

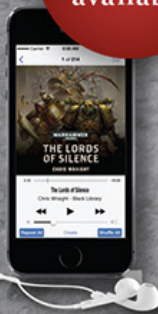


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A Black Library Publication

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THE FIRST PRIMARIS

By Aaron Dembski-Bowden

Deacon Vectragos had brought Bellona with him aboard the *Hex*. Braziers burned in a chamber of black iron, held in outstretched hands of maidens and warriors forged from the same dark metal as the chamber itself. Every iron statue was fashioned blind, either eyeless or blindfolded, in keeping with some Bellonan custom I couldn't guess. Grey smoke curled from the braziers, breathed into scrubber-grilles high upon the arched walls. Humming ventilator engines set a quiet, mismatched rumble with the distant grind of the *Hex's* plasma drives.

Vectragos' personal workshop was vast enough that it should have been spacious. The reality was that he dwelled within a junkyard, cramped by the scattered detritus of half-finished projects. When I'd first arrived, I'd moved along the wide passages between crates marked with serial numbers and stamped with the Imperial aquila; between dismantled engine blocks; between unmade power convertors. If there was order here, I was as blind to it as the statues. I'd followed the spindly, towering figure of Vectragos as he ghosted a path through the chaos.

'Sit,' he'd commanded me, gesturing not to a medicae throne, but to a plain engineer's workbench, covered in schematics and component parts.

I sat, after clearing a space to do so.

The deacon's duty was to pull the truth from my skull, and he did so with relish. His drills bored down into bone, unlocking internal seals beneath the skin of my face, then he inserted sterilised and thrice-blessed forceps into my eye socket. It took no small amount of strength. I felt the bones of my face creaking. My new bionic lacked the finesse of my previous,

artisan-crafted terminus-eye, but it was far more durable.

I grunted something wordless as my cheekbone creaked with the pressure. Vectragos ignored me.

After three clicks, my left eye came free with a crunch.

'Ah,' he said, breathy with satisfaction.

With the vision that remained, I saw the freed orb clutched in the forceps, trailing a cluster of slender cords wrapped in thin metal wire. Together, this cable-trail mimicked the function of natural optic nerves.

The forceps, clasped in Vectragos' eight-fingered claw, jerked back. The cords came uncoupled with a snap. The red-stained half of my vision immediately went black, and I grunted again.

'Is there pain?' he asked, his tone a bland impression of concern.

'Not exactly.'

Vectragos gave a scrappage-abort blurt from the vocaliser sutured at his throat. 'Vague response. Imprecise data.'

'It's difficult to tell. It's a pressure, then an absence. Not painful, just cold.'

'Unrelated data,' he replied.

You asked, I thought.

He treated my eye with the delicacy of a jewel, first spraying it with a mist of sacred incense, then connecting its cable feeds to the clanking machine at his side. I watched, one-eyed, as everything I'd ever seen streamed into the cogitator's data-spools in a fall of fractured binary.

'I have studied Vadhán's ascension post-surgery,' he said.

I nodded.

'Extensively,' he added.

'I see,' I replied. Most of his too-long face was taken up by the seven mismatched eye-lences that gleamed in the depths of his hood, but there was an air of excitement about him. A human excitement, no less. Excitement at promise of revelation. This twelve-foot tall archpriest, with a body of cyborged components and mechadendrite limbs, was like a child anticipating a name-day gift.

'This lore...' he started to say, then choked up with emotion. Or whatever passed for emotion in his clockwork heart.

'My master hopes it will be useful.'

The deacon watched the spillage of data, the vocaliser in his throat

clicking and ticking. I couldn't tell if the sounds were approval, disapproval, or whether he was simply cataloguing what I'd seen. He'd already reviewed the data before the surgery and taken it in several transferal spurts so far, but here - at last - was the promised final exloading of information.

'Many Spears will not be tempted by the Calgarian Rites,' he said, 'and the risks preclude mass-transition. With all factors balanced, the enhancement in terms of efficiency is ultimately negligible. But the choice, even with the dangers, will galvanise morale.'

'Good. As it should be. My master was lucky to have survived.'

He looked down at me then, abandoning all interest in the priceless data. Lowering his hood, he revealed a surprisingly human head, riven with circuitry and a seven-eyed face, each eye a gleaming emerald lens set in a polished brass focusing array. He also revealed a smile: a smirk of at least forty metal teeth in an unnaturally wide jaw. The arched column of his spine forced him to lean forward at all times, adding a predatory leer to his commanding posture. Several of his multi-tooled limbs uncurled from beneath his robes and clicked in time with something clattering within his internal mechanics.

'Are you laughing at me, deacon?'

'Oh, yes.' Three of his delicate limb-tips caressed the metal sections of my face. 'You mentioned luck. Such blasphemy! Luck is but a balm for the deluded. You bring your blasphemous talk of fortune here, to this sacred temple of Martian ingenuity?'

'It's an expression. And a slip of the tongue.'

He tittered, and one of his hands toyed with the compression settings on the augmetic tools jutting from a separate bionic wrist. Vectragos withdrew his touches from my face a moment later.

'Forgive me. I merely tease.' He reflected on this confession as a secondary limb reached up to scratch the back of his head. 'It passes the time.'

Up close, he smelled of gun smoke and overworked engines, of khordyte, fyceline, promethium: the chemical scents of warfare.

It was, in its own way, as holy as Kartash's pious reek had been.

'Here.' He disconnected my bionic eye from the cogitator and, with alarming speed, he jabbed it back into the socket. I let out a sharp breath

as it clicked home, abrupt as a stab.

'Throne of the God-Emperor,' I hissed. I had to blink several times to get my eyes back in alignment.

Vectragos paid no heed to my discomfort. He leaned in closer, examining the bionic eye in its augmented socket.

'You are a costly creature, aren't you, Anuradha?

'All helots are,' I said, with a flush of pride.

'*Indeed.*' He made the word last almost three seconds. 'But the eye Owyn grafted into your skull is a cheap trinket. If circumstances arise, I will replace it with something closer to your original specifications.'

'That would be—'

'Don't move,' he replied, 'don't talk.'

A flash of scorching light flared from one of his fingertip multi-tools. Heat briefly stabbed at my temple.

'Ah, shi—'

'There was a fluid bubble at the cusp of the second articulated axis.' Vectragos withdrew again. 'A droplet of sacred unguent from my cleansing spray.'

'Th—'

'You may leave, little thrall. This has been an educational exchange.'

I cleared my throat. 'I'm a helot, not just a thrall.'

'Such pride in the minutiae!'

'Do I refer to you as mere 'priest', when you're a deacon?'

Vectragos raised his hood and curled several of his arms back inside his robes. 'I will be sure to bear your exalted station in mind during future exchanges, Anuradha.'

Truly, he could be an irritating soul. 'I have something I wished to discuss, deacon, if you'll allow it.'

He steepled the fingers of four hands together. Again, he gave me that forty-teeth smile; I could see it in the shadows of his hood.

'*Indeed.*'

I slipped from the workbench and gestured to the cogitator now containing a significant portion of my memory, siphoned over the course of several sessions.

'With this lore... Could you perform the Calgarian Rite, on Serivahn?'

Vectragos hesitated. Every one of his eye-lenses dilated with mechanical

focus, the irises narrowing, the lenses themselves glowing from within. It was like being fixed by seven fine-beam torches.

'In... deed?' he said quietly. This time it was a question, not a judgement weighted by sarcasm. Vectragos gazed at me with an unreadable emotion playing over his machine-changed features. Only from the reluctance in his posture and the softness in his tone did I realise he was leering down at me with something resembling sympathy.

'You have surprised me with this question, Anuradha of the Mentors.'

Of the Mentors no longer, I thought, but said no such thing.

'Tell me, thrall - *helot* – do you have some special regard for Captain Serivahn of the Vargantes?'

'I respect him, deacon. Is it possible? Can you do it?' Even as I asked question, I wondered if Serivahn had already come here and asked it himself.

'First let me riposte with a question of my own,' said the tech-priest. 'Why do you ask this? Do you think his life is one of torment? Or of shame? Do you believe he can't look upon his pure-formed brethren without plunging into an un-warrior-like bitterness?'

'No,' I answered at once. 'Throne, no. No shame at all. It pains me that he suffers, yes. I know his worth, but he could become the warrior he was meant to be.'

Vectragos nodded, still speaking in that softened tone. '*Indeed*. Let me show you something.'

He turned from me, moving on his strange mechanical tendrils along one of the avenues through the messy workshop. We came to another table, this one for the multi-layered projection of hololithic imagery. Vectragos tapped in a runic keycode and ignited the shimmering blue surface.

'Serivahn of the Vargantes,' he said. The projection table's machine-spirit responded with a cranking of internal gears, and several dozen overlapping images of Serivahn's bio-medicae record flashed into being. Some were scans, others were picts, several were observed notations and image-feeds of the captain in motion or bound into restraint thrones.

As Vectragos began sorting through the images, a servo-skull drifted over from elsewhere in the workshop, like a pet wanting its master's attention. The deacon idly waved it away.

'Here, Anuradha,' he said, bringing one of Serivahn's internal scans to the

forefront. He laid it alongside a pict of the captain's bare torso. Both images showed a horrendous mangling of muscle. Interface ports showed along his chest, spine and shoulders, dark metal sockets that would never accept power armour input feeds.

I winced at the extensive malformations I'd only seen hinted at before. Vectragos caught the expression, and wagged a finger in my direction.

'With your master, the Calgarian Rites offered an opportunity to repair and enhance what was already present in his physiology. With Serivahn, what is wrong cannot be mended, and what is wrong cannot be enhanced. This is not damage to be repaired. They are not wounds to be healed. And this is not a perfect template to be improved upon. Do you follow?'

I looked at the scans. In that dark chamber, they were bright enough to make my eyes water. Well, one of them. The human eye I still had.

'No,' I admitted reluctantly.

Vectragos seemed to anticipate that, for he showed no irritation. 'Imagine a child is born with a degree of cognitive deficiency, due to a flaw in the gestation process. What you have, at birth, is not a template that you can graft improvements upon. The child was merely born that way. It is flawed in comparison to the expected template, aye, but it is a difference to be managed. It is not a *wrong* to be *righted*.'

'But you could try.'

'Try what? And how?' The deacon steeped twenty of his fingers again in that double-pyramid gesture. 'You can heavily cyborg such a flawed child. You can drive cognitive enhancers into its skull. But you are still missing the point, Anuradha. Not only would that technology almost certainly be rejected by the flawed template you are working with, it would also leave you with next to nothing of the initial child. If you desired a child to match the expected genetic template, the only route would be to breed another to replace it. Serivahn is like that. I cannot repair him, because he is not broken or wounded. He is flawed from the expected template, aye. Deeply flawed. Too flawed for the Calgarian Rites to fix, for they are based on amendments to the pure template. He is, in effect, a new template. Lesser, aye, perhaps. But not broken.'

He paused for a moment, overlapping Vadhán's internal scans with Serivahn's own. The differences between the two warriors' forms was beyond brutal.

'Here, Anuradha of the Mentors. Do you see now?'

'I think so.' My heart sank. I'd been so certain this would help, somehow.

'I have offered him almost complete body mechanisation many times in the past. He refuses it. He would not, in his own words, become a Bellonan machine with a man's mind. He wishes to remain a Spear, a Space Marine, even with his flaws. You patronise him,' Vectragos observed, not unkindly. 'Serivahn of the Vargantes would not approve of that.'

'I do no such thing,' I said, narrowing my eyes.

'*Indeed?* Not maliciously. Not intentionally. But yes, definitely. I have done the same myself in the past, Anuradha.'

Triggered by some unknown stimulus, a hololithic image beamed out from one of Vectragos' eye-lenses. It overlaid the chamber, painting silhouettes of blue light over the scene. I watched the ghost performing from the deacon's memory.

It was Serivahn, standing near where I stood now. He was robed in his uniform, with his ruined arm curled close to his chest and leaning against the table to take the strain from his twisted legs. His voice came forth not from the spectre of the man himself, but an audio-relayer in Vectragos' throat.

'You'd turn me into a construct, aye? A thing of iron and oil instead of bone and blood.' The curving air-serpent tattoos inked around his temples and cheekbones danced in the light of the brazier fires. 'I have nothing to prove, Vectragos. I have the *Hex*. I earned her, and now I do my duty aboard her.'

'You misunderstand my offer,' came the deacon's memory-voice. 'Cybernetics are guaranteed to fail. This is so. But the transplantation of your entire mind into a war-automata may breed results.'

Serivahn's tone dipped into a gravely amused drawl. 'Results I don't want.'

'You would be able to fight alongside your brothers.'

Pain flashed over his crooked features, hidden but not hidden fast enough. Serivahn snorted as he limped around the chamber, careful not to touch any of the ongoing works. He came to a halt in front of a magmic cradle, plunging in a stoking rod to stir the forge's embers.

'As a machine? As an embarrassing simulacra of a Dreadnought? You'd have me embrace death just to feign life?'

'I would have you fight as a warrior,' Vectragos pressed. I was surprised at the care in his voice. The concern. Bellona and Nemeton were twinned in the night sky, and their populations had waged war together, back to back, for centuries. 'My skitarii soldiers are no less warriors for their augmentations. Not are my battle-automata.'

Serivahn pointedly focused on stoking the flames, avoiding eye contact. 'I am a Spear,' he said. 'The answer is no.'

'Very well.'

Serivahn's mismatched jaw clicked as he forced a half-smile. 'Ask me again if I'm ever sentenced to entombment in a Dreadnought's coffin, though?'

'As you wi—'

The memory vanished. My eyes stung in the soothing darkness.

'As you have witnessed,' said Vectragos, 'the First Primaris is content, after a fashion.'

'Very well. I understand.' I offered the priest a bow. 'Thank you for your time, Deacon Vectragos.'

He waved my gratitude aside. 'The question does you credit Anuradha of the Mentors.' He hesitated, before his cheeks - practically the only visible human component of his features - crinkled in what was probably a smile.

'Deacon? Something amuses you?'

'Have you chosen a tribe? Your face remains bare of ink, and - as I am sure you have been informed - it lends you a childish cast.'

'Not yet,' I said. 'I was thinking of appealing to the Arakanii for a place among them.'

'*Indeed*. A cannibalistic thrall? Imagine that! And with a little luck it might irritate Morcant. Irritating the battleguard is always a worthy endeavour.'

I pressed my palm to my heart, feigning offence, and looked at the foundry around us both.

'Talk of fortune, here in this sacred temple of Martian ingenuity?'

Vectragos chuckled. It sounded like a Thryxian carnosaur clearing its throat.

'I never actually made a pilgrimage to Mars,' the deacon observed. 'Perhaps one day? If Mars still exists by the time the Great Rift heals, that is. But what of my question? I desire a sincere answer, if you please. We

Bellonans place little value on the notion of tribes, but we respect its importance to our barbaric cousins from Nemeton. The Spears especially get very emotional about the whole thing.'

My eyes were still blinking a little out of alignment. I held them closed for a few seconds, hoping it would harmonise them when I opened them once more.

It didn't.

'Serivahn offered to induct me into the Vargantes,' I admitted. I started to excuse myself, citing that I had best return to my duties readying Vadhán for the upcoming battle, but Vectragos' eye-lenses gleamed with inner light again.

'That also surprises me,' he said, tittering with the sound of clanking machinery in his chest and throat. 'Am I given to understand the good captain has forgiven you for detonating a vortex grenade on his precious warship?'

I took a breath. 'You're as bad as Lord Brêac.'

'I aspire to be,' said the spindly deacon. 'Brêac of the Vargantes is an inspiration in that regard. Now go about your business, little helot. And inform Vadhán that he is to report to me for adjustments to his armour before shipboard dawn.'

I said that I would. 'However, deacon, he doesn't like that name.'

Vectragos was already rooting through a pile of detritus, looking for the Emperor alone knew what. He spoke without interrupting his rummaging hunt, without even looking back over at me.

'*Indeed*. Then please also inform him that his preferences have no bearing on the reality of the situation, and that he will have to get used to it. Off you go.'

I bowed again, which he ignored, and off I went.

PREFACE

This isn't the book I planned to write. It's probably not the book you're expecting to read, either.

If you don't usually care for an author's awkward ramblings, feel free to skip ahead to the story. I won't hold it against you. (Hey, I'll probably never even know!) But if you're interested in the context that helped this novel come into existence, then stay awhile and I'll get you up to speed.

I went into the synopsis phase of *Spear of the Emperor* with the intention of writing a traditional look at a Space Marine Chapter, with a Space Marine protagonist typical of his Chapter's culture.

I like to read those kinds of novels, with those kinds of protagonists, and I enjoy writing them from time to time, too. It's a tradition for a good reason: those character tropes make a good foundation for exploring the various complexities within Space Marine existence. In the same vein, I also intended to explore an essentially unknown corner of the Warhammer 40,000 setting, rather than focus on the big-name, big-selling Chapters that everyone's already familiar with.

The Emperor's Spears were nothing but a striking, slightly unusual colour scheme, so they were safe ground no matter which direction I took them in.

On a more personal note, I was also coming off a run of novels focusing on extremely well-known characters and vastly important historical events (*The Talon of Horus*; *The Master of Mankind*; *Black Legion*...) so I wanted something more personal and grounded. Something on a much smaller scale than any of those other novels, each of which was a deep look into the guts of the setting through the eyes of very well-informed characters.

So far, so good.

Several weeks into the first draft, Alan Bligh, one of my closest friends, died after a short confrontation with cancer. For a while I could barely write anything at all, for reasons that will be obvious to anyone who has ever lost a close friend or loved one. When I managed to start getting words onto a screen again.

I was disillusioned with what I'd planned. I started straying far and wide from my synopsis, feeling the pull of a new direction.

Through several rewrites, the narrator went from a generic Spear officer in the middle of his culture to a human thrall, utterly on the outside of it. Finally, it clicked. Finally, I had the voice that felt right for the new story being told.

Crucially, it also finally matched more with the tone of Imperium Nihilus, which Alan himself once described as *'Picking up the pieces of the Imperium after all the bombs have gone off.'*

Using human supporting characters to highlight the differences between humanity and the indoctrinated, transhuman inhumanity of Space Marines is nothing new; I've even done it myself several times and I really enjoy both reading and writing about the contrasts it brings. With *Spear of the Emperor*, I went all-in with it. Anuradha went from a supporting character to the narrator: the ultimate outsider-looking-in. And with that shift, the story turned a little darker again. Everything became just that little bit more vulnerable.

Explaining the Spears in detail was the last thing on my mind. I didn't want to quantify them, I wanted to show how it might look and feel to see a transhuman existence through a human lens. Focusing on the impossible weariness forced on them by the burdens that they alone can carry. Their refusal to back down, and their curious mix of civilisation and barbarism. They don't fight for glory but for survival. They stand against the unending tide of night because someone has to do it; because they're the last ones left who can still fight. Their brother-Chapters in the Adeptus Vaelarii are either dead or punishingly diminished. The duty and burden of defiance is theirs until the last Spear falls.

The largest appeal was the idea of a character who wasn't always sure what they were looking at when they were confronted with the mysteries and horrors of a story. Someone who wasn't immune to fear or distant from human emotion.

What is it like to live among Space Marines? What does it feel like to serve them, and live on the edge of a culture you will never be truly part of? How would serving such masters change you and your perceptions? What do their customs and rituals look like from the outside? How does it feel, to see them move and fight and so utterly annihilate their enemies with inhuman brutality? And what is required of you, to live up to their expectations?

The flip side of that coin is the heretical half of the equation. What would it mean, to meet the Adeptus Astartes' dark reflections, the Traitor Space Marines? What would it be like, when you're not clad in ceramite and holding a bolter - you're just a man or a woman standing in front of a monstrous creature that has lived in the warp/a mythological underworld for uncounted years?

Anuradha offered a great chance at seeing all of this from an entirely human perspective, and a less formal voice for the text. She hasn't been through hypno-indoctrination like a loyalist Space Marine; she isn't an angelic weapon that struggles to understand the people of the empire she was born to defend. Similarly, she isn't motivated by bitterness and hatred, burdened by the magnified emotional array of Traitor Space Marines, either.

Anuradha is at the mercy of her masters, drawn into the wars they make her fight. Like all slaves (or indentured servants, if you will...) she has very little agency over the direction of her life, but she can choose how she reacts to the twists and turns of circumstance. Narratively, that was a challenge, but one that defined the tone of the story. She has agency, but it's personal and grounded. She doesn't decide the fate of wars. She chronicles them.

She's just a human - albeit valuable to her masters and highly trained - in a difficult situation. The story isn't about her, not really, as you'll see. But she's perfectly placed to tell it.

Like many high-status Chapter-thralls, Anuradha is extremely knowledgeable in several specific areas. Unlike most of my previous protagonists, she's also not equipped with a Space Marine's angelic, psycho-indoctrinated detachment to process it. She's just a human like you, me, and everyone else.

For those story elements, I ended up being fortunate enough to get a huge

range of first-hand accounts from soldiers, firefighters, police officers, doctors... And more than once I thought back to conversations I'd had years ago, when I was lucky enough to talk to a man who had served in WWII as a deck gunner on HMS *Belfast*; and to another who had been in a Japanese POW camp and who'd undergone privation and torture. I wanted to jump as deeply as I could into the psychology and headspaces of people who'd done these things.

On several occasions I kept backing out of writing the book considering redoing it in a more traditional way; playing it more to type with a Space Marine protagonist doing Space Marine things, totally informed about the setting and his surroundings.

In the end it was my friend, the author John French, who stopped me redrafting it all from scratch yet again:

'Are you trying to be popular or are you trying to realise a vision? To quote the man you dedicated it to, "You need to have the courage of your convictions and not be infirm of purpose".'

All of this is a long-winded and self-indulgent way of saying that I loved and hated writing this book. It wasn't harder than any of the others, but it certainly felt different. I can't even imagine what you'll think of it.

I don't use Alan's death as a banner or an excuse for any changes I made. If you like the novel, that's great, and if you don't, that's on me - not the circumstances surrounding the book. Whatever the truth, I hope you enjoy this look at the benighted half of mankind's empire.

Welcome to Elara's Veil, domain of the Emperor's Spears.

Skovakarah unl zarûn.

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

May 2018

AFTERWORD

Spear of the Emperor already has a preface, so if you're one of those fine people that can't stand self-indulgent authorial ramblings then by the gods, this is my official apology. Now you have double the amount. Truly, you are cursed.

To reward you (or perhaps punish you) for grabbing the Limited Edition, this Afterword offers some insight into what this book almost was, as well as what went into making it what it eventually turned out to be.

What I really wanted from Step One was to show how Chapters aren't always bound to their progenitors. The Ultramarines make up about sixty per cent, give or take, of all Chapters original gene-seed. There's no way sixty per cent of Chapters are clones of the Ultramarines' culture and themes, though. It's a popular trope to have a Successor Chapter be a mirror image of its parent Chapter (my Angels Numinous are essentially just Blood Angels) but it's also inaccurate if you apply it *en masse*. The Black Templars aren't just Imperial Fists, after all. One might argue they're the opposite.

Then I spent ages dancing around various chapters before getting going. I wanted a little-known Chapter that I could flesh out without breaking anyone's armies or previous interpretations but that was easy enough. There are loads of Chapters that get zero airtime elsewhere. I had a long list....

...which immediately became a problem. Just like when I have a million options in an RPG's character creation, I started getting indecisive. It's called 'analysis paralysis'.

The Imperial Castellans? Cool, weird colour scheme. Cool name, if a bit long. *The White Panthers?* Famous political movement name. Plus, just choosing another animal-based Chapter felt obvious; I had the Celestial Lions for that, and barbarian Chapters already invite overlap with the Space Wolves. What about the *Absolvers?* Naw, I was saving them for my work on *Wrath & Glory*, the new edition of the Warhammer 40,000 RPG.

The *Subjugators?* Love those guys, but they had a little too much lore already in the bag.

Death Knights? Destroyers? Awesome colour schemes, but I've always been tempted to paint them ('One day, honest, one day...'), and I try not to

mix What I Write and What I Play.

Then we had the *Emperor's Spears*. I not-so-subtly barraged my friends and family with Chapter colour schemes, and the Spears came out on top by a long way. I had a good feeling about them; they looked like they could pass for their parent Chapter, but had their own spin. Perfect for my nefarious plans.

One of my favourite chunks of 40K lore is the Badab War. I know, I know, everyone loves the Horus Heresy, and it's awesome in that over-the-top, ultra-mythical way. On the other hand, the Badab War is a look at the dangers inherent in the volatile clash of Adeptus Astartes autonomy, logistics and politicking from the Adeptus Terra, the overextension of the weakening Imperium, and the infiltrations of Chaos. The Badab War isn't about the whole galaxy burning, it's about the rippling after-effects of several Space Marine Chapters rebelling against an Imperium that either fails them, or doesn't meet their standards. It doesn't make them *right* (its Warhammer 40,000; no one is *right*), but it's perfectly credible in the context of the setting.

I love that. I love the logistics of several Chapters assigned to a region of space, dealing with the various threats, internal and external, that plague such a demanding duty. And so the Adeptus Vaelarii were born: the Sentinels of the Veil. Three Chapters that swore an oath to defend a vast region of space, slowly losing ground through a mix of attrition, misfortune and treachery.

Countless Chapters across the Imperium (especially Imperium Nihilus) are likely struggling in similar straits, and the Spears have it especially bad. Their brother-Chapters are all but gone, the Star Scorpions are dead, the Celestial Lions ravaged by the Inquisition.

I didn't want to make the Spears too heavily linked to a single historical touchstone. I wanted them to have a broader theme that was based on a mood or an atmosphere as much as pointing at a real-world nation's history and saying 'Oh they're X.' To that end, the touchstones of the Spears are a wedge of the Irish and Scottish Celts, a splash of Welsh mythology, a touch of British pre-Saxon history, and European Iron Age Gallia. All of that is ostensibly 'Celtic', but the Celts weren't one unified people: it's a broad term covering numerous tribes, clans, kingdoms and cultures, spread over the entirety of Europe for hundreds of years. You see

something similar in the clans of Nemeton; they come from entirely different parts of the world, but they share core beliefs, a technology level, and so on.

The ultimate atmosphere I was going for was, as you can probably tell, that period of Dark Ages Britain where everything backslid after the withdrawal of the Roman legions. Suddenly, not knowing how to make things like aqueducts, stone bridges, straight roads, and fending off the Saxon invaders, all became immediate concerns. Historians are up and down on term 'Dark Ages' (and I'm obviously being a little pithy in this description) but it's easy to imagine the withdrawal of a shining Rome, that murderous but bright beacon of civilization, and its farthest-flung occupied island sliding backwards in terms of architecture, education and organized society.

That was the vibe for Nemeton. That sense of willfully abandoning another culture in exchange for freedom and the relative purity – the *vitality* – of barbarism.

It rains on Nemeton, too. Anyone who's been to the British Isles knows just how much it rains...

And I know what you're going to say.

'But they're blue, and their symbol is a trident... Why didn't you base them on Atlantis?'

It seemed, um, a little too on the nose. You know?

Anyway, before I let you go, there's one more thing we need to get clear between us.

A trident *is* a spear.

A trident is a kind of spear the way a scimitar is a kind of sword. It's a three-pronged spear, if you want to get technical. (Really! Go check Wikipedia! It's in the dictionary, too!)

So stop @-ing me on social media to say, 'But that's a trident.'

I beg you.

I beg you all, for the sake of my phone notifications.

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

June 2018

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Master of Mankind*, *Betrayer* and *The First Heretic*, as well as the novella *Aurelian* and the audio drama *Butcher's Nails*, for the same series. He has also written the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Spear of the Emperor*, the popular Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Armageddon*, the novels *The Talon of Horus* and *Black Legion*, the Grey Knights novel *The Emperor's Gift* and numerous short stories. He lives and works in Northern Ireland.

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 sub-systems 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.

Click here to buy *Dark Imperium*.

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Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

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