

The Emperor Protects

+++INFORMATUS+++

+++Planet: Aravosis, Designation: Civilized world.+++

+++Heretical insurgency underway+++

+++Planetary defence forces overwhelmed by cultist troops. Munitorum supply lines compromised. Loss of Adamantium supply to forge world Lucius unacceptable. Astra Militarum regiments diverted from Scarus warzone to secure victory on Aravosis. +++

+++Regiments assigned: 22nd Elysian, 224th Cadian Armored, 111th Vendoland.+++

+++Imperial Navy elements present to ensure beachhead.+++

+++The Emperor Protects.+++

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Wickes thumbs the pictpad's power control and ejects the dataslate, the silver cartridge sliding out of the device into his calloused hand. There was little on it he didn't already know. Any information of real interest is locked behind classification rites far above the Lieutenant's rank.

The bulkhead doors open, wide hazard stripes disappear into the walls. A Commissar steps into the room, his boots making crisp clicks on the solid plasteel floor.

Wickes stands at attention, leaving the pictpad on the bench.

"Lieutenant Wickes. The Colonel requires your presence in the strategium," the Commissar says, his aged voice the product of his fourth rejuvenation procedure that had reached the end of its span. A laureled cap rests on his grey hair and heavy carapace armor festooned with medals on his chest, the Lord Commissar has the authority to execute anyone on this ship should they give him cause to do so.

Wickes has his doubts the old man could raise his boltgun high enough to perform the execution.

He has to resist the impulse to physically shake the thoughts out of his head. That manner of thinking puts bolt shells in the skulls of complacent soldiers.

"Yes, my lord." Wickes throws up a stiff salute.

"Immediately, Lieutenant," the Commissar rumbles. "A moment of laxity--"

--spawns a lifetime of heresy," the junior officer finishes the aphorism. "The Emperor protects," he adds, heading for the open bulkhead.

"Faster, guardsman."

Wickes puts a hop in his step, skirting around the corner and down the narrow metal hallways of the ship. The bulkhead closes with a hiss behind him, whirring hydraulics locking it closed before opening the next one into the strategium.

The Colonel and his staff stand loosely circled around an effervescently shifting strategic control display. Even having served a twenty-four year career, Wickes can hardly comprehend its functions. Green nets of holographic data logs float at oblique

angles around the Colonel, orbiting the translucent diagram of the planetside warzones like rectangular moons while red and yellow frontlines trace across its surface in real time. That detail at least, Wickes understands. And it doesn't look good.

A red hooded Techpriest stands to the colonel's right, holding his gear-shaped halberd upright in one hand while the other operates some incomprehensible device. The Magos's craning neck twists slowly towards the Lieutenant, red cybernetic lenses scanning him thoroughly.

"Identity confirmed. Lieutenant first class Laurus Wickes, 111th Vendoland regiment, fourth company, third platoon," the Lucius adept's digitized voice recites.

"Thank you Magos. Without you I might not recognize my own veteran officers," the Colonel says, a cloud of cigar smoke issuing from his mouth. "You're probably wondering about your platoon's deployment, Lieutenant?"

"His will be done sir. Where are we dropping?"

The Colonel replaces the cigar in his mouth, inhaling briefly and speaking again in a cloud of smoke. "You're not."

Wickes pauses, standing steadily at attention. "Sir?"

"High command, in its wisdom, has devoted an entire platoon of my best infantry as a bodyguard for the planetary Governor. He has embarked on one of our support vessels and is awaiting your protection."

"Third platoon isn't deploying planetside?" Wickes growls. "We're the only veterans left from the regiment's founding, they can't hold us back from combat!"

"Watch your tone, Lieutenant," the Colonel sternly reminds him. "They certainly can, and the opinion is that they are not. The threat to the Governor's life is considered legitimate. Administratum officials demanded our most elite troops, and since neither Cadian tanks nor claustrophobic Elysians are suited to a bodyguard detail aboard an imperial navy vessel you will have to do. These are the Lord-General's orders. I expect you to fulfill this assignment with dedicated zeal. To question is to doubt."

"Blessed is the mind too small for doubt," the Lieutenant recites, his eyes sinking.

"Don't keep the Lord Governor waiting," the Colonel replies.

Wickes turns heel and exits the strategium.

"Lieutenant first class," the Tech-Priest's mechanical chatter echoes down the hall from much closer than Wickes anticipated.

He turns back to face the adept, who has followed a distance behind him. "Magos."

"New directive from the machine cult. Accompany first Lieutenant Wickes, 111th Vendoland aboard the Iron Dawn and meet with Lord Governor Assyrius."

Wickes stares back with eyes as hard and cold as the Techpriest's cybernetic implants. "Why?"

"Classified. Knowledge is power. Glory to the Ommissiah."

Wickes groans and continues down the corridor.

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The dropship rumbles out of the launch bay, accelerating to hypersonic speeds and shaking the third platoon troopers in their harnesses. Mirzayev adjusts his flak helmet and tightens the chinstrap. He settles back into the plasteel cradle as the G forces fade. The dark surface of Aravosis far below rests in space like a lump of iron, thrust already into the forges of war, awaiting the hammer of the Astra Militarum.

Mirzayev looks across the troop bay at the Lieutenant, who stares directly forward at the strapped down crates of weaponry and combat gear, his brow furrowed.

One of the younger sergeants, a technically blonde-haired grease rat named Braves stretches his skinny neck out around his harness, turning his black stained face toward Wickes. "L.T. when are you going to brief us on our drop zone?"

"Ignorance is a virtue," the officer hisses. "Pilot," he calls out toward the cockpit. "Maintain speed and direction."

A distant "Yes sir" is heard from the cockpit as the lander settles into an even space-glide.

The grizzled Lieutenant scrapes his nails across the sides of his shaved head, an expression of the veteran's frustration Mirzayev has become deeply familiar with. Wickes unbuckles his harness and stands, pacing to the center of the compartment. He withdraws a combat shotgun and a box of shells.

"They're sending us down with shotguns sir? Asks Lukaz, a gaunt veteran who has served with Wickes since the regiment was first raised."

"Accatran pattern mark XI, courtesy of our Elysian friends so we have an advantage, theoretically, fighting in the tight corridors of a warship," the Lieutenant elaborates, loading shells into the weapon.

Mirzayev fights back a sneer. He knows the real reason for issuing solid-shot wargear aboard Imperial Navy vessels. Lasguns would damage the walls.

I'm surprised they didn't give us the local's extra autoguns.

General looks of confusion spread throughout the platoon.

"We aren't going planetside," the Lieutenant announces.

The confusion turns to disgust and a wave of muttering ripples through the rows of harnessed veterans.

"Throne of Terra, where are we going then?" Mirzayev shouts.

"We have been assigned as a protection detail to the planetary governor and his staff. This was not my decision."

Muttering turns to an irritated, squabbling chatter.

Wickes loudly racks a shell, the sound overpowering his platoon's protest for a brief second. "My disagreements have been heard, ignored, and likely recorded. Any further complaints from this platoon can be made to the Commissariat. Am I clear?"

“Yes, sir,” Mirzayev joins in with the reply, the acknowledgement booming from the entire platoon at once.

“You’ll get specific assignments over the vox as soon as I get a map of the ship from the bridge, until then, take positions as you see fit,” Wickes concludes before returning to his harness.”

Mirzayev furrows his brow.

Something about this is too unusual... the governor should have his own bodyguard, dispatching actual Astra Militarum troops instead of local planetary defence forces to protect an administratum official- it's not right.

He glances left and right at the faces of his comrades.

They’re thinking it too.

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Striding into the bridge flanked by Braves, Lukaz, the Techpriest and a dozen other troopers, Wickes walks with a swaggering facade he learned from fighting alongside Vostroyans a decade ago. They taught him the importance of looking impressive to civilians who technically outrank him. Technically. And technicalities rarely apply in a Warzone. That, he learned from Catachans.

A blue suited, bald headed functionary with a cybernetic eye approaches them first, shuffling across the command center with a distinctly civilian gait. “Lieutenant first class Wickes I presume?”

“Where is the Governor?” Wickes growls.

The functionary shifts back a step. “I- my lord awaits your service this way.”

Administratum officials have a way of wasting words.

He directs us to the back of the room, a wide panel array of displays looking out into the void of space and down at the planet’s surface. Six chairs are rooted in front of the complex control panels. One of them spins around to reveal an aged man, half his head shaved. The other sports a branching tattoo of striking red snake heads, their curved fangs extended from wide open mouths. He wears a sly smile and a set of glittering epaulettes to match. The man has all the danger of an underhive gang warlord and all the glamour of a paradise world noble.

Wickes has to stop himself from retreating a step.

Not what I expected at all.

“Governor?” the word falls out of his mouth.

“Identity confirmed. Achaemenus Colossus Assyrius, Lord Governor of Aravosis,” Chatters the Techpriest.

“I was promised a full platoon of veterans.” the Governor says, his voice rumbling with an unnerving, guttural note.

“You have one aboard, Governor. Unfortunately I don’t believe the full platoon would fit aboard the bridge.”

“Data confirmed. Maximum occupancy of Astronomicon-class freighter control bridge insufficient for-”

“Acknowledged, Magos,” Wickes snaps. “I need a schematic of the ship’s layout so we can set security,” he adds.

“Whatever is necessary for my protection.” The Governor waves. “Captain...” He nods towards an officer monitoring the pulsating lights on the control boards.

“Shipboard resources are available on that cogitator.” The captain points to a console behind him in the center of the room. “It’s off-network, and has no removable dataslates. You’ll have to jack into it.”

“Smart,” Wickes hisses. “Magos, display the schematic.”

The Techpriest inserts his twisting mechadendrite into the port and a cut down hologram of the ship with floating labels registers in blue above the console.

He carefully examines it for possible means of reaching the bridge. Imperial Navy vessels are deliberately designed to make this difficult for an invader. The few corridors that lead there are long and narrow, creating an easy to defend bottleneck. Wickes marks them for weapons teams to set up.

He keys in his vox to the whole platoon, directing each squad to point defense positions and patrol assignments.

“Forgive me, Lieutenant, but you are using your own vox-casters instead of the shipboard communication systems? Would there not be more static on the receiving end?” the Governor interjects.

“Data confirmed,” says the Tech-magos. “Internal structures will interfere with vox signal.”

Wickes releases the key on the vox. He sighs with audible irritation. “Third platoon learned to stick to our own vox channels the hard way. The enemy listens to the corpses of your fallen comrades. It is a matter of principle, as units cannot always report that they are under attack before they are annihilated.”

Or that they were never on your side to begin with.

He continues issuing commands to the platoon and at the end of the long ream of orders he scratches his chin, noticing a detail he’d overlooked at first. “Sergeant Grosse, take squad Tertius and check out the starboard launch bay.”

“Isn’t that bay full of cargo and sealed behind the blast doors, Captain?” the Governor chimes in, leaning over the arm of his chair towards him.

“Yes my lord,” replies the captain. “It contains the material you requested be stored aboard.”

“Lieutenant I’m afraid I must object. The starboard hold contains artefacts of a sensitive nature, not to be interfered with by foot soldiers-”

Wickes delivers the Governor a sideyed glance. “They’re not interfering with anything. It’s a patrol. If anything were to infiltrate this vessel it would most likely go through one of the cargo holds. Squad Tertius is going in.”

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Mirzayev marches at the back of squad Tertius as they approach the hazard-striped doors of the starboard launch bay. Grosse's chainsword rumbles and clicks like a Catachan Devil as it idly cycles, slowly rotating its monomolecular teeth around the chain. The sergeant holsters his pistol and keys in the security code. The bulkhead hisses open and the squad files into the bay.

"Tactical formation, the Emperor protects," the sergeant says.

The squad of ten spreads out just beyond the bulkhead, shotguns levelled at the inky darkness of the room, their shadows cast out like long fingers in the light pouring from the doorway. Finely machined snub barrels aim down the sightless alleys between corrugated metal crates and parked vehicles.

"Clear," Grosse announces.

So he says. It's so dark in here it can never really be 'clear.'

"Search the launch bay, spread out. Muzzle torches on," the sergeant continues issuing orders. "And someone find the damn light switch!"

Mirzayev flicks his torch on and slides it onto the rail of his shotgun then cautiously advances into the tight lanes of the shipboard warehouse. The subtle sound of his practiced military footwork is drowned out by the droning hum which constantly vibrates through the ship.

Dust lingers on every surface and floats airborne, illuminated clouds hanging in the stale re-filtered air as his beam of light passes over them.

This place reminds him far too much of that old hive city, Illustrium IV, his first deployment ten years ago. In the dusty spires of that hive there was so much vox static they resorted to using civilian systems. The whole regiment could hear them.

"Found a light switch sir." The distant voice of the vox operator carries across the bay, muffled by rows of stacked crates.

On Illustrium IV, three full companies showed their true colors as heretic turncoats, manipulated by traitor astartes. Their indiscretion nearly doomed them against the alpha legion infiltrators.

He carefully checks the next corner and stealthily rounds it, his searching light slowly panning the crates. He's come to a dead end marked by the sealed blast doors of the freighter's airlock.

And this place, it reminds Mirzayev of that battle too damn much.

"Then why are the lights still off, guardsman?" the sergeant barks.

Mirzayev's torch settles on a mess of twisted plasteel, the corrugated walls of a crate bent and torn open. He fixes it on the damaged container and advances slowly.

"It's inoperable sir," the vox operator's voice echoes in reply.

"Give me the damn vox!"

The inside of the container is a splintered mess of wooden boxes that've been smashed to pieces.

Mirzayev's eyes widen.

Something shifts in the dust behind him, a barely audible *swoosh*.

Mirzayev Aurrek's heart beats one last time as he turns around.

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Wickes pauses before replying into the vox. "Say again sergeant, a faulty lightswitch?"

The channel fizzes with static as the reply comes through. "Yes sir. The launch bay is completely dark."

Wickes squeezes the key on the vox. "You have muzzle lights and flares, why aren't you searching it anyway?" he barks. "I want that launch bay swept now!"

The governor turns to the ship captain. "Were you aware of faulty lighting in the launch bay?"

"No my lord. All systems were checked and found functioning when we exited the warp. This is most unexpected."

There's a prolonged silence and Wickes grinds his teeth together. The failure of basic tasks was not something he wished to add to this day.

He lifts the receiver and prepares to give the sergeant another piece of his mind when the channel opens up from the other end.

Hissing static mixes with agonized, wailing screams, overwhelming the shortlived bark of shotguns before the line goes dead.

The navy personnel on the bridge squabble in panic, the captain raises a shaky hand to his mouth. Even the Vendoland troopers present exchange worried glances. Only Governor Assyrius remains steady, seated in his chair, unperturbed as a reptile.

"Sergeant, report!" the Lieutenant yells.

The response is silence.

Throne of Terra...

He opens the line to the whole platoon. "Third platoon, prepare for contact, we have unidentified enemy aboard."

Wickes can't help feeling a rush inside, a rising, fiery anticipation. There'll be battle for them after all.

He barks out a string of orders, tightening a ring of containment around the launch bay. Whatever was foolish enough to board this ship, by the Emperor he will drown it in blood and scattershot.

Wickes slams the receiver back down on the vox caster. "Magos I need all the security feeds in that sector on the display *now*."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant first class," the Techpriest drones as the pictfeeds fly into view over the hologram projector.

Slithering like a shadow, something humanoid and black as the void slips past the corner of one camera's vision.

Wickes grabs the vox again. "Squad Primus, get ready, there's an intruder coming right at you."

The whole bridge watches the pict breathlessly as the ten veterans of squad primus set up a rigid firing line down the corridor, kneeling in ranks right in front of the security camera.

A tense moment passes before it appears around the corner, a jet black blur charging the firing line.

It's halfway down the corridor before the guardsmen can fire.

Bodies burst and ragdoll against the walls as bullets rip through them, a huge semi-automatic blasting from the thing's hand.

The shotguns open fire and it dashes through a storm of lead like it's nothing.

The monstrous shadow collides with the firing line, tearing through it with horrifying efficiency. For only the briefest second does it slow down enough for Wickes to get a good look at it. It's a man, or something like one, with a skull helmet and glowing orange eyes. He fires coldly accurate bursts from an incredibly huge combi-pistol while his other hand shreds through the flesh of Wickes's men, huge metal talons rending their flak armor like it's nothing.

The intruder moves with such agility and speed in the narrow corridor he seems to bounce from one wall to the other, weaving between the falling bodies as he eviscerates his way from the front of the squad to the back.

It slips out of view as swiftly as it arrived, leaving the pict feed to show nothing but a corpse-strewn hallway steeped in blood and spent shells.

Sweat streams down Lieutenant Wickes face, a single drop flowing over his eyebrow and dripping onto the console.

Never in twenty-four years of war have I seen anything move like that. Not even Genestealers can clear a long hallway and massacre a squad in an eyeblink.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, he turns to the captain. "Close the bulkheads, total lockdown," he pants. "Do it now."

The captain nods to one of the navy officers, who flips several switches. Every door on the ship slams shut with an airtight seal, including the two opposite entrances to the bridge control room.

"Surely you will be able to get the situation under control, Lieutenant?" the Governor slyly intones.

Wickes says nothing. He leans over the central console, reading the ship's diagram carefully. No mistake, that skull-headed freak is headed for the bridge.

He closes his eyes. "Magos, data. Can the bulkheads still be opened by security codes in lockdown?"

"Consulting the machine spirits... confirmed. Only a loss of power could prevent the bulkheads from being opened by override litanies."

The Lieutenant tries to conceal the shake in his hand as he reaches for the vox again. "Sergeant Hopkan, move squad Secundus to corridor 3a, set up the heavy bolter there," he orders, fighting to keep his voice placid. "You have the security codes. Do not waste any time."

"Aye sir," crackles the reply.

The shadowy form of the intruder bolts past another camera, skidding to a halt in front of a bulkhead. He pauses, as though contemplating, then slowly holsters his pistol and reaches for the keypad. Thick, gloved fingers punch in the override code and the hazard striped door slides open.

"How does he have the codes?" Wickes blurts out.

"It seems our assailant has had some inside assistance..." says the Governor.

Wickes growls and keys the vox, continuing to ignore him. "Secundus, you have enemy incoming, five seconds. Keep the vox on, I want to hear what is happening."

The staccato reply is drowned in the thunder of heavy bolter fire and shotguns. A different weapon replies in rapid bursts that thud and whistle from closer and closer to the vox receiver.

"Magos, search sound files on the cogitator, I want to know what that gun is."

"Isolating sounds from standard Astra militarium equipment also present... Analyzing... confirmed. Weapon profile match found. *Executioner pistol.*"

The name rattles Wickes's bones. He steadies himself, both arms supporting his weight over the console as sweat soaks into his shirt. "Origin?" he breathes the question. "Give me as much data as you can."

The Magos pauses, if his cybernetic eyes could blink, they would. "Data classified. Persons without acceptable clearance detected. Cannot relay information. Only the Governor can access data logs with that level of secrecy."

The vox goes silent before the Magos can finish speaking, every member of squad Secundus reduced to a bloody corpse.

Wickes lowers his head. *I still have two full infantry squads, though one of them is too far away to help, plus the heavy weapons teams outside the bridge control room and the specialists inside of it. I can stop that thing from reaching the bridge.*

Governor Assyrius stands up. "Magos, you will find that imperial law provides me with the authority to relay such information to personnel with the need for it in emergencies."

"Confirmed. Contradictions found in the Book of Justice on this subject. Arbiters not present to rule on them, proceeding."

"Thrones, get on with it!" Wickes snaps.

"Executioner pistol: combination needler and bolt pistol. Exclusive to the Officio Assassinorum, Eversor temple. The assailant is an imperial assassin," the techpriest chatters.

The Magos's announcement stuns the room into silence.

Wickes turns, his hands finding the shotgun on the console. “Why are we being attacked by an agent of the Imperium?” he yells, spittle flying from his mouth.

No one in the room replies, most of the navy officers shift back a step, the captain won’t look him in the eye. Only the Governor holds his position and his stare.

Wickes’s hands shake on the grips of the Accatran shotgun.

I could be defending a heretic, or a corrupt official. Wickes realizes. From the moment he stepped out of the strategium he had wondered how the Adeptus Administratum convinced the Astra militarum to devote it’s best troops to protecting the governor. Now he knows. Bribery, corruption, and heresy. Maybe the crew of this ship are involved too, explains why they’re so quiet. Wickes stands still as stone, the full import of the situation dawning on him. If he fights to the death as every guardsman should, as fully thirty of his men have already, it will be for nothing. If he doesn’t, the Commissariat will consider it a dereliction of duty nevermind the circumstances, and he will be shot.

The only way off of this ship alive is with the Governor.

“Only in death does duty end, Lieutenant.” The governor nods.

Damn him. He knows.

“Augh!” Wickes growls and turns back to the console in time to see the assassin bolt past another camera, leaving a trail of blood as he runs. “Squad Tetrarch and autocannon teams one through three, intruders incoming in fifteen seconds.”

“Acknowledged.”

A pict feed displays clearly the tight ranks of guardsmen defending the corridor, they’ve stacked two autocannon emplacements on top of ammunition crates barricading the hallway twenty meters from the junction. Rows of veterans kneel in front, shotguns extended. *Nothing can get through that amount of firepower without terminator armor, can it?*

The Assassin flashes around the corner and disappears behind it just as quickly. A fusillade of gunfire tears down the hallway after it, its discharges are audible through the doors and echo inside the control room.

A cylindrical object flying the length of the corridor lands on the crates with a hollow thump.

Wickes eyes flash with helpless recognition an instant before the melta bomb goes off and the corridor is swallowed by a plume of white fire, cutting off the camera with a boom that shakes the ship.

The Lieutenant yells into the vox. “Squad Pentus, kill the plasma reactor!”

“No, that will shut down every system on the ship!” the captain exclaims.

“Sir?” comes the crackling reply of squad Pentus’s vox operator.

“Do it now!” Wickes bellows into the receiver.

The captain advances towards Wickes, reaching to grab the vox out of his hand. “I have authority over this vessel, you cannot put us dead in space without power!”

Wickes raises his shotgun, racks a shell and fires.

The captain's head explodes into a splatter of gore, his body falls to its knees and topples over, Wickes stumbles backwards as it collapses at his feet.

The remaining imperial navy officers raise their hands in surrender as the twelve Vendoland guardsmen level their guns at them.

Governor Assyrius, does nothing.

"You are not authorized to execute imperial navy officers, Lieutenant." the Techpriest drones. "They are outside of your chain of command."

Wickes shoots him too.

The Magos's cybernetic eyes shatter and static arcs from his mechadendrites as a solid slug smashes through his tech-enhanced face and spins out the back of his head.

"A wise man learns from the death of others," the Governor says with an insidious hiss.

"Death is the servant of the righteous." Wickes racks another shell.

The ship rumbles as the power dies. The lights flicker out, swallowing the room in darkness. Only the faint light of distant stars filtering through the narrow bridge viewports illuminates the room. The last sounds of violence, of his men being slaughtered outside the bulkhead on the starboard entrance settle. The assassin is right outside the door.

Starlight illuminates the Governor's serpentine facial tattoo, his leering eyes glinting in the darkness, holding onto the Lieutenant with no sign of letting go. Wickes can hear his own heaving breaths in the heavy silence. He shakily reaches for the vox again. The shipboard systems might all be without power, but their own vox casters still work. "My armor is contempt, assassin. The Emperor protects." He releases the key.

For a moment, the silence returns, and then the vox crackles to life. It buzzes with static and a frigid, merciless voice replies. "Not from me."

The receiver falls out of Wickes hand and bounces off the console. The terror in the room is palpable, on the starlit faces of every one of his most grizzled veterans he can see the sweat pooling under their chin straps.

"The doors..." he pants. "Are sealed. Not even security codes will open them now."

"So our assailant cannot get in, and we cannot get out," says the Governor.

"He will find a way in. When that happens we will not be here anymore." He turns towards Lukaz. "The meltagun, guardsman."

"Say no more, sir." The balding trooper raises his weapon towards the port side bulkhead and unleashes a scorching beam of superheated energy, reducing the armored door to a glowing mound of molten slag.

“We’re going to melt our way to the port side launch bay, board the landing craft we arrived on and abandon ship before that Eversor figures out where we’ve gone,” Wickes says. “Now move.”

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The only lights as they move single file down the corridor are their muzzle torches and the glow of the meltagun’s barrel. They advance with Lukaz at point, Wickes behind him and the Governor immediately following. His presence feels like an insect on the Lieutenant’s back.

They are halfway across the ship already, he can taste their escape.

Wickes mutters a prayer under his breath as they round the next corner.

“Another door ahead sir,” says Lukaz.

Wickes stops. “Cut it open.”

The trooper hustles forward within range of the bulkhead, it’s yellow stripes barely visible in the dim light.

The humming of the ship has stopped, the engine silent and dead. Only their breaths, now visible in the cold processed air, can be heard.

The Lieutenant steps forward, astride a hissing vent in the wall.

His head slowly turns and he raises his weapon to it, the flashlight on its muzzle shining through the thin metal grille.

The assassin’s grinning skull mask leers at him, barely visible through the speckled shadows.

Wickes leaps back just in time, flattening against the opposite wall as metal claws tear through the vent.

He falls on his rear, screaming and slam-firing his shotgun into the open vent.

The Governor bolts past him, heading for Lukaz and the door.

The Emperor protects. The Emperor protects.

The Lieutenant pumps the forend backwards until the shotgun’s only reply is a click. He unpins a grenade with his teeth and hurls it into the vent then rolls to his feet. He looks back only long enough to see the skull-headed shadow man burst fully through the wall into the midst of the guardsmen.

Wickes runs after Lukaz and the governor, leaving the agonized screams and thumping gunfire of his men far behind. He reaches the end of the corridor and leaps through the molten blast door.

He skids to a halt and pans his light across the large compartment. The launch bay, complete with several empty landing pads and row upon row of cargo meant to supply the surface campaign below. The dropship that brought third platoon aboard sits idle on the far end of the compartment.

There’s no way they will be able to take off in it before the assassin catches them, but they’ve bought precious time.

Wickes spots Lukaz and Governor Assyrius running for the bulky craft. "Get in cover behind those crates, hold position!" he yells to them.

"Aye sir," Lukaz calls back and pulls the Governor with him behind a pallet of ammunition boxes.

The Lieutenant dives behind a crate, his heart hammering as he stuffs shells into the shotgun. *Why couldn't those bastards issue us lasguns! That assassinorum freak dodges buckshot like we're throwing rocks at him.*

Nothing in any of his training could have prepared him for this.

He crawls alongside the crate and sits up against it, his flak armored chest heaving with breath. He tries to remember words from the Imperial truth, anything that might calm or save him.

Pain is an illusion of the senses, despair an illusion of the mind.

A wise man does not fear, a man afraid does not think.

Wickes looks forward at the cargo in front of him, the crates of frag grenades.

Then there was something else, something a Catachan told him when he was only a sergeant...

He takes a single frag and a roll of chameleoline wire from the first crate and flicks his light off.

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This is a gamble. There's a straight alley between the cargo containers all the way down to the faint glow of Lukaz's torch.

Wickes is crouched at a right angle to a tight Z of wire across the threshold, it's rigged to a sticky frag grenade with a short fuse on one of the crates. Most normal foes would walk straight into the invisible line, but he's certain the Assassin will see it even with the chameleoline.

The assassin stalks into view, nearly invisible in the darkness, save for a grim outline and the projected greenish glow of night vision emanating out of his skeletal eyes.

He stops, spotting the criss-cross of tripwire an instant soon enough. It's precisely taut, low enough that he can't crouch underneath it, high enough he'll have to jump.

And Wickes is counting on it.

The Lieutenant holds his breath. No sound. No muzzle sway, he cannot afford to miss.

He prays to holy Terra that his thumping heart will not give him away.

The Eversor crouches and springs over the wire, leaping airborne over the trap.

The 111th Vendoland's campaign alongside the 44th Catachan among others, fighting the Tyranid menace on an otherwise unimportant jungle world proved...

educational. Wickes learned firstly that tripwires are a distraction at best, and secondly that not even Hormagaunts can dodge projectiles while they're three feet off the ground.

Nor assassins.

His shotgun's report is thunderous and the Eversor twists in mid air as the slug punches a fist sized hole through his center mass, a crimson splash of gore illuminated in the muzzle flash.

The assassin lands face-flat on the plasteel deck, blood rapidly pooling out from him, his gun bouncing out of his hand onto the deck ahead.

Wickes racks another shell and flicks the muzzle light on. He stands up, his gun still trained on the prone Eversor. He finally releases his breath and gasps in and out.

"Death is the servant of the righteous," he mutters once again.

A low, filtered cackling emits from the assassin, his skull rising to look up at Wickes.

The Lieutenant pulls the trigger once more, and the Eversor tumbles out of the way, trailing ichor.

Dragging itself to its feet, the fanatic glares at Wickes, half of the mask ripped off by the shotgun slug. Underneath, a naked eye dilated wide open by a cocktail of combat drugs leers at him in utter madness while the thing's rictus grin moves in shuddering speech. "Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill..." it repeats, charging down the alley toward Wickes.

The Lieutenant screams, stumbling backwards and rapidly slam firing every shell left in the magazine.

With terrifying dexterity even in its impossibly wounded state, the assassin totters from side to side, slugs flying past or grazing its limbs, every step taking it closer.

Wickes wails as it seizes him by the collar of his flak jacket, raising the deadly claw for a strike.

"Kill, ki-

A slug bursts through the thing's chest, flying out past Wickes in a shower of gore.

It falls limp, dropping him while it crumples to the ground.

Wickes scrambles backwards, discarding the shotgun in his haste as he watches Lukaz walk down the alley, hammering shell after shell into the corpse until he's standing over the dead assassin and the weapon is empty.

The old veteran looks at his Lieutenant. "The Emperor prote-"

The Eversor's body explodes with a blast sufficient to shake the launch bay, flattening Wickes and knocking his head against the floor.

His ears ring, his heart pounds, he blinks his crossed eyes. The Governor stands over him, feeding shells into Wickes own shotgun.

"Tell me... this was worth it," the Lieutenant chokes.

"No man died in His service, that died in vain," the Governor intones.

Wickes clears his throat, trying to focus his eyes on the man, trying to move even one of his muscles. "That's what they say."

"Indeed, that said..." The Governor pulls up his sleeve to reveal a snaking turquoise tattoo like a backwards S with three leering, draconic heads flicking their serpent tongues.

"You bastard!" the Lieutenant fights to move, but he can't.

Governor Assyrius racks the shotgun and aims it at Wickes head. "Hydra Dominatus."

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