



# *Retaliation*

By Dirk Wehner

It was such a simple word. Yet, Fioros Loth knew, it struck fear into the hearts of the enemies of the Imperium, just as he himself did. The monster, the silencer, the lurking danger in the darkness – the blank.

Fioros opened his eyes. They were grey, but not like a stormy sea or furious thunderheads. They were grey like nothing, for nothing was what lay behind them. He looked around at his surroundings. His chamber, they called it. His prison, he knew.

It was a spherical room made from brass and adamantium. Every inch of the walls was covered in purity seals to ward off his influence, to keep Fioros isolated until they needed him. The room itself hovered between massive magnetised repulsor plates, the antigravitational field keeping it suspended. There was no way to leave until they came for him.

Inside this cell, aboard the sleek, nameless ship, Fioros stared at the mask that lay on the gridded metal floor in front of him. It stared back, as empty as himself. The smooth silver surface formed a stylised skull, representing the gift of the bearer. All sorts of arcane machinery protruded from the back of it, forming the terrifying device of the animus speculum. A spherical appliance of studded brazen metal sat on the left side of the skull mask – it was the only weapon Fioros needed, a way to unleash the pure darkness of his mind upon his enemies.

He did not find joy in what he did, because he did not truly understand joy. All he understood was his function in this galaxy. Find the target. Execute retaliation. Find the target. Execute retaliation. Again and again.

A purpose. That was what they had given him after all those years spent as the outcast and the monster, viewed as heresy made manifest. Retaliation was his purpose.

A red lumen in the corner of his chamber lit up, signalling that the time had come once again. Fioros put his hands on both sides of the heavy mask, lifting it as he rose and slowly placing it over his head. As the seals of the massive device locked around his neck, he sighed. The inside of this mask was the only home he had ever truly known.

With proficient moves, he tightened the belt that held his psyk-out grenades in place and made for the

door of his chamber, thumbing the activation rune to signal that he was ready. The door slid open with a soft hiss, revealing a fifteen feet gap between his suspended chamber and the next door. In the corners, two storm bolter sentry gun arrays immediately swivelled in his direction. Only then, with the noise of ancient and revered technology, did a series of repulsor plates detach themselves from the walls, hover closer and begin to form a bridge. As soon as the first one was in place, Fioros began to walk with measured steps across the distance of the bridge, while it was still taking shape.

Fioros reached a hallway bathed in red light. Arcane psi-spoor auspexes chimed softly, confirming that the target was on the planet's surface beneath the black warship. Two lumbering servitors, their heads wrapped in black cowls, were waiting for Fioros. Their arms ended in plasma guns and wicked claws – they were intended for him, he knew. An illusion of control, but his masters couldn't fool him. In fact, they only fooled themselves if they thought that this would stop him if he ever decided to turn against them. But why would he?

The time had come. Find the target. Execute retaliation. This was his purpose. Nothing else.

The two servitors took their places on either side of the Culexus Assassin, escorting him through the locked-down corridor and towards the ship's hangar, where his insertion shuttle waited. He knew that they herded him like a beast, but he did not care. He only cared for one thing. His duty.

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Retaliation.

It was such a simple word, yet it had so many facets, not unlike Zara Nox herself. Things were never simple with retaliation; it came in a myriad of shapes, as countless as those receiving it through Zara's hands. Only fitting, then, that she too came in one of innumerable guises to deliver this gift. Yet there was also pain. In a chamber as featureless as herself, Zara underwent the agonising changes of her profession once more. She endured the process in stoic silence. This too was a gift, a gift to her, for it was her weapon.

As the polymorphine did its work, her lithe and sinuous body shifted and became bulky. Zara's musculature became ever more defined, her jawline

became broader and her bones cracked and rubbed against each other as they took new form. She contorted as her vertebrae aligned themselves newly, making her larger and changing her whole silhouette.

A red lumen in the corner of Zara's chamber lit up and signalled that the time had come.

With fingers that weren't hers anymore, she felt her new face.

Zara nodded before she left the small room. This was a face that looked nothing



like the woman it now belonged to, and yet it was hers. This was not the face of Callidus Assassin Zara Nox, and yet it was her true face. It was the face of one thing only. The face of her duty.

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Retaliation.

It was such a simple word. Determined, single-minded with a clear purpose, like a bullet hitting home. There was no room for interpretations, for shades or nuances. Retaliation was pure and simple, straightforward and distinct in its relevance. In this, it was not unlike Moritan Callen, for he himself was retaliation made manifest.

Moritan sat cross-legged in his bare chamber, his exitus rifle balanced on his thighs. One of his black-gloved hands rested on the weapon's shaft, while the other was placed firmly on the gun's silencer.

Moritan knew that others found this part of war disquieting – the wait. Sometimes it even got to the nerves of the members of other temples of the Officio Assassinorum. They would never admit to that, of course, but he knew. He could see it, sense it in their presence. They did not understand the meaning of true patience, true endurance. It took someone of his mindset to fully grasp these concepts. It was the only true way to execute retaliation in its full and glorious form; to lie in wait like a spider for days, weeks, even months, until the perfect, unadulterated moment came.

With this thought, Moritan suddenly sprung into motion. With skilful movements he went through a series of maintenance rituals, feeling every delicate part of the rifle beneath his fingers. It took mere moments for him to put the weapon back together, as he had done so many times before in his life.

Then he opened his eyes. The exitus rifle was lying neatly on his legs, in the exact same position as before. It almost seemed as if he had never lifted it at all, let alone dismantled it.

Precision. Impeccable precision in everything that he did was the true definition of Moritan's self. It was this straightforward precision that had shaped him into a weapon of the Emperor of Mankind. Ultimately, retaliation and precision were the same to Moritan.

A red lumen in the corner of his chamber lit up. With curt movements, the Vindicare Assassin got to his feet and activated the door rune. The black door opened and Moritan stepped into the hallway.



The wait was over. The time to deliver the Emperor's justice had come. The target would not know it yet, but its death was already decided.

Moritan shouldered his exitus rifle and made for the hangar. His mind was set on one thing only.

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Retaliation.

It was such a simple word, yet it meant nothing to him. As Artiom Wendyl was awakened, his instant response was a wordless scream of anger and rage. He did not need to grasp the concept behind retaliation, for he was retaliation's given form.

Immediately, Artiom pushed hard against the restraints that bound him in his small chamber. His metabolism had sped into overdrive as soon as he had been awakened from his cryogenic sleep, and a shock wave of violence was sweeping through his mind. Behind his crimson skull mask, Artiom's teeth were bared and froth was bubbling from his lips.

This was his eternal resting state. He was conditioned to be hateful, the wrath of the Emperor himself in human form, and yet his anger was nothing compared to the pure madness that would unfold once the frenzon was unleashed into his metabolism. Not yet, though. They needed his attention for a few more moments.

While Artiom struggled in his restraints, several small servo-cranes descended from the ceiling like skeletal fingers, closing in on his head. A needle sat on the end of each of the devices, and they plugged into small jacks in Artiom's skull mask. They penetrated the skin and the cranium beneath it to bore right into his brain, injecting sounds, images, smells and other impressions.

Artiom was like a bestial hound, and now he had a scent to follow. He gritted his teeth and growled before rattling at his restraints once more. With a soft and wet noise, the needles withdrew from his head and disappeared into the shadows above.

Red warning lumens lit up the small chamber where the Eversor Assassin was held in place, and a piercing alarm sounded. With a sudden lurch, the drop pod was released, descending to the planet beneath it like a comet of doom.

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'Execution Force Retaliation is successfully deployed,' the Officio Assassinorum adept on the bridge of the

small nameless craft said. 'Target located in war zone C-44. Hostile threat level Extremis.'

'Affirmative,' a distorted voice from the vox hailer replied. 'Hold position until the kill is confirmed.'

'Holding position in orbit over Dessah,' the adept acknowledged, and went through the mission parameters once more. 'Execution Force Retaliation is en route. Target is of Adeptus Astartes origin, Excommunicate Traitoris: Brazen Drakes, Chapter Master Argento Corian. May the Emperor's retribution strike swiftly and irrevocably.'

