

THE HORUS HERESY®

A SAFE AND SHADOWED PLACE

Guy Haley

Still reeling from defeat at Thramas, the Night Lords discover that the world of Sotha is far from a quiet sanctuary

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A SAFE AND SHADOWED PLACE

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Gendor Skraivok, the Painted Count, Claw-Master of the 45th Company, stood motionlessly on the command deck of the *Umber Prince*. He ignored the bustle of the ship's bridge crew and stared out through the last armourglass portal still intact. Ramrod straight, as if inspecting a flypast, he looked not upon a Legion fleet, but upon the remains of one – a filigreed junkyard of broken vessels drifting purposelessly against the raw, polychromatic fury of the aetheric storm shrouding Ultramar, framing it in twists of superstructure as delicate as ice patterns on glass.

It was a wholly depressing sight. Beautiful in its own way, he supposed, but Skraivok had never been one for beauty. Though the opacity of the window was turned almost to maximum, the light of the warp-born disturbance pained his sensitive eyes. Without moving, he shifted his gaze to look out past the twisting tendrils of the storm, into the deep night beyond the borders of Roboute Guilliman's pompous little kingdom.

What few healthy ships had made it to this place had long since departed. He did not blame them. There was an anomaly at the edge of the Sothan System, a midnight blind spot out past the Mandeville point, framed against the corona of the distant Saphir Cluster. It had long been a favoured rendezvous for the Night Lords, who took delight in plotting their murderous business under the nose of the Ultramarines. That odd, shadowy blackness remained.

But Sotha had changed.

No longer a backwater, it practically swarmed with Guilliman's miserable sons. As soon as the more functional VIII Legion vessels coming into the shadow caught sight of the streams of ships making their way to and from the planet – and the new orbital platform, and the babble of noospheric traffic – they

had turned tail and fled back into the empyrean. The rest had departed one by one, limping away as soon as sufficient repairs had been made to their ravaged hulls.

Those that remained were the hopeless cases. The *Umber Prince*, Skraivok reluctantly supposed, was one of them.

He had spent many sleepless nights anticipating the wail of proximity alarms, but the XIII had not come. He had become as bored of waiting for them as he had of everything else here. But Gendor Skraivok reckoned he had a good idea, now, what the cause of all this increased activity was – and that it had something to do with the regular energy pulses coming from Sotha. Luckily for him, these emanations had made the Ultramarines, if anything, *more* blind to the enemy lurking beyond the reach of their sensors.

For now at least, this remained a safe and shadowed place.

Of the nine remaining vessels, only the *Umber Prince*, *Dominus Noctem* and *Shadow Blow* bore signs of activity. The rest were entirely dark, their reactors dead, legionaries evacuated. All lights out, they had become slab-sided shadows thwarting the stars.

Skraivok wondered what terrors now played out within those cold hulls. What petty princelings ruled over the serfs, now that their masters had removed themselves, in the dark of the broken decks? Did they hoard dwindling supplies of food, air and water to support their impermanent thrones? He was sure that it must be so. If there was one thing Skraivok had learned in his decades of service, it was that humans always reverted to type, and that type was ugly.

Considering the irony of these half a dozen Nostramos-in-miniature gave him a certain amusement. It helped stave off the boredom, at least.

Lacking attitudinal control, the damned vessels were sliding into one another, their mass attraction pulling them slowly across the millpond-calm of space where, very soon, they would meet their final ends as an agglomerated mess of broken spars and mashed hull plating. He quite liked that idea. The collision was something else to look forward to.

He had been there for seven months. He checked the chrono count in his lens displays, as he had come to do almost obsessively, counting the hours of every day off with increasing annoyance. *Yes*, he thought. *Seven months of skulking in the shadows, licking my wounds. Marvellous.*

The *Umber Prince* had fared only slightly better than the dark ships, coming so close to destruction that it was no longer funny, and Skraivok was a legionary who found a lot of unpleasant things funny. His serfs had laboured incessantly to

heal it. It had been an unconscionably long wait, and today was the day that would prove their efforts insufficient.

The *Dominus Noctem* and *Shadow Blow* were leaving.

He pondered then, with a twinge of unease, upon Lord Curze's fate. Before his own ship had torn itself away from the battle against the Dark Angels, he had heard that Curze had boarded the *Invincible Reason*. A good number of the Atramentar had followed. Skraivok was more concerned with glory than some of his kin, but that had been a suicidal kind of glory that he wished to have no part of, and the *Umber Prince* had ripped into the warp with its hull aflame.

And so, instead of the pyres of the guilty, he saw the plasma torches of repair crews as they went about their tedious business.

I have only myself to blame, he thought wryly. Out past the storm, the stars were a scattering of fractured diamonds against deepest black, and the ruined fleet hung under their unblinking glare. His hands tensed within his midnight-blue gloves, immaculate again; he had little else to do but polish his wargear. Arc-projected lightning skittered across their gleaming surfaces.

Nothing, he thought. *I can do nothing at all.*

Skraivok thought back to the boltholes he had favoured in his youth, running with the gangs. Hidden places where a fugitive might rest a while, until the search passed them by, though a lot of them turned just as easily into traps.

A cough brought him out of the slum-stink and the greasy wet of foundry-tainted rain – back to the bridge, back from one hole and into another. He honestly couldn't decide which was worse.

'My lord?'

Irritation prickling his scalp, Skraivok turned away from the hopeless view outside to take in the equally hopeless mortal addressing him.

Hrantax was old, and bald, and very, very tired. His black Nostraman eyes were surrounded by deep rings in his pale skin – in the half-light of the command deck, blemished skin and eyes blended together, to make them seem impossibly huge. His uniform was loose upon his body, a consequence of surviving on half-rations. The command interface he wore at the back of his skull was crowded with bunched skin. His insignia had been poorly amended – he looked like a sickly boy playing dress-up, a caricature of a man.

'Lieutenant Hrantax. I suppose you've another damage report for me?' said Skraivok.

'It is *Shipmaster* Hrantax now, my lord.'

'It's whatever I say it is, Hrantax.'

Undaunted, Hrantax continued. One did not survive in Nostraman society by displaying weakness. ‘Your conference with Lords Klandr and Vost is due to take place soon.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Skraivok said impatiently. ‘So get on with it.’

‘Very well. If I may?’

Hrantax waited for no reply, and pinched the haptics embedded in his fingertips to cast a hololithic representation of the *Umber Prince* onto a nearby display. The graphic wavered uncertainly in the air before taking something approaching a stable form. A good number of the projecting lenses were broken, and as the image rotated sections of it blinked out of existence sequentially.

‘We estimate that it will be three more days before the main power links to the Geller fields will be fully operational, my lord.’

Skraivok sighed loudly. ‘This is getting tedious. I’m pretty sure I told you – by which you know I mean I am *absolutely* sure I told you – that you had until today.’

Hrantax looked the giant warrior steadily in his red eye lenses. ‘Tedious it might be, my lord, but the progress we have delivered far exceeds our best estimates. I said fifteen days – it will be done in nine.’

‘Fear drives men well.’

‘Fear only goes so far. They have performed well only because of my oversight and planning.’

Skraivok stared at Hrantax. ‘I should kill you. I could kill you.’

‘Perhaps so, but you won’t,’ said Hrantax.

‘Are you, then, immune to fear?’

Hrantax’s eye twitched, his suppressed terror seeping out of him. Skraivok savoured it. The little man tried so hard, and it was a joy to torment him.

‘Of course not. But you will not kill me if you want this ship approaching anything like void-worthiness within the next few days,’ he replied, then added, ‘*My lord,*’ with just enough insolence that Skraivok laughed. It growled out of his helm speakers sinisterly.

‘So soon!’ said the legionary. ‘I should embrace you tightly instead. Or maybe now, after so many months in this pit, I am past caring and will crush your head just to alleviate the endless boredom...’ He raised his voice up to a shout. ‘...of being *here!*’

The noise on the bridge, a bare fraction of the hubbub that had once filled the place, quietened for a moment. The surviving crew, all of them as hollow-eyed and exhausted looking as Hrantax, glanced nervously at the Space Marine.

Hrantax ignored his commander's posturing.

'Nothing on this ship was untouched, my lord.' The shipmaster waved his hand along the battered flank of the craft. The outline of the *Umber Prince* as it had been was sketched in a soft green wireframe, while what actually remained of the ship was painted in soft reds – pulpy marrow in a shattered bone.

'Thirteen per cent loss in overall mass, seventy per cent crew mortality. Sixty-three of three hundred decks are open to the void. Eighty per cent reduction in weapons output. We have come close to reactor death on six separate occasions. And yet we are still here, mainly because of my efforts. If your time has been boring, my lord, mine has been anything but.'

'I am so glad for you, lieutenant.'

'I am master of this vessel, Captain Skraivok.'

'Only on my sufferance.'

'And your sufferance is predicated on my competence, so if you want to rot here forevermore, I would advise you to finish me now.'

Gendor Skraivok laughed, but only once. It was both a concession to Hrantax's point and a threat. 'Three days? That is good news, I suppose.' He paused a moment, before adding grudgingly, 'Well done. But too late.'

An insistent chime sounded in his helm. A communications officer approached, fear sweating from her every pore. She lacked Hrantax's mettle and did her best to ignore the Space Marine, speaking only to her shipmaster.

'Lords Klandr and Vost are requesting channels.'

'Fantastic. Everything's broken but I can still talk to those bastards,' Skraivok said to her. 'Fine. Put them through, full encryption. I don't want any of this getting out and alerting the bloody Thirteenth Legion.'

The woman swallowed – close to collapse, Skraivok could see. And well she should be. He imagined skinning her, and the thought piqued his interest. She looked like a screamer. But then, they all screamed on the skinning frames...

'Yes, my lord.'

Two faces appeared in the hololith, displacing the *Umber Prince* into a fuzz of collapsing light.

Captain Klandr, known as Quickblade in the 23rd Company, spoke first. '*We are ready to depart as agreed, Skraivok. Will you be joining us?*'

'Nice to see you too, "brother",' said Skraivok acidly. 'And you, Red Wing.' 'Skraivok,' Vost acknowledged him.

'*Are you ready?*' repeated Klandr dolefully. His long face always looked utterly miserable, although there was a touch more contempt to it than usual.

‘Three more days, or so my loyal shipmaster tells me.’

‘*Then we must leave without you.*’

‘Seventy-two hours. Can you not delay? Three vessels are more potent than two.’

Klandr and Vost looked away from him. He supposed that they were exchanging glances, silently asking each other which of them would deliver the blow, although their projections looked past each other from his perspective. *Good news never follows such a glance*, he thought.

‘*This war is done for us,*’ said Vost. ‘*We have no primarch, no orders and no purpose. If we remain here, we will be destroyed. The Thirteenth will notice us soon, and there are a great many of them around Sotha. I have no desire to face them on such unfavourable terms.*’

‘They will not see us – this place has served our Legion well for a long time before now.’

‘*Sotha is not what it was, brother,*’ said Vost. He was less stern in character than Klandr, and closer personally to Skraivok, if such a thing could be said of any Night Lord. His sneer was polluted by the weakness of remorse – hardly apparent, but still there.

‘Such confraternity humbles me! Might I remind you that you cursed the others for leaving us behind?’ asked Skraivok.

The ghost of a smile quirked the corner of Klandr’s perpetually downturned mouth. ‘*That was them, and this is us. The Legion is finished, Skraivok. Perhaps, if we are fortunate, we might aid the Warmaster in some other, small way.*’

‘But generally, it’s every bastard for himself?’

‘*It is the Nostraman way,*’ said Klandr. ‘*We were foolish ever to forget that. We await the next pulse from Sotha to cover our departure.*’

‘And that... the storm. You’ll brave that, will you? I don’t much like the look of it.’

‘*A good job, as you are staying here,*’ said Klandr. ‘*I feel our passage will be safe enough back through it.*’

‘I’m glad you’re so certain.’ Skraivok shifted tack, his tone became more conciliatory, an entirely transparent sham. ‘I don’t suppose you’d consider taking me and my men with you?’

Klandr snorted. ‘*And have you usurp me, knifing me in the back on the command throne? You never were one to take orders kindly from others. There is only room enough for one captain aboard this vessel, and that captain is I, Klandr Quickblade.*’

‘I’ll take that as a no, then.’

The two officers’ outlines flickered, a sure sign of their reactors powering up to full yield. Klandr gave him one last withering glare, and ended his transmission.

‘*For what it’s worth, Skraivok, I’m sorry. We can’t stay here any longer,*’ said Vost.

‘It’s worth nothing,’ said Skraivok coldly. ‘Nothing at all.’

‘*No, I suppose it isn’t,*’ Vost agreed. ‘*Goodbye, Skraivok.*’

The hololith cut out.

Skraivok ordered all hands to battle stations, in case his erstwhile brothers decided to raid his vessel for supplies, although evidently thirty-one Claws of Space Marines were enough to put them off. Nor did they open fire, almost certainly to avoid alerting their ignorant hosts at Sotha than from any sense of loyalty. With silent power, the *Dominus* and the *Shadow* ignited their engine stacks and pushed off from the graveyard.

The XIII Legion were punctilious in everything. Right on cue, just over half an hour later, they did whatever they were doing on Sotha again, and the predictable pulse of energy washed out from the world.

It overwhelmed vox channels and astropaths both, just as it had every other time. Sparks rained down from poorly repaired systems. The dim bridge lumens on the *Umber Prince* flickered. A burning wash of light rushed over the Night Lords’ hiding place – Skraivok’s lenses dimmed, and the armourglass portal dimmed further, but it was not enough. He shut his eyes. The light seared afterimages across his vision, and he did not see Klandr and Vost’s ships clawing their escape into the warp.

At least they had the decency to proceed to a safe distance beyond his own vessel.

‘And then there was one,’ he breathed. Only the *Prince*, and the dark ships bleeding their last into the void.

His eyes watered from the energy pulse. He lacked the energy to unclasp his helmet and wipe them dry. ‘Recall everyone. I want this ship ready to leave as soon as we have the engines back online. Send armsmen out to the other ships. Restock our vessel with full crew. We’re going it alone.’

‘My lord.’

‘And get me Kellendvar,’ said Skraivok.

Hrantax hesitated. ‘Nobody knows where he is, my lord.’

‘Why not?’

‘An error of judgement.’

‘You know,’ Skraivok jabbed an armoured finger at Hrantax, ‘if you weren’t the highest ranking officer left on this ship, I *would* kill you. You know that, right?’

‘I am certain of it, my lord.’

Damn him, thought Skraivok, *for his impertinence. Damn him and Kellendvar both.*

‘Just find the Headsman. Get him here now.’

Kellendvar pushed deeper into the man’s ruined face. The wretch gave out a moan of pain, as blood and gelatinous matter wept down his cheek. Kellendvar’s other hand gripped the man’s shoulder so tightly that his collar bone cracked.

Kellendvar looked him up and down. So weak, so fragile. ‘It is good that you stop struggling. You accept your fate. This is wise.’

‘Please, my lord... please...’ said the man, his voice a pained whisper. ‘I have served the Legion faithfully all my life.’

‘No doubt you think this is not fair?’ Kellendvar’s face was close to the man’s. He smelled blood, the humours of the ruptured eye, dirt and fear. He moved his finger just a fraction, the man gurgled in fresh agony. ‘It is not fair. But there is no fairness in all the universe. Do you not agree?’

The man’s only response was to choke out a phlegmy sob.

‘So tell me where my brother is, and I will give you a swift release from the sins of this life.’ Kellendvar’s tone made it absolutely certain what the alternative would be.

‘Which brother, my lord?’ gasped the man.

Kellendvar contrived to look puzzled. ‘*My* brother. I have only one.’

‘I have not seen any other legionaries since... since... Please, I beg you, release me!’

‘No. I already said – not *a* brother, *my* brother.’

The man screamed. ‘My lord, please! Please! He said he would flay me alive if we told!’

‘I do not think that is of much concern now, do you?’

‘Please, no more! He is in the Great Vault! Please, my lord!’

‘Now, that wasn’t so hard, was it? Be thankful, I will grant you mercy.’

Kellendvar pushed harder, hitting the back of the eye socket, which gave under the metal of his gauntlet like an eggshell. The man shuddered and died, his

brains parting before Kellendvar's thumb.

He dropped the serf to the floor, wiped his hand on the dead man's roughly spun robes, and pulled him into the centre of the corridor. Unclamping the great axe he wore across his backpack, he set its energy field ablaze. A banging strike left a smoking gash in the deck plating and he plucked the man's head free to regard it. Kellendvar searched about for somewhere to display it and pushed it onto a broken lumen bracket before striding off into the dark of the dead ship.

Old habits died hard.

The *Nycton* had been the largest ship in the fleeing rabble that had made the Sotha rendezvous. It had burst back into reality and barely managed to bring itself to a halt. The reactor flickered out not long afterwards, and the ship had descended into chaos. Elements of two companies, the Impossible Dawn and the Deepest Dark, had been present. Rivalry turned into outright warfare, and nigh on a hundred Night Lords were killed in the fighting before some semblance of order had been restored, and then only because of the subsequent arrival of other vessels at the rendezvous. The *Nycton* was subsequently abandoned to darkness, along with its surviving serf crewmen.

But it took a long time for a ship to truly die. The organs might fail, the brain go dark, but life lingered long in the corpse before every cell perished – the stranded survivors digested their host as bacteria in the gut slowly digested a dead man. The great artificial star at the vessel's heart was extinguished, but power lingered still, running from auxiliary stations that would burn for a thousand years. There were many, many lesser machines that survived the death of the whole, enough to sustain a debased form of human life. Men and women might live on within the *Nycton* for generations, gradually forgetting about the galaxy outside.

Kellendvar heard the serfs rather than seeing them. Every so often, scuttling footsteps ran away from him, like rats in the walls. He made no attempt to go quietly, nor any attempt to pursue them.

'I could catch you if I wanted to, little rats!' he shouted. 'You know it!'

His voice echoed through empty halls and chambers, chasing down distant corridors where there were only the dead to listen. He laughed, and walked on.

Whole areas of the ship were inaccessible, and Kellendvar was forced to backtrack many times. Only twice did he don his helmet and force his way out into the void; the immeasurable, dark expanse of the cosmos always made him feel something *close* to fear. He was a child of narrow alleyways. He had never enjoyed the sight of open space.

Within the hull, the air was laced with complex chemical aromas brought on by its burning. His neuroglottis processed it all, feeding him the delicious aftertaste of a thousand deaths. He walked corridors choked by blackened corpses, their twisted limbs and screaming faces carbonised into one, angular mass, so it appeared as though some multi-limbed monster had met its end there.

In the third concourse of the major throughway, he found the corpses of his battle-brothers, their armour cracked by each other's mass reactive shells. He looked them over with disinterest, seeking any he knew, but the companies aboard the *Nycton* were not ones he had ever fought alongside. Their markings and kill-trophies were unfamiliar.

In one great atrium, ruptured pipes sent cascades of water, coolant and human waste rushing down. In some places the artificial gravity had gone, forcing him to plod along with ungainly mag-locked steps, while in others the cold of deep space seeped into the deck, coating metalwork and dead flesh alike in thin layers of frost.

He went aft, now more than two kilometres from where Skraivok's salvage teams were hacking at the corpse of the *Nycton* like sea-scavengers devouring a whale. There, Kellendvar caught the scent of fresh blood.

Not long afterwards, he heard screams.

'Kellenkir...' he breathed. He shifted his grip upon his axe, and thereafter he went with greater care.

The serf had not been lying. Kellenkir had set up his lair in the heart of the Great Vault.

The relics of two centuries of warfare in the service of the Emperor had been smashed from their stands. Mildewed rags were all that remained of the banners of once-honoured enemies. Xenos weapons and skeletons were heaped in corners. Artefacts from dozens of scattered human civilisations lay broken upon the floor. Whether this was from deliberate vandalism or merely the punishment that the ship had sustained at the hands of the Dark Angels was immaterial – all sense of the Vault as a place of remembrance had been smashed by treachery either way.

It had become instead a place of horror.

Shackled bodies, all bearing signs of cruel torture, hung from every stanchion and pillar. The central aisle of the hall was lined by eyeless human heads. The air stank of excreta, blood, spoiled meat and burning flesh. Firebowls, torches and tallow-wicks of human fat gave the room a hellish light. What few windows

remained unbroken were unshuttered, the view of the eerie, starless nightmare beyond bringing further menace to the vault.

Six crude cages lined one wall. Most were empty, but two were crammed with emaciated, filthy bodies. Chips of light glinting from their eyes betrayed the life that was still in them. Otherwise they were utterly still, resolutely staring away from the iron table at the centre of the room.

Chained to it was a serf in the last stages of death – male or female could not be discerned. Breath still bubbled from its lipless, eyeless face. The skin that had formerly clad it was folded with obscene decorum over an empty frame.

There Kellendvar saw his brother Kellenkir at work. He was as guilty as the next Night Lord of atrocity; true enough, he enjoyed it. But it was always to some end or other, not merely a pleasure in its own right. Such were the workings of his twisted morality.

What he saw in the Vault was simply gratuitous.

‘Brother,’ he called, softly.

Kellenkir answered without looking up from his work. He was naked, bloody to his elbows, the gore of his latest victim and the clean metal of his interface ports glittering in the firelight.

‘I heard you coming. You always were too heavy footed, Kellendvar.’

‘I have come to take you back. The *Umber Prince* is finally ready to depart. Time to put aside this idle torture and take up your weapons again.’

‘There is nothing idle about this. I teach these people a valuable lesson.’ He bent over, dug his fingers in between the ribs of his victim. It made a surprisingly loud crack, and Kellenkir’s unconscious plaything took two ragged breaths. Then, with a long, drawn out exhalation redolent of relief, the tortured soul slipped away into oblivion.

‘Skraivok is going to take your toys away regardless, brother. Come back with me.’

Kellenkir looked up. ‘Why? Has he killed his own?’

‘We were out of supplies. We were not sure if we would escape. Now, we need the crew. Leaving them here to fight for survival means we get only the strongest, and they’ll be pathetically grateful to be rescued.’

‘How very noble.’

‘How very *practical*, my brother,’ countered Kellendvar. ‘As the Thirteenth would say, at least.’ He walked to the table’s edge, his axe still at the ready.

‘We are no longer brothers.’ said Kellenkir. ‘This travesty of a fleet has fallen apart,’

‘You will always be my brother. You *are* my brother. We were born from the same mother, the same father. “Brother” is a word that means more to us than it does to the rest.’

‘Does it? What does blood mean, really? Nothing. Nothing is worth anything – not loyalty, and certainly not blood. Everything is worthless in the face of the night.’ Kellenvir grabbed the lolling head of the dead serf and, by brute force alone, wrenched it free of the neck.

‘Father would be so proud,’ said Kellendvar sarcastically.

‘Which one?’

‘Lord Curze. You killed our flesh-father.’

‘I did, didn’t I?’ Kellenkir smiled at the memory. ‘I remember so little from my time as a weakling. But I remember that.’

‘Come back with me. We will reave the stars together! Out there, that is where we should be, bringing terror to a thousand worlds!’

‘Oh yes? And how long will this dream last under a traitorous dog like Skraivok? Our Legion is no more. Those remaining are only the murder-gangs of dead Nostramo born again. We are not an army. We’re returning to type, hiding in the shadows. We’ll be at each others’ throats again before long. A man can only ever be the man he is, transhuman or not. We were fools to believe that it could be different, Kellendvar. The other Legions are right to hate us.’

Kellenkir tossed the head aside. It landed with a wet thump.

‘There is no civilisation, no justice. Only pain and deprivation. And suffering, and the blessed end of suffering. Surely this place is proof of that, if proof were ever needed. Why fight it? I will remain here, and bring an end to suffering and sin.’

Kellendvar shook his head.

‘Not all of the Legion is accounted for. We can rejoin the others, and fight on.’ He lowered his guard a little, to show his sincerity, but only a little. He knew that Kellenkir was one of the few who could best him in single combat. ‘Please, brother.’

‘Who is Skraivok to think it’ll be any better in the rest of the Legion? The Night Haunter is dead. There is no way he could have survived the Lion.’

‘We don’t know that brother.’

‘He nearly killed him the first time. The Lion is not one to leave a job unfinished.’

Kellendvar’s face contorted. This wasn’t going as planned. His brother was always contrary, but never so awkward. ‘We’re all we have, you and I. It’s

always been different for us. We're not like the others. Even amidst all this, we have that.'

'Nobody has anything. Nothing has value.' Kellenkir held up a pendant on a length of chain. 'Have you seen one of these before?'

'No,' said Kellendvar. 'Should I have?'

Kellenkir chuckled, and the serfs in the cage gibbered in terror at the sound. 'No, I think the likes of us not seeing it is entirely the point.' He tossed it over to his brother, who caught it in his hand.

The chain was sticky with blood. Kellendvar held it up. 'An aquila?'

'I've found a few of them wearing these as amulets,' explained Kellenkir. 'And on deck fifty-two, I found a whole lot of them together. They'd killed themselves. There was a bigger one of those mounted on the wall.'

'So?'

'So? You always were the stupid one, Kellendvar. It was a congregation, a *temple*. They're worshipping the Emperor. Hoping he'll come and rescue them. Imagine that! Imagine it sinking into their fragile little skulls that there will never be any settlement dues, no shift rotations, no alternative duties, pay or rights like some of the Legions offer. Just endless servitude in the belly of an Eighth Legion starship, and most likely a painful death at the end. This is *our* war, not theirs. So they turn to the Emperor as a *god*. The Imperial Truth!' he scoffed. 'How quickly they abandon it for a taste of hope.'

Kellenkir turned to the captured serfs.

'Hope is an illusion, life is pain!' he bellowed. 'And I intend to perfect its art.' He went over to the cages and pointed at one cowering wretch. The man fell to his knees, pleading – not for life, but for a clean end. With a cruel smile, Kellenkir shook his head, and swung his digit around to indicate another. 'You.'

He reached in with one hand and grabbed the second serf in a crushing grip. The man screamed like a child caught by a monster. The others did nothing to help, but shrank away from this angel who had become an ogre.

'I was afraid you would say that, brother,' Kellendvar sighed. 'But you are wrong.' He ran at his brother without warning, tackling him high. Kellenkir dropped the serf, who crawled away on his belly, weeping, and the legionary's face twisted with fury. He grappled with his brother, and both fell to the floor.

'How dare you!' He scrambled onto Kellendvar's armoured shoulders, squatting on his chest, pinning his arms to the floor. He smashed his brother four times in the face, each blow like a falling anvil. 'You are wrong! *You* are wrong! No one is coming! It will all end in darkness. It is the only way that anything

ever ends!’

Kellendvar bucked under his sibling. Kellenkir was the stronger – he always had been – but he did not have the added strength of his armour. Kellendvar twisted, sending his brother sprawling, before rolling smoothly to his feet with his bolt pistol aimed at Kellenkir.

Something caught his eye in that moment. Through the windows, out in the void.

The glimmering precursor of an incoming warp translation.

Kellendvar spat blood from his mouth. ‘Then brother, look, and see that I am not wrong.’

Kellenkir’s narrow eyes flickered warily to the view. A tear appeared in reality, vomiting bright colours into the shadow of Sotha. Tendrils of semi-sentient light writhed out as a battlefleet emerged from the empyrean, psychic backwash boiling from its Geller fields.

A Night Lords fleet.

The *Nycton* rocked in the warp-wake of the vessels coming in, pitching them both from their feet. Kellendvar recovered first. He dived at his sibling, a pain-spike in his hand. He jammed it into his brother’s chest interface port. Devised to render a Space Marine immobile, its discharge blasted directly through Kellenkir’s nervous system.

‘One day, little brother, I will kill you,’ Kellenkir managed to slur, before collapsing with a thunderous crash.

Kellendvar holstered his pistol and locked his long axe to his backpack. ‘Maybe. But I am saving you first,’ he muttered.

He picked Kellenkir up under the arms, and began the long process of dragging him back to the salvage area.

In their cages, the serfs wept.

Krukesh the Pale, 103rd Captain, a lord of the new Kyroptera, strode onto the command deck of the *Umbur Prince*, twenty of his warriors filing in close order around him. Only when he reached the waiting Skraivok and Kellendvar did the bodyguard part ways, and then he stepped forwards. He had his helm in the crook of his arm, exposing his pallid, corpse-like face.

He looked around the bridge with eyes blacker than jet, an expression of mild amusement on his face. ‘Well, Skraivok – you have made quite the mess of this ship, have you not?’

‘Only because we did not run quite as quickly as you,’ said Skraivok, who was

painfully aware of the large number of fully operational vessels now crowding his limited view outside.

‘Ah, ah, ah!’ Krukesh wagged a finger. ‘I am Kyroptera! I have gathered much of our scattered forces into something approaching a fighting Legion once more, and am here, it appears, to rescue you from this little hole you find yourself in. A little more respect is due me, Claw-master.’

‘You are only Kyroptera by the say-so of Sevatar. That makes you no Kyroptera at all,’ said Kellendvar.

‘I am the one standing before you, with a fleet at my back,’ countered Krukesh. ‘By my reckoning, that makes me better than most.’

‘Didn’t the First Captain kill all the others?’ asked Kellendvar. ‘You’re a dog on a leash, nothing more.’

‘Perhaps you have a point,’ said Krukesh with mock equanimity. He held up a finger, as if he had just had the most marvellous idea. ‘I tell you what – how about I offer a place in my fleet to any of your warriors who desire it, and then leave you here to die alone in the dark. If I’m feeling sporting, I might contrive to let Guilliman’s Thirteenth know of your presence. At least you’ll have a glorious death. Isn’t glory what you desire?’

Skraivok gave Kellendvar a warning look.

‘Kneel,’ said Krukesh.

Kellendvar unhitched his axe and planted its butt on the deck. Together, he and Skraivok got to their knees.

‘Welcome to the *Umber Prince*, my lord,’ said Skraivok through gritted teeth.

Krukesh accepted their obeisance with a satisfied sneer. ‘Better. You can get up now, if you like. Now, who is this insolent pup?’

‘Kellendvar. He is my Headsman.’

‘And who is this one, in chains?’

Skraivok glanced over to a corner where Kellenkir was firmly shackled to a punishment post, furious eyes staring over a corrosion-resistant muzzle.

‘That’s Kellenkir. He was the vexillary for the Fourth Chapter,’ said Skraivok with a pained smile. ‘But he’s gone... well, mainly insane.’

Krukesh looked incredulous. ‘Kill him then.’

‘Ah, Kellendvar wouldn’t like that very much, would you, Kellendvar?’

‘No,’ said the Headsman, hefting his executioner’s axe.

‘They’re brothers you see,’ explained Skraivok. ‘Actual brothers, inducted at the same time. And Kellenkir is quite the warrior.’

‘I could have all three of you killed,’ said Krukesh. His escorts raised their

bolters.

‘It is not wise to taunt him, Krukesh. Kellendvar is unbeaten in the practice cages by any but his brother. It’s why I chose him as my Headsman.’ Then, in a stage whisper, Skraivok added. ‘So you see, he’ll probably kill you first before he dies.’

Krukesh snorted, and let his threat drop.

‘This phenomenon you told me of. The Thirteenth are building some kind of super-weapon on Sotha?’

Skraivok scratched the back of his neck, worrying at the cable entering the neural port there. ‘Some of the others thought so, which is why they all sneaked away. Cowards. But I’m not so sure it is a weapon. It has an effect on our systems, but not much. It’s more... It’s more like a powerful transmitter array. Or a beacon.’

‘A beacon?’

‘You’ll see for yourself... *my lord...*’ said Skraivok with a total lack of sincerity. For the briefest moment, he got an insight as to how Shipmaster Hrantax must feel. ‘You won’t have to wait long. The Ultramarines are terribly conscientious. They’ve fired the thing three times a day, every day, for the last two weeks.’

‘Always at the same time?’

‘What do you think? It’s the Thirteenth.’

‘True enough,’ said Krukesh.

Hrantax cast a chrono-count up onto the hololithic display. A miniature version of the Sothan System sprang up beneath it.

‘Sotha anomaly in thirty seconds,’ droned a servitor. *‘Twenty-nine. Twenty-eight.’*

Skraivok watched Krukesh out of the corner of his eye. Looped holographic images of the captain’s favourite victims played over some of his armour plates, interspersed with the Legion’s customary lightning bolts in an endless exhibition of his past atrocities. His personal heraldry and insignia had been lavishly re-applied to his pauldrons. Fresh little affectations dangled from his armour – not just trophies, but cast representations of his Chapter, companies, and veteran squads’ iconography.

His helmet bore a new, spread batwing crest in blatant imitation of Sevatar’s own. So sure of himself. So puffed up by his survival. Skraivok had never liked him before, but this new Krukesh was detestable.

The servitor’s countdown ended. *‘Three. Two. One. Mark.’*

Skraivok waited expectantly. They all did.

‘Nothing’s happening,’ said Krukesh. ‘It looks like I’m going to leave you here after all, Skraivok.’

‘I don’t understand!’ blustered Skraivok. ‘It’s the Thirteenth! They must be up to something else. Wait, wait a moment longer!’

‘No, I don’t think—’

Krukesh stopped. A frown brought faint shadows to his pale features.

A strange foreboding took hold of every one of them, and even the crew-serfs looked to their displays and the one undamaged armourglass port in alarm. A pressure built in their hearts, presaging something dreadful.

Skraivok felt a tickling sensation behind his eyeballs. An instant later, Sotha burst into brilliant light, more penetrating than the rays of the system’s sun. The accompanying electromagnetic pulse overwhelmed the systems of the damaged ship, crashing cogitators, wiping out displays, dropping servitors and sending the command deck into a darkness striated by the terrible, invasive light searing through the viewport.

The Night Lords shielded their eyes and winced in pain. The lesser men and women upon the bridge collapsed screaming to the floor, clutching at their faces.

Skraivok waited for night to fall again. It did not.

He lowered his hand a fraction, daring the light.

Unlike every other time before, the blaze of Sotha did not abate, but burned constantly. Seconds later, far too quickly for the light to have travelled by any normal, physical means, another light seemed to answer it from afar: a single star burning true in the sickly blaze of the aether-storm.

‘Well, well, well,’ said Krukesh. ‘That, if I am not mistaken, is Macragge.’ His spread fingers held up before him cast a hard black shadow across his face.

‘How very interesting.’

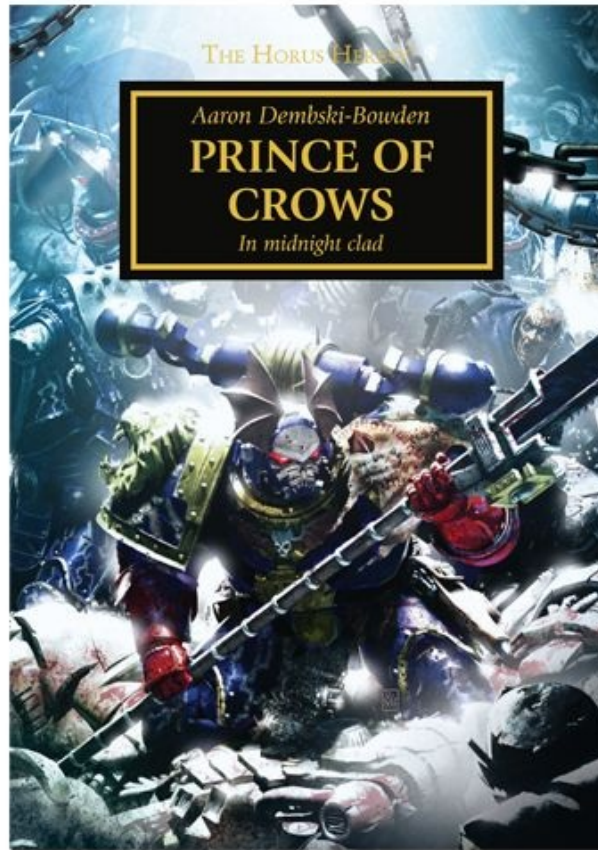
Macragge. Sotha. What was the connection?

Then Krukesh activated his vox-link. ‘Prepare the fleet!’ he ordered, ‘And gather my commanders. I think it is time for us to investigate this system a little more closely.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A prolific freelance author and journalist, **Guy Haley** is the author of *Space Marine Battles: Death of Integrity*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Valedor* and *Baneblade*, and the novellas *The Eternal Crusader*, *The Last Days of Ector* and 'Broken Sword', for *Damocles*. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

Sevatar and the Kyroptera try to salvage what they can from the disastrous Thramas Crusade, unaware that their primarch Konrad Curze still lives in a wandering, deathless state.



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A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in *Death and Defiance* in 2014.

This eBook edition published in Great Britain in 2015 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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ISBN 978-1-78251-907-2

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