

WARHAMMER
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BORN OF THE STORM

EDOARDO ALBERT

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Born of the Storm – Edoardo Albert

An Extract from ‘Dark Imperium’

A Black Library Publication

BORN OF THE STORM

Edoardo Albert

‘Read me another one, papa. Please.’

The man shook his head, but he smiled as he did so. ‘It’s late, Gus. Time for sleep.’ He put the book down, carefully avoiding the patch on the floor where rockcrete mould was beginning to eat through from the hab on the level below.

‘Please, papa, just one more.’ But the words were trailing away now.

The father smiled again. This was his favourite time, after the day’s labour, when he watched his son drift into the safety of sleep, while he sat and watched – and kept watch.

‘Tomorrow, Gus. I’ll read you the tale of the angel and the dragon tomorrow.’

‘That’s my favourite. And the one about the wolf and the shepherd, and the knight and the orks, and the one about—’

‘Shhh.’ The man put his finger to his son’s lips. ‘It’s time to rest now.’

The boy rolled over towards the stained wall. His breathing steadied and slowed.

The man picked up the book. It was a real book, its pages of plaspaper, not a reader with lines that dissolved when it was switched off. His own father had read to him from it.

He stood up. Night shift.

But as he reached the door, the boy spoke.

‘The monsters in the stories. They’re real, aren’t they, papa?’

The man stopped. He looked back to his son. The boy was still turned from him, his lean shape draped in the thin bed cover. He remembered asking his own father that question.

‘Yes, son, they’re real.’

The boy’s head moved in a sleepy nod. ‘Thought so.’

The man watched him settle once more. But just as he was about to leave the room again, the boy turned to him, his eyes bright with dream vision.

‘When I grow up, I’m going to kill monsters, just like the angel and the wolf and the knight.’

The man nodded. ‘Yes, son. I know you will.’

The father stayed there, in the doorway, watching, as his son’s eyes closed once more and his breathing eased into sleep. As he left the room, he brushed the tear trails from his cheeks.

The truck, a wheezing, rickety, barely mobile vehicle, shuddered to a halt. After five minutes, it still hadn’t started moving again. The sergeant, a veteran of the Imperial Guard who never let his cadets forget it, lifted his cap from over his eyes and peered blearily at the boys packed into the back of the truck.

‘If I’m thrown off schedule by some hive scum...’ Sergeant Dalcop’s eyes, which were even redder than usual following a typical late-night get-together of the NCOs, settled on the boy sitting slightly apart from the rest by the truck’s gate. ‘Cadet Augustin, this hole is your neck of the habs. Find out what’s going on.’

Augustin got up.

‘Yeah, Gussy, tell your family to lay off and get back to their habs.’

The whisper was low enough not to reach Sergeant Dalcop, but Augustin heard it. He reached for the door release with one hand while removing the autopistol he had been issued for the duration of training from its holster; it would be reclaimed when their truck rolled back into the Imperial Guard barracks that served as the base for the young cadets.

‘Gussy’s afraid they’re going to say nasty things about him.’

Augustin glanced right, to the boy speaking, then opened the truck’s rear door and slipped down to the ground.

He could smell the smoke as he got out.

It was coming from the hab block up ahead, the smoke closing off the road. Augustin’s eyes narrowed.

That was his hab block.

Dad.

Augustin stepped away from the truck, heading to the hab block.

‘What’s happening, Gussy? The sergeant wants to know.’

The question stopped him. Made him listen. It was quiet. The lullaby of ganger battles had been almost as much a part of his childhood as his father reading to him.

‘What’s going on, cadet?’

Sergeant Dalcop had dragged himself from the only comfortable seat in the truck and was now standing in the cab door.

Something was wrong. This wasn’t just a hab fire.

The road was backed up. The drivers of the other trucks began sounding their horns. In the lead truck, the guard jumped out, stubber in hand, and began firing rounds off into the air.

Augustin turned to the sergeant.

‘Get out!’

‘What is it, cadet?’

From the circle of watching, curious cadets, one sneered, ‘Gussy wants to show us his home.’

‘It’s a trap, sir, you need to get clear. Now.’

‘What?’ Dalcop turned back towards the cadets. ‘Out, everyone o—’

That was when the first of the mines went off.

The mine was not directly under the truck carrying Augustin’s squad. It blew the driver’s cab off and the front of the vehicle’s body. Enough of Sergeant Dalcop fell back in the road for Augustin to know that he was dead.

Then the gangers opened up. They were firing from the hab blocks, from windows and doors; some came crawling from the manholes that led down to the underhive. They were firing stubbers and autoguns, the rounds cutting down wounded soldiers, the curious hab rats who didn’t know to stay away.

‘What do we do, what do we do?’

One of the cadets, who had been blown from the truck, grabbed Augustin’s arm, face frantic with panic. Augustin slapped him, pulled the autopistol from the boy’s belt and shoved it in his hand.

‘Get down and shoot something.’

Augustin pushed him behind an overturned transport, then turned to assess the situation.

The cadet convoy had been destroyed. The trucks were all either on their sides or split apart like sides of protein. The resistance from dazed cadets

and the few surviving regular troops was being cut down by the indiscriminate fire from stubbers and autoguns.

But why attack the cadet convoy?

Then, Augustin saw. Gangers were approaching, emerging from habs and holes. They moved quickly, weapons at the ready, straight for the munitions truck.

The ambush was an arms grab.

The gangers were piling up round the overturned munitions truck as they hacked at its reinforced hull – its armour had saved it from being split apart.

Behind him, Augustin could hear the cadet whimpering. In the remains of the truck were the bodies of most of the rest. None had been his friends but he had enjoyed their company, ignoring the small jibes of the jealous. Now they were dead and the gangers were gathering to feast on the spoils; even as he watched, he saw low-ranking thugs stripping weapons and anything else of value from the bodies sprawled over the ground.

There were a lot of munitions in the truck. The gangers weren't even bothering to set up a perimeter as they began looting it.

So they did not see Augustin approaching, one hand behind his back. Nor did they see the grenade arch over the ring of scrabbling scavengers. But they saw it, momentarily, when it landed in their midst.

Then it exploded.

The fragments cut through the inner ring of gangers, shredding limbs, cutting faces, blinding and piercing. But some among the fragments also cut through the casings of the stacked power packs.

The explosions, an expanding series of detonations, decimated the gangers, scything through the closely packed mob.

In the aftermath of the explosions, as the gangers who survived began to shake themselves from the blast shock, some among them saw a boy approaching, running towards the burning hab block. Trying to clear their sight, they might have seen that the boy was holding a looted autogun. If so, it was the last thing they saw.

Augustin ran past what remained of the gangers. He was filled with a cold clarity and an even colder fear. He processed the movements of the surviving gangers as they staggered upright, and picked them off with the autogun, set to three-round bursts. The fear drove him on towards the burning hab block that the gangers had torched to stop the convoy.

‘Dad!’

Cadet Augustin ran into the flames.

‘What’s this?’

Captain Iustus, Seventh Victrix Regiment of the Astra Militarum, looked down at the document that the orderly had laid on his desk.

‘Execution order, sir.’

Captain Iustus nodded, picked up his stylus and began to sign. But then his eyes, tired though they were from the twelve hours he’d been sitting at this desk signing orders and writing reports, drifted up to the citation for execution, and his stylus stopped.

‘This man, a new recruit, incapacitated how many Munitorum warrant officers?’

The orderly pointed to the warrant.

‘It says seven of them, sir. Along with fifteen staff clerks and, er,’ his finger moved down the lines of the warrant, ‘three troopers.’

‘And all this occurred during the signing-in of one conscript?’

‘I believe so, sir.’

Captain Iustus sat back in his chair and looked up at his orderly. ‘Get me the recordings of the incident.’

‘They should have come with the warrant, sir.’ The orderly looked through the tray on his commanding officer’s desk. ‘Yes, here they are.’

‘Play them.’

A small hololithic scene appeared on Captain Iustus’ desk.

A Munitorum recruiting office. A line of men waiting to be signed up into the Imperial Guard. An officious row of Munitorum warrant officers taking their details, relieving them of their old lives and funnelling them to their new ones.

And at the front of the queue, a young man standing quietly in front of the desk.

The warrant officer was holding out his hand.

‘What’s that? Give it here.’

The young man in the hololith reluctantly handed over what he was holding. It was a book. Charred and burned, but still recognisably a book.

‘You’re in the Astra Militarum now, boy. No more fairy stories.’

The young man held out his hand.

‘I am permitted one personal possession,’ he said.

The warrant officer looked up at him, his eyes full with harsh mirth.

'The thing is, boy, it ain't you who decides what personal possession you get to keep, it's me. I'm generous enough to let you keep your balls. As for this,' the warrant officer held it up over a chute, *'it's for burning.'*

He let go.

The young man made a grab for the book but he was too late. It disappeared into the incinerator.

The warrant officer looked up at the new recruit standing before him.

'Welcome to the Guard.'

That was when the young man jumped over the desk, grabbed the warrant officer's head, and slammed it down on the hard plasteel. Both broke.

Captain Iustus reached out and turned off the sound. He watched the remainder of the recording in silence, until the young man was finally brought down when the recruiting centre was flooded with gas.

The hololithic images flickered and died.

Captain Iustus looked up at his orderly.

The orderly nodded.

'Not much doubt about the execution warrant, sir.'

'Is his listed age accurate?'

'Er, yes, sir, I th—'

Captain Iustus scratched through the place where he had begun to sign.

'Bring me the consign form. There is someone looking for men like this.'

Augustin woke.

That was good. It was unexpected too.

He should be dead.

He woke but he kept his eyes closed and his breathing level. He listened. He felt. He tasted. He made a picture of where he was with every sense other than sight. Then, when the tale they told him became too incredible, Augustin opened his eyes, and try though he might, he could not keep himself from gasping.

For there, above him, red and filling half the viewport, was Mars.

Mars. Its ring crowned with orbital stations, tattooed with vast machinery and studded with towering rockcrete spires.

'You took your time waking.'

Augustin looked round and realised that his head was all he could move. He was strapped to a gurney. There was a man strapped into another

gurney next to him. And beyond him was another, and another.

‘Hey, old sleepy head is finally awake,’ said the man next to him. The announcement was met with a round of catcalls, insults and swearing, but the man did not seem put out by the reception his news received. He turned back to Augustin.

‘Good to see you wake in time. The name is Montado. What regiment did you volunteer from?’

‘In time for what?’ asked Augustin.

‘Arriving,’ said Montado. ‘Must have been the thump when the port locks engaged that woke you. Something had to – you’ve been asleep the whole way.’ Montado nodded up at the planet filling the viewport. ‘He’s put on his angry face to greet us.’

Augustin looked out at the planet above them, half in sunlight, half in night, and saw that the northern hemisphere was occluded by vast swirling clouds, lit up from within by a flickering rhythm of light.

‘Heard tell they’re the worst electrical storms they’ve seen on Mars in millennia,’ said Montado. ‘It’s why they kept us out here in orbit for so long. Must have decided we’ve waited long enough.’ He glanced at Augustin. ‘Don’t say much, do you?’

Augustin looked away. He had heard a hiss, the sound of different air pressures equalising. A port was opening.

A line of servitors shuffled into the hold. One by one, the gurneys were rolled away. As Montado was taken, he called back to Augustin, ‘Hey, at least we’re still alive.’

Augustin nodded, but then he looked at the slack face of the servitor approaching him. He was beginning to suspect that soon his continued life would not appear that welcome.

Weeks. Years. Centuries.

Longer.

Yes, it could have been longer.

No beginning, no end. Fragments of memory. Images. Thoughts. Like a dissolving nightmare that leaves only its horror.

They were making him into something new. But, in doing so, they were cutting away everything he had once been.

Through it all, Augustin clung to one image. It was his anchor. The face of his father. He held that face in what remained of his memory, fighting

off the assaults that strove to drain away his past completely. Everything else could go: the hab, the gangs, the grey unrelenting skies. But not his father.

‘Sacrifice. Any true service requires sacrifice.’

Something was speaking to him. He did not know if it was human. But he knew it brought pain.

Shift.

Rolling silently through corridors, past rows and rows of dead men. Then, the sudden clarity. They were men like him. Still alive, lying, waiting for the pain.

Shift.

Light. Light so bright it burned itself onto everything. Held immobile, head clamped. Eyelids pulled back so there was no refuge from the light. The light...

Shift.

Metal. Cold metal, all around, reflecting and reflective. Multiple copies of him on the wall, the ceiling, ribcage splayed, peeled open.

Shift.

Fingers, not flesh but metal, prehensile and strangely, obscenely warm, moving over his face. Stroking his cheek. Seeking to quiet him, comfort him. Screams. The echo of his screams dying to nothing in the chamber. The pain chamber. The chamber of becoming.

Shift.

The flicker of days, weeks, years – impossible to follow. Running fast, then slowing to a stop. His body still, unable to move. But growing. Becoming. Watching the dust settle on his body.

Shift.

Waking. Waking...

Looking down at a body he didn't recognise. Senses acute, exquisite, alert. A double thump, beating, within his own chest. Pulling at the restraints holding him to the gurney. Pulling – and breaking them as if they were paper. Standing, unrestrained, free.

Standing. Head thrown back, roaring, screaming, crying.

Searching in memory, in the one safe place, for the memory.

Realising it was gone. He had lost the face of his father.

Sacrifice.

Shift.

‘You know what kept me going through... well, through everything?’

Montado was speaking again.

Augustin tried not to listen. This was the final test. Come through this and the pain would end. Fail, and the pain would end too. He wanted to concentrate and make himself ready, but Montado insisted on talking.

Sometimes, it was better to talk back. Then at least he would eventually shut up.

Augustin turned to him. They were sitting in the back of a Rhino, bouncing along over the deeply rutted surface of Mars. There were six of them, out of the few hundred who had arrived in the same ship as him, so long ago. One ship of many. In truth, Augustin had not the slightest idea of how much time had passed while the monster, the archmagos, had moulded him, sculpted him, formed him into something new. That he was something new he accepted now, as he accepted the double rhythm of his twin hearts, the acuity of new eyes that could focus to a point and maintain two hundred and seventy degrees of perfect peripheral vision, and the vitality that coursed through his system. He could, he knew, do wonders.

And now he turned to Montado, talking beside him, as they bounced across the desert to their final trial.

‘What kept you going, Montado? Tell me.’

Montado gestured out, past the plasteel walls of the Rhino, to the wasteland beyond. ‘The storm. That’s what kept me going. I saw the lightning as we orbited Mars, waiting for a landing slot. I heard it strike the drop-ship as we went down from orbit. I heard it, growling and hissing, as... as he changed us. It never stopped. Storms are supposed to stop but this one never did. And I figured that so long as it didn’t stop, then I would not give up.’ Montado looked at Augustin. ‘I didn’t.’

Augustin nodded. Montado, words exhausted for the moment, returned to his reverie, mind out in the storm. For his part, Augustin checked through what little he knew of what lay ahead.

They were being taken deep into the desert zone of Mars, there to be left with only a blade as a weapon, in the heart of the storm, to make their own way to the rendezvous point. Make it back alive and they would be inducted into the Fulminators as battle-brothers. Those that didn’t make it back, didn’t make it. The end.

The Rhino came to a shuddering, juddering halt. The rear doors opened.

Outside, a Fulminator waited on them, clad in the full brilliant blue

power armour of the Chapter.

As they emerged, the Space Marine made the sign of the aquila on his chest. In the sky, red with dust, lightning cracked.

The thin air of Mars tasted metallic in the back of Augustin's throat.

The Fulminator looked at the six neophytes lined up in front of him.

'Your respirators will last for forty-eight hours. When they fail, you will endure for a further ten hours. In that time, you must reach the rendezvous point. There are dangers along the way. May the Emperor protect you.'

The six neophytes watched in silence as the Rhino drove away into the storm.

Augustin put on his rebreather. He took out his knife – the only weapon they had been issued with – checked its edge, then sheathed it. Better to have hands free. As he made his preparations the other neophytes set off, one by one.

The rendezvous point was set at three hundred and thirty degrees. Augustin turned to it, setting the direction instinctively.

Montado still waited. Augustin looked at him.

'You don't want to go together...' Montado's voice trailed away. He shook his head. 'I will see you there.'

Augustin watched him jog off into the desert. He was alone on red Mars.

Before he went anywhere, he let his senses spread out, testing the look, the feel, the taste of the land. There were creatures in the desert – under the desert – hybrids of flesh and machine that could tear through plasteel and rockcrete as if they were paper. Even though he was stronger than ten normal men, without the power armour of a Fulminator such creatures could rip him apart and barely draw whatever passed for breath among them.

Augustin nodded to himself.

He had just realised something that – if he lived – he knew would stand him in good stead. The first rule to successfully carrying out a mission was to understand its objectives. This was a survival mission, pure and simple. He did not have to kill anything, get intelligence on the enemy or cause a diversion. All he had to do was get to the rendezvous.

Six hours later, he was lost.

Augustin knew he should not be lost. But the storm, that unending electrical storm that had given his putative Chapter its name, was disrupting his sense of direction. He would get a handle on the rendezvous

point, and then the storm would release sustained lightning discharges and he would lose it again. In the end, Augustin decided to forgo his engineered sense for magnetic north and work to dead reckoning. The original rendezvous heading was three hundred and thirty degrees. With the blur of light that told of the dim presence of the sun through the swirling dust clouds, and after a rapid calculation of time of day and Martian season, Augustin worked out where north lay on the horizon, fixed it with a shattered rockcrete spire at the edge of visibility, rotated thirty degrees and fixed his direction of march using the broken fins of abandoned machinery for his first objective.

Staying in the long shadows, working to keep the wind in his face so that it would not carry his scent in the direction of movement, always conscious of never making a silhouette against sky or sand, Augustin moved through the desert more silently than the scouring sandpaper wind. The rebreather stopped the sand as much as it filtered and concentrated the thin oxygen of the Martian atmosphere, and for that he was grateful. Nevertheless, his eyes ran raw under the sandlash.

Soon, the sun would set and the temperature plummet, but his system could compensate for the cold of the Martian night, and the strobing of the lightning storm would provide light enough, and more, to keep moving.

The desert looked different in the night. It would be lit with shadows then plunged into darkness again, the distance diffused into the light spilling from the towering hive cities that now rose above the horizon. He could hear things moving in the dark, things emerging from sand burrows to scavenge and hunt. Some he saw – segmented rolling creatures humping through the sand like waves – while others he heard as the skitter of thousands of claws over hardpack. Whenever he heard or sensed movement, Augustin went to ground, a shadow in the shadows.

But by the last hours of the night, Augustin became sure that he was being tracked.

Something was following him, keeping well back, but shadowing him onwards through the desert.

He lay a trap for it. A deadfall, hastily assembled, of shattered rockcrete spars to which he attached a long lever; a position under cover, and a trail left that took whatever was following him under the deadfall.

Then, he waited.

It was approaching. In the dark, even with the occasional lightning

flashes, he could not see what it was, for it kept to the shadow path as well as any Space Marine. Instead, he waited for it to enter the trap, listening for the distinctive sound of the sharp sand he had sprinkled under the deadfall.

Rasp.

Augustin went to pull the release.

Lightning flashed and he saw the creature following him lit up, surprised, suddenly aware of what it had walked into.

‘Montado! What are you doing following me?’

Montado glanced up at the deadfall suspended over his head. ‘You’re not going to pull it, are you?’

‘No. Get out of there.’

Montado edged back into the clear.

‘Why are you following me?’

‘I... I was lost.’ Montado began to ask a question.

But Augustin never heard what that question was. He was bowled aside as easily as a skittle. The creature skittered forward, its multiple legs rattling, and leaped upon Montado, bringing him down. Mandibles clicking against bone, it cut into the neophyte.

Augustin hurled himself on top of the creature, pulling its head back with one hand while with the other he sawed through its throat. Liquid, a mix of promethium and blood, spilled from the torn neck tubes but the mandibles kept clacking. Montado was fighting to hold them from closing round his neck, his hands running with blood.

A last pull of the knife, and Augustin severed the neck. He pulled the creature’s head away from Montado, feeling its metal flesh under his fingers as he held it high, and suddenly noticed the hair on his arms standing on end.

The lightning struck him. It came down through the creature’s head, fusing flesh to metal. It ran along his arm, over the side of his face, down the length of his body, and ran to ground through his left foot.

The strike was captured in Augustin’s superhuman recall with the clarity of lightning in the night.

Then all went dark.

Augustin woke to the Martian day.

He could barely move. He saw Montado lying beside him, chest moving

but unconscious, the lightning strike on top of the attack having overwhelmed him.

Augustin staggered to his feet.

He looked down at Montado. He could leave him. Montado should never have followed him: it was a solo test. As it was, he could feel his system was near collapse, and he still had a day's march ahead.

He could leave him.

No one would know.

Thirty-six hours later, as the rendezvous base was being packed, Augustin staggered from the desert. He was carrying the body of Montado in his arms. The talkative neophyte was silent now, his injuries having overcome him, the great quiet sealing his mouth just an hour from the camp. The Fulminator from the beginning of the test came and took Montado from Augustin, laying his body out on the sand.

Augustin looked round.

'Are we last?'

'Only you came from the storm.' The Fulminator made the sign of the aquila. 'Brother Augustin.'

The Fulminators assembled in the great vault. Augustin, stood alongside his battle-brothers, listened intently.

'You have heard, all of you have heard, that there is no service without sacrifice.' The speaker paused, his ultramarine-blue armour blooded red in the light streaming from the great gothic window that looked out onto the void of space. 'But now hear well. There is another facet to that truth. For the greater the sacrifice, the greater the service.' The master's eyes scanned over the assembled Chapter, meeting the gaze of each brother in turn.

'You have already sacrificed much, far beyond the understanding of ordinary men.'

Augustin locked sight with the speaker, and saw in that gaze the shared memory of pain. They too had suffered, under the knife and through the years.

'What you were before is gone. You have been remade, refashioned. You are warriors, the implements of the Emperor's will, and the enemies of mankind shall fall before you.'

Augustin heard the double thump of his heart, saw the face before him

with the acuity of a telescope, and felt the vitality of ten men pumping through his veins. He had indeed been made over into something new, at the cost of pain, and years. Now, in his strength, he grudged neither. But, in one corner of his mind, he wished still to look upon the face of his father again.

‘Are you ready, my brothers, to make that sacrifice?’

And Augustin joined with his battle-brothers in giving voice to their assent.

Ten thousand years had gone past, and the sky had split.

It made no sense to ask which was first.

Since their waking from the Long Sleep, and his time in the storm, there had been only war. A blur of worlds and actions, a crusade. Only now, on Chevreuse, had they slowed long enough for Sergeant Augustin – he was a sergeant now, the leader of a five-man Reiver squad – to find out the name of the world they fought for.

But on Chevreuse, they did not fight for a world; they fought for a man. A dead man.

The mission – and Augustin remembered the lesson of the desert: know your mission – was to enter the storm zone, besieged by the forces of the Archenemy, and save the relics of some Imperial saint.

Above them, the sky blazed with lightning in a way he had not seen since Mars the Red – so very long ago.

The yellow and grey and green of Chevreuse, its Bael trees with their thorn ropes, the supercharged atmosphere with its constant electrical discharges, and the storm – the lightning storm that raged without ceasing over the holy stations that led to the shrine cathedral of Saint Blaise.

They had come in low, the Valkyrie flying barely out of reach of the tree canopy, the assault carrier burning out and away as soon as it had dropped Augustin and his squad.

Now, they waited. Invisible, dug into the no-man’s-land that surrounded the storm zone, waiting for the rendezvous with one of the Faithful, who was due to be their guide to the shrine cathedral.

The rendezvous was scheduled for 06:00 at a structure the locals knew as the Tomb of Blessed Etienne, one of the companions of the saint. But they had come in before first light, scouting the territory before taking cover in positions where they could keep watch over both the tomb and its

approaches.

Augustin saw him.

Sliding over the lightning-scarred land, moving like smoke, his head and body smeared yellow, and grey, and green.

But as he watched, a click – they were keeping vox silence – alerted him. Augustin scanned south.

An enemy scout patrol, grey clad, moving with the awkwardness of off-worlders over the shattered terrain that surrounded the storm zone. Augustin calculated movement: they were angling towards the prescribed rendezvous point.

The Fulminator watched the Faithful stop. Observe. He had seen the patrol.

All he had to do was let the patrol go past. Maintain mission secrecy. Rendezvous delayed, not missed.

But then Augustin saw the Faithful draw and aim a needler at the patrol's point man. He noted that the model of the needler was old – and a memory flashed of a ganger wielding one.

The Faithful fired. The needler removed the point man's eyes.

Augustin watched as the patrol poured las-rounds in the direction that the needles had come from, their paths marked by spark discharges in the supercharged atmosphere, while the Faithful slid through shadow and trench towards a stand of Bael trees, passing silently through the scar zone around them before looking back from their cover.

The Faithful raised his needler, took aim again.

It was necessary to ensure that the Faithful did not draw further attention this way. Sergeant Augustin, silent as death, moved towards the man, sliding his reiver knife from its oiled sheath.

One hand he put over the man's face, sealing his mouth and nose.

The other, holding the knife, was at the Faithful's neck.

'To call out requires a throat. Make a sound and I will remove yours.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edoardo Albert is a writer and historian specialising in the Dark Ages. He finds that the wars and cultures of the early Medieval period map very well on to the events of the 40th and 41st millenniums. His Black Library fiction includes 'Green and Grey' and the novella *Lords of the Storm*.

An extract from *Dark Imperium*.



The void is impossible for the human mind to encompass.

Within the galaxy mankind calls home there are three hundred billion stars. Around these revolve hundreds of billions of worlds, and the spaces between are crowded by a diversity of objects which defy enumeration. Mankind's galaxy is but one of trillions of galaxies in a universe of unguessable size. The distances between even proximate astronomical bodies are inconceivable to creatures evolved to walk the warmer regions of single small world.

This is why the void cannot be understood. Not by men, nor by their machines.

The magi of Mars insist on their understanding, but their apprehension can only ever be an abstraction, dead numbers modelled by dead-flesh cogitators. No matter how brutally expanded their minds, men cannot comprehend the majesty of the void.

And when one considers the warp, that nightmare realm skulking behind that of touch, sound and sight, well... any being who claims understanding of that is either deluded or insane, and is in both cases dangerous.

Among the higher races there are those better equipped to grasp their own limitations. They understand that the cosmos is ultimately unknowable; they accept their lack of insight. By comparison, the creatures of Terra are so crude in thought that – in the opinion of these more enlightened civilisations – it is a wonder humanity can understand anything at all.

Humans are beings of short reach. Give them voidships, change their shape by geneforge and augmetic, provide them with weapons of sufficient power to break a star, and the children of Old Earth are still but apes removed from the savannah. And just as an ape's mind cannot hold an ocean, and the notion of a whole world is inexplicable to it, so a man's

mind cannot hold the void, and the layered infinities of the warp are beyond him entirely.

The Imperium claims a million worlds as its own. It is an empire spread gossamer-thin across the run of stars, its worlds so far removed from one another that it requires the bloody effort of countless men and women to sustain. In the grand flow of history, the Imperium is the greatest galactic empire of its day. To the people who populate it, it is the most powerful ever to have existed.

However, to the uncaring universe, it is nothing, the latest in a line of such realms that stretches back to the days of the first thinking beings, when the stars were young and the warp was calm, and horror had yet to uncoil its tendrils into the material realm.

There are philosophers that argue war is man's natural state, and to the inhabitants of this era of blood it is a proven hypothesis. War is everywhere. Peace is the dream of a silent Emperor, broken by His treacherous sons.

Those sons continued to fight.

Over the green gas giant of Thessala, two great battlefleets engaged. Titanic energies snapped and blinked in the eternal night of space.

The total efforts of star systems went into the construction of these fleets. Neither was free of the taint of blood, not in their construction – for tens of thousands of lives had been expended in their making – nor in their usage. The resources of planets had been poured entire into the forging of their frames, and the secrets of ancient sciences plundered to bring them to murderous life. Both had been responsible for the levelling of civilisations.

The fleets differed in only two regards. First was in their appearance. One was a gaudy assault on the senses, the other a motley collection of sober liveries. The second and more fundamental difference was in their allegiance. The sober fleet fought for the continuation of humanity's great stellar empire; the gaudy one was dedicated to its extinction.

The battlefleets pursued each other in a slow dance that broke through Thessala's rings, hundreds of vessels ploughing gaps through the dust that would take centuries to close. The voiceless lightning of their guns filled the skies of Thessala's inhabited moons. The lives of millions below depended on the outcome of the battle, but the consequences would ripple much further.

At the centre of this iron storm there was no calm, no eye in which respite might be found. Instead, there was a pair of leviathans: the Ultramarines battle-barge *Gauntlet of Power* and the Emperor's Children battleship *Pride of the Emperor*. Two vessels, forged in a common cause but now implacable enemies, locked together in mortal combat only thirty kilometres apart – no distance at all in void war.

Each was the flagship of a primarch, genetically engineered demigods crafted by the Emperor of Mankind. Aboard the *Gauntlet of Power* stood Roboute Guilliman, the foundling of Ultramar, the Avenging Son. The *Pride of the Emperor* was home to Fulgrim – the traitor, the fallen exemplar, the blighted phoenix. Once covered in his Emperor's blessings, Fulgrim had followed the arch-traitor Horus and pledged his allegiance to ancient dark gods, becoming the herald of perversity.

In fighting for their father, both primarchs were made fathers themselves, though not of princes or strong daughters; through the application of arcane science, they were the sires of two of the Space Marine Legions, mankind's greatest warriors. The Space Marines were lords of the galaxy, designed to reunite the human race and shepherd it to a glorious future. Instead, they had failed and turned upon one another, and their war had nearly destroyed the Imperium.

Such fury a battlefleet can unleash!

It can cow a world without a shot. It can extinguish the life of a species. Battlefleets are the tools of tyrants, whomever they fight for. Whether their admirals espouse salvation or damnation matters not to the execution of their purpose. Death follows in their wake.

To those participating, a void war seems a terrifying, roiling chaos of violence, but it is the pinnacle of mankind's destructive ingenuity, a whirl of gigantic explosions where lives are snuffed out by the hundred. In such combat, a single man is nothing; he is but part of the machine of the ship he serves, as essential or otherwise as a steel cog or an indicator lumen. He can do nothing but work his appointed task and pray his life will not end, or if it must end, that it does so in painless disintegration. A single crewman's task dominates everything, even his fear of death. There is no escape from service. War and his part in it are the totality of his existence.

Yet what is a void war to the timeless deeps of the blackness that envelops all these footling motes of light that sentient creatures battle so earnestly over? A void war is twinkles in the distance. It is silence. It is

infinitesimals of matter sparking and dying, scintillas of metal and flesh consumed by transient fires. The detonation of a battleship kilometres long is insignificant to a cosmos where the death of a sun atomises worlds. On a galactic scale, the loss of a warship and ten thousand lives is a nugatory flash outshone by the billion-year candles of the stars.

The inverse is true to a single man. His life is all that matters, for one life is all a man has, and he fears to lose it. Yet he must blindly serve in terror. The universe gives meagre gifts, and it does not care how they are spent.

Over Thessala, mankind fought in a civil war already centuries old. The Emperor of Mankind, a human with the power of a god, had tried and failed to unite humanity's scattered worlds so that the species might survive the supernatural threat of Chaos. His sons, the primarchs, godlike beings He had created to complete this task, had themselves been corrupted, and half had turned against Him. The Horus Heresy, that war was called. It had ended the Emperor's dream.

The Heresy was part of a war that had continued for aeons and would continue for aeons still.

To the beings of this galaxy, the war was everything; to the blank gaze of time, it was nothing. And yet, for all humanity's seeming inconsequence, the children of its greatest son held the fates of two realities in their careless grasp.

Roboute Guilliman remained loyal to Terra. His ship was sternly decorated in gold, so much so that it rivalled that of Fulgrim's vessel in ornamentation, but whereas the *Gauntlet of Power* was ornate, the *Pride of the Emperor* appeared vulgar. Its decoration had been applied with abandon – everything that could be adorned had been adorned. Back when the two ships had fought side by side, its extravagance had not been to the taste of the Ultramarines, who were born of more solemn worlds. Now it was an affront to decency, added to and added to again until tawdry obscured all trace of art. Neglect went hand in hand with this ostentation, and it made the *Pride of the Emperor* appear ugly. It was a decayed relic from a bygone age, like a theatre from a decadent century left to rot in the rain.

However, the *Pride of the Emperor's* ability to mete out destruction remained undiminished. At point-blank range, it traded punishing blows with the *Gauntlet of Power* as the ships passed slowly alongside each other. Huge cannons flared, exchanging projectiles the size of transit

containers. The space between became a deadly thicket of lance beams and laser light. Void shields blurred and sparked with the dissipation of mighty energies. Multi-hued lightning silenced communications and burst subsystems with their feedback for thousands of miles around. Weaponry capable of levelling cities blinked and flashed on both sides.

Around these metal behemoths, dozens of other ships struggled in cosmic silence, some approaching the size and power of the flagships in their own right. Without exception, those on Fulgrim's side were the damned ships of the Emperor's Children. Though Fulgrim had lost his war and his humanity, his Legion yet held some cohesion. On Guilliman's side fought half a dozen successor Chapters of the proud XIII Legion: the Ultramarines. Dissolution had been the price of faithfulness for the Legion of Ultramar, and though there were strengths in the smaller formations Guilliman had forced upon the Space Marines after the Great Heresy War, there were weaknesses also.

For all their primarch's famed strategical genius, the loyalists had been out-manoeuvred and caught. Their pursuit of the fallen primarch had become a fight for survival. Three fleet elements of Emperor's Children had pinned the loyalists into place above Thessala; Fulgrim had turned his flight from Xolco into a devastating trap.

Once, Roboute Guilliman would not have made such an error. Perhaps the dire situation over the emerald skies of Thessala was simple misfortune, and Fulgrim was no ordinary opponent, after all. Should Guilliman fail, history would surely be forgiving, if there were any good men left to write it.

Or perhaps the truth was that rage had clouded the Avenging Son's judgement. Perhaps, some dared whisper, Roboute Guilliman had allowed his desire for revenge to overtake his reason.

Roboute Guilliman was stretched. Although several other primarchs still stood as champions of humanity, the wounded Imperium looked to Guilliman to save it. Every man has a limit, demigod or peasant, and Guilliman's burden was the heaviest of all. He was the saviour of humanity.

The *Pride of the Emperor* heeled over, bringing its portside weapons batteries into better firing arcs. In response, the *Gauntlet of Power* intensified its barrage, and the void shield covering the *Pride of the Emperor's* ventral towers winked out.

Explosions bloomed suddenly across hull plating encrusted with gold and filth.

An opening had been made.

On board the *Gauntlet of Power*, one hundred of Ultramar's finest warriors waited on teleport blocks surrounded by buzzing machinery. They comprised fifty of the First Company and fifty of the Second, all garbed in the deep blue of the Ultramarines Chapter. The white helmets of the First Company's veteran Space Marines, recessed under the cowls of Terminator armour, looked out at hundreds of tech-adepts and mortal crewmen labouring to prepare the Ultramarines' way through the warp.

The Space Marines of the Second Company were in standard power armour, and were being equipped with tall breaching shields by arming servitors. Their battleplate lacked the sheer thickness of Terminator armour, and the shields, though bulky, would increase their survivability in the close-quarter fighting of the coming boarding.

Ammunition trains rumbled across the deck on plasteel wheels. Smartly uniformed Ultramarines Chapter menials handed out munitions to their masters while the enhanced warriors performed last-minute armour checks on themselves and their brothers. Chaplains strode from platform to platform, hearing oaths and affixing papers to armour with wax that hissed as they were impressed with sacred iron seals. Whether human or transhuman, every member of the Chapter worked with perfect efficiency. Even so, as invested as they were in their preparations, all of them had half an eye on the grand archway leading onto the deck.

The ship shook violently. Alarms blared. Lumens spat sparks and went dark. A section of gantry clanged down from the tangle of struts and pipes that clogged the ceiling high above. The crew continued upon its business with unhurried purpose. Orders were given to reroute power. Emergency teams of armoured voidsmen and specialised servitors began clearing the wreckage. All was restored to order.

Such calm made it easy to forget the punishing fire the ship was under. But there was no doubt that they were losing.

This was not how the battle was supposed to have gone.

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