

Oppressors' End

By Colin Cubbon

Thorvek pressed his full weight onto the witch, who lay on the alley's rough ground. He pinned the psyker's arms beneath his knees and smothered the man's mouth so that no curses could be spat. From the alley's mouth, Hollun looked back nervously. Thorvek muttered a prayer, hurried but heartfelt, before swiftly drawing a blessed dagger across the man's thick neck. The cut was clean, efficiently made, and blood welled out immediately. It flowed over the man's neck and down the alley, before pooling in a stinking, litter-choked drain that was already buzzing with cryptilids.

The witch's convulsions ceased with a final spurt of bloody froth that covered Thorvek's apron. He swore silently – evidence! They had prepared for this problem, but it was still something Thorvek could have avoided. If the Imperial lapdog now dead beneath him hadn't been so damned strong, he could have covered his throat as planned. Gerta would deal with it. Patermine bless her! She was incredibly skilled in swiftly excising incriminating stains and dyes out of the most impliable fabric. So skilled, in fact, that senior leaders from other cells of the Mindchord – even beyond Thorvek's home city of Grezum – begged for her training as often as secrecy would allow.

Home city. Not for long, he thought, not now that salvation was on its way. It meant a better life for all the faithful of the Cult of the Mindchord, not least for Thorvek, for kind-eyed Gerta and for the small star angel she was swiftly bearing to term.

At the alley's end, Hollun shifted incessantly from foot to foot. The lookout was constantly on edge, it seemed, at least when not in the pastor's presence. Hollun's eyes and ears were the best in the cell, though. Working out on the slag fields on the outskirts of Grezum meant his eyesight and hearing were incredibly sharp. They had to be, for all sorts of predatory life stalked the slag.

'You done?' he hissed back at Thorvek, eager to get out of such an enclosed space.

Thorvek swiftly signed for the lookout to wait. He placed the tip of the blessed dagger upon the psyker's forehead – still warm and caked in grimy sweat – and drew a wafer-thin rag of filthy cloth from his overall. Thorvek consulted the simple image scratched in charcoal on the rag, and began to carve an identical one into the witch's head. He made sure

that the cuts were jagged, pressing hard to incise the skull beneath, just as the pastor had instructed.

Soon, the bloody shape of an eye was riven into the psyker's smooth forehead. The red eye mirrored the chalked occulus that Grezum's governor had scrawled on the backs of rounded up psykers, as his troops paraded them on the way to the Black Camps. More importantly, bloodily carved like this and with a cleanly slit throat, the mark bore all the signs of the recent vigilante attacks on those bearing even a whiff of sorcery about them.

Looking at his work, Thorvek instinctively rubbed his own forehead in the same spot, massaging the tiredness he felt over the shallow, bony ridges there. The five sacred ridges were his inheritance – dating all the way back to when the Serene Paternosa arrived as the emissary of the Star Children. Thorvek felt happy, despite the dull ache; everything was as the pastor had wished, expressed in the man's mellow voice. Other cells had rather outlandish names for the statuesque man: Cognosc or Viapater, and to Hollun he was always the pastor, but Thorvek had been personally invited to address him as the Magus.

The Magus – always so admirably in touch with dealings around the city – had told Thorvek and Hollun how the governor's expanding corps of witch-finders were equipped with some new, off-world tech. The governor had told his counsellors that he had negotiated a pact with the Adeptus Mechanicus, but the devices looked like no work of the Tech-Priests. They were smooth, subtly curved, like nothing the Magus' Mindchord contacts had seen before. These psy-hunting bands of armoured agents were trawling dangerous areas of Grezum in fifty-strong gangs, often followed by a mob of hate-filled civilians. Thorvek could sympathise, hating witches intensely.

Many loyal brothers and sisters of the Mindchord's scattered cells had joined these hunts, helping their fellow Grezi root out the foulness – even if the rest were unbelievers. Yet, imagine such an unthinking mob, the Magus had mused, witnessing the simple and honest miracles gifted to the Cult of the Mindchord. What then? These witch-finders too, the oppressor's tools that they were, would they understand? Everything the Serene Paternosa had done to save them would be in vain, the Star Children might even turn aside from this world in

shame. The Magus had spoken sadly of his worry, and Thorvek had ached to do something to help him.

Even the thought of that brief meeting with the Magus warmed Thorvek through. Since his earliest boyish memory of a blessing at the man's hand, Thorvek had seen the guiding light of the cult only a handful of times in person. Yet often did a mental image of the Magus come to mind during vital work for the cult. Stealing uniforms, monitoring sentry patterns and reconnoitring possible new sanctums – all were carried out with the reassuring presence of the Magus' eyes at the back of his mind. Thorvek had jokingly told himself the Magus watched Thorvek's dealings through his servants' eyes. Yet, with the miracles the man wrought, who was Thorvek to say that wasn't exactly what occurred?

Psykers, Thorvek thought, bitterly. The tyrannical overlords of Grezum sought to buy the docile obedience of its citizens by hunting the witches down, all the while pampering their pet sorcerers. There had been so many more purges recently, but with the oppressors' increased trawls with witch-finders and their off-world tech, came the increased risk to the security of the Mindchord's cells. It was a blessing, then – a portent, the Magus had called it – that the Cult of the Mindchord had been blessed with so many more workers of simple miracles. It was a sign. After all these generations of preparation, it was the sign.

'Come on,' he called sharply to Hollun. The lookout ran to where they had dumped the psyker's body, and together they wove into the darkness of crumbling alleyways. Thorvek liked the wiry man, who was favoured with a violet cast his hairline just about concealed.

'I hate this place,' Hollun spat. 'Why'd we have to drag that witch all the way out here? This is King Jarran's patch, even slagers like me know that! That old smuggler's had enforcers killed before now. He wouldn't think twice if he caught us here.'

'That's the point. You trust the Magus, the pastor, don't you?'

Hollun looked appalled. 'Yes! Of course I- you know I do!'

'Think about it. The cult catch that off-world, Imperial witch sniffing around the pastor's private

chambers, right? That filthy mind-spy gets found here, "shanked by vigies". Now that we've got loyalty in the mobs, they'll make sure he's discovered by the witch-finders.'

'But King Jarran isn't some low life the governor can walk over. The witch-finders tramp here, there'll be war.'

'Yeah, there will.' Thorvek grinned and slapped his friend's lumpen back as he saw realisation dawn. 'It's happening, Hol. In our lifetime, it's finally happening! The oppressors will be slaughtered!'

'Patermine!' Hollun breathed. He smiled in ecstasy, pointed yellow teeth gleaming.

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Less than a week later, Grezum burned. To Thorvek's awe, the Serene Paternosa's tireless agents across the entire continent had revealed their hand as one united people. Grezum convulsed in the throes of a war between the city governor and the huge resources of King Jarran's criminal underempire, their former back room agreements swept aside in blood. The city didn't blaze alone. From his vantage point at a high window of a derelict factorum, Thorvek saw at least three satellite cities in flames. How he wished his grandfather could have laid his lidless eyes on the scene and known this moment. Below Thorvek, the briefest of violet sparks flared. Ascension hour had come at last.

His perfectly executed luring of the murdered Imperial investigator had earned Thorvek high praise. Now, he led what would be the cult's first open blow against the oppressor.

Thorvek stalked down through the abandoned factorum and, like oily shadows, the fighters of his cell slipped along in his wake. By the time they poured silently out of a rear loading bay, almost thirty dedicated brothers and sisters of the Cult of the Mindchord crept alongside Thorvek. In the twilight, greasy rain soaked them. They looked ragtag, their grime-smeared serf coveralls layered over stolen flak jackets.

Bolt-action rifles, brutalist autoguns and even antique hunting arquebuses were borne in a mismatch of firepower. They were nothing like the recent propaganda vids spewed by the governor,



with his honour guard at practice ranges in neatly pressed uniforms, firing their new Grezum-pattern plasma long rifles. Stolen vid logs from the governor's chambers had also shown him cajoling the city's wealthy with tales of new backers. He jabbered of better weapons for the city state militias, off-world investment and global unity.

Thorvek's target was an outer defence post of the city militia. Its unimportance made it the ideal mark. They didn't yet have anyone inside this particular post – its clique of politicised nepotists had proven hard to infiltrate – but there were always ways to overcome any problem, as the Magus told them. Crouching near the gate, in its outer perimeter, Thorvek signalled.

Sister Regenn, her angelic purple features hidden beneath a militia helm, entered her pass card in the brass reader. With gloved digits, she punched in the code whose acquisition had cost an unbelieving colleague his life. She casually covered the locking mechanism as she passed through, letting the heavy gate close behind her as she walked with her characteristic awkwardness to the post's door. Regenn looked up openly at the skull-faced pict-thief above the door. Regenn knew from her own shifts at other posts that the images it took were monitored, and those inside would be trying to raise her on a vox frequency keyed solely to this post. She theatrically tapped the side of her enclosed helm, beautifully conveying abject and tired frustration, as well as a supposedly broken vox bead. After a moment, the defence post's portal opened.

Thorvek felt events slow.

Two militia guards came out to remonstrate with Regenn. They were strained, on edge and without sleep. The internecine city war hadn't yet reached this area, but the guards had been posted on endless shifts without hope of relief. The bigger of the guards managed two shouted invectives before Regenn brought her stub gun up. The guard's face disappeared in a roar of heavy slugs and the back of his helmet erupted in a shower of blood, brain matter and sharp shards of bone.

The other guard didn't turn and flee, surprising Thorvek, but the woman was doomed nevertheless. In a tide of bodies, Thorvek's cell kin poured through the gate that Regenn's inserted scramble emitter had prevented from locking. The guard shot Regenn with a kind of slim-nosed plasma pistol that Thorvek didn't recognise, but then took too long fumbling for her vox bead contact and was ripped apart by the Mindchord's devoted liberators.

Another of Thorvek's squad scooped up the pass card from Regenn's dead hand without so much as a glance at her. She was a blessed martyr, but she would be reincarnated with all the others when the Star Children arrived. Her actions would allow them to sever this post's connections with the capital, draw whatever forces the governor could spare out here to the lonely fringe and leave the entire city at the mercy of the Mindchord waiting in the ancient sewers beneath.

The pass card opened the defence post's portal and Thorvek's squad poured a hail of shot inside. Two of his fighters were hit by immediate return fire, rapid-firing streams of blue plasma torching them. The smell of the warriors' burnt flesh washed over the fighters who followed, stampeding over their dying cell-kin with hisses and shouts.

Inside the interconnected command rooms, signal housings, armouries and billets, the savage fighting was far closer than Thorvek had anticipated. The twenty or so sleep-deprived guards should have been swarmed in moments. Instead, they braced themselves around the gantries, covering each other in a way that Thorvek had never seen before. Many more zealous cult fighters fell to the guards' fire, chests and heads flash-burning in the volleys of plasma pulses. The guards' unified cohesion could not save them though, not against such determined liberators as Thorvek's. His brothers and sisters poured rattling automatic fire into the post's guards, tore out throats with angel-touched talons and drove knives into eyes, hearts and lungs again and again.

Barely ten of Thorvek's warriors survived, and he could not share their joyous celebrations at finally having overcome collaborators of the oppressor. Thorvek's mind churned with everything that was wrong inside the defence post. The guards had used the oddly proportioned plasma weaponry meant to be so new it was only held by the governor's honour guard. This was an outer defence post, manned by dregs, yet they'd fought with selfless cohesion. What then, the governor's own praetorians? A heretical thought surfaced: had the Cult of the Mindchord underestimated the oppressors? A stained chapbook stuck out of the breast pocket of the guard at his feet, above which blood continued to flow from the ragged stump of the man's neck. Thorvek flicked through its yellowed pages idly, trying to order his thoughts.

There is a unity to which we can all belong, he read, a higher purpose. A greater good.

In Thorvek's mind, the Magus' dark eyes opened.