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THE
**TWISTED
RUNES**

A SILVER SKULLS SHORT STORY BY
MATT SMITH

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THE TWISTED RUNES

By Matt Smith

Prognosticator Beynan Rhondus stood in the Well of Judgement. The stone pit was thirty feet deep, ten in diameter, and made up the centre of the Chamber of Fate, the most hallowed meeting hall of the Prognosticatum of the Silver Skulls. Surrounding the upper rim of the well were thirteen thrones set into individual alcoves. Twelve belonged to the most senior prognosticators. The last was reserved for the Chapter Master.

‘Speak, Prognosticator Rhondus. Tell us, what do the runes show you?’ a voice spoke above him.

Eight prognosticators sat in judgement on this day, but from the foot of the well, Beynan could not make out their faces. The Chamber was dark, lit only by the dying embers of torches. Their light served only to cast deeper shadows upon the thrones. All Beynan could truly see was the giant metallic skull leering down on him from the wall of the well. In this setting, the symbol of the Chapter was both intimidating and inspiring.

‘They show me death. *Our* deaths and those of every Silver Skull.’

The room fell silent but Beynan’s skin prickled as the air filled with psychic energy. He could only wonder at the words spoken in telepathic communion above him. He longed for the day he would be a part of it.

‘Where and how will this come to pass?’ another voice called down to him.

‘It is unclear. The runes are scattered, confused. For some time, I could not discern their meaning, but this night past I had a dream. A vision of the past and the future.’

‘Is this the first time you have foreseen the Chapter’s demise?’ asked another.

‘Yes. It was so vivid. Prognosticator Aharan was there. He spoke to me.’

‘Aharan?’ It was the first voice again, but softer now, and Beynan could see a

blue-robed figure leaning forward from his seat. He recognised him as Chief Prognosticator Vashiro. The master of the Prognosticatum looked down at him intently. ‘Tell me of this dream, young brother.’

‘It was a vision of destruction and woe. I saw an item of great power and meaning. It was hidden, in a place remote and lethal, concealed from a sky ruled by warring dragons. It was taken by a thief in the night, hooded and cowed. Four sentinels barred the gate – an army of slaves, while harbingers waited in the shadows, wreathed in fire. They howled in despair. I saw a great beast to be slain, and a sorcerer consumed by pride. Aharan showed me a path that must be walked, for the sake of us all.’

‘Was there anything else?’ a new voice asked.

‘No.’

‘You bear Prognosticator Aharan’s runes, and your portents have seen us true this far. It is clear the Emperor speaks through you. Prognosticator Rhondus, you will have the warriors you require,’ said Vashiro. ‘Where will you take them?’

‘Skythis.’

Skythis was the only habitable world in the Aris Drakartis system, but Beynan knew this was a stretched truth. It was a death world characterised by sweltering jungles and vicious native wildlife. The Thunderhawk *Seer’s Steed* descended towards a remote island in the northern seas. Launched from their strike cruiser, *Spear of Destiny*, it contained eighteen warriors. Beynan sat at their head and looked down the row at the squads under his command. The first was Amethyst Squad. It contained ten Tactical Marines from the Sixth Company, led by Sergeant Braxus – a capable, if unspectacular, leader. The second Beynan had requested specifically. Jade Squad consisted of five veterans from the First Company under Sergeant Tor’ra, a staunch traditionalist. Bastev Tor’ra was an old friend of Beynan’s former mentor, Prognosticator Aharan. Though Beynan had only met him a couple of times, he had still recognised the sergeant’s face when it appeared in his visions. He was there for just fleeting moments on the periphery of greater events, but every time, his chainsword swung and cut down an unseen enemy. Tor’ra’s skill and brutality were both famous within the Chapter.

As they made their final approach, Beynan replayed his vision again, examining it for any meaning he may have missed.

‘It was hidden, in a place remote and lethal, concealed from a sky ruled by warring dragons.’

The Aris Drakartis system was named for the constellation visible from any of its worlds. It appeared to depict a pair of battling dragons. Skythis was the planet and this island was the most remote landmass. When he reached the end of the vision in his head, he felt a weight sink upon him, for he had lied to the Prognosticatum. There was one last thing he had seen.

‘A hero, exalted for generations.’

He had not told them this for he could not know if they would understand. If they thought he wanted to venture to Skythis in search of his own glory, they may have sent another in his place. He couldn't allow that. In another's hands, the Chapter was doomed. He did not do this for pride. He did this for the survival of the Silver Skulls, and because it was the infallible will of the Emperor. Beynan told himself this, over and over again.

Seer's Steed was forced to set down in the rocky shallows surrounding the island, much to its pilot's disdain. Brother-Techmarine Rikolux muttered litanies of apology to the machine's spirit throughout the landing and visibly tensed as the gunship set down, as if he expected the ground to give way below it at any moment. After a few seconds of baited breath, the access hatches opened and the Silver Skulls disembarked.

The group stepped out into the humid air. They made their way down the access ramp and splashed through the shallow water. When they reached the shore, the prognosticator called them to gather around him in a circle.

‘Let us pray that we shall succeed here in carrying out the Emperor's will, and in doing so honour the Silver Skulls. *Primus Inter Pares.*’ First Among Equals. It had been the Silver Skulls' mantra since their birth in the Second Founding.

The Silver Skulls echoed their leader, then fell into their own ministrations. Some remained standing, others knelt. Some made the sign of the aquila, while others pressed their fists against their hearts in a warrior's salute. They murmured prayers and litanies in different tongues and dialects from across the Chapter's recruitment worlds. Beynan lowered to his knees. He removed a simple leather pouch from a cord tied around his waist. He weighed it in his hand for a moment, then closed his eyes and upended it. The rune stones held within fell and made tiny craters in the sand.

Aharan's runes were made from grey slate carved from the frozen cliffs of Varsavia. Once sharp edged and rough, centuries of use had worn them smooth. Symbols had been carved into them with a knife and a delicacy unexpected of a warrior's hands. Aharan had been slain eight months prior fighting orks on Godwin's Landing. After being separated, Beynan had found his injured master

just as Aharan used the last of his strength to tear the orks' warboss in half with his incredible psychic might. As he'd laid dying, Aharan's final act had been to bequeath his rune stones to his apprentice. Beynan would always remember his master's pale and drawn face in that moment. He had looked so frail, and the scar surrounding half of his left eye, once distinguished, had become merely ugly.

Aharan's stones spoke to Beynan clearly now, as they would speak to any who knew how to listen. Where Beynan had poured them from their pouch, the Emperor's hand had placed them in the sand before him. He spoke His will through symbols, their orientation and their positions relevant to one another. The aquila stone was marked with the twin-headed eagle. It was the only stone that was not part of Aharan's original set. Aharan had lost the original many years before, though he had never been sure when or how. Its replacement had been in use long enough that it had bonded with the rest and its virtue lay true. It had landed highest and correctly oriented. A good omen. The compass stone, marked with a four-pointed cross, had landed just below it. The longest point, which represented north, reached forwards towards the aquila. His goal lay to the north. The warrior and seer stones rested together. His path and that of his brothers ran parallel. Above them, the reaper's stone had fallen oriented sideways. There would be deaths on both sides. This was regrettable, but such was the life of a Space Marine.

Beynan returned the stones to their pouch as the rest of the group ended their prayers. Sergeant Tor'ra then reorganised them into formation. His veterans spread out to take lead positions in a wide forward arc. Braxus' squad fell into close defensive positions around the prognosticator and Techmarine.

'I have had to make modifications to this auspex,' said Rikolux dourly. 'If doing so hasn't offended its spirit too gravely, it should identify the energy signature much more clearly now.'

'Then let us hope you have suitably appeased it. We do not have time to search the entire island. Join Sergeant Tor'ra and see that we are going the correct way.'

'Yes, prognosticator.'

The group moved forward as one, and swiftly crossed the beach before passing into the jungle. The light dimmed immediately; the sun's rays barred entry by layers of thick canopy. Power-armoured boots were caught up in thick bundles of roots. Progress slowed as the Space Marines were forced single file through an ever tighter bottleneck created by centuries' old tree trunks. The air buzzed constantly with the sounds of insects. At first, Beynan filtered out the sound

through his helmet's auditory systems, but it grew so loud he could no longer block it without leaving himself deafened. With each step, the jungle grew thicker and the Space Marines were forced to draw blades to cut their way through the grasping branches. Beynan kept a close eye on the tracking signal coming from Techmarine Rikolux. More than once, he was required to regroup his retinue as they were broken up wading through the thick flora.

'Contac—' a voice yelled through the vox. It was cut off by a sickening wet crunch. A trio of bolter rounds exploded in the distance, then there was silence.

'Brother Tek, report!' Tor'ra growled into the vox, but there was no reply from the warrior who had raised the alarm. 'Jade Squad, regroup on my position!' Another bolter barked in anger.

'Forward,' Beynan ordered, and fell in behind two members of Amethyst Squad as they hacked furiously at the trees in their efforts to catch up to Tor'ra's veterans. Beynan drew his bolt pistol and force sword, Soul Render. The bolter fire up ahead grew in intensity, and he could now make out an unfamiliar but unmistakably malicious hiss. He wondered what kind of foe could make such a sound.

'Prognosticator, they're here,' Brother Artum called back to him as he cut through a gnarled branch with his knife.

Tor'ra, Rikolux and Jade Squad were fighting back to back, the ground around them littered with dead beasts. They were seemingly reptilian. Their hides were covered in thick scales that fluctuated through shades of green, brown and deep, natural reds. They had four legs that jutted at right angles from their long, heavy torsos, each ending in a trio of long talons. A pair of barbed whip-like tails lashed out erratically behind them at all times. On all fours they reached a Space Marine's mid-thigh, but when reared up, Beynan estimated they could easily reach chest height. Their heads were wide triangles covered in spines that housed broad mouths filled with pointed teeth, two of which jutted down prominently near the centre of the upper jaw. As Beynan's group reached them, Rikolux pinned one underfoot and finished it with a shot to the head. Another leapt at him from his right but was snatched out of the air by his servo-arm, which clamped around its neck and continued to squeeze until something snapped and the creature went limp. The largest pile of the dead lay around Tor'ra, their bodies shredded where the sergeant had set about them with his chainsword. He tore another from Brother Vra'del's back and bisected it in a spray of ichor.

‘Join us, prognosticator. There are plenty to go around,’ Tor’ra said with a vicious enthusiasm as he discarded the dead beast. Beynan and Amethyst Squad added their strength to the defensive ring Jade Squad had formed. The prognosticator took his place to Tor’ra’s left.

‘What are these creatures?’ Beynan asked.

‘Some form of pack animal,’ said Tor’ra. ‘Which means one is the alpha. I suggest we kill them until we find it, then kill that too.’

For a time, the jungle was alive with the roar of bolters, the hiss of reptilian beasts, the wet cutting of blades against flesh and a high-pitched scraping of claws against armour. Then the sounds of battle faded, replaced only once again with the insect buzzing.

‘Do you think they’ve retreated?’ Brother K’la of Amethyst Squad asked.

‘No,’ said Tor’ra.

The sergeant was immediately proven correct. Using the dense undergrowth to hide their approach, they struck together on one side of the Silver Skulls’ defensive ring. Beynan was thrown to the ground along with the members of Amethyst Squad to his left. The creature on top of him snapped at his face, and Beynan could only raise an arm in defence. He stifled a cry as it bit down, fangs puncturing his armoured vambrace and digging into his flesh. A boot swung by Beynan’s head and hit his attacker. It released its grip and spat at the newcomer. A thick black substance covered the face of the warrior who had come to Beynan’s aid. It immediately began to eat away at the layers of ceramite. The warrior fell back, clutching at his helmet seals. Brother Artum raked the creature’s flank with bolt-rounds but did little more than anger it. One of its tails lashed out and severed his hand.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Beynan kicked the creature back and unloaded his pistol into it. The creature stepped back under the onslaught, allowing the prognosticator to stand. With some separation, Beynan could see what he was facing. This creature was larger than the others by far. It reared up on its back legs and loomed high above his head. Under its chin was a swollen, glistening black gland that no doubt produced the substance it had spat moments before. Every spine and barb on its body was longer and thicker than its peers, and its body rippled with dense muscle. If any creature was the alpha, this was it.

‘...*a great beast to be slain.*’ The prophecy rang around in his head.

Bolt-rounds detonated harmlessly against its hide and Beynan’s sword arm was growing numb where he had been bitten. The alpha rocked back on its haunches and the prognosticator made his choice. As the creature made to attack again,

Beynan opened his mind to the Immaterium. He allowed its raw power to flow into him. His body coruscated with psychic energy that sparked like red lightning. He raised his hand and reached across the air. Beneath his helm, he snarled his contempt for the beast, and relished the agonising death he would bring it. The alpha lunged at him, but then stopped and recoiled. At first, it hissed in anger. That anger turned to pain and it squealed pitifully. It rolled onto its back, writhing and snapping, fighting against an enemy it could never reach. Beynan boiled its blood in its veins and didn't stop until the creature's mewling cries were silenced.

At the death of their leader, the remaining creatures scurried away, disappearing into the jungle as swiftly as they had arrived. Beynan closed himself off from the warp and allowed its energies to dissipate around him.

'A fine kill, prognosticator,' a gravelly voice said from behind him.

Beynan turned to see Tor'ra approaching. His helmet was clenched in his right hand, its face-plate still steaming where the thick black spit had struck it. His bare face was pale and bald with heavy patches of scar tissue on his cheeks and jawline, ancient wounds he wore like badges of honour. A pair of silver service studs were set over his right brow above a pair of surprisingly warm brown eyes.

'And a good omen, sergeant.'

'How so, prognosticator?'

'*A great beast to be slain.* So says my vision, so it has come to pass,' said Beynan proudly. 'Brothers, heed me,' he began, addressing the group now. 'Skythis has claimed its tithe in blood from us here, but there is no greatness without sacrifice. The portents ring true. My path is certain. Walk with me and know not fear or doubt, for by my side you will know victory.' The surviving Silver Skulls cheered their leader. A number then turned to speak litanies for the dead. 'The Emperor will watch over our fallen brothers,' Beynan added. 'We will reclaim them when the battle is won.'

Tor'ra stepped past the prognosticator to inspect the alpha's corpse. 'Its skull will make a fine addition to the trophy halls back home.'

'It will indeed,' said Beynan, 'and the elders will tell the neophytes of my victory here for millennia to come. We shall take its head when we come back to recover our fallen brothers.'

'*Our* victory, prognosticator,' said Tor'ra frowning.

'History rarely remembers the names of the soldiers. Only their leaders.'

Tor'ra opened his mouth to respond but Beynan had already turned away.

The prognosticator picked out the Techmarine in the group – his head was

bowed with the auspex gently pressed against his helm. Beynan watched him trace the symbol of the Omnissiah across his chest and heard him whisper litanies the prognosticator did not know the names for.

‘Which way, Brother Rikolux?’ he asked. The Techmarine’s head snapped up as if he had been rudely interrupted from his meditations and he looked around to see who had disturbed him. His shoulders rose and fell as he consulted the auspex, turned on the spot and pointed ahead.

‘This way,’ he said without enthusiasm.

‘Form up. Stay close. We know not what this world is capable of,’ said Tor’ra. The sergeant stepped past Beynan and once more took his place at the head of the group.

They pressed on. Progress grew ever slower as the jungle seemed to become more dense with every passing step. Many times, Skythis tried to kill them. Trees with thick, tentacle-like roots reached out to grab them. Giant insects with spear-like mouths descended on them and desperate canine carrion feeders snapped at their legs. After the first attack, none of these posed any true threat and each was hacked apart, crushed in armoured fists or summarily executed with clinical bolter fire.

It was not long before Brother Rikolux called the group to a halt.

‘Is this it?’ Beynan asked.

‘Yes, prognosticator,’ Rikolux said. ‘Just ahead. That is where the readings grow strongest. At least, to the best of my ability to interpret the available data,’ he gestured to the auspex. ‘Our guide’s spirit is unsettled.’

‘Then perhaps we are guided by more than energy signatures. Another good omen.’

Rikolux returned the auspex to his belt and checked the magazine on his bolter silently.

‘Be alert, brothers,’ said Tor’ra. He sent two members of Jade Squad ahead to cut a path, the rest following in pairs behind. It was a matter of seconds before they came to a halt once again.

‘Report,’ Tor’ra said across the vox.

‘There is a clearing, sergeant,’ the veteran replied. ‘And some kind of structure. A doorway. It appears to lead underground.’

Beynan pushed forward until he came side by side with the leading warriors. Tor’ra, Braxus and Rikolux followed behind. The clearing was small, no more than thirty yards in diameter. It was circular but irregular, as if it had been artificially created but neglected for many years. In the centre was a low, wide

archway that sloped back into the ground. Its roof was covered in foliage but underneath was still traces of Astra Militarum-issue camouflage netting. Under the arch was a wall of solid black iron and a heavy door like one would expect to find on a fortress or vault.

‘Your orders, prognosticator?’ said Tor’ra.

‘...concealed from a sky ruled by warring dragons.’

Beynan looked up. The jungle canopy was thinner here and allowed one to see patches of bright blue sky. There were no stars in this light but he knew they were there. The Aris Drakartis.

‘This is the location, sergeant. This is where it rests. Underground, just as I foresaw. Let us not tarry here. Follow me.’

Beynan stepped free from the undergrowth and into the clearing. Tor’ra and Braxus followed, then Rikolux and the others.

‘Prognosticator, something moves,’ said Rikolux.

He was right. Beynan watched as two shapes emerged from the ground on either side of the door. Two more rose further out in the clearing, between the Silver Skulls and the door. His eyes widened as he recognised the familiar boxy shapes. Heavy bolter turrets. Each bore a pair of the weapons and spat streams of explosive bolts at the Space Marines.

‘Take cover!’ Tor’ra yelled, but not swiftly enough for some. Heavy explosive rounds tore into the Silver Skulls as they made for the small measure of protection offered by the tree line. All but Beynan. Drawing upon his Emperor-granted gifts, he summoned a dome of psychic force. Soul Render growled in his hand. His sword arm had grown strong once again, what vile venom had afflicted it earlier was now purged by his superior anatomy and the cocktail of potent stimms dispensed by his armour. He closed on the nearest turret, its heavy bolts exploding harmlessly against his shield. Soul Render lashed out, its empowered blade carving contemptuously through the first turret’s armour. A missile launched from the tree line and destroyed the second in a pillar of flame. The two remaining turrets either side of the fortified doorway turned to fire at the missile’s source. No longer under attack, Beynan allowed his shield to fall, and directed his gifts outwards. He grasped the turret with his mind and pressed. Plate by plate, the turret buckled under the weight of psychic pressure. Its fire became wild as it bent, then ceased entirely. It exploded from within as bolts detonated inside, unable to escape from blocked barrels.

Finally, the last turret turned on him. Whatever spirit guided its targeting deemed him the greatest threat and fired. Out in the open, unshielded and at

close range, the heavy bolts struck Beynan and threw him from his feet.

‘Prognosticator?’

Pain ran through him, his breaths felt sharp in his chest. Beynan raised his head and looked over at Sergeant Tor’ra closing in on him. He looked worried but seemed to relax as he saw Beynan move.

‘Prognosticator Rhondus,’ the sergeant said, relieved. ‘We thought you were dead.’ Tor’ra offered Beynan his forearm but the prognosticator ignored it. He pushed the tip of his sword into the ground and climbed to his feet. He winced as pain shot through his torso. He should be dead. At that range, the heavy bolters should have punched clean through his armour. Looking down at himself, though his armour was blackened and his body evidently bruised beneath, he was otherwise unharmed.

‘The Emperor guides me, sergeant, and the Emperor protects.’

‘The Emperor protects,’ Tor’ra echoed.

Beynan looked over at the turret that had struck him down. It was now riddled with a dozen puncture wounds that streamed thin trails of smoke.

‘Vengeance rounds,’ Tor’ra said, following Beynan’s gaze. ‘Fortunate. I had almost elected not to bring them.’

Beynan shook his head. ‘It should be apparent to you by now, sergeant, that luck has nothing to do with our mission here. Everything is proceeding to the Emperor’s plan, just as I foresaw. We have defeated the four sentinels. Another obstacle cleared from our path.’

‘The four sentinels, prognosticator? I don’t understand.’

‘I do not require you to.’

‘Prognosticator Rhondus. You must see this,’ said Sergeant Braxus from the edge of the clearing.

Beynan made his way over to Braxus’ position, Tor’ra followed. A few steps beyond Braxus, face down in the dirt, was Rikolux. A chunk of the back of his head was missing. Deep red blood ran in streams over the uneven leafy ground and pooled around lumps of half-pulped brain matter and twisted shards of scarlet ceramite. Beynan sighed and made the sign of the aquila across his chest.

‘This isn’t right,’ mused Braxus.

‘This is a shame, yes, but he played his part. He brought us here. Let him always be remembered as my pathfinder. The Emperor protects,’ replied Beynan.

‘That is not what I meant, prognosticator.’ Braxus gestured to the fatal wound. ‘The wound isn’t right. It could not be caused by a heavy bolter. That would have removed his head entirely.’

‘What are you saying, sergeant?’

Braxus reached down and rolled the Techmarine onto his back. His cause of death became apparent. His left helmet lens had been punctured by a single, precise, small-calibre shot.

‘It would seem we are not alone here,’ said Braxus.

‘Did your vision show you this, prognosticator?’ asked Tor’ra.

‘No.’ The word hung awkwardly in the air. Beynan stared down at the dead Techmarine. The gathered Space Marines looked between one another, unsure of how to proceed.

‘Open that door!’ Tor’ra shouted over his shoulder at the members of Jade Squad gathered in the centre of the clearing.

‘No,’ Beynan said firmly, ‘if we have enemies out here, let us face them.’

‘I agree, prognosticator, but we cannot fight what we cannot see. Out here we are vulnerable.’

Beynan rounded on Tor’ra. ‘From all of Aharan’s stories, sergeant, I did not have you judged as a coward.’ Tor’ra bristled at the insult but Beynan ignored it. He was a prognosticator. The sergeant would not dare lay a hand on him. ‘Are you out there?’ Beynan called out to the jungle, his arms spread wide in challenge. ‘Do you dare face the wrath of the Silver Skulls?’ He turned back to Tor’ra. ‘See, sergeant, we are in no danger. Whatever was once here is now gone. It was not foreseen so it is irrelevant to my destiny. Now come, fate lies ahead.’ With that, he turned away and stormed across the clearing.

Seeing him approach, one of the members of Jade Squad who had been inspecting the door turned to address him. ‘Prognosticator—’

‘Stand aside.’ Once again channelling his gifts, Beynan gripped the fortified door and pulled. He felt the bolts fighting against him, but he would not fail now. As his focus intensified, his body throbbed with energy. Sweat beaded on his brow as he strained. The hinges buckled first. Then the locking bolts sheared apart. The door swung open and the hinges snapped allowing the door to fly out, narrowly passing over Beynan’s head. Tor’ra, Braxus and the surviving members of Amethyst Squad were forced to throw themselves to the ground. The door sailed into the jungle, splintering trees as it spun uncontrollably, leaving a path of destruction in its wake. Beynan fell to one knee. His breath was laboured and it rasped loudly through his helmet grille.

Once more Tor’ra was the first to reach him and help him to his feet, but the prognosticator shrugged him off, drew Soul Render and strode onwards. Inside the bunker was pitch black, save for sparse red lumen lamps that indicated the

only path forwards – a long, sloping corridor that led deep under Skythis' surface. The walls were bare metal and gave no indication of who had built them. Beynan proceeded without caution, his heavy footsteps clanging loudly. The corridor led down for a hundred yards, then turned back on itself and descended further, eventually ending in a narrow doorway. Beynan passed through it and found himself in a small circular room with a low, domed ceiling. The centre was barred off, and Beynan made to skirt its perimeter to reach the exit on the far side. He was stopped in his tracks as the room came to life. The low red glow was replaced by a stark white luminescence that revealed the middle of the room as a hololith display. It projected a grainy image of a man in translucent blue light. He was unremarkable in every way – of average height and build for a mortal man, his facial features were hidden beneath a wide hood. What little of his face could be seen was covered in an armoured half mask fashioned as a stoic unmoving mouth. His body was draped in light robes that showed a glimpse of the bodysuit worn beneath. On his chest was a rosette depicting a skull before a stylised I. A message played, but it was damaged and hard to decipher.

‘Greetings. I am Inquisitor... of the Ordo... I do not know... found... but this is your first an... no further. What lay... very dangerous. Be you loyal... turn back. There is no... here. If... foe... kind, may you burn...’

It repeated continuously.

Beynan listened closely, trying to decipher the lost fragments, but additional voices broke his concentration. They were quiet, but echoed enough for his superior hearing to make out. They came from the entranceway – the rest of the Silver Skulls descending to meet him. The whispers spoke of dissent. Beynan's choler rose that his warriors dared doubt him. He waited, and it wasn't long before they arrived, Tor'ra leading. The sergeant walked around to stand by Beynan's side and studied the hololith.

‘An inquisitor. He looks... familiar,’ he said.

‘You know this man? Beynan asked.

Tor'ra rubbed his forehead like a mortal developing a headache. ‘No. Perhaps... He is familiar, but I cannot place him and it pains me to try.’

‘No matter, sergeant. What is clear is that he is the thief in the night,’ said Beynan.

‘Another part of your vision, prognosticator?’

‘Yes, sergeant. This man took something of great importance to our future and it is here. I can feel it.’

‘Can you sense anything else?’ asked Braxus from across the room.

Beynan stared at him. ‘You doubt me, sergeant,’ he said. It was not a question.

‘No, prognosticator,’ said Braxus.

‘Do not lie to me, sergeant. It is unbecoming of a Silver Skull, as it is to whisper behind a leader’s back,’ Beynan said calmly but full of malice.

‘I am not, prognosticator. I have faith. I—’ The warriors of Amethyst Squad shuffled anxiously at the tension rising in the room, and clutched tighter at their bolters. More voices rose, either in defence of the sergeant or support of the prognosticator, but speaking over one another none could be heard.

‘Do not lie!’ Beynan shouted.

‘He is not.’ Tor’ra’s low growl cut through the rising bickering like a knife and brought the room to silence. ‘*I doubt you.*’

Beynan stood bolt upright and looked Tor’ra in the eye. ‘Explain yourself, sergeant.’

‘You are arrogant and look down upon your own brothers. You see us not as your brethren but as tools to use and dispose of to achieve *your* goals.’ Tor’ra’s voice dripped with disdain.

‘My goal is the Emperor’s goal. He speaks through me,’ Beynan replied angrily.

‘You are no divine prophet, prognosticator. Believing you are has made you reckless and has cost the lives of your brothers and almost your own.’

‘The Emperor protects the faithful!’

‘Then why are we dying? Open your eyes, prognosticator. If the Emperor could protect us all, then no Space Marine would ever fall. He may guide us. In our darkest need, He may turn His attention upon us for a beat of His heart, and then He is gone again. We must protect ourselves. Your way will see us dead. Aharan would be ashamed of you.’

Beynan had loved and respected Aharan above all others. Tor’ra’s words cut him to his core. ‘Do you believe you could lead better?’

‘I do. Cede leadership to me. I will heed your council regarding the portents, but the decision of how to proceed shall be mine. I will lead us to victory.’

Beynan had never been disobeyed like this before, or seen any prognosticator defied so openly. In the face of such betrayal and humiliation, Beynan’s already burning temper threatened to overcome him, but Aharan would have been ashamed of him if he allowed it, that much was true. He considered accepting Tor’ra’s request. Then the vision came to his mind once again, unbidden.

‘*A hero, exalted for generations.*’

The truth hit Beynan like a thunderbolt. ‘You believe it is you, don’t you? You

would accuse me of hubris only to heap glory upon yourself.’

‘You are speaking in riddles, brother. I do not understand.’

Beynan growled. ‘I will not allow it, and I assure you, the Chapter Masters will hear of this.’ He turned to the rest of the group. ‘All that remain loyal to the Silver Skulls, follow me. Victory lies ahead.’ With that, he stormed out of the room and into an enormous square chamber. Support pillars ran in two rows down its length as far as Beynan could see. The Silver Skulls advanced and fell into formation around him. Fanned out, they covered half the chamber’s length. Beynan glanced to his left and a deep rage burned within his gut when he saw that Tor’ra had followed too. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to focus. Up ahead, a slight movement caught his attention and the sounds of chains turning cogs washed towards them. He could see the far wall opening to reveal hidden alcoves. From them stepped grey-skinned servitors. Each of them missed their right arm, replaced by all manner of heavy weapon systems. At first, they were still and stared blankly forward, then they raised their weapons.

‘Destroy them!’ Beynan ordered. He lashed out with a wave of brute psychic power. It flung several of them to the ground with such force it bent metal and ruptured flesh. He then stepped behind the nearest pillar as a stream of heavy slugs bisected the air where he had just been.

‘An army of slaves.’

The Silver Skulls’ counter-attack was swift. Beynan added his own pistol to the weight of return fire and blew the heads off two servitors in quick succession. Though outnumbered and outgunned, the Silver Skulls were winning. The servitors slowly advanced across open ground, paying no heed to their own survival, and though their weapons were heavy, their aim was poor. One by one the Space Marines cut them down. Then the battle changed.

It started with a pained howl from the rear of the group. Beynan’s head snapped around just in time to see another of Amethyst Squad fall, a pair of fist-sized holes burned clean through his chest. Beyond the fallen warrior, he could see more servitors entering from further alcoves which had behind them.

‘Sergeant Braxus! Rearguard!’ he shouted.

Braxus organised the rearmost Space Marines and returned fire. Beynan’s attention returned to the enemy ahead. ‘Damn the Inquisition, the wretched fools,’ he muttered to himself as he moved to the head of the Silver Skulls’ formation. His pistol barked, felling servitors with every shot. ‘Advance! Push them back!’ he ordered. There was another tortured cry from behind him and he dared a look back. The Silver Skulls were caught in a crossfire and the rearguard

was crumbling. Shots flew past the Space Marines from both sides, the servitors even striking their own kind, but for each that fell, another advanced in its place.

Beynan cursed the weakness of his so-called brothers. If there was to be any victory here, he would have to take it for himself. He felt Soul Render pulsing in his hand. ‘Yes,’ he said quietly. ‘That would be glorious.’ Without warning, he charged. He emptied his pistol into the enemy horde, then took Soul Render in both hands, striking into their lines. There was only one who could fulfil the portents. One hero to be exalted. The name Beynan Rhondus would live on in legend.

Up close, the servitors were slow and ungainly, their weapons ineffective. He was an instrument of the Emperor’s will, His wrath made manifest. He was strong and skilled, a warrior without equal. Soul Render rose and fell in deadly arcs. With every strike and counterstrike, a servitor fell, relieved of what little life they still possessed. No movement was wasted. Every step was perfect. Should even the most vaunted of heroes in the history of the Chapter see him now, they would be envious of his skill. When the servitors drew too close or threatened to overwhelm him, he would strike out with his mind and throw them back, cutting them down once more.

Then he was through them and the path opened ahead of him, an adjoining hallway to the right. He forged onwards, valiant and unstoppable. From the chamber, he passed through corridors and rooms that spiralled down into the planet. In each, he was assailed by more servitors and turrets. He destroyed them all, never breaking stride and never looking back. Soon he reached an elevator, its doors open, awaiting him. He boarded and it carried him down into the depths. He waited impatiently as it descended and finally disgorged him at the end of a long, narrow room with a low, arched roof. In the distance, a figure barred his way. He could not make out details, only shapes. It was far taller and broader than any Space Marine and its head was highlighted from behind by a vibrant orange glow.

‘Harbingers waiting in the shadows, wreathed in fire.’

‘Come, harbinger!’ he roared. ‘But know that I will not be denied.’ He lifted Soul Render and charged. The harbinger responded in kind and screeched, a high pitched wail that pained Beynan’s ears even through his helm.

‘They howled in despair.’

It was far faster than he had anticipated, and its bulk filled the chamber, but Beynan was true to his word – he would not be denied. As it closed he could

finally see it for what it was, a battle automaton. A relic from an age long past. It lowered its shoulder, intent on crushing him against the wall. Beynan sidestepped, his armour scraping against bare rockcrete, and slashed down at its arm. Its armour resisted even the etheric energies pouring into Soul Render. It turned and swatted Beynan away, sending him tumbling backwards. Beynan quickly regained his footing. The automaton closed on him and Beynan reached out, tearing a great chunk from the ceiling. It broke over the automaton's back and forced it down to its knees. Seeing his opportunity, Beynan charged, channelling his great might once more into the blade. He turned it in his hand, reversing his grip as he leapt. The blade fell, driving clean through the automaton's head. The psychic power discharged and Beynan was thrown back down the hallway. He hit the far wall hard enough to crater the rockcrete and for a moment the world went black.

When he came to, the top half of the automaton was gone, the kneeling legs smoked and sparked. Beyond the wreckage were Beynan's brothers, or what remained of them. Tor'ra led them. Blood coated his right leg and he limped heavily. Two more of Jade Squad followed, one holding up the other, who held his hand to a wound in his abdomen. The fourth of Jade Squad had lost his left arm below the elbow. Sergeant Braxus was last, his face covered in blood from a pair of horrendous gashes down to the bone.

'There you are,' said Tor'ra, his voice pained.

'Where else would I be, sergeant?' Beynan said, getting to his feet.

Tor'ra's face furrowed with anger. 'Anywhere, prognosticator. We lost you before we left the first chamber. It has taken us this long to reach you. This place is a maze, designed to ensnare and destroy.'

Beynan was confused and momentarily lost. 'That cannot be, sergeant. My path was clear. There was only one route through.' Beynan smiled beneath his helmet. 'Does it seem that destiny guides me after all, sergeant? My victory and my prize lie ahead. Come.' He didn't wait for a response before pressing on.

The door to the final chamber had been blasted from its hinges by the same shock wave that had destroyed the automaton. Inside was a vast, domed room, its roof so high it was claimed by the shadows. Besides sparse red lumen globes, there was a single light source. A bright white cylinder sat atop a pedestal in the centre of the chamber.

'Is that it?' asked Tor'ra as he followed Beynan into the room, 'You abandoned your brothers. You charged ahead and left us to face an army. Tek is dead.'

Amethyst Squad are dead. Because of *you*. For what? Your vanity? Your pride?’

Beynan turned on his heel and thrust Soul Render towards Tor’ra. ‘Hold your tongue, sergeant! I have heard enough of your insubordination. Your plans to undermine my victory here have failed.’

‘My plans? I made no plans here but to achieve our objective. It saddens me that I had to question a prognosticator, but you gave me no choice.’

‘Do not treat me like a fool. You wish to be the hero the portents foretold, exalted for generations, but you are not. I led us here. I defeated the sentinels. I defeated the harbinger.’

Tor’ra frowned. ‘Once more you speak in riddles, prognosticator. My knowledge of the portents is only what you have told me. You have never spoken of any hero, and if the costs are as great as you have said, then our mission here is beyond any individual.’

Hearing Tor’ra’s bravado melt away into desperate pleas brought pride to Beynan’s hearts. He was victorious here also. Their mission was almost complete and he had proven himself superior to the self-righteous sergeant. He opened his mouth to speak but Tor’ra cut him off.

‘Wait,’ Tor’ra said. He hurried past the prognosticator to inspect the central pedestal.

‘You dare—?’

‘I said, be silent!’ Tor’ra snapped back at him. He turned back to the pedestal. ‘It’s a stasis field.’

‘What is inside?’ asked Braxus, standing near the entrance.

‘A book,’ said Tor’ra.

‘Bring it to me,’ said Beynan.

‘I... Prognosticator, we have made a dire mistake,’ said Tor’ra.

‘I have made no mistake. This is where the portents guided us. This is where we should be.’

‘Then the portents were wrong.’

‘Blasphemy!’ Beynan roared, and strode towards Tor’ra, Soul Render starting to pulse in his hand.

Tor’ra held up his hand but did not reach for a weapon. ‘Hear me out, prognosticator. I am starting to remember something. A mission, almost a century ago. The hololith at the entrance – the inquisitor – he approached the masters, asking for warriors. He was granted five – Ma’lok, Dastillus, Ko, myself and Aharan.’

‘Aharan?’

‘Yes. The inquisitor needed us to launch an ambush, to claim an alien relic. I cannot remember the attack, only that it was a slaughter. When it was over, the inquisitor left with his prize and we returned home.’

‘What was the relic?’ asked Beynan.

‘A book. This book.’ Tor’ra gestured to the pedestal. Inside the stasis field was a heavy tome bound in a strange material that shimmered in the dull light. Its cover was inscribed in alien symbols. ‘It is dangerous, prognosticator. Too dangerous to be allowed out of Imperial hands. After the mission, the inquisitor...’ Tor’ra growled in frustration. ‘His name eludes me. He had his psykers cleanse our minds so we could never be used to find it.’

‘How is it you recall this now?’

‘A safety measure. Should any of us encounter this cursed thing again, we would remember enough to know the threat it poses.’

‘Then how will it save the Chapter?’ asked Braxus.

A loud whip-crack echoed around the chamber and Braxus fell dead.

‘It will not,’ said a voice. It was soft but cold, angelic but inhuman. No, not inhuman. Alien.

Their approach had been silent and perfect. They filled the shadows between the Space Marines and the entrance. Beynan turned and saw lithe, tall warriors in bone-coloured armour with high helmets crested by manes of bright red hair. They carried finely crafted sabres that flowed with deadly energies.

‘Harbingers waiting in the shadows, wreathed in fire.’

Two figures stood apart, one wrapped in a hooded black cape, carrying a long rifle. The other dressed in cerulean-blue robes adorned with trinkets. She was the only one whose face was uncovered. Her skin was pale and unblemished, her face gaunt and hard with sharp, high cheekbones. Her ears went back to delicate points and her long black hair was tied up in a tight ponytail. She carried a spear in her right hand, its haft tapping against the ground as she stepped to the head of the group.

Beynan had encountered such creatures once before. Aeldari. He did not wait to ask questions.

‘Purge the xenos!’

The sound of bolter fire filled the room, but the aeldari were already moving. The bone-armoured warriors howled so loudly Beynan faltered in his charge.

‘They howled in despair.’

Pain speared through his head. The injuries to his arm and chest burned anew. Decades of psycho-conditioning fought against primal terror as fear threatened

to overcome him. He may have run, but he could not move his legs.

The aeldari leader reached him first, her slender fingers outstretched. Lightning leapt from them and coruscated around him. His body was racked with pain and he fought to stay standing. Once more, he summoned his gifts, the Emperor-given strength he had used to forge the path down to this chamber, he would now use to crush this filthy alien.

But it was gone.

Where before he had been unstoppable, now he was only tired. He pushed back against the witch, but his efforts were nothing more than the flailing of a petulant child against her. Something gave inside him and he felt blood trickle from his nose. His body went numb and he slumped to his knees. The world around him felt like a dream. He could only watch as the final moments of the Silver Skulls played out before him.

He watched as screeching warriors danced around the last members of Jade Squad, cutting them to ribbons in a display of perfect acrobatic swordplay. He watched Sergeant Tor'ra holding more of them at bay, swinging his chainsword in wide, vicious arcs, but each was narrowly avoided by its targets. Tor'ra, who was wounded and bleeding, was tiring. Finally, one of the aeldari spiralled inside his guard and drove her sabre up under his chest-plate. He spat blood on her as the others leapt upon him. Tor'ra fell, still impaled on their blades. When Beynan looked back, the witch was standing over him. She was relaxed, confident he no longer posed a threat.

How could this be? Beynan thought. His vision had been so clear. The portents, every one of them had led him here. He had done as the Emperor demanded and yet he was dying, just like those around him.

'Who are you?' he asked, the words slurring uneasily.

'I am Farseer Endrasil of the Craftworld Iybraesil.'

'I am Prognos—'

'I know who you are, thief. I would see your eyes once more before you die.'

His arms were heavy and it took great effort to lift them, but he would not shy away now. If he were to die, he would do so face to face with his killer. He unsealed his helmet and clumsily tore it off. It fell with a clang and rolled away. Endrasil flinched, then frowned.

'You are not him,' she said, scowling. 'Where is he? The one with the crescent scar.'

Crescent scar? She could only mean one man. Prognosticator Aharan. He too had been part of Tor'ra's mission.

‘Dead.’

Endrasil visibly tensed. Her spear lashed out, stopping as it pricked the skin of Beynan’s throat. ‘When? How?’

‘Eight months past. Orks.’

Endrasil hit the haft of her spear against the ground. ‘I have planned this moment for a hundred years and you tell me I am denied my moment of victory by a horde of moronic greenskins?’ She stopped and turned away, making a conscious effort to calm herself. ‘Very well. If he is already dead, then you shall have to do. Who are you?’

‘Prognosticator Rhodus. The man with the crescent scar was Prognosticator Aharan. My mentor.’

‘So the student shall pay for the crimes of the teacher.’

‘I came here following portents and visions from the Emperor... I—’

‘You believe that long-dead husk that you worship sent you here? Is it not clear to you yet? You are here because I drew you here. Tell me, do you also carry these?’ Endrasil reached into a shimmering pouch and extracted a dull grey stone inscribed with a twin-headed eagle. Beynan recognised it immediately. Aharan’s missing aquila stone.

‘That belonged to my master.’ Beynan removed his own pouch from his waist and dropped it by Endrasil’s feet.

‘I carry the rest.’

The farseer smiled and nodded. ‘Yes, this makes sense now. I can feel it. This stone and the rest of your master’s are deeply linked. With one, it was no trouble to manipulate the rest.’

‘My vision...’

‘Did not lie. I had only to suggest. Your hubris did the rest. You are the sorcerer consumed by pride.’ She pointed her spear towards the fallen Tor’ra. ‘Him. He who brutally murdered so many of my kin. A beast to be slain.’ She looked back to Beynan. ‘Your master, the thief in the night, hooded and cowled.’ She tapped his psychic hood and the helmet on the ground. ‘All of you are my army of slaves. Thanks to you, I can reclaim what was taken from me. You gave your lives so that my people need not. You are a hero. My people shall remember you.’

Endrasil’s words struck Beynan like a blade to the heart. He looked around at the bodies of the Silver Skulls around him and thought of those fallen throughout the facility and outside of its doors.

Endrasil walked past him towards the stasis field, and with a wave of her hand,

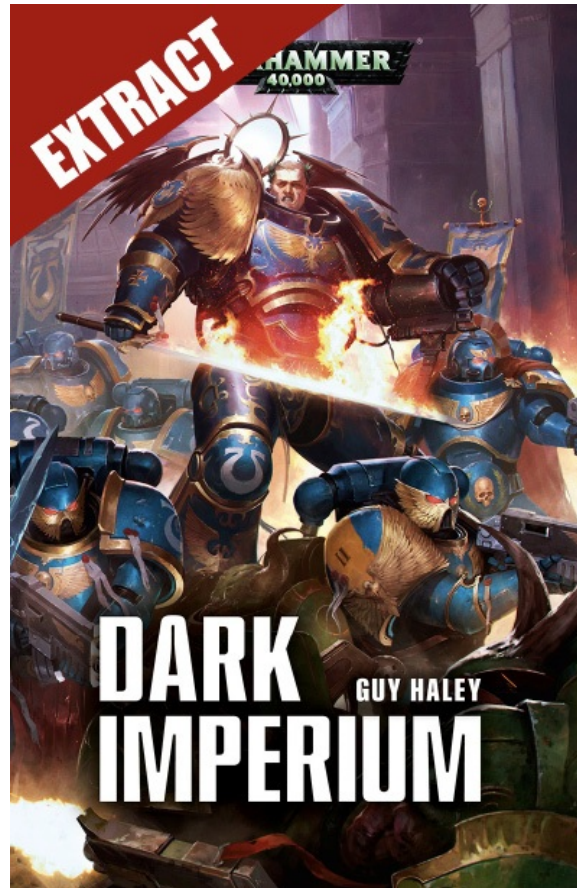
its power died. As she reverently removed the book from its mounting, a piercing scream suddenly split Beynan's mind. His knees gave way and he collapsed to the ground, his eyes rolling back in agony.

'Forgive me, brothers,' he breathed, and the darkness consumed him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Smith is one of Black Library's newest authors, and the Warhammer 40,000 short story 'In Service Eternal' is his first. He is based in Norwich and spends his spare time working on his Raven Guard army and training in martial arts.

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 outmanoeuvred 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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