Gendro bin.*

Ayam soule Boratrix Boudic.

I am Lukas Fretz.

Viktor Zhau.

Torq.

Kurei Adamta.

Hours passed as she remoulded her bones and muscles, as she reshaped who she was. From man to woman and genders in between, the Callidus operative reshaped her mind as well as her body.

She was lost in a trance when Kurei called her.

'I'm sorry, Klara,' he said.

It was the first time they had spoken since the Vindicare's arrival. 'What do you want, Vanus?' she snapped.

'Just business then,' he replied. All the friendship that had once flavoured his words was gone, vanished into the aether. 'It's time for the briefing. Ten minutes, Rhasc, and play nice.'

The briefing hall aboard the *Traduceum* was the only part of the vessel devoted to ostentation. Ordinarily the Officio Assassinorum eschewed such frippery. They were a disjointed organisation, crafted for a single purpose. The Assassins of the Temples delivered the Emperor's judgement.

The murals in the room displayed that purpose. The Emperor, enthroned as the god of justice, stared down from gold-tiled mosaics. From His Golden Throne, the Emperor waited in judgement, an executioner's blade in one hand and a balance scale in the other.

Scarcely less honour was paid to his incarnation as a god of the dead. Those murals depicted the Emperor's nine sons beside him, each girded for war. Nameless Space Marines, and darker shadowed figures between them, stood above the faceless ranks of the dead.

The message was clear to Rhasc: the Temples were the Emperor's instrument, his dark blade of judgement and death. She had never been a pious woman, but the sights here always filled her with awe. They were a justification of her purpose, her creation. Darkness came too easily to an Assassin's soul. Their

work was demanding, damaging to the psyche.

A long table, carved of some dark wood, stretched down the centre of the large hall. A hololith danced in its centre, glowing a dull green. Flickering candles set in the skulls of Temple instructors provided further illumination, setting the mosaics to uncertain life. Darkness and shadows moved through the hall. Gothic arches framed windows that looked nowhere, filled with stacked stone. The hall had the feeling of some dark temple and it reminded Klara Rhasc of home.

Zhau was already seated when she entered. His eyes stared straight before him, boring into a data-slate. He offered no acknowledgement of her arrival, no greeting.

She sat opposite the Vindicare.

Torq entered, followed by the withered husk of a woman. The Eversor's eyes were dull and lifeless, filmed almost grey. The servitor behind him carried ranks and ranks of ampoules and tubes. Its fingers were needles, injected into the Eversor's back. He was being prepared for the mission to come. His presence was only a formality. His chem-bleached mind could not be counted on to contribute to their instruction.

Adamta entered last. The hololith shifted into the shaking impressions of a battlefield. Sound filtered faintly from hidden speakers.

'This,' Adamta began, 'is what we are facing. This is what we must kill.'

At first, all that could be seen were Astra Militarum soldiers. They loomed large and proud, indomitable, unbreakable.

'Hnnh,' Torq drooled.

Fifes and drums echoed. The distant shouts of charging men prowled through the room. The timbre shifted.

The hololith danced and lost focus. Rhasc heard chanting and knew it for a psyker's focus aid. The hololith shifted to show the sky, turquoise rife with auroras. Ships exploded and drop pods fell.

'Who provided the source for these images?' asked Zhau.

Adamta responded, 'A Cadian battle-psyker called Cataboldine. These are the last images he saw. This is the message he provided to the Inquisition, forwarded to the High Lords of Terra.'

Zhau nodded.

Explosions rippled through the Cadian ranks. Bodies and blood flew everywhere, but there was something wrong with the weapon dispersal pattern. To Klara's eyes, this did not resemble artillery.

A deep bass roar reverberated through the room, chilling even through the

speakers. The true threat revealed itself. Armoured in red and bronze, loping out from the battlefield pall, came Chaos Space Marines. Cadians were pulled apart as the traitors advanced.

‘What warband is that?’ Klara asked.

‘We believe them to be the Crimson Slaughter, formerly the Crimson Sabres. Fallen in...’ Adamta consulted his notes. ‘...late M41. Their Chapter records and post-excommunication data are available in your mission briefing.’

Rhasc heard the unmistakable howling of daemons, and the wails and screams of the damned.

Something huge came into view. A massive armoured form, wreathed in fire and smoke, scattered Cadians. Jewelled eyes glared out from a horned helmet. Golden fire streaked from the staff clutched in one hand. The other directed bolter fire into knots of Throne-loyal men and women. The hololith paused.

‘Break him,’ Torq growled. ‘Break him, kill him and cut him.’ The servitor behind him emitted a series of binaric cants. Metal needles slipped free from the Eversor’s back.

The other Assassins stared at the Eversor for a moment.

Adamta cleared his throat.

‘Quite,’ he said. ‘This, as you’ve no doubt surmised, is our target. We believe this creature is Severin Drask, once a Librarian of the Crimson Sabres, now sworn to ruin. Billions of deaths have been ascribed to this sorcerer. The exact details of his actions are either unknown or sequestered somewhere that the Officio’s archives cannot or will not reach.’

‘What is the traitor’s end game? What does it want with Achyllus?’ asked Rhasc.

‘According to Cataboldine, Drask seeks to conduct a ritual in something called the Temple of Shades. What that ritual is intended to accomplish is impossible, indeed reprehensible, to understand. Who can say why the servants of ruin do what they do? What is clear is that we have identified a traitor to the rule of man. The High Lords have deemed it necessary to kill the creature before it accomplishes its aims.’

Zhau placed his pistol on the table, slowly, deliberately. It gave the barest of metal clicks as it settled. ‘Why does this mission require more than one Assassin of the Temples?’

‘I don’t...’ Adamta began and then caught himself. ‘The High Lords demanded it.’

‘Has an Execution Force of this scale been called before? I don’t recall having

read anything like this, or hearing of its like.'

'According to the records we officially have access to? Never. According to the ones we don't... very, very rarely.'



V

The iron door buckled with a screeching tear. Plasma washed from within, flowing out in a sun-bright stream. Three Crimson Slaughter warriors were caught in the flow, their armour igniting. Bellows of rage and pain flared over the vox before abruptly dying as the warriors melted.

Drask and the other Crimson Slaughter watched, impassive.

The towering edifice of the Astropathic Sanctum loomed over the Space Marines of the Crimson Slaughter. The aquilas and other symbols of Imperial rule were all that remained to announce this planet's adherence to Terran oppression. Drask's warriors and ships had scoured Achyllus Prime, slaughtering its citizens.

Shouts came from within the sanctum, delivered from thin, mortal throats. Lasbolts lanced down from crenellations and murder holes, acting as nothing more than an irritant.

Rocks and debris hurtled at the gathered Space Marines. One crushed a warrior, the sudden pressure popping the warrior's armour in a gout of gore and viscera.

Almost absentmindedly, Drask conjured a dome of fire to cover his warband. The sounds of the outside world drew away – the haunting cries of the butchered population and the hunting warbles of the neverborn. All that remained was the machine growl of ill-maintained power armour, the heavy breathing of the Chaos

Space Marines, and the whispers that assailed their minds.

Entire choirs of voices had been added to Drask's tormenters. The sorcerer lord winced as the voices of the recently dead levelled their accusations and their censure. Let them ramble, the sorcerer told himself. Let them vent their impotent rage. They can affect nothing.

Drask stole the heat from the cooling plasma and channelled the caged fury into the fire dome above his head.

His warriors stormed into the revealed breach and were met by a hail of lasgun fire. Akkarnol led them, the daemon at the fore.

Drask followed, wading through piled corpses. Within, a small guard fought against the Crimson Slaughter assault.

Laughing Space Marines tore their struggling bodies apart. Others toyed with the mortals.

'Save them,' Drask demanded. 'I will need their blood and their souls to bring the Temple of Shades into reality.'

Akkarnol spat a curse and bared his teeth in resistance to the command.

Drask hesitated. Had the daemon finally overwhelmed his friend? He levelled his staff and prepared a word of unmaking.

Akkarnol shuddered and his outward mutations receded. His crown of horns pulled back into his skull. The flesh that covered his armour boiled back into the joints.

'My apologies, lord,' he said, dropping to his knees. 'The daemon slumbers once more.'

'Unreliable,' Drask rumbled. 'Rein it in. I would hate to kill you, old friend.'

'Your will, my lord.'

'Take the tower. Find the astropaths,' Drask ordered the Chaos Space Marines around him. 'Akkarnol, you will take a detachment to guard the sanctum. Ensure that none disturb the ritual.'

Drask watched Akkarnol wrestle with the order. The message that lurked within was clear. The possessed Space Marine was being punished for his lack of control.

Staircases curled into the tower's interior. They stretched from the entrance hall, dotted with landings. Dark stone formed the walls. Slogans and wards glittered in gold. Crude, drawn by a hand that was only just beginning to grasp the intricacies of the warp, they were meant to focus the minds of those who dwelled within the sanctum.

Cultists slunk in through the door, mortals sworn to the Dark Gods. Frail, but

useful as delaying fodder, Drask brought the human dregs along to die. Puffed up and posturing before their masters, the wretches brandished their mutations. The Crimson Slaughter ignored them.

Drask lumbered up the stairs, cracking the granite beneath his heavy tread. Hooded minor sorcerers followed, brought down from orbit.

A bullet pinged off Drask's shoulder guard. His head snapped up, hunting. His mind analysed the trajectory, and he followed the sound and angle of the shot. A blink-clicked rune switched the sight in his helm from reality to the flowing soul eddies of the warp. Two floors up, a small soul glowed behind a balustrade.

Drask raised his hand and called down fire from the warp. His sharp gesture brought the fire sweeping down, crushing that soul beneath the weight and heat of his will.

Pain stabbed into his mind. A rising squeal of white noise assaulted his ears. Random thoughts and voices filled his head. Visions of things that he had never seen, vague impressions of places he had never visited and crises he had never dealt with overwhelmed him. Above all, the sorcerer lord felt the scourging fire of golden light. Context came. He faced the combined assault of the sanctum's astropathic choir. Which meant the golden light was likely their combined memory of the soulbinding.

It took him moments to recover his wits, to filter falsehood from reality. The golden fire scoured his mind. This fire lacked the familiar comforts of his power. This fire spoke to a barely remembered time of shackles and service. He staggered back, Terminator footsteps stumbling on the stone steps. His staff fell from his hand.

Drask clutched at his skull, trying to hold the fire at bay, tried to keep that awful judgement from pressing in on him. He failed.

The servos in his knees whined as they fought to keep him upright.

A mote in the golden light failed. Then another and another as astropaths died from their mass outpouring of psychic resistance.

Drask felt the holes form. He shaped his mind into a chisel, breaking away at the holes in the light. More motes died. His mind formed a hammer. It pounded into the edges, breaking into the holes, making them wider.

The astropaths renewed their attack, but he was wise to their tricks now. He shut his mind to the images, to their memories and their messages. He was adept at avoiding such things, adept at blocking the voices that afflicted him.

Echoed exhaustion flooded into him, the sympathetic feeling emanating from the astropaths almost forcing him to slow once more. The astropaths severed the

link, broken and shattered. Failures.

His backwards flight ceased and his staff flew into his hand. Drask bulled up the stairs. Several sorcerers were left scattered behind, smoke drooling from their eyes and ears. Their bodies had already begun to smoulder.

Grim-faced guards, their minds stunted against manipulation, marched in lockstep down the grand staircase. They fired hellgun volleys into Drask and his attendant sorcerers.

Mindless discipline drove them. Drask's lip curled. At least the Cadians expressed courage. These men and women were too brain-dead to know the difference.

A hellgun blast cut through his pauldron, slicing a hole through his shoulder. Heat spread down his arm before pain suppressants brought cooling numbness. Another speared through his thigh. His forward momentum slowed. Paint abraded from the front of his armour.

The sorcerer's own answer slammed into them. Changing fire clung to the broken tatters of the lobotomised guards' minds. Flesh rippled and became vegetable matter, darkening to purple or blazing into a cloud of eyes.

Others burned in crackling sheets of bronze and black.

Drask's attendant sorcerers added the weight of their sorcery to his. Their powers manifested as telekinetic shifts in pressure, crushing bodies and bones. Three guards turned their guns on their own.

Their resistance crumbled as the sorcery destroyed them. Bodies hurtled from the railings, thrown into the darkness. Crackling holes in reality burst open and daemonic hands reached out and pulled the lobotomised guards with them. Confused daemons poured from the rifts in the warp and fell into their ranks. With senses confounded by this new realm, the weak daemons lashed out at the dim soul-fires around them.

Drask withstood the last ragged volley of hellgun fire. Holes leaked smoke from his armour. Pain flashed through his systems, but the sorcerer lord ignored them. He was transhuman, gene-crafted to be superior to any threat the galaxy could ever conceive.

Fire lashed from his outstretched palm, coiling like a whipping serpent. Then he was among them. His golden staff crashed through a rank of three guards, crushing bones with an audible pop and flinging the bodies over the edge. His backswing crushed a man's skull.

Drask the fire sent lashing through the body of one man and into another. Emerald smoke drifted from the wounds.

He burst through the staggered ranks and turned on them before they could readdress. His sorcerers followed him in a wedge.

Drask corralled the minds of his attendant sorcerers, pulled them together and forged their strengths to his. Alien thoughts invaded his mind, the minds and memories of his wretched followers. The sorcerer lord ignored them.

They pulled fire from the Changer's realm, the Great Maze of Tzeentch. Formed from shrieking souls and the hopes, dreams and ambitions of sentient beings, the fire tore through the veil and annihilated the remaining guards.

Where they had stood, where their ranks had knelt against the ancient stone of the stairwell, was a bizarre amalgam of flesh, stone and crystal. Arms waved from glass surfaces. Faces spoke from the stone. The Changer had reached through and touched this spot.

Severin Drask brought his temper back under control, reforged his will and dampened his choler. He looked upwards, to the summit of the sanctum.



VI

The *Traduceum* slunk into the Achyllus System with the grace of an oceanic predator – a knife slipping through the dark. It ran nearly silent. Its engines were designed to flicker with the light of distant stars. Its obsidian hull reflected no light, gave nothing away.

The vessel's profile was a dagger, sharp and tapered. No guns protruded from its side. No cannons broke the smooth lines of its flank. The vessel was not made for fighting, not made to stand against its foes. Instead, the *Traduceum* was a conveyor.

Its purpose was stealth; its purpose was death. Like a needle, the vessel was designed to deliver its poison, the Assassins who stalked its dark halls, and then retreat.

It broke the warp far out of the system. Ships stalked the inner planets of Achyllus, blasphemous things in the ruined colours of the darkest traitors. They brayed and announced their victory, postured and bellowed at one another. Minor skirmishes broke out between them. Their discipline was gone, eradicated without a foe to face and an iron will to keep them bound.

This disunity served the Assassins' purpose.

They assembled aboard the *Traduceum*'s tiny bridge. Brushed metal walls watched the gathered Assassins as they had generations of their forebears. No

ornamentation broke the unremitting monotony of bare steel. All the lines within were clean and sharp, bereft of the gothic ornamentation that encrusted most Imperial architecture. Servitors burbled from stations that, in an ordinary vessel, would be crewed by free humans. Adamta lounged in the command throne, his eyes flickering from instrument to instrument.

A constant stream of course corrections flowed from his mouth.

‘Minor burn, bring us past that vessel,’ he said.

A hooded servitor, mechadendrites extending from its chest cavity, manipulated a number of wheels.

‘Compliance,’ it stated with a voice choked with dust and disuse.

A vessel coated in what looked like fresh gore steamed past them. Ident codes proudly announced the hulk as the *Death’s Paradise*. Its guns spat out random fury into the void, annihilating chunks of debris and the remnants of the Imperial fleet that had evidently tried to hold this world.

The *Traduceum* swam beneath the Chaos ship, secure in its stealth.

Rhasc’s breath grew shallow. The Assassins grew silent. Even Torq stopped his laboured breathing as the vast shadow consumed them.

The *Traduceum* rocked gently, buffeted by the kinetic energy expended by the traitor ship. An alarm burst through the silence, followed by another and another.

‘Collision imminent,’ blurted the lobotomised remains of a tech-plated woman. ‘Collision imminent.’ She began to repeat the words, the pause between losing all meaning.

Achyllus Prime glittered before them, looming larger in the viewscreens with every passing second. Its turquoise skies were bruised and pockmarked by continent-spanning ash storms, a far cry from the bucolic image that had graced the briefing.

Rhasc felt a tightening in her chest. The sour metal taste of adrenal hormones swam through her mouth. Her body was responding to the rising stress levels, mistaking the moment for the kill-urge.

The acrid smell of unleashed chemicals filled the bridge as each of the Assassins’ own systems coped with the stress.

Still the servitor warned of impending calamity. Rhasc could see the Eversor trembling with barely suppressed rage, could hear the sudden blood-fuelled force of air rushing through his clenched teeth. He exploded into motion before any of them could react.

The Eversor punched his naked fist through the servitor’s back and ripped away its spine. Grey flesh tore and iron-rich oil gouted from the wound. He dropped

the metal structure, still twitching, to the deck with a clang of finality.

‘Quiet,’ Torq growled. ‘Better.’

Adamta glanced at Rhasc and rolled his eyes.

Silence returned, stirred by the combat chemicals that flooded the room.

Violent shaking rattled through the ship’s bones, the vibrations dancing up through Rhasc’s legs. The broken servitor twitched in its cradle. Withered lips mouthed words that would not emerge from its brutalised form.

More trauma assaulted the *Traduceum*. A console erupted into sparks. The sudden burst of light brought a strobing, twitching effect to the bridge. Metal creaked and groaned. Something snapped, deep within the ship.

‘Were we hit?’ asked Zhau. No emotion betrayed his words. He spoke with utter calm.

Rhasc read the readout from a nearby screen. ‘Negative,’ she said. ‘But the atmosphere in the lower decks is venting.’

‘It was a near miss. The traitor ship was firing at some scrap that caught the gunners’ eyes. We were likely caught in the blastwave,’ said Adamta.

A new chime blipped into life on the auspex, a newcomer barrelling out of the spinwards reach of a planet.

‘Emperor’s teeth,’ Adamta cursed.

This ship was a true behemoth of the void, a colossal vessel. Pict-thieves on the *Traduceum*’s hull relayed its image to the watching Assassins. It was a bone-encrusted thing, mounted with horned skulls and pulsing skin. Branded into its flank was a series of runes that whispered of burned books and flowing spinal fluid. Rhasc tore her gaze away from the runes, knowing the false temptation offered by the mad alphabets of the Archenemy.

This new ship bore down on the *Death’s Paradise*, still stretching above them.

‘That’s on an attack vector,’ Zhau whispered.

An evil smile curled Torq’s battered features. ‘Ramming speed.’

‘What are they playing at?’ asked Adamta.

Torpedoes spewed from the behemoth’s prow, crossing the void at mind-defying speed.

‘Dive!’ Rhasc yelled. ‘Dive now!’

Adamta recognised the danger. The Vanus yelled orders at the servitors, trying to bring the Assassins’ ship out of range of the impending explosion.

Pressure bloomed in the bridge as the ship spun down. Air exploded out from Rhasc’s lungs, while stars danced in her eyes.

Torq lost his footing and went spinning through the air.

Then they suddenly stopped, hanging in the void. They had put thousands of kilometres between themselves and the void execution.

The debris field grew worse the deeper into the system they ventured, remnants of the battle that had once raged here. Achyllus Prime beckoned them onwards. Its skies swirled with storm clouds of every conceivable colour, evidence of the warp corruption that plagued it. A vast structure flickered in high orbit, visible only with their naked eyes. The instruments read nothing there, just empty atmospherics and passing debris. An inverted mountain of stone bled into the void. At its bottom, a wickedly sharp point threatened the planet below.

Crouched atop the mountain's flat plateau loomed a structure drawn from Rhasc's nightmares.

Her senses rebelled at the impossibility of what she saw. Something like a temple wrought from nightmare and madness. Despite the vast gulf that separated her from the fane, for no other word truly suited it, she could somehow see disturbing details. Friezes depicted cavorting daemons and war between archaically armoured Space Marines. Towering statues mouthed unknowable promises.

'What is that?' she breathed.

'The Temple of Shades,' said Adamta, awe and revulsion warring in his voice.

Torq watched it, unable to tear his gaze away from the structure. 'That needs killing,' the Eversor said. Drool slipped from his mouth.

A stream of energy anchored the fane, spearing up from the surface of Achyllus Prime. Flickering with the light of murdered souls and empty colours, it forged a bridge between Achyllus Prime and the Temple of Shades. Waves of force pulsed from the structure, beating in time like some vast monster's heart.

Ships surrounded the impossible mountain, barely visible against the vast bulk. They encased it in a cordon of steel, a rampart of adamantite fury.

'We cannot approach that thing from the void,' Rhasc said. 'Those ships would detect and destroy us.'

Zhau agreed. 'This ship would die.'

'What does the light do?' Torq asked, shocking them all. He pointed at the light that seemed to connect the fane to the planet.

Rhasc's mind danced along the possibilities. 'A bridge perhaps?'

'That could be our egress point,' said Zhau. 'Where is it attaching to on the planet?'

Adamta consulted a data-slate. 'The storm clouds make it difficult to judge the

geo-location, but I think it safe to assume that the light is tethered to the sanctum Astropathicus Achyllus. The last reports from the Cadians indicated that was where the traitors were bound. While the ways of the witch are mostly unknown to me, perhaps the sorcerer required the astropaths to accomplish his aims?’

‘Can you deliver us there, Kurei?’ Rhasc asked.

‘Not directly. The storm patterns around the sanctum are too strong for direct drop pod insertion. There is a break a dozen kilometres away, where the storms appear less fierce.’

Rhasc and Zhau offered their own insight, catching the few things that Adamta did not. While their minds might not have been honed for such information handling in the same way as the Vanus, their intellects were still fierce things.

‘I will deploy and scout first.’

Rhasc made to protest, but Zhau held up a forestalling hand.

‘I will deploy. And I will scout first. This is non-negotiable.’

‘Fine. Mark the targets, find us a way in, but do not engage.’

‘Of course,’ Zhau said.



VII

The chamber was guarded by the final remnant of Achyllus's protectors. They stared down at the approaching Chaos Space Marines. The moment one of the sorcerer attendants crested the final landing, he was nearly bisected by lasgun fire.

A kineshield shimmered into being before the remainder. Drask shoved it forward. Through its oily shimmer, Drask could see the glory of the circular chamber. At one time, when the sorcerer had bent his knee before the Golden Throne, he would have felt wonder at such a place. The walls were cast in stamped gold, shaped into beatific images of the Emperor's primarchs. Blind astropaths, heroic in their pose and their duty, marched toward the massive doors that guarded their innermost halls. Cadians and thrall-soldiers of the Astropathicus knelt before those doors.

Drask shoved the kineshield forward. He roared as he charged through the last token resistance of the psykers within and pushed the kineshield into the rank of mortals. They staggered back as solid air punched into them and then pushed them into the great doors.

Arms beat weakly against the shield. The pressure increased. Bones shattered, bodies burst, as the kineshield met the immovable force of the doors. The mortals were reduced to a red paste, flecked with pink and white.

He dropped the shield and the meat paste plopped wetly to the marble floor. Sweat beaded against Drask's skin, suddenly clammy. Witchlight leaked out from his eyes.

Psychic energy, built up after prolonged use, still boiled beneath his skin. He knew it was glowing, shifting like patterns of fire. Errant embers and sparks shot from his gauntlets.

The sorcerer lord removed his helmet and breathed an exhausted sigh. His transhuman physiognomy could cope with much, but the expenditure of his mental faculties had left his mind drained and weak. When he exhaled, his breaths shivered against the air, twisting like fireflies.

He knew he had much farther to go before this day would be finished. This was merely the next step on the path to his ascension, to the rising of his star.

The psychic energy boiled beneath his skin, eating at his mind, firing his ambitions, his emotions. The weariness in his bones surged, ached and then dissipated. Compensatory mantras and automatic systems within his armour flushed the exhaustion from him.

Hyper-clarity stole over his senses. Falling slabs of pulverised meat and the chattering chants of his attendant sorcerers lanced into his mind. Drask marshalled his strength and pushed against the doors. His psychic might fell upon them like a hammer, like a battering ram, like the adamantite fury of a ship's prow. His arms rose and then pushed against the air.

The doors did not budge. Recessed wards, cunningly wrought to lie beneath the friezes and murals, blazed into ferocious light. The blowback flung Drask across the room. The sorcerer lord, clad in treasured Tactical Dreadnought armour, left the ground, propelled by his own strength.

He crashed into the statue of an astropath. Stone did not just fracture, it disintegrated, crushing into flinders and dust. The surviving portions fell on him like rain. Shards of rock the size of his fist clattered into his war-plate. Dents appeared, then there was a sharp slicing pain in his upper torso.

Drask saw everything through a haze. His ears rang. His eyes barely functioned. His mind refused cognition. For a moment, he lost his sense of self, of his purpose. He knew only pain.

The sharp snap of broken bone brought Drask back to himself. With a roar of pain and effort, he summoned a small shield. A bubble of protective force surrounded the supine sorcerer lord.

Pushing himself to his feet, Drask nearly stumbled. The stubborn plates of his armour kept him upright. Servos whined then growled as they protested the

abuse.

The great golden doors offended his sight. Fading, the wards disappeared once more beneath the facade.

The crowing voices of Crimson Slaughter berserkers sworn to the Blood God, slain by Drask over a disagreement regarding the direction of the Chapter, shouted in his head, '*Charge the doors! Slay those within! Drink their blood and break their bones! Blood for the Blood...*'

His body, battered and bruised, began to move without the input of his recovering mind.

Drask, spurred on by the voices within his head, lowered his horns and charged the doors. Forced into a lumbering run by the cumbersome weight of his Terminator plate, Drask awoke to full consciousness in the moment before impact.

His horns punched into the soft gold, defacing the masterwork artistry that adorned them. Black corruption spiralled out from the impact. His helmet crunched in next. His spine compressed. Metal howled. Pain rippled down his back, through his abused bones, even through the heavy plate and fibre muscles.

The wards failed.

Drask pulled himself free. Golden light trailed from his staff as he gestured his sorcerers forward. They wrenched the doors open with their own psychic might.

Soporific vapour curled from within. Psy-dampeners hummed on the walls, great bulky machines covered in swirling etchings.

Ducking fat cables that hung from the ceiling, Drask entered the room. The feeble, tired minds of the astropaths beat at his own. But they were defeated. Their last gambit had failed.

Pods formed sigils that were supposedly pleasing to the Emperor and the choirs of his servants. Amniotic fluid gurgled within and Drask caught the wretched twitches of emaciated limbs through the dark liquid. Blood pinked the waters. Psychostigmatic wounds peppered the bodies he could see.

Some were dead, already beginning to pickle in their containers. Enough were alive.

Drask pulled a ritual knife from its sheath. Wicked, curved and wrought from some dark, porous metal, the knife was crusted with old blood, both human and xenos.

He approached the nearest pod and punched the glass. It shattered beneath the hammer-blow of his fist. Foetid liquid drained out, thick with nutrients and human waste. The body within twitched feebly and held up stick-thin arms to

ward off his next blow.

Drask hauled the squirming astropath free and began to cut.

INFILTRATION



I

In the empty reaches between stars, a shard of blackness detached itself from the greater dark. Long cold systems stirred into life. Machine-spirits emerged from hibernation with the quiet hum of re-ignition.

Steam and incense drifted through the depths of the Officio Assassinorum vessel. Lights blinked, muted, insistent, glowing in red, blue and green. Obsidian walls formed a coffin, a blank space devoid of comfort.

A form shuddered. Gasps of sudden breaths slipped from between a skull's rictus mask. Vapour condensed, froze and fell to the deck with a tinkle of ice.

Fluids gurgled down outstretched, flexing tubes. Some glowed a fitful yellow. Others were the sluggish flow of iron-rich blood. Lenses winked into light, green and searching. Fingers stretched and curled, then clenched into hard fists against leather armrests.

Chimes sounded through the vessel. The figure leaned forward, almost drunkenly, unaffected by the cold. Sheets of frost fell from the black sleeves, ice cracking. Breath rasped out from the steel teeth of a skull's mouth.

The figure tried to stand as vague panic settled in. Disorientation flooded his brain. Then understanding and familiarity took hold. The panic receded, replaced by cold certainty. Knowledge dawned while memories re-emerged from the mind's own hibernation. None were clear. He had been robbed of the privilege

for such experience by the gift that rode his genes.

The darkness around him thrummed. His heart beat a heavy drum, pounding in his ears, irregular at first, then settling into a healthy rhythm.

Long experience brought his arms and hands forwards, setting them to reawaken further dormant systems. The ship shuddered as its engine erupted into quiet life.

Warm air gusted through long disused vents and soon the maddening drip of water filled the ship's compartment as frost melted and water flowed.

Warmth spread down the figure's body. Tubes retracted from body sockets and pulled into the obsidian walls.

He flexed muscle groupings, drawing blood into anaesthetised meat and tissue. But he could not stand. The ship did not yet permit him to do so.

Augur and auspex chimed into mechanical life, defining the space around the ship. For hours, nothing broke the monotony of the deep void. Data danced across his eyes, moved across the empty spaces where windows waited, shuttered and cloistered. Mission exloads, target identities and allied force compositions stretched away, pulsing green and white.

The former were expected, almost comforting. Already plans and formulae pulsed through his mind. His training brought answers while the agility of his honed cognition filled gaps. But the latter was different, a variable he had never before encountered. He knew, in an academic manner, that it was almost unheard of for those such as he to deploy alongside others. Indeed, it was rarely necessary. None could stand his presence. His genes broke mortals.

The variable was disquieting. Outside the realm of his knowledge base, outside the realm of his comprehension, the fear of the unknown yawned wide, as cold and hungry as the void that surrounded his vessel. Iron training kept it quiet, kept the gulf of disquiet bridged and manageable. Still, it lingered, lurking at the back of his thoughts.

Windows opened, iron shutters receding, and the cold light of far distant stars twinkled into the cabin. The detritus of a space battle gently spun in the void. A planet beckoned beyond, thick with ash and storm clouds.

Warnings danced across the ship, the strident voices of angry machine-spirits manifesting as a droning wail. Proximity alerts and alarms buzzed into strident declamation. The figure silenced them all one by one. This was expected.

Heat shoved the small craft forward. It slowly rose in the cabin too. The figure within rocked his head from side to side, waiting for the satisfying crackling of relieved pressure. He followed with a swift cracking of the joints in his fingers.

Micro twitches swept through the figure's frame as adrenaline and apprehension built up. Anticipation flooded through his mind.

Lights stabbed out from the front of his vessel, spilling warm light into the void. Kilometres flashed by. The ship shook gently as minor space debris bounced off its frame.

The lights caught something, the reflexive shine of obsidian against the deep void. It grew, larger and larger, into the sleek predator outline of another vessel. Barely visible against its side was a small blue port. Already a pod was pulling away.

Brief engine light caught the machine-spirit's attention and the figure followed it.

The figure within began his final preparations.



II

Viktor Zhou stood on the edge of space and looked down. Achyllus Prime turned gently beneath him. Storms raged across its surface.

For a moment, Zhou thought he could see faces forming from the clouds. He blinked and they were gone.

He stood alone, waiting near one of the high orbit drop pods that would carry him to the world's benighted surface and his target. He preferred this. He knew himself, the only being he would and could ever trust beyond the God-Emperor's benevolence. No other being was worthy of his faith, save the God-Emperor. The presence of the Callidus Assassin, their past history, was a complication Zhou did not desire. The loathsome creatures with their false faces made his skin crawl. That the two had history, history that she apparently remembered, did not ease matters.

Viktor Zhou preferred to work with what he knew: his pistol, rifle, skills and training. He had never needed anything else, never even considered that he might.

His calling was one that brooked no other beings.

The black drop pod's door yawned open, ready to convey him to the surface. It was a small thing, designed for only one occupant. Bulky thrusters studded its outer surface, ready to realign the pod at the occupant's touch. Windows and vid-

picters watched him with empty glass stares.

He checked his exitus rounds, obsessively brushing imagined dust from their casings, repeating the prayers carved into the metal. He checked the inner workings of his rifle and pistol, not trusting the Callidus's potential meddling.

All was in order. All was as it should be.

The unease that had been eating at him around the other Assassins was rapidly fading. His soul no longer felt at war, prepared for the knife to carve into his back.

Viktor Zhau stepped into the drop pod, donned his mask and knew peace.

The Vanus muttered something over the vox as the drop pod fell away. A prayer of safe-passage, a reminder, inane words, wasted words. Zhau ignored them.

The drop pod fell.

Achyllus Prime caught the pod in gravity's embrace. Fire licked at the edge of the windows, the friction of atmospheric entry.

The Vindicare recited his calming prayers, his mantras.

'Let my aim be true, Golden Lord. Let my target be courageous. Let them be obvious. Let your judgement flow through me and render itself known through the righteousness of my skill. Grant that your enemies will fall in the name of the Throne that saves us all. Let those who profane your majesty be scourged by the cleansing shadows.'

High altitude wind snagged at the pod, pulling him off course. Zhau's fingers tapped commands into the pod's systems. Rockets ignited, angling him back toward his landing site.

A face leered from the fore-window, misshapen and mocking. A devil's face wrought from purple cloud vapour. Broken teeth gnawed at the glass.

Zhau resisted the urge to pull his pistol and erase the thing from his sight.

More daemon-things took interest in the pod.

Something heavy landed on top. Zhau could hear the scrape of talons against the hull, the bright shrieking of something that had no right to exist in the God-Emperor's demesne.

'As you faced the blasphemers in your time among us poor sinners, you taught us faith. Grant me your faith, your conviction, O Emperor. May you make of me an instrument of your holy will. Hollow this flesh and scour my soul of all sin. Let my hand enact your justice.' Zhau was almost yelling the prayer. The words slipped from his lips in a rapturous chant.

Hands clawed at windows and view-ports, ripping at the outer edges. He could hear claws writing runes. Skeletal fingers tapped out blasphemous paeans to

their heretical masters.

Zhau felt powerless. So he fell back into the prayers he had been taught. Fire scoured from the pod's rockets, engulfing the drop pod in a halo of cleansing flame.

Still the daemons shrieked and gibbered, their maddening voices crying out in invitation.

'Yea though the daemon may tempt me, though it might challenge my soul and my strength, I will triumph, for I enact your judgement. Through thy great gifts of life and duty will I serve thee, O Emperor!'

Certainty filled him. Righteousness granted him the strength of will to endure this drop. Faith soothed the raw edges of the Vindicare's soul, erased the anxiety that bloomed within.

As it hurtled through Achyllus Prime's tortured atmosphere, the drop pod corkscrewed.

Zhau blacked out.

He came to a second later, shutting his eyes against the rotating madness outside.

He tried to open his mouth, to offer a prayer to the God-Emperor, but the force was too much.

The altimeter ceased working, its screen broadcasting a meaningless scree of numbers and letters. He had no idea how far he was from the ground.

The boost rockets refused to answer his commands. The machine-spirit roared its wrath around him, speaking in the tongue of the wind.

The screens died, drowned in swirling white.

Hands beat against the outer hull. A woman's voice cried for aid.

Zhau could do nothing except merely endure.

The blinding white lifted and Zhau saw the ground. The light of Achyllus's sun bathed the pod in its glow.

He had made it through the cloud layer. The inner consoles died and were resurrected. Alarms screamed into being. The rockets ignited in a burst of the machine-spirit's rage.

An empty plain, mottled with stains of red, brown and green, stretched beneath him.

A vast weight punched Zhau backwards. Emergency systems enacted and the pod slowed down. It landed, punching a crater into the earth.

The door popped open as explosive hinges flashed into life.

Viktor Zhau rose from the drop pod, rifle held at the ready. He whispered one

word into the vox, calm despite the blood that pounded through his vessels.
'Deployed.'



III

Zhau's first act out of the pod was to ascertain his location, to find how far off course the winds and the daemons had taken him. Few landmarks stood proud of the plain and only one mattered.

It was impossible to miss. The Astropathic Sanctum loomed kilometres in the distance. Even without the imposing edifice towering into the sky, the swirling bridge that connected it to orbit would have drawn his attention.

Bodies stretched all around him, bloating and rotting in the sun. The stench was horrific, barely filtered by his spy mask.

Zhau turned one over. Gas burped up from the corpse's slack mouth, and flesh fell away in his hand, but the unit markings were still legible. The purple eyes that spoke of the genetic legacy of Cadia faced a turquoise sky. Cadian Astra Militarum.

Great wounds had been torn through the body and the others all around. The corpses stretched nearly as far as Zhau could see. Some were consistent with bolter trauma. Others were more esoteric.

By the decrepit state of the bodies, and the fluids seeping into the ground around them, Zhau judged the soldiers to have been slaughtered a few weeks prior.

It mattered little. These Cadians had failed in their Emperor-given duty. They

had allowed horror to take root on this planet, to walk its surface unanswered.

His intelligence corroborated, Zhau ignored the bodies. They were irrelevant, their only use in proving the disgusting proclivities of the Archenemy.

The plain was a churned mess, carpeted with the Cadian dead. A fog drifted from them, shimmering almost green against the turquoise sky. Rotten eggs and decomposing flesh turned the air into a disgusting soup of noxious fumes.

Zhau picked his way through them, a black ghost moving through the fields of the dead. Strange sounds echoed: the groaning wheeze of corpse gas through tattered lips, the tearing of flesh and the cries of carrion creatures.

Every so often, Zhau caught the distant *crump* of an explosion as shifting bodies touched off failing ammunition.

Cultists, garbed in mismatched carapace and moth-eaten uniforms, patrolled through the dead. They were sloppy, inattentive. Their Dark Masters already controlled this world, so they believed themselves beyond reproach, or so they acted.

None noticed the Vindicare's presence. When a knot of the chattering brutes passed too close, Zhau would prostrate himself flat into the mud. Sludge oozed beneath his chest. His cloak slipped over his head.

His breathing was controlled, almost non-existent. The lenses of his mask tracked nearby movement, but something interfered, preventing accurate tracking.

Zhau slithered deeper into the ooze, burrowing between the crevasse formed by two bodies.

Cultists passed nearly five metres away. They laughed in some mongrel tongue, all harsh syllables and rasping humour.

Zhau rose like a spectre of death after their passing. He shook his cloak, brushed as much of the foulness away as he could. The cameleoline garment weighed heavily upon him, but it broke his silhouette and merged his colours with the landscape.

A kilometre from the tower he began to follow the patrol routes of the traitors, shadowing their steps. They all emerged from a central location, all traced the same paths. A pattern emerged, evidence of a guiding intelligence.

More munitions cooked off in the distance, brief flashes that stirred the fog. The vibrations upset the corpses; wheezes cried out from slack jaws in a symphony of the failed dead.

An opening yawned in the sanctum's base, clear of corpses. Blast doors sprawled metres away, ripped from their hinges. The ground before the opening

was melted and fused.

‘I’ve found our entrance point,’ Zhou said. He panned his scope around.

There was a slight delay through the vox, a crackle of static that sounded almost like voices. Zhou mouthed a prayer to the Emperor in His guise as the Machine-God that communications would improve.

‘I know what you did,’ Adamta hissed. The man’s good humour was gone, as if it had never existed. This voice was cold, calculated and furious. ‘I followed the trail on Ymber, after we left. There is always data left behind.’

Zhou said nothing for a moment. ‘She got in the way.’

A cultist walked through his field of view, robed and cowled in green and black. Tumours and growths erupted from the woman’s flesh.

‘Got in the way of what?’ Adamta asked, smoke and static mangling his voice.

Through the lens of his exitus rifle’s scope, Zhou pierced the darkness. Immediately inside the entrance crackled several small fires. Cultists milled and lounged around them. Each was armed with a motley collection of weaponry, a scattering of lasguns, autorifles and close combat weaponry.

Nothing was immediately threatening.

‘My mission. I was entrusted by the authority of my Temple and the God-Emperor to eliminate the target. I do not tolerate outside variables,’ Zhou finally responded.

‘And another Assassin’s presence constitutes an outside variable?’ While Zhou was not a keen student of the nuances of human interaction, even he could tell that Adamta already knew the answer.

‘Quite,’ said Zhou. The link went dead.

Something moved beside him. Zhou’s attention snapped to his close surroundings. A close knot of dead soldiers met his gaze from the floor. Decomposition ravaged these corpses more than their fellows. Holes crawling with buzzing flies provided glimpses to spoiled internal organs. Glassy eyes watched the sky for a salvation denied to them.

The Emperor would never harbour failures such as these. A place at the Golden Throne’s side was purchased with success and victory.

Just as he turned to survey the sanctum once more, he caught movement. The chest of the nearest corpse rose. Impossibly, it seemed to be breathing.

Flies boiled out from a hole in a woman’s stomach. Buzzing angrily in the air, the insects formed a dense cloud. The mottled hands that had, in life, tried to keep the wound closed, fell away, squelching into the noxious muck. Wriggling maggots fled the corpse, spilling on to the ground. Her skin distended. A dribble

of oily black blood leaked from the wound.

Five grubs punched free, splitting the skin and feeling the air. Zhou watched in fascinated distaste. An arm followed the grubs and the sight clicked in the Vindicare's mind. Not grubs, but fingers.

More skin ripped and a ringed maw chewed free. Gimlet yellow eyes watched the Assassin. One closed in a slow wink. A fat, bloated creature crawled free, slipped from the body and fell into the muck. Its thick, wormlike limbs waggled in the air for a moment, trying to right its body.

Zhou's pistol coughed and the creature burst like an oil-filled balloon.

The bodies around him shifted. More of the noxious daemon-things crawled free and blinked at the weak sunlight. Tongues licked out from between needle teeth, tasting the air.

The Vindicare froze. Slowly, the daemons turned to face him. Their tongues flickered out. Beetle maws rasped a buzzing drone.

With deceptive speed, the daemons swarmed. A chittering whine pierced his mind. Zhou danced back, running across the unsteady carpet of the dead.

Tiny hands snagged at his ankles. Zhou nearly fell as bright lines of pain scratched across them.

Bone clasps caught his cloak, ripping him backwards. Zhou stumbled a step. Only his reflexes, so fast they bordered on transhuman, saved him. Nearly wrenched off balance, Zhou teetered across the rot-slick surface of corpses. He severed his cloak, lamented its loss and mouthed a prayer to the Emperor on High.

The tiny daemon-things crowed with victory, then realised their failure. They advanced on him like a rogue wave, all horrifying motion. Detail was lost in the mass, the chittering horrors melding together into one disgusting horde that owed its image more to liquid than the solid individuals that comprised it. A tide of bruised skin and decomposing flesh, broken horn and chitin, chased the Vindicare through the fields of the last stand of the Cadians on Achyllus Prime.

A weight landed on his shoulders. Zhou reached to pull it off, his imagination filling in the horrifying details of the daemon that had landed on him. He was still trying to grab it when jagged teeth stabbed into the meat of his shoulder. Creeping fever heat spread from the wound.

Yanking on the latched creature, a sack of loose skin and necrotised flesh, Zhou hurled it from his shoulder. Blood flashed, spurting from the bite wound. He fired his pistol, bursting the daemon in midair.

The distraction slowed him, and the daemons rushed closer. Their insect voices

rose in victory. Tiny hands, full of sharp bones splitting from rotting flesh, snatched at him.

Fat flies shadowed over them. Thick streams of the black insects covered the sky, blocking out the fog and the weak sun.

The Vindicare stopped, turned and emptied his exitus pistol into the horrors. Bodies popped with grotesque finality, showering their shrieking comrades in pus and reeking fluid. His pistol chimed, starved of ammunition.

He was a weapon crafted to eradicate a single target. He had no true weapons to counteract this threat, this horde of daemons.

Prayers brought calm and clarity. Inferno rounds, originally designed for use in the Adeptus Astartes, but repurposed for his exitus weaponry, provided the answer. He carefully slid a clip of them into his pistol as he ran. His aim was sloppy, accuracy stolen by the immediacy of the threat. There were too many daemons.

Zhau ran on, bouncing across the bloated bodies of dead Cadians. Fever sweat broke against his brow. Laboured breathing burst from between his lips. Disgusting, too slow; the wound would kill him.

Bright spots of detected metal flashed against his mask. A series of blink-clicked orders had the mask detail out the length and breadth of the minefield. Zhau sprinted down it as the daemons flowed after him. Their passage was too light to set off the mines. Zhau needed an out, required shelter from what he planned. Then it dawned on him – if his pod could resist the stress of atmospheric entry, it could resist the explosion of mines.

But still they came. Gas swirled in the wake of his flight, disturbed by the sudden movement. Pale green it glowed, drifting up from the bodies of the slain.

Zhau neared the crater where his drop pod lay. The massive horde followed, howling in idiotic fury. The Vindicare launched himself from the lip, dirt crumbling beneath his feet. He spun as he flew through the air, sighted on a nearby mine. His mask extrapolated overlapping fields of explosive ordnance.

He finger depressed the trigger of the pistol. Inferno rounds, their cores filled with promethium, punched into the centre of the horde of chattering daemons. There was a brief *crump*.

Then the world flashed red with fire.

Zhau awoke to the sound of voices. For a moment, he couldn't understand them. The words were washed out, the tone bleached of all meaning.

He tried to pull his pistol from its holster, to aim it at the voices. Cultists, his

bleary mind thought, manufacturing the broken language of the Archenemy.

Then he caught his name. ‘Emperor’s hells, Zhau. What is happening down there?’ asked Adamta.

‘Fire,’ Zhau croaked.

‘We can see that, Vindicare,’ said Rhasc. ‘A plume of fire just erupted around the Astropathic Sanctum.’

‘Yes. The gas. The daemons.’ Zhau despised the confusion in his voice. Emperor damn him, where was the certainty, the calmness? It had all fled, banished by this accursed grogginess.

Zhau sat up and his vision swam.

‘I think I have blown our cover.’ He propped himself up on one elbow and checked his body for injuries. The Emperor had smiled on him and he had come through the experience mostly intact.



IV

Klara Rhasc had seen dozens of worlds over the course of her service to the Imperium, the Temples and the God-Emperor, each in a state of ruin and fallen to the wiles of some enemy or other. She had developed a jaded eye, a casual lack of interest or imagination. All the worlds in humanity's demesne were the same, at the core, shaped by the whims of the Emperor's chosen species.

She expected Achyllus Prime would be the same. Even from orbit, it looked much like all the other worlds lost to war. The drop into its atmosphere opened her eyes and revealed her assumptions for a lie.

The drop itself was a harrowing experience, stuck in an enclosed environment with the horrors that haunted Achyllus Prime's atmosphere. Great winged things warred with one another in the turbulent skies of the planet. Voices and cries haunted the vox. She passed through layer after layer of smoke and cloud before finally slamming into the ground.

A claw punched into the pod, then pulled out with a screech of rending metal. Desperate air whistled in, stirring her hair. The temperature plummeted. Spice and salt rode the air in the corrupt richness of the Archenemy's depredation.

The claw came again, next to Rhasc's head. It scrabbled and tore. She could hear the grunting wheeze of some great beast's breath, smell the foetid reek of rotting flesh.

Restrained in her drop harness, Rhasc could do little to stop the creature. She hauled at the straps, trying to reach the emergency release clips. They stuck fast. Daylight winked in, bathing the cool darkness of the ship's interior with the angry light of Achyllus's sun.

Shadows passed over the hole opposite her. A great eye stared out from beyond, green and gold flecked with a curved pupil wrought into some blasphemous rune. It blinked slowly. Nictitating lids coated the eye with luminous slime.

The Callidus Assassin reached a knife, drew it across the thick cloth of the restraint straps. With a snap, they parted.

The eye shifted to watch the movement. Rhasc pulled her punch dagger free and stabbed it into the organ. Something screamed against her skull. It squealed and rasped in a voice like sandpaper and steel.

Her drop was unimpeded after that.

She made landfall in a crater, slamming into the earth. Torq's pod landed near her own. The seals popped and Rhasc leapt out. Torq shoved past her and halted.

'Someone's left a mark,' he breathed. He coughed a rasping laugh.

A scorched plane stretched before her, littered with bones and burning embers.

The Vindicare was waiting for them.

'Emperor spare me from the humour of Eversors,' he said. The grogginess was gone from his voice. He was back to his calm, cool self. His rifle was clutched loosely in his grasp.

'The Astropathic Sanctum is this way.' He gestured at the vast structure rising into the sky.

Light flickered out from it, shimmering in colours that mankind was never supposed to give name to or witness.

'I can see that,' Rhasc said. She checked her weaponry, ensuring all was placed as it should be. Her thumb ran down the edge of her sword. Blood pooled at the cut. 'Which dialect was the enemy using? What mongrel tongue?'

'I know not,' Zhau answered. His hands made to smooth at a cloak that wasn't there. 'I am not conversant in the particulars of the languages of ruin. In my experience, I rarely come close enough to hear them.'

'Useless,' she muttered in response.

Torq hugged himself, arms wrapped around his sides. 'Go,' he said. 'Hunt.'

'Wait, Eversor. We will deploy together,' said Rhasc.

His response was a spit-wet growl.

'The Archenemy will know we are here. We should get moving,' Zhau

reminded her.

The Assassins started to run through the field of scorched dead.



V

Gothic spires reared into the sky above them. Rhasc glanced up and recoiled. Impossibly, she could see the Temple of Shades looming in the atmosphere. Corposant licked along the sides of the Astropathic Sanctum. Light flowed like water. It streamed down the high gothic splendour of the building. A bridge of colour connected the two.

Rhasc waited before the entrance to the Astropathic Sanctum. Ash-dusted rags lay over her bodyglove, scraps stripped from singed Cadian uniforms. She had removed her mask, coating her face in the flash-dried earth and the cracked bones of the dead.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Torq clamber over the side of the massive entry hall, perching atop the carved lintel like some skull-faced gargoyle. A few centimetres between her shoulder blades whispered of Zhau's trained rifle. The feeling was surely just paranoia, but the Vindicare had shot her before. Sympathetic pain radiated from the mass of scar tissue along her side.

The Callidus Assassin affected a limp, a hitching stumble in her walk as she stepped into the fire-flickered gloom of the sanctum's entry hall.

Cultists were already stumbling to their feet, guns and weapons appearing in their hands. Brutal features stared at her in slack-jawed amazement.

She had a second to guess the language they would speak, would understand.

From the clan markings, the tattoos and pact symbols, she gathered much. Ethnic features, warped by the tides of the Great Eye, further differentiated these dregs from baseline humanity. But the bastardised languages of the Archenemy were many and ever shifting.

She selected one and hoped for the best. *'Zzar khayas,'* she stammered.

'Sacrizier fuer. Camerad sacrizie khayas.'

The words were disgusting on her tongue. Already, she felt a headache forming.

She pointed outside. *'Zzar,'* she pleaded.

The cultists boiled past her and into the sunlight.

A distant crack sounded and one of the cultists flew backwards. The back of the man's skull exploded in a spray of blood and brain matter.

Rhasc followed, a stab of her sword slicing through a tattooed woman's spine. She swept upward, bisecting the body in a wash of gore.

Then Torq descended.

The false face's use of the Archenemy's language bled into the Eversor's mind, eating at the coherence he was rapidly losing grip on. The killing haze pounded through his vision. All colour, all meaning was bleached from the world.

He needed to kill. To rend, maim and to feel the bright wash of blood against his skin. The Eversor listened as the Callidus spun her web, drawing the cultists into the open where they could die beneath the broken light of the sun.

They boiled out, away from their cover and their barricades. Confusion took them as the Vindicare claimed the first kill.

Torq fell. His sword crunched through the skull of a short, fat man. He grabbed the arm of the woman beside him, punched his knife-tipped fingers into her pale flesh. Neurotoxins swam into her system and the woman went into convulsions. Blood and the liquefied remains of her organs spewed from her mouth and nose as she screamed into the ground.

Cultists turned to face this new fate that stole upon them.

'Come, wretches,' Torq bulled. *'I will break your bones and tear free your spines.'*

Torq was doom. He was death. Trained and honed by the masters of the Eversor Temple, his mind unshackled by the limitations of reason and logic by chemical cocktails, Torq tore through the two-score cultists that milled in front of the Astropathic Sanctum.

Blood flashed through the air, spraying from torn arteries, pumped by failing hearts. The rapid, muffled boom of sniper rounds culled a number of too-brave

cultists who tried to stall the Eversor.

Rhasc danced past him, somersaulting into a knot of the enemy. Her neural shredder whined and men fell with their nerves liquefied.

But none could challenge Torq, or surpass this broken shell. He swung his power sword into a mutation-bulked slab of muscle that had once been human. The creature blabbered and shook as his sword lodged in its abdominal cavity, slicing into intestine and bone. It stuck fast, but Torq used the sword as a climbing tool. He pulled himself up and thundered his fist into the mewling mockery of the mutant's face.

Two quick cracks of his fist saw blood and bone spraying. His third assault was with his open hand, almost a slap. Then he gripped and pulled the mutant's face off. The Eversor flung the scrap of flesh into a knot of terrified men and women. He drew his pistol, shoved the wide barrel into the thing's ruined face, then unloaded bolt after bolt until it began to sway and fall.

He flipped backwards, using the momentum to jerk his sword free. A spinning kick broke a beast-horned mutant's neck and spun its head around until it faced back the way it came.

Torq exulted. This was where he was meant to be. This was where the chemicals kept him happy, kept him centred in rage. Gone was the pathetic weakness of his mind, his personality. It was subsumed beneath the haze that filled his hands with meat and blood.

Las-rounds flew through the air as scattered cultists fired in their panic. The *crackle* and *crump* of exploding ordnance announced hastily hurled grenades. These dregs were no match for the peerless killers that stalked through their ranks.

Cultists pulled out grenades. Zhau shot them out from their mongrel hands; some exploded in midair while others landed in the midst of startled groups of survivors. Rhasc moved through them like a deadly shadow, her blades carving lethal furrows with poison and edge.

Torq wrecked cultists like a blood-fuelled machine. The chemicals in his blood drove him to heights of slaughter and destruction. Where he moved, only chunks of quivering flesh remained. The thirsty ground, flash-dried by the corpse-gas explosion, swallowed the blood and viscera.

Torq killed until no one remained alive. Rhasc and Zhau stood before the Eversor. He almost swung at them too. The Callidus held up a hand and he stopped, his head cocked to the side in puzzlement. Great breaths hurtled out of his mouth. His chest heaved and blood slowly dripped from his hands and

helmet. But the victory was hollow. There was no challenge in these mewling creatures. They were mere scraps of flesh, a waste of his talents and his fury.

‘Enough, Torq. They’re dead. They’re all dead,’ Rhasc said.

He curled in on himself mentally. ‘More,’ he said.

‘There will be more inside,’ Zhau said, pointing at the sanctum where the fires still flickered.

Rhasc wiped the blood free from her blades and dropped the filthy cultist rags she had been using for the purpose on the ground.

The crude fires burned down to sullen coals. Hasty barricades, crafted from the rotting bodies of fallen Cadians, divided the entrance hall. Their glassy eyes watched as the Assassins made ready to ascend into the darkness. That watchfulness filled the atmosphere, settling thick along her bones. She kept catching the flicker of movement out of the corner of her eyes. Her keen senses, her instinct, screamed that something was wrong here, that the Assassins were not alone. But no threat faced them, just the eerie murk of the corrupt Astropathic Sanctum.

Screams echoed down the dark stairs in the building. Blood dripped down the steps. The walls slowly expanded and contracted. The building was breathing, Rhasc realised with a shock. Corruption, like everywhere else on this world, had sunk its claws deep.

Shapes swam through the stone, like living friezes. Hands stretched out from the granite. Faces screamed in stony silence. Runes shivered and spat sparks.

Sunlight glinted far above. Booted feet echoed from the high reaches. Distant voices spoke in the mongrel tongues of the Archenemy. Above it all, at the pinnacle of the building, stone floated in looping patterns, caught by the aetheric whimsy of the Sea of Souls.

Rhasc kept her eyes focused on the Vindicare and the Eversor.

‘Shall we?’ she asked.

Torq’s response hissed out through spit-slick teeth.

‘Yes.’



VI

Las-bolts whickered down from above, splitting the darkness with bright red stabs of light. A metal ball arced through the cavernous interior and tinkled down between Rhasc's feet.

Rhasc recognised the grenade. She gripped it with her feet, spun a cartwheel and flung it back up from whence it came. The explosion seconds later brought a shower of dust out from the walls. A stone bannister, carved to resemble a multi-limbed gargoyle with a child's face, broke away and crashed to the ground hundreds of metres below. A massive chunk of the landing fell with it. Cultists screamed as they tumbled into the darkness before being silenced in wet bursts of flesh and blood.

Beneath them, just for a moment, Rhasc caught the faint scrabble of claws on stone. The snick-click of bone hooks scratched into her ears. A heavy animal breathing sound huffed through the shadows. Then it was drowned by the ensuing combat.

Rhasc took the stairs three at a time. The footing was made treacherous by the dripping, sticky blood, but she was an Assassin of the Callidus Temple and made to operate in extremis. At the stair before the landing, she vaulted into the air. She flung out a fan of poisoned knives which studded into eyes and hearts.

She landed in a crouch. Her phase sword licked outwards. The green blade

flickered in and out of sync with reality. Blood spurted and limbs flew. She pulled the phase sword out, swept it sideways, and cut a cultist off at the knees. The man cried out in shock and pain as he fell.

More cultists streamed down from the upper levels. Confident in their numbers, the babbling hordes of the Archenemy came to destroy the interlopers. She could not shake the feeling that something was very wrong here, beyond the obvious corruption that afflicted everything.

Las-fire cut through the air. The sanctum strobed with red. The cultists' accuracy diminished the more they fired, their mortal eyes unable to cope with the shifting light.

Rhasc had no such trouble. Her mask's lenses resolved the irritation. Knives twirling, punch dagger stabbing, Rhasc carved her way through the damned.

Torq shoved past the Callidus. He sprinted into the volleys of las-fire. His executioner pistol spat needles and bolts into the front ranks. Cultists fell along the left side, towards the shifting walls. The Eversor forged a wedge clear in the teeming mass of Archenemy.

The Eversor lowered his shoulder as he ran. The flensing knives of his neuro-gauntlet swept out, cutting through the mass. He hit a mutant with two vestigial heads emerging from its neck above the sternum and pushed the monstrosity into its fellows. Panic broke out among the cultists.

Sniper fire took out any who looked to be resisting the chaos, those who tried to lead and calm their comrades. Panicking cultists swarmed, stampeding. They began to shove and jostle at one another. Torq could almost taste their desperation. More cultists impacted against his shoulder. He heaved and flung them over the edge.

Cultists fell away. Claws scrabbled against his bodysuit. Red lines of pain crawled across his skin as knives found his flesh. Blood trickled from the wounds, thick and sluggish. A lasburn grazed his right bicep.

Torq howled to the uncaring universe. These dregs did not deserve the honour of his fists. They deserved only the killing edge. Throats parted as he sawed his sword through cultists' necks. A woman with the face of a toad gurgled as blood sheeted from her neck.

Another five died in pieces, cut and carved, maimed and broken. His sword was a whirlwind. His appearance was death.

Torq was vaguely aware of Rhasc behind him as he slaughtered his way up the stairs. She finished those he left behind, the broken and the mewling.

Breaking before him, the cultists tried to turn and run, but none could escape his reach. Some chose to leap to suicide rather than face this avatar of Imperial vengeance in their midst. Torq's fury rose all the higher when these cowards fled from him.

At the next landing, the cultists ran away into the dark corridors that webbed the Astropathic Sanctum.

One door yawned wide. Flapping footsteps echoed from the hall. Torq began to give chase.

'Control yourself, Eversor,' the Vindicare said with mild disdain.

Torq paused. Something in the words spoke to the tiny nugget of discipline that lurked in his heart.

'Slaughter them after the primary target has been eliminated, Torq,' exhorted Rhasc.

Headache pain bloomed white-hot in Torq's skull as they neared the summit of the tower. The combat drugs that swam through his blood began to unravel, leaving the haze of chemical hangover.

Sunlight burned into his eyes. It came from a crack in the sanctum's walls. The edges of the rock glowed cherry red, molten from the fury of what had broken through. A drop pod, plain and black, lay on the landing. The door was missing.

The stone on this landing was shifted, crystalline and dancing with echoed fire through the mineral striations. Petrified hands and horrified faces reached out from within. But the sickening feeling of corruption was gone, missing, torn away and dampened.

Something ticked away at Torq's mind. A niggling presence, an annoyance, a shred of thought, demanded his attention. An aura suffused the air.

He felt dead inside, hollowed out and empty. Even the fury that hobbled his mind, that freed his body to accomplish his kills, rested. His legs burned from the effort of climbing so high.

His voice, when he spoke, was nearly normal, slurred only with the onset of exhaustion. Indicators winked into life on his support pack. Tubes that fed into sockets all along the Eversor's neck and back began to swell. Further stimms entered his bloodstream. 'Were we expecting another Assassin?'

Rhasc examined the drop pod. 'Adamta said nothing of another one coming.'

It was the same type of craft that had brought each of them to this world, and to countless others.

Dismembered mutants lay in a circle around the craft. Terror studded what remained of their bestial faces.

‘It would appear that the Vanus was withholding information,’ Zhau said. No hint of surprise lurked in the bland Vindicare’s tone. He trailed a gloved hand through the blood. His eyes followed the arcing spray of vitae along the walls. ‘Dead for at least an hour,’ he stated.

Rhasc’s unease spiked, even past the bristling insinuations and presence of the Vindicare.

Her neural shredder flickered into her hand, but nothing emerged from the darkness.



VII

Broken bodies lined their ascent. Mouths gaped in silent terror. Glassy eyes stared widely from ritually scarified features.

They moved silently, even Torq. Zhau led them.

Reasoning and meaning pressed through the chemicals that tainted Torq's mind.

The rock here was striated with passages, each wrought with Gothic numerals and grinning gargoyles. Shifting sounds of crackling, falling rock echoed from within. No cultists emerged to challenge them.

The darkness itself was gone, missing from the heights. Instead, the Assassins were bombarded by the shifting madness of the upper chambers. The ceiling pulsed whenever Torq looked up, morphing from transparency to defiled murals desecrated with blood. When it turned empty, when the ceiling fell away, Torq was confronted with the enormity of the Temple of Shades. Between the sanctum and the fane lurked the spoiling warp. Great shapes swam through the space, owing no fealty to reality or the laws of logic and reason.

His fingers kept coming together, sliding across in chalkboard whines as sparks danced between the knife-tips.

The dead mocked him, brought the echo of rage stirring. They offered no relief, no sport to his torment. That they had already faced the Emperor's judgement brought no solace.

The sanctum expanded at the top. The stairs ended. A great plaza, once lined with stone and gold statues of the frail men and women who had served in this building, stretched away. Those statues were now strewn across the floor, dividing the room into a maze of shattered glory. Heat haze, or something like it, stirred ripples through the lazy air. Mammoth doors, vast and gold, were wrenched open.

Light and swirling colour pulsed from within.

Torq felt an itch hum into his gums, a small rattle against his teeth.

Thunder-cracks split the fragile environment. Bolt shells lanced through the air. The Assassins fell to the ground.

Booted feet, driven by tremendous strength and depthless malice, crunched the flagstones. Blasphemous war cries tore into the room. A bolt hit the gold face of a fallen astropath statue to his left. Splinters and shards broke away and whickering snaps of shrapnel carved through the air, cutting into Torq's flesh.

Torq smiled, teeth bared in a rictus grin. He rose to his feet and began to laugh.

Cultists were nothing compared to this threat, this challenge.

‘Come, traitors and oathbreakers. Come and face Torq of the Eversor. Come and face the judgement of the Throne of Terra. Come and face death!’

Disappointment flooded through his veins. There were only seven of the turncoats. Seven of the giants in red and gold, veterans of the Long War and servants of ruin, dared to face him. Pitiful creatures.

Sneering their own reply, the Chaos Space Marines charged through the broken field of statues. Torq met them.

These power-armoured behemoths dwarfed the Assassin. Torq faced two of the traitors. He brandished his sword, splaying his neural gauntlet.

Horned heads lowered and screaming chainswords gunned for the Eversor. He blocked one with his power sword. The weapon's molecular dissonance field erupted into angry life, flashing with coruscating electrical discharge. Teeth from the chainsword flew off the weapon. Adamantine-tipped knives created a storm of deadly edges. Torq ignored the pinpricks of pain that swatted at his flesh. Pain was nothing. Blood was nothing. He saw only red.

The battlefield narrowed. The plight of his comrades, his fellow Assassins, bled away from his mind. They meant nothing in the moment. Torq could hear them in some distant corner of his mind. Could hear the coordination they were attempting, the desperation of their own battles, but he was unheeding.

His sword carved through the air, snapping through space faster than the human eye could follow. The traitor's hand separated from its wrist. The Chaos Space

Marine roared in response. A red gauntleted hand swept forward, fast as muscle-cables and ceramite would allow, and thundered into the side of Torq's head.

The Eversor saw sprites of flashing stars dance through his vision. Blood leaked from between the teeth of his skull mask. Part of the mask slipped to the ground, shattering like porcelain.

Bellowing a prayer to its blasphemous gods, the other Crimson Slaughter Space Marine tackled the Eversor. Oily as a snake, Torq slipped from its crushing grip. The five tips of his neural-gauntlet punched into the back of the traitor's helmeted skull. Mounted tubes gurgled and bright neurotoxin flowed directly into the Crimson Slaughter's brain.

Shudders wracked the traitor as toxins ate into his nervous system. Boots hammered into the stone. Convulsions wracked the Crimson Slaughter. He died with sudden finality.

The one whose hand he had stolen switched to his bolter. The weapon chattered as it sprayed fire at the Eversor.

Torq cursed and rolled. He jinked and danced. Nearly inhuman reflexes pushed him forwards. The chemicals that stole his mind pushed him forwards. Gravel slipped under his feet.

The Chaos Space Marine walked backwards as he fired, tracking the Assassin with a storm of bolts. It backed unknowingly into a corner formed by two fallen statues.

Torq ran up the side of one, clawing himself up with quick stabs of his gauntlet. The Chaos Space Marine was slow to address this sudden change in position. Torq's own pistol leapt into his hand. He opened fire.

Toxic darts flew from the pistol. Studding into the joints between the Crimson Slaughter's war-plate, the darts delivered more of the neurotoxin.

A hand grabbed the Eversor's ankle.

'Not again, false face,' he growled. A memory of fog and pain crawled into his abused mind.

Instead of the Callidus Assassin's mocking, a voice made of abandoned sepulchres and toxic knowledge answered. Torq was pulled down and slammed into the plaza's floor.

His sensorium pack cracked and the acrid stench of stimms flooded the air. The rich iron stink of his own blood mingled with the dust.

Shudders and tics marred the Chaos Space Marine as it loomed over him. Blood and bright green neurotoxin wept freely from the puncture wounds in its helmet. It said something again as it aimed its bolter at his face.

Torq was beginning to rise, beginning to spit his own response, when a new puncture wound joined the five others. Smoke curled out from the hole in the traitor's helmet.

It slumped as it stood, still as a statue.

Torq groaned in frustration. 'Mine,' he said.

'No,' answered Zhau. A whispered prayer ghosted over the vox, driven by the Vindicare's calm voice. 'Thus do the enemies of the Emperor find the judgement of the righteous. Let light and—'

Torq tuned him out, cutting the vox-link in a flash of anger.

Torq sought the Vindicare through the melee, past the blur of speed and grace that was Rhasc as she engaged three Chaos Space Marines. Torq was taken aback for a moment, stunned by the artistry of the Callidus's movements. She was a dodging blur, flowing between buzzing chainswords driven by monstrous strength. One hit would be enough to destroy her and yet she endured. She danced like water out of the way of the attacks. Rhasc mounted her own returns, pinpricks of poison with a knife in her left hand and her punch dagger in her right. Blood streamed over the clotted red plates of the traitors' power armour.

Even as he watched, as he ran forward, one of the Chaos Space Marines fell with her dagger slipping out of its gorget.

Zhau claimed another with a crack of his exitus rifle. This time the traitor's chest cavity erupted in gore and shards of black bone.

Four traitors remained. Torq leapt onto the back of the one still facing against Rhasc. It was turning from the Callidus as it heard his sudden approach. By then, it was already too late. Torq flew through the air and landed on top of its powerpack.

His sword carved into the traitor's spine while his neuro-gauntlet punched through its skull. It toppled forward and Torq used the momentum to sprint to the remaining three.

Renewed bolter fire announced the arrival of reinforcements. Seven had not been enough, Torq knew. Now the traitors did as well. The room fairly shook with the tramping of their boots. Blasphemous oaths and paeans to the unholy beings who they claimed to worship, filled the space.

Torq saw their numbers and even he knew they presaged death. The three Assassins were outmatched, outgunned.

The Eversor bellowed his fury, raised his pistol, and then felt his anger bleed away to be replaced by paranoia. Distrust latched onto his soul and he turned on Rhasc, who ran beside him.

A black-clad figure clambered over the ruins of a robed statue. Its hands twitched and grenades fell among the traitors.

A hollow feeling blooms inside the Eversor, bleeding in the twitching remnants of his pain. This is fear. This is the place he will not go; he takes the drugs to keep away. He is alone with himself, the bleeding remnants of the man he could be, should have been.

Sylas Torq can do nothing. He is trapped. He is alone with himself, his true self. All he can see is the bone-white grin of a skull.

The figure stood between three of the Traitor Space Marines. Their motions were furtive, wary. Their attacks were almost half-hearted. The figure drifted between them like a ghost. It carried no weapons in its hands.

Instead, the figure shimmered close and reached out to rest a hand on a traitor's pauldron.

A scream wailed free from the Crimson Slaughter, thick with gurgling blood. Its gauntleted hands wrapped around its own skull as the hideous sounds broadcast from its vox grille.

The figure dropped a small object at the feet of the other two. The object burst a second later in a shower of golden light. Babbles of incoherent speech curdled free from the Chaos Space Marines. Soul-light streamed from their heads.

The lens mounted on the left side of the figure's helmet drew in the light. He paused a moment.

A beam of energy shot free from the lens, scratching against Torq's mind. The newcomer wielded the beam like a scalpel, carving into the two, unmaking the gibbering wrecks.

The lens clicked and the light died.



VIII

The fourth Assassin approached his comrades.

Blackness blocked out the twitching warp light above them. The dismal gloom of the sanctum grew thicker. Rhasc, Torq and Zhau all had weapons ready, but something held them back.

Rhasc's heart began to beat faster, past the adrenaline still flowing through her system after the battle against the Traitor Space Marines. Who was this? *What* was this?

The figure approached without threat, without obvious weapons. A skull mask, almost akin to the one that locked away Torq's brutal features, grinned its porcelain humour at them. The steps were quiet, sure and calm.

The figure spread his hands wide, a gesture of peace, of stayed conflict.

The sense of wrongness increased in the room. Rhasc's heart beat faster. The white skull grinned.

'What are you?' Torq muttered. The Eversor puffed himself up. Rhasc could see his muscles twitch as he worked himself up into a threat posture.

The wrongness grew, becoming oppressive, almost painful.

Clicking and whirring, a lens rose from the skull mask's temple and swept over them.

A voice croaked out from the figure. It was a halting thing, dry throated and

broken. 'Culexus Temple,' it said.

Rhasc was stunned. Every Assassin knew the rumours, the tales that another Temple existed. In an organisation as fraught with secrecy as the *Officio Assassinorum*, legends abounded. It was a way of creating a mythology, of tying their individual exploits into a greater narrative. Stories spoke of another Temple, its agents skull-faced like the Eversors which comprised a different offshoot from humanity.

This Assassin, this *thing*, claimed to come from that Temple.

'Who are you really?' Zhau asked. He raised his exitus rifle and rested the butt casually against his shoulder. 'Speak, or I end you now.'

The skull cocked to the side. Lenses whirred.

'Was my answer not sufficient?' the voice asked, sounding genuinely confused. 'I am known as Noctus Kord of the Culexus Temple.'

Fear and paranoia sent the blood pounding along Rhasc's veins, throbbing in her temples.

'We are oathbound to eliminate the heretical filth known as Severin Drask. That is why I am called here. That is, I presume, why you are here as well.'

The voice grew stronger as the Culexus spoke. Rhasc loathed every word, despised this man without knowing why.

'We near the summit of the sanctum. Why did you wait so long to reveal yourself?' Rhasc asked. She nearly spat the words.

'I have been following since my deployment, easing your passage. Did you not feel my presence?' The croaking quality left the Assassin's voice. 'I have been told by my masters that my condition has an adverse effect on allies.' He turned to face the broken golden doors. 'Regardless, time grows short. I became impatient with your pace, unsure of the probability of your survival in this engagement, and have ensured your continued service to the Throne.'

Rhasc retied her hair, gathering the errant strands that had slipped free in her fight with the Chaos Space Marines. Distaste and anger lurked in her thoughts. She bled from a dozen small cuts, gifts from stone splinters in the opening fusillade.

'We should proceed,' she urged.

The broken gold doors, veined with black corruption, beckoned. Light and colour dilated within, the broken stuff of the Temple of Shades, the empyrean bleeding and moulding reality.

Her skin crawled to even behold such horror, let alone set foot within. Duty called. The mission and the Imperium demanded that this threat be stopped

before it could take further root.

She stepped forwards and entered the true sanctum of the astropaths.

The rich scent of blood hit her like a wall as soon as she passed the threshold. Rank incense rode the air currents. Withered bodies and scraps of skin and parchment covered every surface with runes made from blood and bile.

The corruption made her skin itch and her brain buzz. The very air was thick, rife with unrealised potential. It was pregnant, waiting and lurking. Kord's presence dampened the effect, eased the oppression, but could not eliminate it entirely. Yet the Culexus seemed to be the only one truly unaffected.

Tics marred the Eversor's movements, while Zhau's constant stream of prayers filled the vox.

Vast cables snaked through the room.

'We need to find a way into the Temple of Shades,' said Zhau. The Vindicare picked his way through the sacrificed astropaths.

Rhasc's eyes flickered over the Astropathic Sanctum's map layout. 'The briefing indicated that the astropaths installed a teleportation array in a side chamber.'

Kord asked, 'Why would the witches need a teleportation chamber?' He idly gestured at the amniotic tanks. 'It doesn't appear as if they were designed to go anywhere.'

'Emergencies?' Rhasc reasoned. 'This planet went through a turbulent period in its early colonial years. Perhaps the adepts of the Astra Telepathica desired an escape route.'

Corposant gambolled down a clump of wires. It was the only evidence that the machinery here still functioned. Matching the direction of the cables, Rhasc knew that they ran to the teleportation array.

She could hear the distant wailing of the empyrean from that path. The same noxious unlight that emanated from the Temple of Shades radiated from the corridor. Waves of pressure pulsed.

Errant arcs of electricity fizzled down the wrought walls, describing faces and runes.

Rhasc caught the click of claws again, the brief hint that something watched her. Beneath the zapping fizz of uncaged electrical discharge, Rhasc thought she heard the heavy breaths of some vast animal.

'We are not alone,' she whispered over the vox.

Dark niches concealed doorways to other rooms. The doors stood ajar, providing glimpses into the lives of those who served the astropaths. The half-

light allowed Rhasc to see broken furniture, empty canteens and dormant servitors. Bodies lay where they had been butchered, long strips of meat pulled from the bone while the servant yet lived. Pools of congealing blood were marked with swirling symbols, left by the tip of some gauntleted finger. The Crimson Slaughter seemed to have been left to slip the leash here, to indulge in whatever sport they desired.

Endless hallways stretched away into nothing. No sound came from within, but Rhasc could see bootprints left in congealed blood.

As yet, this inner sanctum was undefended. Rhasc could not tell whether that brought relief, or alarm. Perhaps the remaining servants of Drask stood beside the sorcerer lord in the Temple of Shades.

The unlight of the Sea of Souls grew brighter and brighter, drowning out all meaning, all presence of reality. Within the teleportation chamber, reality broke.

Walls were gone, half spinning away into nothing. Cruel flowers made from the flayed skin of xenos sprouted from the floor. Jagged crystals broke through stone. Daemonic whispers taunted and gave voice to promises of torment and terror. Vast shapes curled through the space beyond, half-glimpsed and unrealised.

Through the tears in the walls, the Temple of Shades beckoned. Somehow, the Assassins had drawn level with the fane itself. They could see inside, through the vast arches that lined its exterior. Rhasc caught a distant impression of power-armoured figures, of cavorting daemon-things.

The array itself, a circle of inscribed iron, was the only part of the room left untouched. Bare stone lay within. Cords snaked away from the device, linking the machine to some other place.

‘The control console is missing,’ said Zhau. Actual emotion lurked in his tone.

‘There is a secondary command console on this level. A failsafe in case the first was seized,’ Rhasc said. ‘It is not far, but it will require us to split our forces. We cannot allow the array to be undefended while we activate it. As soon as it comes online, we will draw attention to ourselves. The Emperor alone knows what will come through when the system activates.’

‘Take the Eversor,’ Zhau said. ‘This Culexus and I have the better chance of eliminating our target regardless of your intervention. Should you fall, we will progress through.’

Rhasc bristled at his tone, feeling that the Vindicare had some ulterior motive to claim the sorcerer lord’s death for his Temple. The other Assassin had shot her and left her for dead before. Rhasc did her best to quell the paranoia. There was

only the mission, only duty and fealty to the Emperor.
She nodded instead. 'Let's go, Torq.'



IX

Following the cables brought them to the secondary control console. Icons of the Cult Mechanicus stood proud from the walls, untouched by the corruption. Someone had made a half-hearted attempt to vandalise the holy symbols, but had been unable to do much more than mar the cog-sigils of the Omnissiah.

Singed prayer papers studded the cables at regular intervals. Blood and oil coated the walls. Beneath the ever-present stench of blood and bile, Rhasc caught the faint resin-smell of incense. Quiet and calm haunted this realm of logic and reasoning among the witch-minds of the Adeptus Astra Telepathicus.

Instead of stone, everything was metal. Bronze, iron and silver formed this section of the structure. Rhasc was struck by its similarity to a starship rather than an astropath's sanctum.

Ordinary mortals would have left sounds as they moved along the heavy iron plates. The Callidus and the Eversor moved silently, their passage muffled by training and artifice.

Sealed blast doors, scratched and dented by chain weapons and bolter fire, studded the hallway; yet more evidence of the Crimson Slaughter Space Marines that had sacked this structure. Of the Chaos Space Marines themselves, there was no hint of their continued presence within the sanctum.

Rhasc opened each door in turn, searching for the console. They swung open on

silent, oiled hinges. Abused and broken machinery were inside. None resembled the console she was looking for.

‘It would be kind for the Mechanicus to clearly label things in a language spoken by those beyond their ranks,’ Rhasc complained.

Torq grunted.

‘Seven is all we faced,’ Torq drooled. ‘Pitiful. Paltry. Not enough. Must be more.’

‘There were more,’ Rhasc reminded him. ‘The Culexus’s intervention saved us. Remember?’

‘Should still have been more,’ the Eversor said.

If even Torq’s abused mind could find the puzzle of missing traitors, then Rhasc knew there was something more to their absence. They could not be alone here.

‘Even the far fallen would not leave such a critical location unguarded. What are we missing? What are we not seeing?’

The itching feeling of corruption grew. A patina of blooming corrosion covered everything. An anathema to the Machine Cult, this odd-coloured rust had been brought in from outside, spreading like a fungus through the halls of the Martian enclave.

She opened the next to last door. Only a slight resistance met her push as the door scraped through something. Blood and oil gushed out through the widening crack. It stopped half-way open.

Unlight streamed through as the deep bark of bolter fire erupted from within.

Torq shoved his shoulder against it, adding his strength to hers. It barely budged. Shrapnel flickered out from the bolt impacts, cutting into her skin, slicing through her bodyglove.

The Eversor threw himself into the door, a roar of rage slipping from his lips. Bolter fire kept hammering at the opening. Deadly shards of metal pinged through the air.

Rhasc stepped back. She drew her phase sword, considered the door, and sliced into the hinges. The sword’s properties, engineered to the exacting standards of the Callidus Temple and forged by nearly forgotten technology, had made the blade beyond sharp. The sword sliced through the thick armour that covered the door. Metal sparked and spat. Molten iron ran down the cuts.

Torq saw what she was doing. He stopped shoving at the door and waited.

The last hinge failed, compromised by her sword. She nodded at Torq.

The Eversor leaned back and kicked. There was a massive boom and the door flew backwards, propelled by the Assassin’s prodigious strength. A stream of

bolt shells flew through the space. Torq had already jinked inside.

Rhasc followed and found the reason for the blockage. Robed bodies were stacked three deep. Oil and blood pumped from their veins and systems. Some still twitched and groaned.

Mechadendrites slipped from the bodies, trailing to a lectern.

Behind the dais stood a Crimson Slaughter Space Marine. The traitor stood with legs braced, a heavy bolter spitting a steady stream of rounds at the Assassins. Horns emerged from the creature's skull. Flesh grew in thick tumours from between its armour. Mouths and tongues lolled from the growths.

Rhasc rolled underneath the fire, through the blood. Faster even than Torq, she leapt up and rammed her punch dagger into the traitor's gorget.

Unable to react quickly due to the heavy kickback of its weapon, the traitor failed to block the blow. Instead it grunted, accepted the punishment and wheezed a gurgling '*Death to the False Emperor*' in heavily accented Gothic.

It dropped the heavy bolter and reached for her instead with one arm. With the other, the traitor pulled a brutally serrated combat knife. Torq came at it from the other side, spitting curses and scrabbling with his neuro-gauntlet. A grip of iron caught on Rhasc's left arm and she felt the bone crack. Pain lanced through her. The traitor raised the knife, ready to disembowel her.

Torq's sword carved down and took the Chaos Space Marine's arm off at the elbow. Blood spurted and then clotted. It chuckled something in its malign tongue and then turned its attention on Torq. The knife flashed through the air. Torq, overextended, tried to twist out of the way.

The Eversor failed. With a crunching sound, the knife broke through the Assassin's ribs and sunk into his torso. He jerked on the blade and pushed the arm that held it back. Centimetres of bloody steel came out from his torso, along with a wash of blood.

Rhasc unholstered her neural shredder and pressed it against the Space Marine's helmet. She pulled the trigger and the traitor flopped bonelessly to the floor.

'He was never false,' Rhasc said to the corpse. 'You were.'

Torq groaned. He had his hand clasped to his wound. Blood leaked through it, pouring down the front of his bodyglove. Rhasc moved to help him, but the Eversor held up a forestalling hand. 'Don't. It's fine.'

'Clearly it isn't.'

A new sound interrupted her, a deep-throated laugh. The snick-click of claws came down the corridor. A heavy, animal breathing came with it, wet and

burbling.

‘Am I interrupting something?’ asked a creature with twinned voices, one transhuman, and the other a daemon’s wet rasp.

Her head snapped to the doorway. Framed there, a massive figure towered. Spiralling horns scraped the ceiling. Tongues of flame spat from toothed gaps in its armour.

‘When your souls scream into the warp—’ it began to say. Torq tore his way towards it.

Its hand shot out, lightning fast. Torq caught it with his neuro-gauntlet, punched into its muscle meat. The thing’s arm bulged, flexed massive plates of muscle and threw the Eversor down.

Rhasc fired her neural shredder. Matter wept from the thing’s eyes, but it continued to laugh. It flowed like water toward her, crossing the space between the pair in the blink of an eye.

Rhasc battled for her life. Her phase sword carved through weeping armour plates, ignoring the protection it offered. But the thing was monstrosly fast, able to match her grace with a daemon’s agility.

Fire spat from its maw, bright green and vile. Heat singed her and flash burned against her bodyglove. A poisoned blade hurtled through the air, flung from her outstretched palm. It skewered the creature’s tongue and stuck it fast against the back of its throat.

The flames ceased as it gurgled, choking.

Torq hit it from the back, sword stabbing, neuro-gauntlet punching into armour plates. Toxins roared into its bloodstream and still the thing came on. He stabbed again and again, punching deep into the Space Marine’s body, but still it came on. With an irritated roar, it pulled Torq off and flung him to crack into the lectern.

The Callidus caught the snap of bone.

Rhasc tried to pull it towards her, away from the injured Eversor and the command lectern. They all bled from dozens of cuts, shallow or otherwise.

With a rising whine, she fired her neural shredder again. Blood fountained out from the Space Marine’s head, erupting from its eyes, ears and mouth.

It lowered its head and charged.

She jumped over it, flipping onto its back as it crashed into the thick metal plates of the wall. Its horns stuck fast.

With a grunt of effort, she punched her phase sword down, shearing through muscle and bone. The fires in its body flickered, burning ember-bright.

It struggled to free itself. The traitor braced its arms against the wall and tried to shove itself off. Muscles shifted below her, mutating even as she straddled it. She sawed through one arm. Blood and steam jetted from the wound.

Still it roared, still it fought.

Torq rose from where he had fallen. His speed had nearly left him, hobbled by broken bones and internal trauma.

The Eversor hurled his sword. The blade flashed end over end, before cutting through the traitor's other arm. Frustration erupted from the creature's mouth with a stream of invectives in a language no human was ever meant to know. It jerked its head, desperate to pull itself free.

'Go,' Torq said, words slurred by more than chemicals. 'I will activate the lectern. Complete the mission, false face.' Blood poured from the wound in his torso.

'Die well, Eversor,' Rhasc said. She sprinted away, barely catching the last words he spoke.

'No such thing, Rhasc,' Torq said to her back. 'No such thing.'



X

Zhau's pistol coughed. The turbo-penetrator round broke clean through a Crimson Slaughter's helmet. Brain meat sprayed the traitor's cursing comrades. He fell back into his cover, a nest of crystals that emanated a child's desperate wailing. The teleporter array lay frustratingly dormant behind him.

'Bless this servant of your divine will,' Zhau exhorted.

The Culexus held them at bay, keeping them hemmed in. Kord was a shocking ally, quick and agile, but the true threat stemmed from the terrible lens that crouched on his helmet.

Glancing from cover, Zhau trained another shot into the teeth of a whirring chainblade. Mangled before it could fall on the Culexus, the weapon exploded into shrapnel.

Bolt shells impacted against the crystal he crouched behind. Spinning shards filled the air, but Zhau was already moving. The sniper's training that called to move after every shot ingrained until it had become instinct.

He snapped off shots as he moved, laying down suppressive fire.

A crumpling explosion rocked the room as Kord dropped one of his grenades. Wails erupted from the Chaos Space Marines, oddly high-pitched for the deep-throats that gave voice to them.

From his new cover, Zhau switched to hellfire rounds. He took advantage of the

madness that consumed the traitors and fired. Three bursts saw the bio-acidic rounds impacting into cracks in their armour. Flesh liquefied and Space Marines fell.

‘Blessed are you, Emperor, our god, Sovereign of Mankind,’ Zhau prayed.

He sprinted to new cover while the Space Marines were distracted, sliding behind the ruined hulk of some machine.

The Callidus burst into the room, sprinting through the assaulting traitors. ‘Into the circle!’ she yelled. There was no sign of the Eversor.

Kord abruptly turned. Bolt shells fell all around them. War cries streamed anew from altered throats.

Rhasc grabbed Zhau by the collar. She touched him, actually touched him. His flesh crawled to feel the touch of another being.

‘Where is—’ Zhau began.

She all but threw him into the circle.

The Callidus shouted something into the vox.

Light erupted all around the three Assassins, consuming the world and stealing away all thought and consciousness.

EXTERMINATION



I

Looping declamations assaulted Rhasc's ears. Writhing mist, the residue of teleportation travel, twined about her legs. The air pulsed with some unearthly power.

The close-range vox failed in a wash of broken voices and malignant white noise. Her mask's lenses drew targets everywhere, fizzled in and out of function. She ripped the useless device from her head, freeing her senses. Her hair streamed in an unholy wind, thick with brimstone and the saccharine sweetness of rotting flowers. Her skin prickled with the unwholesome light of the unleashed Sea of Souls.

Shades, or perhaps souls or daemon-things, twisted through the air, leaving contrails of cancerous light behind them. Statues of dark, hooded figures loomed over her. Inside, Rhasc caught the brief glimpse of broken faces, twisted by mutation.

Jagged and broken words boomed out from a voice cast in a deep rumble.

'The sorcerer lord!' Rhasc yelled over the din.

Vast arches beckoned deeper into the fane.

Booming sounded from ahead. Blooms of fire speared toward the Assassins. They were already sprinting forward. From dark alcoves came the chattering thrum of bolter fire.

War cries left polluted throats. Ten gene-bulked mutants, tentacles and shards of bone writhing from their slimy skin, brandished axes and wicked instruments of war. Warriors of the Crimson Slaughter led them.

Poison darts flew from her hand, speared into throats, lodged into muscle. Two of the mutants fell to the unholy ground, dancing out their death throes. Winged daemons alighted on the corpses and began to tear strips of flesh free. Purple light leeches from the mouths of the dead.

Zhau's rifle gave a dry cough, its sound stolen by a muffling silencer. The Vindicare fired at point-blank range. A traitor's head exploded, the body flopped backwards, blown onto its back by the kinetic impact.

Streams of heavy bolter fire stitched holes in the marble beneath her feet, walking in sawing lines toward the Assassins' position.

'We must break through them,' Zhau exhorted. 'They don't matter. We must stop the ritual, in the God-Emperor's name.'

Rhasc dodged between bright tracers, rolling beneath the deadly fire. She stood level with the first of the sprinting mutants. Reaching up, she punched her sword through its gullet, through its mouth and into its skull. Bloody froth wheezed out of the wound.

The body twitched, puppet strings cut. Blood poured down her arm. She hissed at the sudden acid sizzle of its polluted bite.

She ducked between the dying mutant's legs, whipping her sword free. Another of the confused creatures stood before her, awareness, alarm and pain waging war across its stunted features.

A flicker of movement in its dying eyes, a slight smile, brought her warning. She pulled her punch dagger free from its gut, brought it up to block and had the sword nearly wrenched from her hand.

'Death to the False—' the Chaos Space Marine began. In its hand, a power sword glowed with a cruel purple light. Daemon maws slavered down its length.

A poisoned dart took the traitor through the throat, skewering the creature's windpipe and cutting off the air it required to speak. It drew back its sword for an answering strike. Rhasc stepped into its guard, close against the burned ceramite of its war-plate. The heady stink of blood and offal wafted from the traitor. She ducked below the swinging arm. Her punch dagger swiped up, severed cabling and sawed through fibre-muscles. Oil spurted like blood. The armour whined in a facsimile of pain while the arm fell to its side.

A scream emerged from the sword as it fell out of the gauntleted fist and clattered to the marble. Tongues licked free along its length and the sword tried

to crawl back to its master.

Rhasc continued to swirl around the Space Marine's back. It tried to turn and face her, but, rendered bulky and cumbersome by its heavy war-plate, the Space Marine was too slow. Rhasc was faster. Her punch dagger sliced in through the side of its skull.

A heavy weight landed on her back and bore her to the ground.

Glazed eyes, crinkled with hunger, and snapping jaws closed in on her face.



II

Zhau saw the Callidus fall. He hesitated for a moment. Chances calculated in his head, driven by the honed synapses of his mental faculties.

Faith filled him. The zealot's warmth brought meaning to his work. He was a champion of the God-Emperor walking through the profane, bringing the Emperor's judgement to those who thought themselves beyond reproach, beyond the light of the Golden One. But he could not do this alone. His chances for mission success were too low.

Though he had abandoned his mask as useless upon arrival, Zhau's practiced eye took in the angle, the distance. His rifle snapped to his shoulder. A switch flicked on its side saw a normal round chambered. The sniper drew in a breath, loathing the unholy air that filled his lungs. He depressed the trigger.

The rifle bucked. Blood spurted and burst with the sound of a popping sack. Rhasc emerged from underneath the mutant's bulk. Her gaze met his, and she hesitated, then nodded. Zhau returned the gesture.

Heavy bolter fire streamed towards Zhau, who was walking through mutants and sawing the creatures in half. Curses came from the battling Crimson Slaughter as they felt the sudden impact of friendly fire. The Vindicare ran, moving forwards. There was no time to retreat here, to find more viable cover. The Crimson Slaughter saw him moving and lumbered toward him, chainswords

grinding out a buzzing paeon to their dark masters.

Zhau watched the angles, let them come close. With a motion born from long practice, he flipped another switch on his exitus rifle. Turbo-penetrator rounds clinked into the chamber. 'Emperor's will guide my shot,' he breathed. 'Grant me your patience.'

Time seemed to slow and horrific detail emerged from the brutal planes of the Space Marines power armour. Flapping faces, ripped free from human skulls, mouthed unknowable words. Defiled aquilas graced their breastplates. Fire leaked out from their eye lenses.

In the blink of an eye, the Space Marines drew level. Zhau blurred into motion, jinking to the left. Just as swiftly, he raised his exitus rifle and opened fire.

The bright flare of the turbo-penetrator round leapt from the barrel. A sharp crack accompanied it, not from the rifle, but from breaking ceramite. Designed to puncture adamantium, the round burrowed through the chest cavity of the first traitor, carving through meat and gristle. Another crack of ceramite announced its emergence microseconds later. It tore through the Space Marine's right arm and severed the appendage.

Scarcely slowed by its journey, the round continued until all three of the traitors lay dead.

'We cannot tarry. We cannot allow ourselves to be slowed by this delaying tactic!' Rhasc shouted.

The Assassins punched through the melee in a burst of gore and black-clad lethality.

The traitors struggled to readdress. Zhau ran in a serpentine pattern, weaving from side to side. Bolts hammered all around him. His ears rang with the constant boom of angry bolter fire.

They passed beneath the baleful shadow of the arches, into the inner darkness of the heathen shrine. Muzzle flare split the blackness and gave meaning and shape to the gloom.

Shrouded statues seemed to move as the light flashed. Leathery wings flapped overhead.

More corrupt Space Marines loomed out of the shadows, the evil glow of their eye lenses providing scant warning. A massive arm punched into the right side of Zhau's torso and threw him. He cracked painfully into the marble.

The prayers that had been streaming from his mouth ceased, stunned away by the pain. He struggled to rise as dark shapes closed in. Wicked knives caught the scarce light as they flashed in descent.

Zhau felt despair and anger roll through him. His target would survive him, left free of the Emperor's judgement. Then the zealot caught a twitch of green light.

A bright beam sawed through the cavernous space, throwing the broken outline of three warriors into sharp relief. The light hammered them, cut through their armour and vaporised their blasphemous flesh. Bodies blew backwards and the traitors crashed into the marble wall as their flesh burned.

It was horrifying, this uncaged light. Then it died and Zhau was left with the stinging afterimage. A hand stretched through the bright phantoms afflicting his vision. His skin crawled and he drew his knife in a smooth motion.

Pale and white, a grinning skull chased the hand. Zhau relaxed, as much as he could with the Culexus so close, and Kord hauled the Vindicare to his feet. Rhasc waited impatiently behind.

Sounds echoed around them. Voices clamoured. Pale wisps of flame tried to draw them down false paths, to some rotten hell within the heathen shrine.

But Zhau knew that the Emperor guided their sprinting steps. He knew because light bloomed at the end of the long hallway they were running down. It was noxious and unclean, but evidence of their journey's end.

Sorcerous words shivered the air. Vast declamations of power that Zhau had neither the mind to understand nor the desire to, grew and grew. They passed from the shadow and into the light.

The ritual was nearly over. A pile of bodies served as his altar, their flesh moulding and morphing into a shape more pleasing to the Changer of the Ways.

Words ripped from Drask's mouth, left his tongue burned and blackened by the bright fire of their passing. He could feel the daemons pressing in at his consciousness, could feel their approval, their *need*, hammering at his hearts.

Above the Temple of Shades a rift was forming. Glinting through the void, the iron hulls of ships lurked. Bright smears of golden light marked their colliding Geller fields. An invasion fleet to storm the False Emperor's domain and herald the end times, granting victory in the Long War. It was through his will that this would be done. His power and his will.

The symphony of the warp flowed from his fingertips, danced down the edge of his staff and broke free from the cage of his mind. It was the most beautiful thing Severin Drask had ever heard.

Pride and awe melded within his hearts. Already he shook with earnest anticipation of the glory. The exhaustion that had afflicted him was gone, channelled through the dripping red tip of the ritual knife that had ended the

lives of the astropaths and paved the way for ascension.

Fever-bright eyes bored into the sky. Gasping breath, weak from blood loss and pain, joined the symphony as so many others had before. This last weak, drooling thing was the final catalyst for the ritual.

Drask slammed the knife down, felt the satisfying crack of the man's sternum. Aspirated blood sprayed into his faceplate, peppering it with vitae. The astropath's soulflame streamed up toward the heavens.

The crucial moment arrived. The final words began to leave Drask's mouth. A bullet hammered into the back of his skull.



III

The blasphemous bulk of the sorcerer lord staggered forward, slamming into the writhing altar of bleeding bodies.

Faster than Rhasc thought possible, the sorcerer lord turned and regarded the interlopers. Kord was already running forward, light vacuuming into his helmet.

Rhasc was beside him, ready to destroy this blasphemy. Zhau had taken the shot, but something had stopped the kill. It fell to them to end this.

Heathen war cries filled the temple's heart as corrupt Space Marines barrelled into the chamber.

Rhasc ignored them; she had eyes only for the sorcerer lord. Her neural shredder screamed its whining blast, casting minor sorcerers into gibbering wrecks. They flung their own retaliation back: flaming runes, serpents of light and shadow. They fizzled in the air near the Culexus, robbed of their potency by some unknown artifice.

Drask roared towards them, scattering a phalanx of his attendants. Whips of fire carved through the air. Bolts hammered from his gauntlet.

Shrapnel carved into Rhasc, stitching bright lines of pain in her body. Still she ran forward. In her hand waited a death card, a lasting reminder of the long reach of the Callidus Temple and the God-Emperor of Mankind.

She outpaced Kord. Her dagger reached through the metres intervening

between herself and Drask. Kinetic force slammed her back, pulled her from her feet and shoved her through the air.

Light blasted from the Culexus's lens and flapping daemons disintegrated in bursts of smoke and screaming shards.

Drask's sword punched through Kord's skull, shattering the lens. The sorcerer lord was yelling something, bellowing in pain and anger and broken loss. Shots from Zhau's rifle spanked off his armour.

Rhasc rose to her feet, feeling the full crushing presence of the warp on her soul as the sorcerer tossed aside the broken body of the Culexus.

She hurled her poison darts, but they bounced off the sorcerer's Terminator plate.

He lowered his staff and pointed it at her. A shot from Zhau's exitus rifle slammed into his hand, bursting it in blood and shards of ceramite. The golden staff fell to the floor of the fane.

The sorcerer lord's storm bolter chattered. Rhasc prepared herself for death. She flung herself at the sorcerer, determined to end his wretched existence. Somehow, she leapt above the stream of fire. Her phase sword slid through the air and carved through one of the curling ivory horns that adorned his helmet. It bit deep into the ceramite and blood gouted from the wound.

An iron grip caught her as she fell. It squeezed and Rhasc felt something in her spine snap. The blade fell from her grasp.

More shots hammered into the sorcerer lord, but he ignored them now, pulling the Callidus toward the altar of writhing bodies.

Then Klara Rhasc heard laughter. The deep booming laugh of Torq echoed through the chamber.



IV

Skull mask grinning, the Eversor ran on broken legs, the fury pushing him past the boundaries and requirements of flesh. Every step brought a pain so deep it nearly broke him.

Clarity had found him in the wake of the possessed Space Marine's death. Purpose filled him, pushed him to his feet, sent him stumbling to the activation console. The rage pushed him on, past the point of his broken body. He had arrived in the fane in a wash of gore, punching his way through the dregs of a rearguard.

Only a paltry few enemy guarded the teleportation array's terminus. Mutants, large and stupid, bellowed challenges. For once, Torq ignored them. His bolt pistol answered their cries with death.

Heads burst. Chests erupted with bone and blood.

His fury demanded a rarer target. Bodies carpeted the obscene ground surrounding the Temple of Shades.

In the darkness of the fane's outer precincts, past glowing crystals filled with fire, Torq pushed on. The knowledge of what he must do filled him. He had a failsafe built inside him, an insurance policy to ensure the demise of an Eversor's target.

The withered limbs of daemons sought to waylay him, sought to slow him

down. Torq carved through them with his sword, traded the swiping hits of his power weapon with claws and talons. An angry line of pain ran down his back, slicing through some of the tubes that kept him sustained. Liquid splattered and painted the gloom.

He wheeled, faced a beaked horror with a nest of spindly limbs. ‘You won’t stop me,’ Torq told it. ‘I’ll pluck your arms one by one and break that smug grin off your heathen face.’

It squawked at him. Clawed limbs speared through the air. Torq’s sword chopped, once, twice. Arms fell to the ground, writhing like worms before dissolving into noxious smoke. The daemon squawked again and ran away into the darkness.

The bones in his legs ground together. Dull, pulsing heat radiated up his spine. His frenzy began to slow.

Before, Torq would have given chase and made good on his threats. Now, his thoughts returned, brought him back to himself.

Bright things, like winged maggots, flapped overhead, trailing ropes of slime. They circled him, drawn to the Eversor’s pain. His bolt pistol burst one like a ruptured balloon. A looping cry lanced into his skull and set his ears ringing. More came, sweeping in from the darkness.

Torq ran, dodged between the dripping slime. The hiss of acid filled his ears. Every step brought torture, a test of the flesh.

He emerged in the temple’s heart to see his comrades fail and Rhasc brought to the altar. The sky writhed overhead with greedy anticipation. Torq could see the ethereal light of the warp glint off voidships. Souls wailed from the altar. Faces stretched across the air, drawn in swirling skeins of smoke.

Bands of mutants and Crimson Slaughter traitors chanted, smacked their weapons against their chests, gripped in a fanatic’s rapture.

His thoughts slowed to a crawl, bereft of the frenzy that defined his life. Torq laughed. His pistol boomed, heralding his presence. Bolts punched at the sorcerer lord and hammered at the war-plate.

They did little more than mar the paint. The sorcerer lord picked up his staff.

A prayer lit up the fane like the ringing of a clear bell. It broke through the guttural chanting of the hordes of Chaos. Zhou’s voice rose in a sacred hymn. The Vindicare joined him. ‘Day of wrath and doom impending...’

Chaos Space Marines died as Zhou found his mark. Blood painted the unclean air.

‘The Emperor’s judgement descends on you!’ Torq bellowed. ‘Face His wrath.’

Zhau's voice underlay Torq's advance. His sniper rifle bucked as it cleared a path. 'Wondrous sound the rifle flingeth, Through Terra's temples it ringeth, All before the Throne it bringeth.'

Every syllable brought death to the Emperor's enemies. Those same enemies closed on the sniper as he slid from cover to cover, crunching through the marble, venting their fury.

Heads turned. The sorcerer lord's incantation faltered.

Viktor Zhau bought him his passage through the gauntlet of triumphant Crimson Slaughter and their debased servants. Even as they isolated the Vindicare Assassin, as they pulled him down and tore at him, Torq punched into the sorcerer lord with the speed and inexorable weight of a wrecking ball.

'You're dead,' Rhasc spat through broken teeth. Drask cast her away towards his crowd of attendants. The sorcerer lord lowered his staff, golden tip shining.

'No,' Torq said with a laugh. 'He is.'

The staff punched through Torq's chest, breaking through the sternum and heart. Drask shouted in triumph.

The Eversor felt unimaginable pain boiling away his thoughts and eating his mind. Blood gouted down the haft of the sorcerer's weapon. Torq watched his lifeblood flow away. Beneath his mask, a grim smile bloomed.

Torq surrendered himself to death, accepting his fate.

Failsafes snapped deep within the Eversor. Chemical compounds reacted with one another, setting off a chain reaction inside his body. His flesh expanded. Fire flickered out from his mouth and Torq detonated.

Scouring fire erupted from his body.

Severin Drask screamed as his plan fell apart around him, as the Changer of the Ways withdrew his support, and the world died in loss and fury.



V

Rhasc watched through her one remaining eye. The other drooled fluid down her cheek, burst as the sorcerer had cast her aside so he could deal with Torq.

She watched as the fire consumed the altar, consumed the heart of the Temple of Shades. Zhau's singing had stopped, broken in the crash of bolter fire.

Confusion reigned among the traitors who stood around her.

Shudders rocked the Temple of Shades. Rock groaned then racked and fell away. Shapes flickered into being, long-fingered, cruel and sharp.

Rhasc felt the buzz of corruption against her skin intensify. Her eye grew wide. Her face paled.

The fane was collapsing back into the warp. Blood flashed, sucked away into the maws of manifesting daemons.

The haunting cries of the neverborn echoed through the fane as they sought mortal souls.

Klara Rhasc tried to crawl away, to make it back to the teleportation circle. She called to Adamta over the vox, unheeding that it no longer functioned. She made ten metres before something sharp slid between her ribs.

Foul breath gusted down around her. Rhasc flipped over, brought her last poison dart up and shoved it into the face of an equine thing. It recoiled, jabbering in some dark tongue.

Numbness chased out of her wound. Ripples passed through her flesh. Desperation drove her movement. She struggled weakly, scraped her way across breaking marble. Rhasc failed; her strength left her.

The God-Emperor's name was on her lips as the Temple of Shades fell fully into the warp and her mission ended.



EPILOGUE

Kurei Adamta took a long pull on his lho-stick, savoured the smoke that poured into his lungs, and tried to remember what empathy felt like. Ever since the events on Achyllus, during the long flight back to the Solar System, Adamta had had difficulty remembering emotion. He missed the sound of another voice, another presence. A slight tremor palsied his hand, small but perceptible. His thoughts kept whirling with the possibilities of what had happened in the Temple of Shades.

Some viewed eidetic memory as a gift, a blessing from the Emperor of Mankind. The Vanus Temple recruited only those who possessed such a mind. Kurei Adamta cursed the gift for the first time in his life.

He walked through the metal-chased halls of the Vanus Temple on Holy Terra. The great sigils of the Vanus clade, and of the wider Officio Assassinorum, stared down with skull-eyed glory. Today, they felt oppressive. His footsteps echoed off the metal, the soft clang of each step a boon so rarely granted to his ilk. The ability to make noise, to physically exist in an environment, rather than merely act as a fixture of stealth, should have been a treasured moment. It was not.

Kurei Adamta walked alone, as was his right, his burden as the sole survivor of an Execution Force mission.

His heart pounded. Anxiety drove roughshod in his mind.

The other Assassins, regrettably, had been unable to recover. They had simply seen too much, endured what no mortal, however trained, could ever be asked to. The very nature of their task had ensured their elimination.

Rhasc had been decent, certainly better than many of the Assassins he had handled. The others were what they were, embodiments of the Temples that had crafted them, fit them for purpose in the service of the Throne of the God-Emperor. Some small part of him mourned, as it always did after an operation like this.

Subtle beams of red light swept out from recessed niches. Flesh-verifiers and gene-coders sought to determine that Adamta was who he purported to be. Imposed after the madness of the Age of Apostasy by a rightly paranoid convocation of the High Lords, the precautions guarded against infiltration and subversion. Vandire's reign of blood had left many scars on the Throneworld and its political institutions.

Images kept flashing through his mind, full of the shrieking madness of lost souls. The Temple of Shades was broken, the sorcerer lord's mad plot finished. The apocalypse had been averted, for the moment. It was left to Adamta, the handler for the Execution Force, to report to his superiors.

Footsteps ringing against the metal, Adamta entered the debriefing chamber. He stood alone in a vast room. The ember-tipped cap of his lho-stick flared brightly as he drew in a juddering breath.

Light bloomed as vast monitors blinked into static-laced life. The crackle of vox speakers joined the ambience. Vid-screens, hololiths and other communication systems came online.

Shadows stood within. Hooded figures broadcast their presence. They moved as one, spoke as one. These were the hidden masters of the Officio Assassinorum. Adamta suspected that the High Lords themselves watched as well.

Sweat broke out against his brow. His face flushed, however he controlled the tremble his hands.

'Is it done?' asked the voice of his masters. It spoke with the uniform patterns of machine alteration.

'It is done, my lords,' Adamta said, his voice confident, though in his mind he still watched Drask die while the Temple began to collapse over the other Assassins. Daemonic things descended on his charges.

'You have done well, Vanus,' the voices said. Several of the screens and hololiths faded out. Now, the true debriefing began.

I did nothing, Adamta thought. Instead, he thanked the lords of the Temple.

‘Then the crisis is concluded to our satisfaction. The Despoiler will not be allowed another foothold in Imperial space. The realm of man remains inviolate. Is the Execution Force disbanded?’ The final question was rhetorical. All present knew that the Assassins were dead, that it was the only outcome of an Execution Force mission.

Adamta bowed. ‘It is, my lords. The other Assassins were, regrettably, unable to effect exfiltration from the fane.’

More obfuscation of the truth. He knew, from long experience, what answers his masters expected to be entered into the records.

The death of Rhasc replayed in his mind. The betrayal, evident as he watched through picters installed in Zhau’s mask, showed in her body posture. He saw the horned shadows that came for the bright souls of the Assassins as the Temple shuddered back into the warp. He watched as the picter recorded the shift into the nightmare hells of the empyrean. Adamta had seen many terrible things in his long service to the Officio and the Imperium. All paled in comparison with the torment and the horror, he witnessed during those few seconds. He knew, as he breathed out a cloud of grey-blue smoke, that the images, the fate of those Assassins, would haunt him to his dying day, that they might have compromised his ability to fulfil his function.

‘Excellent and so noted.’ The final vid-screens and flickering hololiths died.

Adamta was left alone in the gloom. He took another long draw on his lho-stick.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Parrino is the author of a range of Warhammer 40,000 stories, including the novella *Shield of Baal: Devourer*, the audio dramas *Alone*, *Damocles: The Shape of the Hunt* and *Assassinorum: The Emperor's Judgement*, and the short stories 'Witness', 'The Patient Hunter', 'Nightspear', 'In Service to Shadows' and 'No Worse Sin'. He lives, writes and works in the American Pacific Northwest.

[On the world of Tevrat, Callidus Assassin Klara Rhasc stalks her prey, awaiting the moment to strike.](#)



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