

The Killing Creed

By Andy Clark

I am watched by gargoyles as I ready myself to kill.

Their stone eyes stare, unblinking, as I stretch each muscle in turn with slow deliberation. They observe as I bring my breathing back to normal and feel my heartbeat quicken in my chest.

They have watched me for sixteen days, and in all that time I have moved barely more than they. Rains have come and gone, slicking their stone hides and the matte-black synskin of my bodyglove. Thunder has boomed overhead and lightning flashed, its vicious glare muted by the envirobaffels of my spy mask so that I have been barely more aware of nature's fury than were my stone companions. They care nothing for the world around them, and neither do I.

We are as kin.

Now, though, our kinship must end. Their indifference to the teeming Human populace can continue, but I do not have that luxury. If the bio-choral auspexes in my rig are correct – and they are always correct – then my business with the people of this world is about to begin in earnest.

Three hundred and fifty-two feet below me. Seventy-six feet to my left. He is there. Cardiospectral resonance feeds bring me his distinct heartbeat, sifted from amidst hundreds of thousands. There is the barely perceptible arrhythmia that indicates a Human body sustained beyond its natural span by repeated rejuvenat treatments, the minute weakness of the mitral valve left by a childhood case of sanguamori.

A youth of less lavish means would not have survived so merciless a disease. Cardinal Jenguai's family were willing to expend prodigious resources to ensure their progeny's survival.

They had plans for him. Ambitions.

I rise slowly, smoothly. The motion is liquid as molten quicksilver, and conducted over three full minutes so as to confound motion detection auspexes. Just as slowly, I bring my exitus long rifle up to my shoulder, and allow my spy mask's machine spirit to commune with that of my weapon. They are old allies, these spirits. They kill well together.

Sometimes, during the quiet weeks of long waiting for one mark or another, I find myself wondering

whether I am merely the means of locomotion by which my weaponry and wargear stalk their prey.

Such thoughts flirt with heresy, of course. My mind, body and soul have been honed to perfection through the decades-long efforts of the Vindicare Temple. I am a living weapon of the Officio Assassinorum, as far superior to the Human cattle as are they to the Grox they farm, or the parasites they burn from the holds of their spacecraft. I do not require my weapons or wargear to kill. Their machine spirits are subservient to my will, as all machines must always be subservient to the will of Humankind.

I give my long rifle agency.

I direct my spy mask's focus.

Without me, they are nothing. Yet with them, I am greater and more perilous than I would be without.

I put aside such mental irrelevancies, snuffing out the random sparks of undisciplined consciousness one by one as I narrow my focus upon my mark. It is always this way after a long period of mental hibernation.

I stare down from this gargoyle's roost and see the petitioners packing the Square of Holy Address. They wait for Cardinal Jenguai to speak. Thousands upon thousands of secondary presences crush in between the looming shoulders of the Cathedrum Redemptor Immorti, until it seems they might trample one another.

Perhaps some of them do.

That is not my concern.

All that matters to me is the small and sombre-faced man in cardinal's finery who is even now dismounting from his servo-palanquin to address the crowd. He stands upon a battlemented stage of address, twenty-two feet above his flock. From his armoured lectern spread the golden wings of the Aquila. From within its core is projected a potent, protective force field.

That will be no obstacle.

Ecclesiarchal Crusaders with blades and storm shields guard the foot of the Cardinal's stage. Adepta Sororitas line its wings, boltguns ready and eyes

vigilant. High overhead, gunships of the planetary militia prowl as watchful shadows against the evening sky. Casthac lies at the very heart of a war zone. The Cardinal must be protected at all times.

They cannot protect him from me.

Only he can do that; as Jenguai clears his throat, grips the edges of his lectern and glowers down upon the crowd below, he has no idea that this sermon is also his testimony of defence.

In this moment, I am not Kharun Shase. I am not an assassin of the Vindicare Temple. I am merely a conduit for the Emperor's judgement. If Jenguai speaks falsely, it is the Emperor that will strike him down; my body, my rifle, will be his instruments.

It is unusual that I should have to wait in this fashion. My victims are normally corpses the moment they present themselves to me. Of course, normally my masters are already certain of the target's perfidy before I am despatched.

Cardinal Jenguai is different. This is not some doing of the man himself, for the Cardinal is hardly unique. It is instead a facet of the war zone within which he delivers his sermons, for here three competing creeds collide until it is difficult to distinguish diabolical heretic from loyal zealot.

Thus, I have been given a most unusual charge in the execution of this mission. I must listen to the Cardinal's address. I must gauge for myself whether he speaks the true word of the Emperor, or whether his message has been tainted by either of the two deviant xeno-creeds proliferating through this sub-sector. Others have tried, and failed, to discern heresy in this man's preaching, yet still suspicions remain.

He is a powerful orator.

He is beloved of his flock, such that they would risk being trampled by their peers, simply for a sight of this man that they hail as a saint-to-be.

If he truly preaches the Emperor's will, then this man is surely as much a conduit for the Emperor's will as am I. If, as some fear, he is subtly and cunningly tainted, however, then his every word is another drop of poison into the ears of the masses. If that is so, then it is my duty to silence him.

He speaks, and as his words boom from lion-mouthed laud hailers at either edge of the stage, so a hush falls across the crowd.

I too am silent, silent as the gargoyles in whose midst I wait. I listen to the words of this supposed holy man, and I wait to see how the Emperor judges him.

His sermon floats up to me, captured with such clarity by my mask's audio receptors that I might as well be stood at the Cardinal's left shoulder. He speaks well. He preaches of enemies without, of vigilance towards enemies within. He speaks of the perils of the alien. He speaks of the heresy of unbelief and berates his audience for their capacity to harbour sin. He demands more of them. They listen, rapt, and I truly believe – as much as I can give any thought to the existence of secondary presences – that they will seek to follow this man's instruction.

As he speaks, I access microscopic neural augmetics within my cerebellum, surgically inserted there for this mission. I beseech their machine spirits to sift through the hundreds of thousands of hours of vid capture footage, audiotheft recordings and Inquisitorial transcriptions. They do not infect my mind with the heretical dogma that has been painstakingly loaded into them. Instead, the micro-cogitators absorb the sermon being delivered below me, then compare and contrast each of the Cardinal's utterances with the heretical speeches and sermons they contain.

One, I know, has been tainted with the deviant ramblings of the T'au Empire's credo of Greater Good. The other contains the poisonous oratory and deluded scriptures of the Cult of the Star Children, they who willingly pollute their bodies with the xenofilth of the Great Devourer.

I feel a muscle beneath my right eye tic as the process continues. It is a miniscule motion, yet I loathe and resent it for the enormity of its implications. It is proof that, at present, the cleansed and honed machine that is my mind suffers the presence of things unclean. I look forward to the moment when the micro-augmetics can be purged, and my body restored to absolute spiritual purity.

However, as my Templemaster is so fond of repeating, needs must.



Cardinal Jenguai speaks on, unaware that a microgram of pressure from my trigger finger is all that stands between him and annihilation. As he preaches, so my cerebral augmetics return their findings. They do so carefully, delivering each matching phrase or line of dogma sufficiently censored and shorn of context, so as to prevent any risk of corrupting my far too valuable mind. Yet,

for all this, I see a tapestry of similarities weaving together before my mind's eye.

Serving a greater cause appears to be a strong theme in the Cardinal's address, and of course on the surface he speaks of the Emperor. Yet, the T'au Empire prate of their Greater Good, even as the Genestealer Cults offer all they have to their unclean Star Children. This correlation is inconclusive.

The augmetics next warn me of more than one hundred points of linguistic correlation between the Cardinal's words and the notion of the tyranny of truth. The Imperial creed is the one true religion in the galaxy. All other belief systems are false, their adherents at best deluded fools, but more likely dangerous deviants who must be excised from the

Emperor's realm. All know this. Yet, as I watch the datapoints weave together, I see that this belief, too, runs deep through both xenocreds threatening to corrupt the peoples of Casthac. This correlation, then, must also be cast aside.

So it continues: vigilance against enemies of the faith, the absolute right to rule, surety that this creed is the one true solution to the galaxy's ills, surety that only by this path can Humanity be saved, while all other faiths will lead Mankind off a precipice from which there can be no return. One belief system and another blend together, until I can perceive only one truth.

All other creeds extant in the galaxy have stolen their tenets, and their convictions, from the word of the Emperor. All are but hollow echoes of his.

But what, then, of the mark below me? The Cardinal's sermon is building towards its conclusion and, despite subjecting his words to cogitational analysis that would shame a war room's worth of intelligence operatives, I can be no more certain of his allegiance. Were he speaking openly of casting off the chains of Imperial oppression, or converting to the worship of the Greater Good, then the matter would of course be easy. Were he so brazen then none of this would be required, save my presence and my bullet.

Perhaps were my cerebral augmetics permitted to present me with more explicit examples of the correlating language or imagery, I would be able to

better distinguish... but no, that would represent an unacceptable risk to my sanctity as an asset of Imperial judgement.

Transfixed beneath the gargoyles' gazes, I hold my body in absolute stillness, my weapon in absolute readiness, even as my mind races to process all that I have seen, heard and learned.

The fact is that, heretical though many might call such an assertion, the different belief systems espoused by Imperial, Genestealer Cult and T'au preachers cleave so closely to one another that, without certain explicit utterances, they are nigh impossible to prise apart.

No wonder this war zone is such a convoluted mess.

In the end, my decision is simple.

I cannot rely upon empirical evidence to condemn, nor to save the man I have been sent here to kill. My mortal senses, superlative though they be, are still fallible. They leave room for doubt. I have been placed in an impossible position by those who should have known better than to corrupt the perfection of my service to the Emperor.

I am rendered unable to deliver a final verdict. Only the Master of Mankind can do that.

If I am unable to deliver verdict, then the act of judgement has been taken out of my hands. I am returned to my true purpose, merely a weapon, a locus for the Emperor's judgement.

He would not have placed me here, now, without reason.

The Cardinal must be corrupted, whether by one alien creed or another. He is condemned in this moment by my mere presence.

My finger tightens slightly on the trigger. The rifle twitches minutely in my grip, its tremendous recoil restrained by technology so sacred that I could not

even begin to comprehend its deeper mysteries.

Below me, upon the stage, the Cardinal's sermon comes to a sudden end.

The Emperor's judgement has been delivered.

Doubt is a sin that cannot be borne.

Jenguai will preach no more.

