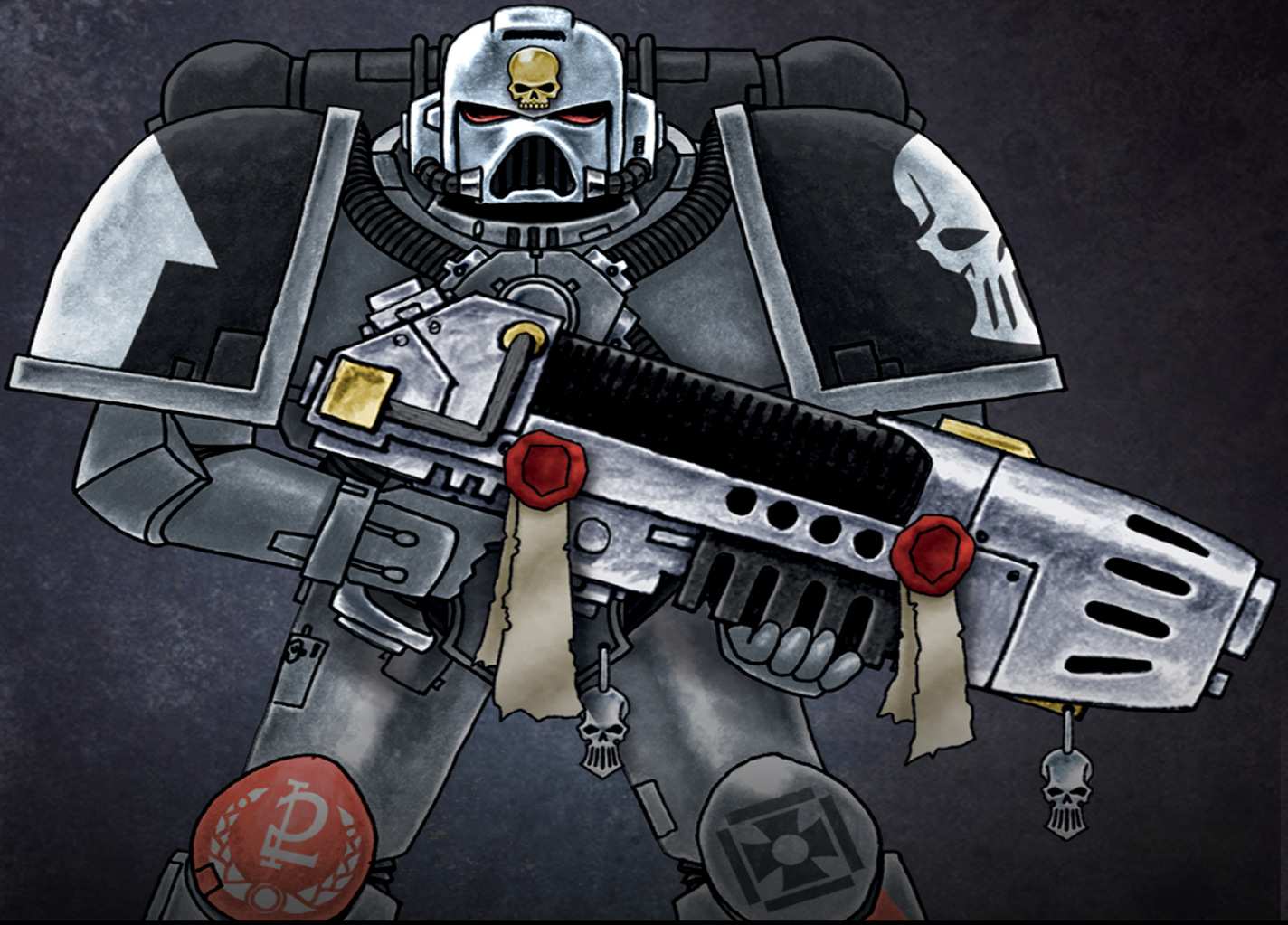


WARHAMMER 40,000



SILVER SKULLS ACTION AND CONSEQUENCE

S P CAWKWELL

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Vincit Qui Patitur.

The words of the company motto were bold and confident, standing out in silver lettering on the midnight-black of the Eighth Company's war banner. *He conquers who endures.*

On board the strike cruiser *Silver Arrow*, the chapel was the same as many thousands of other such chapels scattered throughout the Space Marine ships of the Imperium. A quiet place of reflection, prayer and preparation, the battle-brothers of the Eighth Company all found their way here eventually prior to deployment. Some came, gave due deference to the statue of the God-Emperor and retreated.

Others lingered.

Within this cradle of ultimate faith, a warrior could assert his place in the universe. Within this sacred place, a warrior of the Imperium could come as close to knowing peace as he was ever likely to.

Gileas Ur'ten, a man rarely at peace, knelt at the front of the chapel. His dark hair fell forwards, framing his face as his head bowed in reverence. Softly, he recanted his own personal litanies of battle, paying particular care to those that honoured his forebears. Above his head, the company's war banner was displayed proudly, pinned wide to display all the names written on it in tiny, delicate filigree script. Battle-brothers would gladly sit for hours to add a name to the banner. It was always considered to be an honour, never a duty.

Hundreds, even thousands of names were represented on the banner: brothers-in-arms he had fought alongside in his one hundred and twenty

years of service, and still more names there of those he had never met, but whose deeds were legendary. His eyes lifted briefly and rested on the name of Captain Andreas Kulle, his own mentor and the only man who had initially believed the savage little boy from the south had possessed the potential to succeed. Kulle had long passed to the arms of the Emperor. But his name lived on, and as long as the banner remained, that would never change.

Whoever was chosen to bear the standard into battle was greatly honoured. Gileas had carried the relic many times over the campaigns of the last five years. He had held on to it with grim tenacity against seemingly overwhelming odds, and had always returned it. He was a valiant, fearless warrior whose own deeds on the battlefield were earning him a reputation that many envied and others watched with cautious uncertainty.

Gileas Ur'ten's career had gone from strength to strength. The first recruit from the tribal people of Varsavia's southern continent to achieve a sergeant's rank, Gileas was stalwart and confident. He had led his squad for several years, and it was grudgingly acknowledged that they were amongst the best in the entire company. He was a charismatic man whose brothers followed him willingly and without question. Even the majority of his greatest antagonists had reluctantly accepted that his promotion to the rank of sergeant had been well earned.

And yet this was not a universal opinion. To others, Gileas was still considered a loose cannon, a Space Marine whose tempestuous nature and fiery spirit could not truly be trusted. A savage southerner whose instincts overruled his head on far too many occasions.

If Gileas was aware of the opinions of his brother Space Marines, he rarely – if ever – commented on them. He was, he had reasoned many years ago, who he was. He lived only to serve the Imperium and he would die in the line of duty. It was a reward he anticipated with the inherent pragmatism of all the Adeptus Astartes. He was loyal, honest and, as far as his superior officer was concerned, completely trustworthy. It was these qualities that had marked him out for the honour that had become his.

The death of Brother-Sergeant Oniker during the last campaign had left a void in the Eighth Company that many of the other company sergeants were eager to fill. The captain would need to nominate his chosen second-

in-command, a role that Oniker had filled until his untimely death at the hands of the ork warboss Skullrencha. Each one of the sergeants had brought unique qualities to the table. The final decision, however, had gone to the company Prognosticator.

Shae Bast, Captain Meyoran's advisor, had cast the runes. For long hours he had communed with and channelled the Emperor's will. He had finally brought forth the Emperor's decision, knowing that there would be unrest in the wake of the announcement. The captain had been completely satisfied with the choice of Gileas Ur'ten, but there were plenty amongst the Eighth Company with whom the decision did not sit comfortably. Indeed, there were rumblings about what was considered an ill-omened choice from other companies throughout the Chapter.

Gileas knew it well. Despite his own misgivings and barely understood concerns, he bore it all without comment, other than to take up the mantle of his new role with the same enthusiasm with which he approached everything. He looked now at the statue of the Emperor which stared impassively ahead, its gaze as cool as the stone from which it was carved. The solidity and permanence of the Emperor's presence was a soothing balm to Gileas's troubled heart, and he took quiet strength from it.

'I am not disturbing you, I hope, brother-sergeant?' The voice came from behind him, low and rumbling. Gileas raised his head and turned to take in the sight of his captain filling the chapel's doorway.

'Not at all, brother-captain.' Gileas rocked back onto his bare heels. Whilst aboard the *Silver Arrow* and not in the training cages, most of the battle-brothers of the Eighth Company wore simple surplices and either soft leather sandals or chose to go barefoot. Gileas settled into a cross-legged sitting position and looked up expectantly.

With the quiet confidence that marked his every action, the captain strode into the chapel, crossing the short distance between the doors and the altar swiftly. Like most of the men under his command, Keile Meyoran was exceptionally huge – even for a genetically altered Space Marine. He kept his head and face shaved completely smooth, barring a long, thin-plaited black beard that served only to make him look even more aggressive. The years of honour tattoos that were painstakingly designed and worked into his face made him look at one and the same time both barbaric and mystical to those who did not understand the Silver Skulls'

tradition of marking themselves in such a way. They recruited from worlds other than Varsavia, but all were introduced to the planet's tradition of tattooing on their induction into the Chapter.

Meyoran joined Gileas at the altar and looked up wordlessly at the statue of the Emperor. His lips moved in a silent prayer and he placed his right hand on the figure. Gileas watched his captain without comment until the older warrior turned to study him thoughtfully.

‘Are your preparations complete, brother?’

‘Aye, sir.’ Gileas made a move to get to his feet, but Meyoran held up a hand, forestalling him.

‘There is no need for me to interrupt you for long, Gileas. I merely wanted to bring you a message. Your presence is greatly desired in the strategium. We will translate in-system in less than four hours – and your experience in urban warfare will prove invaluable to us.’ His lips curled upwards into a smile at the look on Gileas’s face. ‘Is this invitation such a surprise to you, brother?’

‘Surprised? No, sir.’ As the youngest sergeant in the company, he had rarely been invited to attend a war meeting in the strategium – and never a direct invitation from the company captain. ‘Not surprised, merely... honoured.’

Gileas had never been a good liar, and given the way the tips of his ears turned slightly pink where they were visible beneath his unruly dark curls, it seemed that he was unlikely to start grasping the concept now. Meyoran’s smile broadened and he reached down and clasped the younger warrior’s shoulder.

‘You will be fine, Gileas,’ he said, quietly. ‘I have every faith in your ability to put your personal stamp on this position. I know that you have misgivings. I know also that some have questioned your own suitability for this role. You have commanded – what is it? Twenty missions as sergeant?’

‘Twenty-five, sir.’ Such pride in his voice. Only twenty-five missions. Practically a novice.

Meyoran nodded. ‘Twenty-five missions. *Successful* missions.’ The flicker of a smile tweaked the captain’s lips, then he resumed his serious expression. ‘But Gileas, whatever your misgivings may be... when we deploy, there will be no opportunity to dwell on them. I need to know that

your head is in the right place. I need to know that your heart and mind are focussed on the mission.'

'Of course, sir,' said Gileas, a faint tone of indignation coming into his voice. 'I am fully prepared and I will not let you down.' This time, he was not lying.

'No,' mused Meyoran, touching his hand to the statue of the Emperor once again. 'No, I don't believe you will, lad.'

It will be the actions of the rest of my company that worry me, he added silently.

Less than four hours later, Gileas found himself in an environment as far removed from the peace of the chapel as could possibly be imagined. The familiar, almost comforting roar of the retro-jets filled his aural senses as the drop-pod punched through the haze of cloud lying in a perpetual gloom over the planet. Pressed down hard in his seat by the harness, the sergeant put a hand to the hilt of his chainsword and cast a glance around the pod's interior.

His companions were all murmuring pre-battle litanies, apart from Theoderyk the Techmarine, whose voice soared loudly above the others. His litanies were fervently directed at the machine-spirits that guided them to their destination. Gileas allowed his own thoughts to stray to that particular outcome. There was a great battle to be had at the end of this drop and the thought of it filled his veins with fire.

He blink-clicked through final system checks, absorbing the vast quantities of scrolling information and runes that flashed before his eyes. His jump pack was functioning well and he had lovingly stripped and cleaned his weapons in the hours before they had deployed. He was as ready as he was likely to be.

The potential pressures of additional responsibility had not really bothered him. Like all the Silver Skulls, he was an enormously pragmatic man. He knew that he had the competence and the training to handle whatever these enemies could throw at him and he also knew that on the field of battle, the men under his command would obey his orders unquestioningly. Whatever his battle-brothers might have thought of him off the field of war was inconsequential.

Such confidence came easily. Certainty in those thoughts did not.

‘Prepare for impact.’ Theoderyk’s voice crackled across the vox and Gileas, along with the others on board, murmured their acquiescence. The sergeant’s hand closed still more tightly around the hilt of the chainsword and he offered up an impassioned prayer to the God-Emperor that this matter would be dealt with swiftly and without heavy losses. The Eighth Company was already low in numbers. It could not afford further deaths.

With enough force to completely flatten the remaining structures in this part of the already-devastated city, three drop-pods smashed into the landscape with deadly accuracy. Scant seconds later, the echo of release charges detonating resounded across the crater-pocked landscape, heralding the deployment of two dozen Silver Skulls. Each warrior was filled with righteous fury, ready to be unleashed against the xenos invaders who had made the fatal mistake of daring to set foot on Imperial soil, daring to commit the most heinous of transgressions.

Thumping the release button on his grav harness, Gileas was on his feet in seconds, sword in hand, ready for action. He gathered the others together and scanned the landing zone.

Gileas turned to the horizon, his auto-senses feeding critical information that might affect the performance of an Assault Marine’s jump pack. Wind speed. Humidity. All of these details and more were fed directly into his neural sensors. The auspex in Theoderyk’s hand picked up no life signs other than those of his fellow Space Marines – which was not what their intelligence had led them to believe.

‘Sergeant Ur’ten, report.’

Captain Meyoran’s voice came across the vox, announcing itself in Gileas’s ear as he led his men clear of the landing site. Three Thunderhawk gunships screamed overhead, heading towards the smouldering hive ruins to the east. A fledgling world under the protection of the Silver Skulls, Cartan was still in the earliest stages of colonisation. And the planet was already under threat.

‘Three pods down here, sir.’ Gileas scanned them swiftly. All had opened, releasing their passengers, including Brother Diomedes, one of the Chapter’s deeply venerated Dreadnoughts. The sight of the ancient lumbering towards him filled Gileas with even more fire than before. It would be a deep honour to serve alongside him.

‘Diomedes?’ Meyoran addressed the ancient directly.

‘Deployed and at your command,’ the Dreadnought responded, his voice mechanically altered by the body that housed one of the brightest and greatest warriors the Chapter had ever known.

‘No enemy contact,’ Gileas reported. ‘Intelligence suggested that the xenos had a temporary base here. If they did...’ He looked around him at the destruction caused by the arrival of three drop-pods. ‘...it was destroyed on our arrival.’

‘They move swiftly, sergeant. Be on your guard. Rendezvous as soon as possible at the coordinates I’m transmitting.’

Gileas turned to Theoderyk, designated the squad’s coordinator for the mission. The taciturn Techmarine, a silent yet dependable member of the company, gave an abrupt nod as he assimilated the stream of information. He pointed to the east. The servo-harness on his back hissed into life and the servo-arm ending in a plasma cutter came to the fore. With the harness, Theoderyk was easily half as big again as the giant Gileas. A huge, shaggy bear of a man, even without his Adeptus Astartes implants, Gileas would have been enormous.

Gileas surveyed the demolished remains of the outlying habs. Those who had worked here were undoubtedly long dead, or captured by the enemy. The burned-out husks of silos stood to one side of what had been a storage facility. The air, even filtered by their helmets, was rank with the scent of burning promethium and the chemical reek of weapons discharge. There had been fighting here recently.

Thoughtfully tapping the fingers of his free hand against the thigh of his power armour, Gileas turned to the Dreadnought standing motionless beside him.

‘Ancient one,’ he said, his voice filled with reverence.

‘Brother-Sergeant Ur’ten,’ the Dreadnought responded, the low rumble of his voice resonating deep in Gileas’s chest. ‘Your command?’

‘The last communication from Sergeant Kyaerus was less than fifteen hours ago and this was his given location,’ Gileas mused aloud. ‘I find it hard to believe that he has strayed too far from this position. I know him too well.’ The sergeant grinned. ‘I suspect he will already have met up with the captain. Nonetheless, we will scout this immediate area for any

signs of activity. You take the east side. Report back with anything that you find.'

'As you command,' the Dreadnought acknowledged. 'Thoroughness is essential. Wise words, Brother-Sergeant Ur'ten.' With his seal of approval thus stamped, Diomedes left with a growl of machinery, the ground shaking under his tread.

Gileas watched the Dreadnought leave, its armoured form testament to the highest honour any of them could hope for. To serve, even in death... that was the ideal.

'We missed whatever happened here, Gileas.' One of the Reckoners, Gileas's assault squad, marked by the red skull on his right pauldron, moved to stand beside him.

'Maybe. But there are xenos involved. They are therefore not to be trusted.' Gileas frowned beneath his helmet. 'Keep your wits about you and your thumb on that activation stud, Reuben.'

Gileas signalled to the group to move out, scanning the horizon as he did so. As of yet, Theoderyk had reported no activity on the auspex. But the speed and cunning of the enemy was about to be proven. Bare moments later, the whine of engines filled the air.

Half a dozen vehicles came tearing into view and recognition was instant. Eldar reaver jetbikes. Fast-moving and deadly, they were swift and sure in their attack. Wickedly edged blades caught the light of the weak sun and glinted the briefest warning, but not soon enough to prevent Brother Lemuel losing an arm. A razor-sharp blade tore through his armour with ease.

For the next few seconds, all that mattered to the Silver Skulls were sounds. The bizarre, alien whine of the jetbikes, the rotating scream of Diomedes's assault cannon as the Dreadnought pounded back to the scene and levelled the weapon at the enemy. There was the unified roar of chainswords thumbed into deadly life and the battle cries of the Silver Skulls as they launched themselves at their assailants.

'It's good to see you, Captain Meyoran.'

The voice belonged to Sergeant Kyaerus of the Tenth Company. Slender for a Space Marine, seeming more so against the oversized warriors of the

Eighth Company, the Scout-sergeant's face, prematurely aged by the mass of burn scars that covered the whole left side, showed signs of early fatigue as he emerged from the cover of a half-destroyed building.

The captain considered the other warrior. 'It's good to be seen, sergeant.' A mirthless smile flickered across his face. 'Make your report.'

'Yes, sir.' Meyoran quietly approved of the sergeant's stoicism, even in the face of his current situation. He gestured to his men to maintain a perimeter and to keep a watchful eye out for anything that moved.

Kyaerus reattached his bolt pistol to the mag-clamp on his thigh, taking advantage of the arrival of backup in order to afford himself a little less vigilance. His augmetic left eye whirred softly as he spoke, constantly adjusting to every nuance on the face of the captain.

'In accordance with the Chapter Master's instructions, I travelled to the Cartan Hive to gather the first batch of aspirants and to receive reports from the Governor regarding the state of the mining operations.'

Cartan V was rich in mineral deposits, and it had been this more than anything else that had made it a desirable place for settlement. The Silver Skulls themselves had overseen the relocation of the beleaguered citizens of a largely destroyed hive world – on the agreement that they could return at any point in the future to acquire new recruits.

Kyaerus continued. 'During my conversations with the governor, we received a report. A group of engineers were planning a detonation in order to construct a new minehead. They uncovered something else.' Kyaerus's mutilated face contorted in barely concealed rage. It was a look that Meyoran had come to know all too well in recent years. 'And less than an hour after it was uncovered, the first attack was upon them.'

Meyoran scowled. 'Eldar.' A blunt statement of fact, not a question. The sheer depth of hatred in Kyaerus's face engendered by the captain's words spoke more than his reply did.

'Aye, sir. Obviously my squad and I took a stand with the local military force out at the blast site. We found out very quickly what it was that they had uncovered.' His hand clenched into a fist. 'Only uncovering it wasn't where they stopped. In their curiosity, they had raised it. The local militia were quickly depleted. They just weren't prepared to deal with an incursion of this scale. And the eldar sent through a massed force. They

have made several raids on the garrison, as you see.’ Kyaerus gestured around the ruined barracks before continuing.

‘They hit hard and fast. They’ve practically destroyed the hive. A large percentage of the population have made their way to the sub-levels and are seeking sanctuary there. Those people the raiders *have* found...’ He hesitated, made both angry and deeply regretful by the next bit of information.

‘Prisoners.’ The Adeptus Astartes standing just beside Meyoran, dressed in armour of cobalt-blue that marked him apart from most of the others, stepped forwards and spoke, filling in the pause. Prognosticator Bast’s voice was whisper-soft, and whenever his eyes passed over anybody, they got the feeling that they were being scrutinised very closely. ‘The xenos have rounded up living souls and have imprisoned them. Including our aspirants, yes, sergeant?’

Kyaerus nodded, his face darkening with anger. Meyoran felt a hollow form in the base of his stomach. For the Silver Skulls, recruits were a precious commodity. To lose a batch to the hands of the eldar...

‘Your thoughts, Prognosticator?’ Meyoran finally shifted his gaze from the sergeant to the psyker. The two men had served side by side for decades and he deferred without question to the other’s judgement.

‘The artefact was presumably a webway portal?’ Bast directed the question at Kyaerus, who nodded. ‘It would be a reasonable hypothesis to presume that raiders probably attacked this planet at some point in its past. Uncovering the portal may have alerted them to an opportunity to do so again.’ The psyker shrugged his giant shoulders. ‘None of us truly understand the heathen technology of the webway.’

The Prognosticator reached up to remove his own helmet. The face that emerged was so lost in tattoos and tribal markings that it was hard to make out any specific features. Dark hair worn in tight braids was shot through with silver, but beyond that, it was impossible to approximate the Prognosticator’s age.

Cold eyes, so pale a shade of blue that they were almost entirely colourless, fixed on the sergeant, who held the gaze with cool confidence for a few moments before he wavered and looked away. A flicker of a smile played around the Prognosticator’s face and he enjoyed the moment of startled uncertainty that he lifted from the sergeant’s mind.

‘Whereabouts is the portal?’ Meyoran asked, snapping his helmet back on. ‘If that is the heart of the enemy, then that is where we will strike.’

‘To the south-west.’

The words came from the Prognosticator rather than the sergeant as Bast almost lazily took the answer from his mind. He was not a particularly cruel man, but he had always taken a cynical delight in reminding others of his psychic capabilities. He treated the sergeant to a slow smile before he hid his face once again behind the helmet. In the legends of Old Terra, Bast was the name the great people of Gypta had associated with cats – and Meyoran had always felt there was something faintly feline in Bast’s methods. He liked to play with his enemies before killing them, too.

‘The south-west,’ Kyaerus acknowledged. He tapped a data-slate. ‘All the coordinates and information I’ve gathered are there.’

‘Good work. Then we move out.’ Meyoran waved a hand and the Silver Skulls fell into practiced formation. Kyaerus also gestured, making signs with his fingers, and four hitherto unnoticed Scouts, young neophytes in carapace armour and armed with sniper rifles, appeared from various locations around the compound. Meyoran grinned his approval.

‘You’re training them well, sergeant. You will make a superb captain some day soon.’ Next to him, Bast turned slightly, considering Meyoran’s words.

Kyaerus inclined his head, accepting the compliment with a slight twist of his lips.

‘Let’s go and get our boys back.’

The thunderous report of the Dreadnought’s assault cannon filled the air as Brother Diomedes fired on the attacking reavers. The long, lean armoured bikes moved utilising the anti-grav technology that belonged to their race. Each one was piloted by a single rider armed with pistols that they fired with unerring accuracy at the Silver Skulls. Viciously sharp blades lined the vehicles and it was one of these that had taken Brother Lemuel’s arm from his body.

It took far more than losing a limb to stop a Space Marine though. His body was already working to close over the neat amputation. Lemuel had borne the worst of the pain with little more than a brief yell. He had lost

his chainsword when the limb had been severed, but he merely levelled his bolt pistol and fired at the enemy instead.

Gileas blink-clicked through the runes scrolling in front of his eyes until it brought up Lemuel's data. His systems were coping with the injury well, but he was far from optimal. There were so many combat narcotics and analgesics now coursing round his veins that his reaction time was gravely compromised.

'Lemuel,' he voxed. 'Take a step back, brother. Leave this to us.'

'I can still fight, brother-sergeant.' Lemuel continued to fire on the bikes, which were presently turning for another attack. Diomedes paused briefly, scanning the half-dozen or so vehicles and determining vulnerable points. The massive assault cannon tracked the leading bike. Then the Dreadnought acted, concentrating his fire.

In a burst of blue flame, the bike detonated, throwing its eldar rider free and sending pieces of armour plate and blades in all directions. The burning xenos was thrown to the ground with an audible *crump*, the body twisted at an unnatural angle. The other bikes veered erratically, thrown off from their planned attack run by the sudden loss of the leader.

'Squad Ur'ten, on me.' Lemuel and his obstinate behaviour was not an issue. Lemuel was an Adeptus Astartes. He was bred and trained to purge the galaxy of all that was wrong, and to the Silver Skulls there was little that met the criteria so much as the eldar – particularly these pirates. Lemuel would either survive to fight another day with an augmented limb, or he would die fighting in the Emperor's service. Either outcome was ultimately satisfactory.

With a single burst of his assault cannon, Diomedes had already countered the surprise attack and Gileas would lead his squad as he led every mission he had commanded so far in his career. From the front.

The venerable ancient pounded forwards, his massive Dreadnought body shaking the ground under the Space Marines' feet and cracking the ferrocrete. At one time, this blistered area would have seen the comings and goings of Imperial vessels, bringing supplies to the planet for the building of the hive, delivering people and resources and shipping out whatever had been mined. Now it was a ruin, a place that seemed far older and scarred than something so new had any right to be.

‘For the Emperor and Argentius!’ the war machine bellowed in his thunderous voice. ‘Do not suffer these abominations to live, brothers. We are Silver Skulls. We will prevail!’

‘We will prevail,’ the squad chorused, eager to engage the enemy.

For the tiniest fraction of time, a pause so brief that even Theoderyk could not have captured it on his exquisitely forged chronometer, there was silence. Anticipation. The calm before the storm.

And then the storm broke.

Complete pandemonium descended for several minutes. To the unfortunate xenos attackers, the rapid discipline and fearsome strength that their prey demonstrated meant that those few minutes seemed to stretch out beyond reason. Any advantage they may have had in altitude was reduced by the fact that they had underestimated the fighting prowess of nearly half an Assault company. Even as Gileas fired his jump pack into life, all around him other Silver Skulls were rising to meet their enemies in mid-air.

With Diomedes present, the cleansing of this filth was a matter of course for the Silver Skulls. They entered the fray with customary enthusiasm. Their reputation as a barbaric fighting force was not without reason. They were brutal, efficient warriors who were not adverse to using whatever tactics were necessary to win a fight. This was said of the entire Chapter, but bore particular relevance to the Eighth Company.

Three more eldar riders were unseated by the sudden momentum of fully armoured Silver Skulls launching past them and grabbing them from the bikes. Without riders, the machines careened haphazardly. One struck the ground and exploded in a burst of whickering shrapnel. The others collided in mid-air and similarly detonated. More heat and smoke billowed out in plumes. The remaining two riders turned their bikes into the smog, leaving nothing but contrails in their wake. The warriors who had felled the eldar plummeted downwards with their victims, driving them to the floor with a satisfying crack of vertebrae.

Gileas cast a brief glance at the rune on the bottom left of his display, blinking rapidly to cycle the lenses in his helmet, enabling him to see more effectively through the smoke. The fires from the destroyed jetbikes raged on, continuing to spew ash and cinders into the air.

The cacophony of the past few minutes ebbed back to the soft thrum of chainswords on low power. There were still two reavers out there and the destruction of their compatriots meant that they were temporarily masked in the resultant smoke.

‘Sergeant Ur’ten, report,’ Meyoran voxed. Gileas glanced around. Of the twenty-four warriors who had exited the drop-pods, there were still twenty-two standing. One was dead, the other injured.

‘Eldar raiders, sir,’ he responded. ‘On jetbikes. They struck without warning.’

‘Dead?’

‘Job almost complete, sir. Two left out there. I’m almost certain that—’

With a sudden, screaming whine, one of the remaining jetbikes burst out of the smoke, heading straight for Gileas’s broad-shouldered back. Without so much as turning around, the Assault Marine thumbed his chainsword back into life, sidestepped lazily and brought his weapon around in a murderous arc. The serrated, whirring blade chewed through the pilot from just below its right ear, down through the thorax and severed the body diagonally. The head and left arm fell away in a shower of gore, leaving an out-of-control jetbike, a still-twitching eldar gripping the controls with a lifeless hand.

With a single burst from his cannon, Brother Diomedes finished it.

‘Correction. One left, sir.’

Gileas’s tone had not changed at all.

‘Good work, sergeant. Transmitting coordinates. Sergeant Kyaerus has found us.’ Gileas smiled. Not, he noted, the other way around. ‘Meet us as soon as you can. Stay alert for that rogue rider. Try to get here in one piece.’

‘Aye, captain.’ Gileas grinned beneath his helmet. ‘On our way.’

They encountered nothing as they traversed the largely obliterated compound. All the Silver Skulls remained alert, aware that there was a reaver close by. The intelligence that had been broadcast with the emergency transmission had suggested a reasonably sized force in-situ on this planet. It was the reason the decision had been taken to deploy a large proportion of the company.

During the meeting in the strategium, Gileas had queried the necessity for Captain Meyoran to come down to the surface at all. The captain had laughed dismissively, claspng Gileas's shoulder.

'Brother-Sergeant Ur'ten, I hope that you don't plan to let this promotion turn you into my keeper,' he had said. 'Prognosticator Bast has communed with the Emperor. It is His will that I lead this expedition. Besides, why should I let you have all the glory? You will take command in my place soon enough.' The words had sounded ominous; prophetic, even.

Gileas had begun to protest, which had earned an indulgent grin from the captain. 'I jest, brother,' he had said with a gruff laugh. 'By the Throne, Gileas, learn to be less literal.'

Bast, assigned directly from the psyker-led prognosticatum, had nodded solemnly. 'The omens are most auspicious for the battle to come, Brother-Sergeant Ur'ten,' he had pronounced in his soft whisper. 'It is vital that the captain is present.'

Unsettled by the Prognosticator's words without quite knowing why, Gileas had put his worries to the back of his mind and they had instead concentrated on the importance of eliminating the eldar forces.

Over the centuries the Silver Skulls had repeatedly encountered the eldar in their many and varied forms. Whilst the justifiable detestation of all alien races was the right of the Adeptus Astartes, the Silver Skulls reserved an especial hatred for the eldar. Many good battle-brothers had been lost at the Battle of Oram Pass. Many good battle-brothers who had yet to be replaced. The Chapter was dipping well below its normal numbers and the recruitment process was slow for many reasons.

As a result, the prospect of visiting righteous retribution on the eldar was one that Eighth Company relished with grim enthusiasm. Fifty warriors had been deployed, more than half the company's current complement.

By the time they reached the rendezvous point, Meyoran and his warriors were already gathered. Prognosticator Bast and the only other psychic battle-brother present stood to one side, conspicuous by the colour of their armour. The prognosticatum had suffered more losses at the hands of the eldar at Oram Pass than any other. For a Chapter whose home world

was sparsely populated with psykers, it had been a harsh toll. The prognosticatum had more reason than most to hate the foul eldar pirates.

‘You took your time,’ greeted Meyoran, his tone light, but his voice slightly strained with the tension of what he had established of the situation thus far.

‘Apologies, sir.’ Gileas joined his captain and removed his helmet. ‘Undisciplined xenos taking an attack of opportunity. We made short work of them thanks to Brother Diomedes.’ The sergeant nodded reverently in the Dreadnought’s direction.

‘You know what it is that we face here, then?’

‘Aye, sir.’ Gileas’s hand closed into a fist. ‘Eldar raiders.’

‘Mostly correct. Eldar raiders, yes. Eldar raiders with access to a webway portal.’

Gileas faltered only slightly. That changed things. With access to a portal, he knew well from experience that it would be impossible to plan any sort of attack based on numbers. More could arrive at any given moment. Their priority was clear. He nodded his understanding and Meyoran continued.

‘I will lead the attack on the portal with the majority of our fighting force – and Diomedes,’ he said. ‘You will take the Reckoners and command the rescue mission.’ He indicated a young Scout Gileas recognised. One of Kyaerus’s squad, the callow youth was looking eager to get the battle under way. ‘Tyr took the liberty of going ahead to assess the situation as best he could under the circumstances. The eldar have a considerable number of human captives, including our aspirants. As of a few minutes ago, they were in holding pens, presumably awaiting loading into one of their ships. Time is of the essence.’

Meyoran tweaked his long plaited beard. ‘Priorities are to destroy the portal, eliminate the xenos threat and ensure as many citizens as possible survive the ordeal. This may present difficulties given that the raiders have arranged the cages around their central position. Those are our objectives. In that order.’

‘Slaves?’ Gileas was aware on an unconscious level that Meyoran was assessing his reaction to being denied the honour of leading the attack, and kept his face as neutral as he could. Despite his best efforts, disappointment stirred in the pit of his belly.

‘Possibly.’ Meyoran’s tattooed face twisted into a scowl, the black ink contorting grotesquely. ‘Or worse. Either way, expediency is critical.’

Gileas set his jaw angrily. ‘So they are utilising human shields?’

‘Aye. There may well be Imperial casualties during this operation, Gileas, but do what you can to minimise risk.’ Meyoran waited a moment as though expecting an argument. Gileas was far more suited to the task of taking the portal than he was of search and rescue, and they both knew it.

The serpent of rebellion that had woken at Meyoran’s orders writhed in Gileas’s stomach again, threatening to rise its hooded head and strike. But Gileas quelled it. He would question the captain’s orders when they were back on the *Silver Arrow*, not whilst they were in the field. He knew he was being tested and he would be damned before he failed.

‘As my captain orders,’ he replied, snapping his helmet back on again. ‘Reckoners, on me.’

Meyoran glanced at Bast as Gileas turned to walk away. The Prognosticator inclined his head almost graciously.

‘Sergeant.’ Meyoran called after Gileas’s retreating back.

‘Brother-captain?’ Gileas turned slightly.

‘Endure, brother.’ There was a passion in Meyoran’s voice that poked the seed of uncertainty that had been planted in Gileas’s mind during the meeting in the strategium. His doubts and misgivings burst into bloom, and he almost turned to consider the captain fully. But there was no time to dwell on thoughts and feelings. He had promised Meyoran back in the chapel that he would maintain his focus. He had his orders and he would carry them out to the best of his ability.

The alien portal rose up from the ground, a slim, tapering arc casting a faint rippling visual distortion in its curve. It looked frail, a thing that could be easily broken under the onslaught of the Silver Skulls, and yet they had fought enough eldar raiders to know that they were disasters just waiting to happen. At any given moment, more troops and vehicles could arrive without warning. Then their troubles would be multiplied exponentially.

A Raider, one of the transport ships that the pirates so favoured, hovered silently next to the portal. It was a massive thing, painted with

incomprehensible symbols. An eldar pilot was seated at the rear of the vehicle, his long, thin alien face with delicately pointed ears clearly visible. He was looking out at the makeshift arena in the compound.

From the vantage point below the rising ridge that led to the blast site, Meyoran had already assessed the battleground. He had noted potential risk points and possible cover. The cages were pulled into a rough circle, a curtain of human flesh drawn between them and their prey.

Meyoran and his force would lead the battle inwards, away from the civilians. Diomedes had been charged with the destruction of the webway portal. By creating such a chaotic distraction, they might buy Gileas and his squad enough time to liberate the prisoners. Perhaps.

Turning his attention to the Raider, Meyoran reviewed the data the Chapter had assimilated over the years on eldar tech. He knew where the weak points were and exactly how he could destroy the vessel. It looked customised; an ornate throne had been pushed forwards to the front of the main deck, where what was presumably the leader of the mission sat, watching with undisguised delight over the chaos he had wrought.

The humans in the cages were sobbing pitifully, calling out for the Emperor's aid, or in the case of several burly young men, screaming promises of revenge. The recruits.

Occasionally, one of the warriors mingling around the makeshift arena would jab into the cages with cruel blades, or fire a shot from the weapons they carried. Elsewhere, the xenos were fighting one another. High-pitched cackles of delight filled the air.

The overseer shouted something in his harsh tongue and several of the raiders raced to a cage, pulling one of their captives into the middle of the circle. Even as Meyoran watched, the aliens began to torture their victim, slicing strips of skin from his face with wickedly curved knives. The man screamed in pain, but for every scream that bubbled from his lips, the more his captors screamed back – only their screams were of joy.

Closing his ears to the sound, Meyoran completed his scan of the area. A rough ring of scrap metal framed the entire scene, bedecked with spikes and broken plexglass. Some of the spikes were further decorated by the grisly addition of human heads. Some still wore their Cartan Militia helmets.

‘Prognosticator?’ The captain turned to the blue-clad battle-brother at his side. He and Shae Bast had worked together for so long that they knew one another’s methods inside out. Alone, Bast was a dangerous opponent. Teamed with the brute force of a Space Marine Assault company, he was nigh-on unstoppable.

The Prognosticator’s head snapped up and the sparks of psychic energy flowing steadily through the crystal mesh rising from his gorget began to pulse. He was gathering his powers. As soon as he gave the word, they would attack.

Meyoran’s eyes flickered once again to the Raider. He had already established his own personal objective. The power fist at the end of his arm hummed softly. Beside him, Bast was motionless.

The hunger for action was like a living, breathing thing.

Finally, Bast’s whispering voice transmitted across the vox to all the Silver Skulls who were coiled like springs ready for the attack.

‘Commence,’ was all he said and the steel-grey force washed over the ridge like a tide of doom, weapons at the ready, raging litanies of war and hatred.

Within seconds, the Silver Skulls were met by a forest of dancing xenos whose voices raised in harsh, ear-searing counterpoint to the Space Marines’ battle roar. The eldar were all flashing blades, cruel edges and needle points. The howls and whoops of half-crazed joy accompanied their attack as their narcotic-soaked minds engaged instantly with the fight.

Even as he raised his crackling fist to smite them where they stood, Meyoran could not help but assess them. They were the complete antithesis of their Space Marine counterparts: a chaotic rabble with no style or structure to their methods. They would fall under the onslaught of the Adeptus Astartes, of that there was little doubt. It remained to be seen what the toll would be on the company.

Perched like grotesque gargoyles on broken spars, a number of bat-winged warriors unleashed bizarre alien weaponry. With brays of uncontrollable delight, they fired their weapons. Toxic crystalline shards scattered over the Space Marines, a glittering rain that broke over battle plate with the discordant sound of crashing chimes. The sound of sniper rifles joined in the jarring noises that echoed around the natural basin as Kyaerus’s young Scouts took aim and fired on them.

Aboard the Raider, the overseer had got to his feet. Long, lean and with cruelty etched into his features, he pointed at the Prognosticator and shouted something to his warriors. Some of them broke away and concentrated their efforts on the encroaching psyker, the sound of laughter intensified to near-hysteria. Through it all, Bast continued to walk towards the centre of the compound, determination implicit in every step. His psychic hood crackled with barely contained power.

Meyoran fought with grim determination, pouring silent scorn on an enemy who were so keen to die. They practically threw themselves into the path of his fist, dying with gurgling ecstasy. Everything about these xenos offended and sickened him to the core. That fury channelled itself into every swing, and he broke bones and shattered skulls wherever he walked.

A group of eldar had turned their weapons on the prisoners in the pens and were preparing to open fire. The unfortunates within huddled into a corner of the cage, sobbing pitifully and waiting for the death that was sure to come. The lead eldar gestured with his rifle and barked an order.

Bare seconds later he was pulverised into the ground when Gileas Ur'ten dropped onto him from the sky. Meyoran felt a surge of something that may have been exhilaration, but could just as easily have been relief.

‘Excellent timing, sergeant.’

Meyoran received little more than a grunt in response. Around the compound, the Reckoners were descending from the heavens, having used their jump packs to lend momentum to their attack.

In the heart of the battle, Bast stopped walking and stood, raising his helmeted head to meet the gaze of the overseer on the Raider. The eldar lifted his right hand and bellowed a command. Meyoran could hear the urgency in the tone, but it was too late. Far too late.

Dropping to a stoop, Bast laid his gauntleted hand on the ground and brought forth his power. At first nothing seemed to happen, but then there was the very faintest rumble. Bast’s powers had always been elemental in nature and the seismic shock he brought forth from the willing earth was enough to knock many of his would-be attackers off their feet.

‘Get those prisoners clear, sergeant,’ Meyoran voxed urgently, his voice strangely distorted by the earth tremor. ‘Use whatever means necessary.’

‘Acknowledged, sir.’

The Reckoners had secured the area around the cages easily enough. The problem now would be holding them long enough for an evacuation. It didn't remain a problem for long, however, as Diomedes ploughed through the rocky ridge, effectively creating the perfect escape corridor. The Dreadnought continued towards the portal, scattering the foe before him.

'They're activating the portal, Gileas,' Meyoran advised. 'Get these people to safety. Diomedes, level that device now before they can retreat, or worse, reinforce their position.'

The massive war machine fired at the alien device without hesitation. The first stream of shells seemed to do little more than inflict surface damage. Delicate and fragile it may have looked – but it was a sturdy structure.

Everywhere was noise and carnage as the Reckoners fought for the liberation of the human prisoners. The eldar did everything they could to prevent their delicious prize being stolen from them, lashing themselves into a frenzy with archaic – but, as several battle-brothers discovered, deadly – gladiatorial weapons. Toxic shards rained on the humans as they fled. Many died, but the Reckoners did what they could to prevent too many losses. Even in the midst of battle, Meyoran quietly approved of the calm efficiency with which Gileas carried out his orders. Not for the first time, he felt pride in the younger warrior.

As the shimmering haze within the portal rippled unnaturally, a handful of eldar troops ran into it and vanished. The overseer called out something to his pilot in an urgent tone.

'They're retreating, Diomedes!' Meyoran bellowed in fury. He wasn't going to let the architect of this destruction get away if he could help it. The Dreadnought rumbled a reply and began another assault on the portal.

With a sudden scream of engines, the jetbike that had escaped from the earlier attack ripped into view, its mounted splinter rifle firing on prisoners and Silver Skulls alike. Distracted by the unexpected arrival, Meyoran turned his attention away from the overseer, just for a moment.

It was to prove to be the most costly moment of his life.

'Captain Meyoran!'

Several voices came across the vox almost simultaneously, cutting into and over each other urgently. Behind him, the leader had raised a weapon that looked for all the world like a barbed whip. With expert ease, the

eldar flicked back his wrist almost lazily. A thin, snakelike tendril writhed towards Meyoran with preternatural speed, wrapping itself around his gorget. The eldar jerked the whip tightly, pulling the captain to the ground.

Searing pain came and went as Meyoran realised that the whip had sliced through his power armour at the neck seal. Felled by the blow, the warrior struggled to stand as the jetbike turned towards him, firing unceasingly, weapon mounts chattering. His power armour sparked, buckled and finally gave way under the onslaught. He fell back to the ground and almost immediately a ravening pack of eldar swarmed over him. Meyoran fought for all he was worth, but he was losing.

‘Sergeant Ur’ten, get the prisoners clear. You have two minutes by my estimate.’

His voice felt strained and unnatural. Perhaps there had been some sort of xenos toxin contained in the weapons strike. Perhaps it was simply the fact that there were presently eldar warriors clinging to him like limpets. Death was imminent and he felt no regret. The omens had spoken of this. He would not defy fate.

That was not *his* destiny.

‘Captain Meyoran, I’m heading your way. I will—’

‘No, Gileas. There isn’t time. We need to finish this. *You* need to finish this. You have to get the aspirants back.’

‘I can stop them—’

‘Follow your orders, Gileas Ur’ten.’ Shae Bast’s cold, impassive voice cut across the conversation.

‘But—’

‘Look to your duty, brother-sergeant!’ It was Meyoran this time who snapped the order. ‘I’m not finished yet. You must endure, brother.’

There was no reply.

Engines fired into life and the Raider began to move, heading towards the damaged portal into which the remaining eldar were racing headlong.

You *must* endure, Gileas Ur’ten, Meyoran willed silently.

With a roar that started deep down in his stomach, the mortally wounded captain rose to his feet, the eldar still clinging to him, hacking, slashing, firing. Several fell from his body as he stood, and they scuttled frantically into the portal.

He powered his jump pack into life and soared skywards, landing unsteadily on the Raider beside the overseer. The last of his strength was bolstered by the ceaseless flow of combat stimms around his system. Were he to remove his helmet, he suspected his eyes would be as wild and staring as those of the creature he now faced.

Having not anticipated this move, the alien screamed its defiance. The noise was curtailed as Meyoran reached out and crushed the fragile skull in one hand. He tossed the corpse over the side with casual contempt.

He raised his power fist and cast a glance around the compound. Gileas and the Reckoners were ensuring that the humans were clear. The other Silver Skulls were finishing off the remaining eldar and Diomedes was pouring fire onto the portal.

All was as it should be. The Silver Skulls were doing more than prevailing. They were *winning*. If this was to be the last thing he ever saw, then he would die with pride and honour.

Meyoran's helmeted gaze met that of the Prognosticator, who raised a hand in silent salute.

With every last ounce of strength left in his body, the captain thrust his armoured fist into the heart of the vehicle. The fragile engine housing splintered under the force of the impact, crushing power circuits and couplings just beneath the surface. The pilot lost all control as the fist's energy field flared, igniting the vessel from within. Simultaneously, Diomedes's persistence was rewarded as the ship reached the webway's active field.

Both the portal and the half of the Raider that had failed to translate to the webway detonated in a expanding ball of fire and debris. Gileas and the Reckoners had done their job; the civilian survivors, whilst thrown to the ground by the shockwave of the blast, were far enough away that the explosion itself did little more than singe an eyebrow or two.

The remaining threat was dealt with swiftly. The jetbike was ripped apart by Diomedes. The other aliens, who had descended into even more chaos at the loss of their leader, were dead in moments.

Dead.

Gileas reached up and snatched off his helmet, flinging it to one side. He would not accept the blinking rune that told him of Meyoran's demise. He *could* not.

‘Prognosticator!’ His voice bellowed across the smouldering battlefield. ‘Prognosticator, I need to speak to you right now!’

‘Gileas...’ Reuben, Gileas’s oldest friend and his brother-in-arms since the days they had been novitiates, laid a gauntlet on his sergeant’s arm. He could feel Gileas’s fury and grief. ‘Now is not the time.’

The sergeant shook his arm free from Reuben’s grip and turned furious hazel eyes on him. ‘You are wrong, Reuben. Now *is* the time. There are rituals to observe. And, damn it, I will observe them. Prognosticator!’

‘Sergeant Ur’ten.’

The Prognosticator’s whispering voice came from behind him, channelled through the vox-bead in his ear.

‘Confirm Meyoran’s death.’

‘You saw the explosion yourself, sergeant. Surely—’

‘I said confirm his death.’ Gileas took a step towards the psyker, who held his ground serenely.

‘As you command, brother-sergeant.’ The Prognosticator drew his concentration in once again. Gileas felt the brief touch of the psyker’s mind on his own as Bast allowed his attention to drift around the battlefield.

‘Nothing, brother-sergeant.’ Bast’s helmeted head lowered in respect and Gileas was temporarily thrown off his raging stride by the genuine sorrow he heard in the other’s voice. ‘The captain is gone.’

Gileas ran a hand across his stubble-shadowed jawline and stared at the Prognosticator. The words were there, but the meaning would not connect with his synapses. Bast took a step closer, leaning in to whisper so that only the stunned sergeant could hear him.

‘Meyoran is gone, Gileas,’ he said, quietly. ‘Control your inner beast for once in your life and do your duty.’

Duty. There it was again. That word.

Born into a nomadic tribe which had struggled just to survive, reborn into a tribe of warriors upon whom the very fate of the Imperium depended, the word had always had a profound effect on Gileas. He was a Space Marine. He was a Silver Skull.

‘Yes,’ he said, his shoulders automatically straightening. ‘Yes, of course.’ Bast inclined his head and stepped back.

The battle was over. There was nothing more they could do here other than to recover the legacies of their fallen brothers and take back however many of the aspirants remained. The recovery of the hive would fall to the local troops and emergency aid would be sent in due course.

Gileas cast a glance at the smouldering portal. The eldar might return, but it would undoubtedly take time for them to assimilate any galactic coordinates they might have been able to glean from their brief time on Cartan.

‘Silver Skulls,’ Gileas said, over the vox, bending to retrieve his helmet. ‘Withdraw.’

The chapel aboard the *Silver Arrow* once more wrapped Gileas in its cocoon of calm. This time, however, he was not hardening his core, grounding himself in battle doctrine and preparing for a fight. This time he was there for a different reason.

Keile Meyoran.

The captain’s name had been painstakingly written letter by agonising letter onto the company’s war banner, along with the names of other brothers who had fallen. As his position dictated, the job of adding Meyoran’s name had been his right.

It was an honour, but one that he had not wanted ever to fulfil.

‘He should not have died,’ Gileas said softly to the Prognosticator who stood by his side, staring up at the banner. Out of his battle plate, the Prognosticator’s years were more evident in the slight stoop of his shoulders, as though he held the weight of his centuries on them.

‘It was his destiny. It was predetermined before we even left the ship. For every action, Gileas Ur’ten, there has to be a consequence. By leaving the ship to come down to the surface with the company, Meyoran set an irreversible chain of events in motion.’ The psyker’s colourless eyes skimmed over the banner with cool detachment. ‘It was the Emperor’s will that he was lost today. He knew that and he accepted the omen gladly.’

Gileas angled his head abruptly in Bast’s direction. The Prognosticator held a silver rune in the palm of his leathery-skinned hand. He turned it over and over almost idly, such a complacent gesture that Gileas felt his blood start to boil.

‘He should *not* have died.’ The sergeant spun on his heel and turned to face Bast fully. ‘He could have been spared to fight another day. He should not have listened to you.’

Taller than the psyker by a considerable amount, the Space Marine towered threateningly. In any other circumstances, it would have been no question as to who would have the upper hand should things come to blows. But the power of the prognosticatum over the whole Chapter meant that nothing was ever so certain.

Gileas was well aware of the extent of Bast’s powers. He had seen the Prognosticator crush dozens of warriors with a word. He had been indoctrinated over the decades to revere the Prognosticators of the Silver Skulls and to defer to their ultimate judgement. And yet right now, all he felt was anger. Anger at the power the Prognosticator wielded. Anger at the fact that Meyoran, a good warrior and a good soul, had been taken from them. Anger at something he could not put a name to.

An amused, almost indulgent smile twisted Bast’s features. Involuntarily, Gileas’s hands clenched into fists as he allowed his anger to be quenched in the physical face of his duty. He could not, in all good conscience however, allow the words to pass unsaid.

‘Auspicious, you said. You said that the omens were auspicious for the battle down there. You knew, didn’t you? You knew he would die if he went down there, and still you let him go?’

Bast nodded. ‘Our lives are about adapting to circumstances. Change is a fundamental part of the life of a Space Marine, Gileas. This *had* to happen in order for future events to occur to the fullest benefit of the Chapter.’

‘What events?’

Bast paused, and for a heartbeat Gileas sensed the psyker’s touch on his mind. Then Bast’s eyes left him and the older Space Marine pocketed the rune. ‘It remains to be seen. For now, though, do not mourn Keile Meyoran too much. Remember him as we all will, but give thanks to the Emperor that his death was a glorious one. Put your energies into your own life instead. You endure, Gileas Ur’ten. Remember that.’

The Prognosticator bowed deeply and took his leave, his bare feet padding almost silently on the cold metal floor of the chapel. Gileas watched him go, pondering his words. His eyes lifted once again to the banner and were caught by the motto.

Vincit Qui Patitur.

He conquers who endures.

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First published in *Hammer and Bolter Issue 5* (2011).
This edition published in 2015 by Black Library, Games
Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

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ISBN: 978-1-78572-302-5

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