

WARHAMMER
40,000

**IN THE
GRIM DARKNESS**

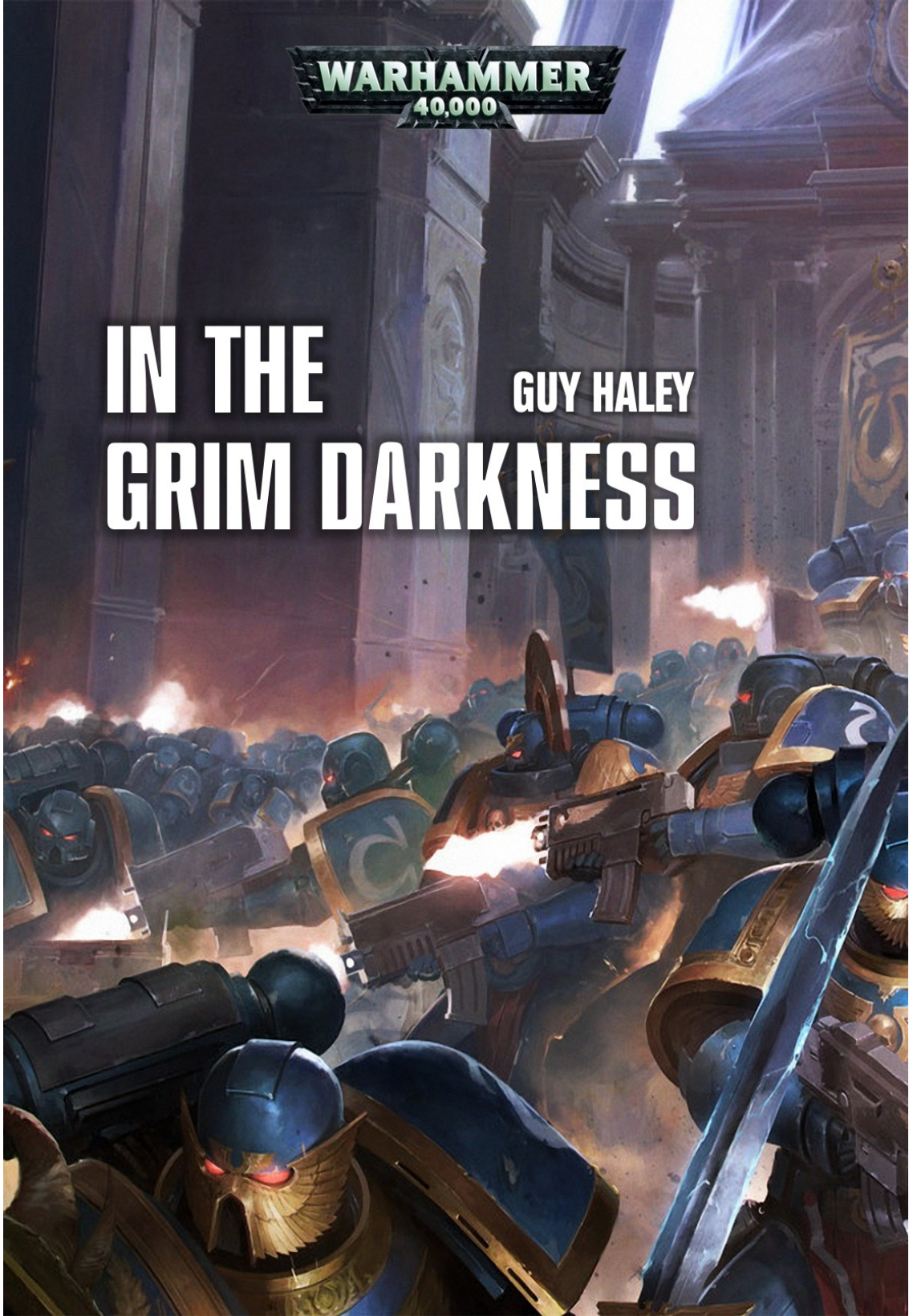
GUY HALEY



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IN THE GRIM DARKNESS

Guy Haley

They came for Decimus minutes before the shuttle departed.

All Sixteen boys occupied the transit hold, four short of the total capacity. There hadn't been a full class graduation ever, so they said. Decimus couldn't quite trust the dormitory rumours in the battle scholium. He was wise not to. Credulous boys rarely made the grade, but that one rang truer than most.

Yearly intake at the occluda scholium was fifteen thousand boys. Some of them would die there, for though the regime took care of its charges, the curriculum was hard, and the boys were pushed to the limits of their capabilities.

Of the thousands that graduated every year, most could look forward to positions of responsibility in Ultramar. Generals of the Ultramarine Auxilia, civilian administrators of the highest grade, diplomats and ambassadors, some of whom might even one day tread the poisoned soils of Terra, engineers, governors, judges, economists, cardinals, and potentates of every degree.

Up to twenty from that weighty cohort might, just might, make it into the Ultramarines Space Marine Legion.

It was never the full twenty. Not ever. The Ultramarines took only the very best from each of its recruitment institutions. Once, they had been less rigorous, so the whispers in the night went. Things had changed after the Great Heresy War.

If that were true, the fact that Decimus Androdinus Felix was chosen was even more amazing.

He still couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe it when his name had been called out. He couldn't believe it when the valedictory was delivered, and the scholium had saluted those lucky few. Even while he was sitting in the spotless transit

hold, it seemed impossible. Lumen glow shone from every surface of the white plasteel interior, so clean it could have been manufactured the day before. And though the walls and ceiling and ribbed floor seemed to be the very brightest white there was, the Ultima of the Legion emblazoned on the bulkhead separating transit hold from the cockpit transpired to be whiter still, so white the light of the soft lumens struggled to define its hard edges. The blue it was outlined by was the cleanest, purest blue Felix had ever seen. White and blue, the same colour as the uniform he now wore. The uniform of a neophyte of the Ultramarines.

Decimus had wanted nothing more than to be a legionary since he was a child. His father had lectured him on his family responsibilities, he had listened without comment, and applied himself harder to his studies. His mother had beseeched him to think of the children he would never have. Aged seven, he had replied, 'Then who will protect the children of others, if I am not there to do so?'

He had been a precocious child. Humourless, some had said. He did not want to play, or to learn his music, or to study the family occupation as numismatic purity guarantors. He wanted to be a Space Marine.

He permitted himself a tiny smile, so slight it barely registered on his face. It wouldn't do to smile, not now. The others sat in their acceleration harnesses, faces forward and expressions stern as old statues, trying to grow up immediately, and be the warriors they would one day become.

Maybe it was that smile that damned him. Felix was very capable. He knew his talents exceeded those of most other boys, he was possessed of enough self-awareness to know how envy could take root in others. He was too focused on his goal to be smug about his ability, but if he were not careful, his manner could make it look like he felt himself superior.

He killed the smile. He curbed his enthusiasm. It was too late. The ready light in the hold went red. The boys looked at it in confusion.

'It's not supposed to do that, is it?' whispered one.

The entry ramp opened with a slow hiss, revealing the cluttered cityscape of Pembria beyond the spaceport, a sight Decimus thought never to see again in this life.

Three men were silhouetted in the door. They came within and stared at the boys, the boys blinked nervously back, their pretence at adulthood shattered.

Decimus didn't recognise the uniforms. A pale grey with dark blue panels. Their left arms sported a run of fabric badges from shoulder to wrist, a variant of the Machina Opus prominent at the top, but these were no Mechanicum priests. Their hands were covered by grey gloves. Spotless. Amazing how fear fixes

small details in the mind. One of the men glanced at a dataslate in his left hand.

'Decimus Androdinus Felix?'

Fifteen boys looked at Decimus. Decimus said nothing to confirm his identity. The man pointed at him anyway.

'You. You are to come with us.' The man had a hard face, bagged grey under the eyes. Pinched features with a miser's calculating expression.

'I'm sorry?' said Decimus.

'You are to come with us. Now.'

The man's glum companions came to his side, deactivated his transit harness and half-dragged him from his seat.

'But, but I am due on Macragge!' Decimus pleaded.

'Not anymore,' said one of the men. Cold metal was pressed into Decimus' neck. There was a colder hiss on his skin, and consciousness fled to the crashing of breaking dreams.

He was cold, very cold. His head ached. What that meant was yet unclear, but he at least knew he was alive. There were voices.

'This one's a good specimen. His test rates are far above acceptable parameters. The archmagos will want this one for command,' said one, high and nasal.

'When he gets the seed to work,' said a second, this one bland and disinterested.

There was a clatter of metal instruments on a metal plate.

'You don't think he will?' said the first.

'I'm not saying that,' said the second. 'I'm saying when. When could be a long time away. He has to survive the stasis first.'

Decimus sat up slowly. From the sound of the voices, he judged the speakers were facing away from him. He was on a hard table that smelled of anti-biologics. His eyes ached at the light, though it was low and greenish and barely bright enough to see by.

Two men in hazard suits were on the other side of the room, laying out a torturer's dream of tools. Their heads were hidden by high, rectangular hoods that were of a piece with the suits, fronted with clear, flexible plastek. Oxygen pipes connected them to the walls. Everything except the table and the tools were covered in soft, transparent coverings. It was like a mortuary, or an operating theatre, guarded against contamination.

Decimus' heart hammered. It felt so feeble in his chest, like a caged bird beating against his thin, boy's ribs. The technician slipped off the bed. His feet touched a freezing floor.

One of the men turned around, intent on the screen of a hand held medical auspex.

'Hey!' he said, looking up. It was the one with the nasal voice. 'He's awake!'

Decimus dropped into a crouch, swung his legs around in a long kick, and swept the man's feet off the floor. He went down with a crash, scattering scalpels, prods and other things bouncing and tinkling all over the floor. The second man made a lunge for him. Decimus pushed up from the cold tiles, his fist pushing in the clear viewing pane of the suit, and taking the man in the windpipe. He fell back with a strangled cry. Decimus scrambled towards the door, dipping down to snatch up a sharp bonesaw. He jumped on the first man's stomach as he attempted to rise, then shoved a table and its bulky device to the floor behind him as the men flailed about, getting tangled in their hoses. He pulled a dust cover from another table, sending more instruments clattering, then he was out of the door half a second before one of the men sent it slamming down behind him.

Decimus was in a long corridor. An angry red light flashed over the door he had exited a moment before. Alarms blared. Wrapping the plastek dust sheet around himself, he looked up and down the corridor, picked a direction at random, and fled.

Belisarius Cawl enjoyed listening to music while he worked. Today's choice was an ancient composition of thrilling complexity whose notes delightfully evoked the mathematics of noospheric data exchange packets in a virtual, nine-dimensional informational manifold exchange. It was doubtless a complete coincidence, for the man who had written it had been born tens of thousands of years before such things existed. Art was a matter of subjective enjoyment. It spoke to the consumer more than it did the artist who created it. For all Cawl knew, the composer had hated the piece, dissatisfied with its finished form. Perhaps it had not lived up to his design, or had disappointed him due to some flaw that tarnished its excellence for him but was invisible to all others.

Cawl loved it. He was an artist himself. There was a connection there, between he, the greatest mind in the Imperium, and this long-dead composer.

Even so, their minds were incalculably different. The composer was a genius in his limited way. Cawl's intellect exceeded all those who had come before him. He knew that, because he had built his own mind to be excessive in every regard.

To say Cawl was a single sentience was untrue. Not anymore. He was a

collection of iterations of himself. Creating them had taken him over the line of blasphemy that he had skirted most of his life, but he did not care. Duplication of psyche equalled multiplication of effort. They were limited things, these copies of himself, but utile. Half a dozen sub-Cawls worked in perfect synchronicity, overseen by the core intelligence that was the original Cawl. Though Cawl would only put it in such crude terms if he were forced to, he was like the conductor of the music he listened to, directing a host of lesser Cawls, all playing different instruments.

What instruments they were too. Cawl worked on the flayed body of a failed test subject in all his multiplicity. Hard-linked servitors plodded around him, directed by a lesser persona. Another controlled the servo skulls that performed a myriad tasks of data recording, fetching, and analysing. A third maintained synchronous data transfers between the great hive of cogitators that governed the sub-systems of the *Zar-Quaeistor*. A fourth rode the machine spirit of the giant vessel. And so on, each allotted its own task, each distinct, each a part of Cawl in total.

Like the orchestra, the collective whole that emerged from individual efforts was greater than the parts. Cawl was a multiplier to himself.

It was one part of Cawl's grand gestalt that became aware of the small personage watching him from a vent halfway up the wall near the door, and brought notification of it to the being that had been man that was buried deep, deep inside the mechanical frame of the Archmagos Dominus.

Slowly, so as not to scare his guest, Belisarius Cawl stepped away from the bloodied corpse on the dissecting slab and rose up to his full, impressive height. Cawl's body was as engineered as his mind, and as capacious. Three times the height of a man he stood, an engine of discovery he had made himself into and of war if need be, for there was no science of creation or destruction that was beyond Belisarius Cawl.

Cawl sifted through his personality filters. He was a complex being who enjoyed emotion for its own sake, though he had left much of his flesh behind, and like any other man had clothes to fit his mood. In his case, his clothes were carefully crafted personae, made with specific purposes in mind.

He flicked through his beings as a normal man might peruse a book. He hovered over one collection of traits that fit the situation.

Kindly. Avuncular. Cautious. Pedagogic.

That would do.

He selected a voice to go with it; warm and human, slightly wry.

A voice at odds with his monstrous, mechanical appearance. And he was a monster to human eyes, so big and imposing, so alien seeming a standard human from a backward world would not recognise him as belonging to the same species. None of his fleshy components were visible. He had numerous extra arms, and a shape that, when stripped of its voluminous red robes, evoked precisely nothing of mankind's basic form.

'Hello there,' Cawl said. His sub-personae continued with their tasks, cutting and sawing, analysing and predicting. Muscles were carefully resected and lifted from bone as the dead test subject was dissected. The work never stopped.

The boy looked at Cawl from the vent. His eyes were bluish shapes in a smear of shadow. 'What kind of thing are you?'

'A very good question. I am a man, though I realise that might be hard to believe. There is a man in here, deep down somewhere.' He tapped his metal chest with metal fingers.

'You look like a monster.'

'I suppose I do. What kind of thing are you, and what are you doing in my laboratory?'

'I am a neophyte of the Ultramarines. Your masters have me prisoner.'

'Masters?' said Cawl. A lesser subroutine of his enhanced mind picked up a general alarm from the examination rooms. 'My!' he said aloud. 'I must have been deeply occupied to have missed you, little one. Why don't you come down?'

The boy fingered a metal blade not well suited to fighting.

'I shall not hurt you,' said Cawl.

The boy stared back.

'I promise. You are safe here. I give you my word.'

The boy thought a moment longer and slid from the aperture. What landed softly on the floor was a child of darkish skin, no more than eleven standard Terran years, that carried himself with a fighter's confidence. Cawl was pleased with this one. He could see his gatherers had chosen well.

'Best put that down,' he said, pointing a subsidiary claw at the bone saw. 'You cannot hurt me with it.'

The boy looked up at the towering cyborg, and his shoulders sagged. The bonesaw fell from limp fingers.

Cawl's layered personalities resonated in sympathy.

'You appear as a warrior on the day of his defeat!' he said. 'That will not do.' Cawl moved forward, bending his enormous body in half to bring his hooded,

robotic head down to the boy's level. 'When you should be celebrating victory.'

The boy was fearless, and stared back.

'What victory? I was taken away on the day I was to be made a Space Marine. I was the highest graded in my class, and that means I was the best in the whole scholium. My future was stolen from me.'

Cawl cocked his head on one side. The boy's datafile slid easily into his memcore, inloaded via quantamic entangling directly to his brain. His sub-personae froze a moment.

'Ah, you *were* the highest graded. The highest this year. My, my. Congratulations. You are exceptional, even among those who excel.'

'Congratulations?'

'That is why you are here,' said Cawl. 'Because you are so special.' He withdrew, his many limbs resuming their autonomous dances.

'They will find me. I think I hurt the man badly.'

Cawl shrugged. 'He is replaceable, you are not. You already show your promise. An eleven-year-old boy, giving my gatherers the slip! Remarkable. They will not find you.'

'What is this place?'

'This is my cogitatio, my home, if you will. My innermost sanctum sanctoria.'

'Where is it?'

'Aboard a ship, a most marvellous ship, it is called the *Zar-Quaeistor*.'

'What of the captain?' said the boy. 'He will want me dead for hurting his men, if he didn't mean to kill me already.'

'I wouldn't worry about him,' said Cawl. 'He will not kill you.'

'Why? Does he know you're even here? This place is buried so deep.'

'Oh, he knows I'm here,' said Cawl.

'But this place is hidden!'

'It is hidden, even from my closest advisors,' admitted Cawl. 'I like to work without interruption, you see, and the secrets here are so profound they must be kept from everyone.'

'Then how does the captain know you are here?'

'He knows, because it is my ship. I am the captain! You know, you should return to my gatherers. It really would be for the best.'

'I'll fight them. I am an Ultramarine! They took me,' said the boy defiantly.

'Not quite yet, you are not,' said Cawl. 'I hear a warrior's bravado coming from a boy's lips, but you are still a boy.'

'If you don't let me go, I'll fight you too.' He glanced at the bonesaw on the

floor, already regretting dropping it.

Cawl chuckled. 'My, you do have spirit. What is your name?' He knew already, of course, but he did not wish to frighten the boy with the appearance of uncanny powers.

'Decimus. Decimus Androdinus Felix.'

'Well then Decimus Androdinus Felix, I shall do you a trade. Come with me. I have something to show you. If you don't like it, I will set you free.'

'You promise?'

'Absolutely. It is in my power to do so. I do not like to lie; it only causes problems later.'

The boy hesitated. Cawl held out the most human looking of his hands. Reluctantly, the boy took it.

'Very good,' said Cawl. 'Very good!' He pulled the boy toward one of the cogitatio's many secret doors. The boy slowed, and looked up.

'What is this music?' the boy asked.

'It is by an ancient man of Old Earth, called Motz Artus.'

The boy wrinkled up his nose. 'It is terrible.'

Decimus let the monster lead him onward into the massive ship. They walked for so long he gave up trying to count the hours. The monster took him into a cavernous cargo hold full of humanoid shapes. Only when the monster called forth the light did he see what they truly were.

'This is Space Marine armour!' Decimus gasped.

'Yes,' said the monster.

'It doesn't look like any type I know.' It was not. It was cleaner in design, bigger too, with a helmet reminiscent of the Maximus pattern, and other parts similar to, but quite unlike, the pieces of others.

'You know them all I suppose, clever little boy like you,' said the monster.

Decimus nodded fiercely. Of course he knew them. 'I memorised all the marks and variants long before I was accepted to the battle scholium.'

'And how did you come about this information?' said the monster. It looked down with an array of shining glass eyes, each lit with inner power. Such a face shouldn't have been able to convey any kind of emotion, but it was certainly mocking him gently, like an uncle teases his nephew. 'That kind of data is not really intended for the likes of small boys.'

'I found it. It took a long time,' said Felix.

'You did?' The monster made a grating noise in his chest. 'This one then,' it said.

A hololith beam flickered out from an eye, projecting a Space Marine in mid-air at one quarter size. The projector was a unidirectional type, the simplest there was, but the image it wove was as solid as if a tiny legionary were floating in the gloomy hold.

'Mark III Iron armour, with a Demodian helm. He carries a Calixis IV pattern boltgun. His backpack has a sub-optimal stabilisation jet spread.'

'Oh, so you know how this device works then too?' said the monster mildly. Decimus was not fooled. It was testing him.

'No. I only know which ones are best in combat. This is not the best.' Felix glanced at the armour lining the store in their racks.

'I guess what you are thinking. This armour you see here *is* the best,' said the monster proudly. 'Or, it is better, at any rate.'

'What is it called?'

'It does not yet have a name,' said the monster. 'It is not finished. If I am honest and I try to unflinchingly be so, it will take time to perfect.'

'How long?'

The monster laughed again.

'As long as it takes. Ten years, ten thousand years. That is the true virtue of discovery, you never know how long it will take you. The journey is the joy, as once was said, long, long ago. My brothers in the priesthood forget this. They do not like to *innovate*,' he said, stressing the word. His voice hitched and burred, elongating the last syllable, as if the machinery that allowed him to speak rebelled against the concept. 'They copy. They look for other things to copy. They make mistakes while they are copying. They rarely understand what they replicate, and never make anything new. I do,' he said proudly. 'Anything can be improved upon, and if it cannot, then you should make something better. This was once the prime driver of human technology. My colleagues think we have forgotten much and expend all their efforts in rediscovering it, but actually the most precious thing we lost as a species was not standard templates or ancient techniques, but the spirit of inquiry. Without it, there is no science. They do not see this, and would kill me for saying so. But the Emperor knew. Come. There is more to see.'

They came out of the armour halls into a crossway, whose ceiling was lost in the gloaming of its impossible height, while beneath grilled floor panels engines purred and shone with plasmic light.

'I will offer you a choice at this juncture. We can go on and you can see what I intend for you. You may not like it, but you will know why you are here,' said

the monster. 'Or you can go back, and depart. There is still time for you to return. I am afraid you have been here a while already, but I am sure the Legion will still have you.'

Decimus narrowed his eyes. He was scared, really scared in a way that he thought impossible. That was not what a Space Marine would feel. They knew no fear, and so he chose not to.

'Which choice will serve the Emperor best?' asked Decimus.

The monster walked around him, mechanical claws ticking on the grating giant feet stamping its torso bent and moved so sinuously it appeared to be swimming through the air, independent of its motive units. 'That depends,' the monster said thoughtfully. 'You have your known way of service - quantifiable, arduous, glorious. I offer you the unknown - dangerous, uncertain, but perhaps superior.'

'Then I choose the superior way.'

The monster nodded approvingly, and drew itself up to its full height again.

'There was an old language a little like Gothic, that was spoken in Ultramar especially. Do you know what your name means in this tongue of Old Earth?' asked the monster.

'Felix. It means lucky,' said Decimus.

'Yes, it does,' said the monster. It placed one of its many metal hands upon Decimus' back and guided him on.

Wherever they went, the machines responded to the presence of their master. Lumens activated. Doors opened. Servitors and cogitators burred greetings and service reports. Still radio waves were briefly animated with the cant of multiple devices as silent systems burst to life, then fell quiet again once the monster had passed.

The monster led Decimus through an airlock. On the far side of the second door there was a deep, killing cold, and a subaquatic green light. There were children like him, thousands of them, in individual cryofreeze jars, their small lifeless bodies hanging buoyantly in seas of supercooled methalon. Chill vapours poured from the top of the units, tumbling down the sides in ceaseless falls to pool on the floor and make of it a sea of mists.

'I am catcher of children,' said the monster. 'Does that scare you?' He reared up menacingly, spreading his abundance of mechanical limbs.

'No,' said Decimus, and willed it to be true.

'Good.' The monster pivoted, sweeping round the arms on his left to show an empty suspension flask.

'That is for me?' said Decimus. Despite his best efforts, his voice shook from

fear and the cold.

'It can be,' said the monster. 'It is intended to be, if you want it. None of these other boys were offered a choice. They sleep, unknowing why they were taken, or what will happen to them. You, I shall tell, because you are here.' The monster paused expectantly. 'It is an interesting experiment in psychology.'

'What will happen to me?' said Decimus. He was on the verge of running. 'How can this be in service of the Emperor? I was to be a Space Marine!'

The monster let go of Decimus' hand and bent double, its armoured back jutting unnaturally high on its flexible spine. The metal fingers of its uppermost arms steepled in front of its face and tapped together. 'You see, you see! You will be a Space Marine of a type yet undreamed of outside here.' With another hand, the monster tapped its metal cranium. 'That is what I am creating here, at the order of Roboute Guilliman himself!'

'The primarch?' said Decimus in awe.

The monster nodded. 'You will be better, and stronger, and more powerful than any Space Marine that has come before. You will exceed them in every way. You will save the galaxy, my boy, you and your brothers who sleep now around you.'

'How do I know you won't dismember me like the body in your laboratory?'

'You do not, but I won't. That one failed. There were some complications. I assure you they have been addressed. You have great things ahead of you.'

'Will I be an Ultramarine?' said Decimus.

'You already said that you are, so I would say perhaps. Do not see this flask as a prison. See it as a door.'

Decimus looked at the flask doubtfully. It did not look like a door. 'What is through this door?'

'Oh, my boy!' said the monster. It plunged mechadendrites into interface wheels set into the pod. Datarods rotated in the locks. Gas spouted from vents, and the pod glass rose. Freezing air billowed from its interior. The monster's metal face made an expression that looked nothing like a smile, but could not have been anything but. 'The future. The future is on the other side of this door of sleep,' it said. 'Will you pass through it? Will you serve the Emperor in a way no other boy like you ever has? You are special, Decimus Androdinus Felix. You are not doomed.' The monster spoke gently. 'You are blessed!'

Felix looked at the other children, lost between life and death in their tubes. There were racks and racks of them. Thousands.

He thought of the advanced armour in the cargo bays, awaiting its wearers.

There was a data panel on the instruments being operated by Cawl. He read his

name upon it. There were words beneath that read, 'Undergoing integrity check.'
And there were dates.

The monster was right. Decimus was a clever boy.

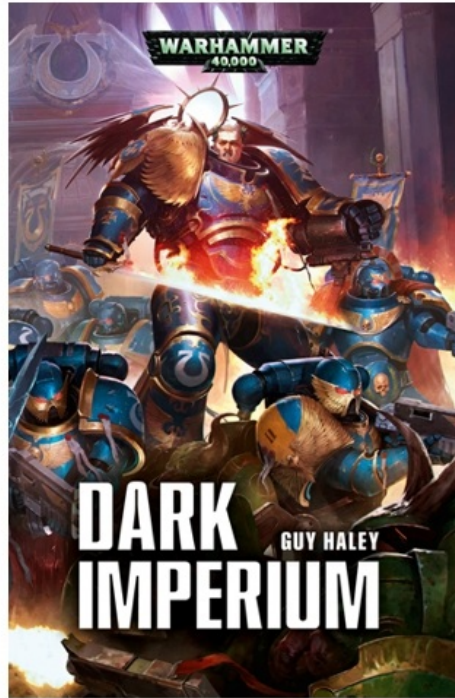
He had been in that pod before.

In the end, there didn't seem to be much choice. If he had come out once, he would come out again. If the monster were lying, he would escape.

'For the Emperor, I accept the future,' said Decimus, and entered the pod.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Pharos*, the Primarchs novel *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia* and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dante*, *Baneblade*, *Shadowsword*, *Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.



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