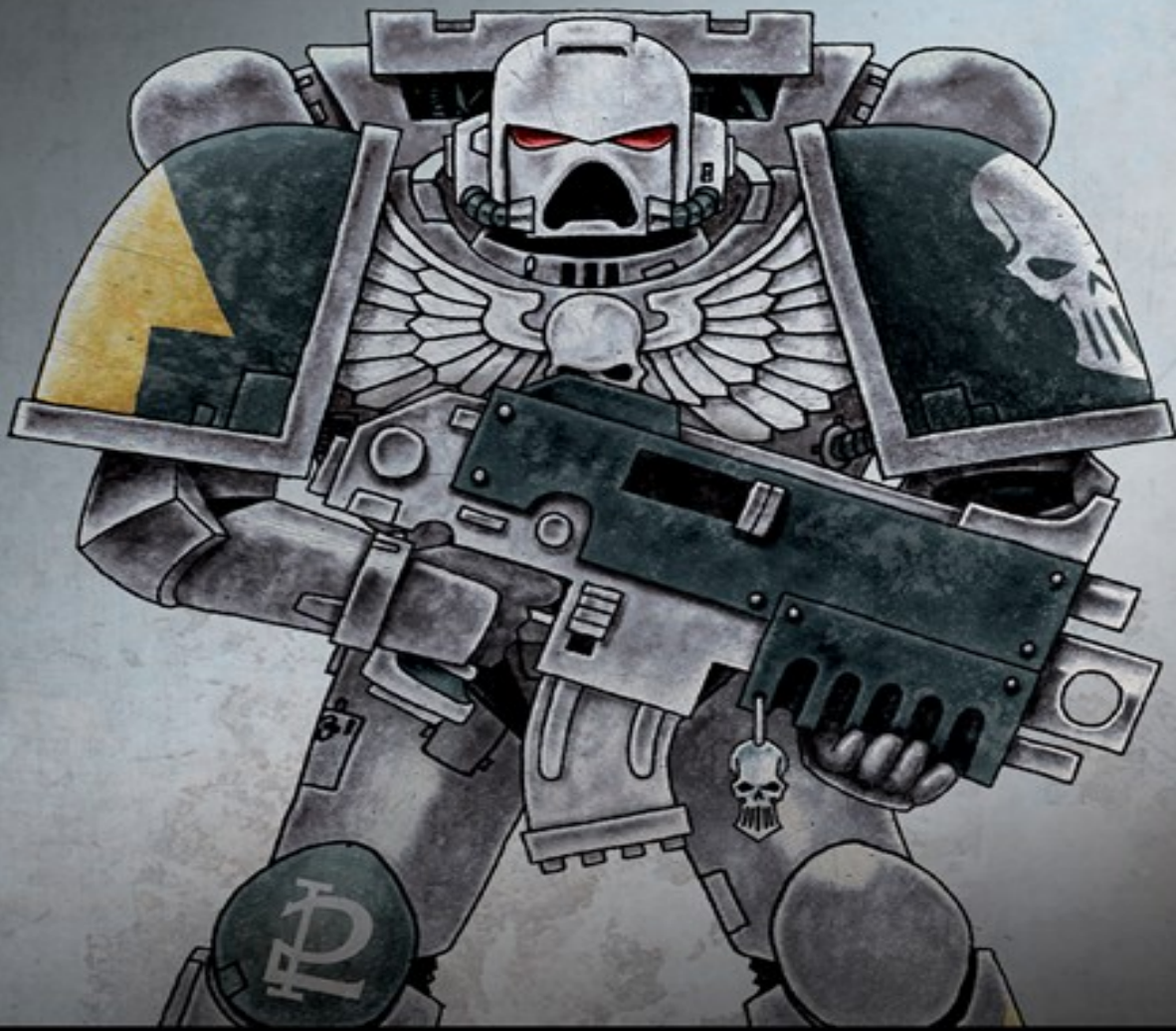


# WARHAMMER 40,000



## SILVER SKULLS CAUSE AND EFFECT

S P CAWKWELL



## CAUSE AND EFFECT

Sarah Cawkwell

The whisper of the Emperor's voice was his constant companion. But Vashiro, Chief Prognosticator of the Silver Skulls Chapter of Space Marines, could only properly discern His glorious truth by channelling the psychic connection into something more tactile.

Whenever he cast the sacred runes, or turned over the fading cards of his centuries-old Imperial Tarot deck, he reached through the immaterium and sought the Emperor's guidance as an infant reaches out to a parent. The use of the objects was a means to channel and focus that guidance. There was also an element of mystery attached which induced respect from all who witnessed a Prognostication.

When a metaphysical link was finally forged, when any of the psykers of the Chapter connected with their ultimate father, the shrouded futures of the Silver Skulls were unveiled and their paths paved with solid decision. The Emperor's psychic children simply took His words and will and divined their purpose.

At times, the obscurity of the visions meant that their meanings were difficult to extrapolate. When this happened, a great burden fell on the shoulders of the divining Prognosticator who frequently had to make a call to arms that could see squads, or even entire companies, devastated on the field of battle.

No matter how contrary or controversial, the decision of a Prognosticator was never questioned – except by another, more senior

member of the Prognosticatum. Their word was never disputed. Their orders were obeyed without hesitation. They were revered above all other battle-brothers. They were few in number yet their power, both on the field of battle and politically, was immense.

A former Lord Commander Argentius had once refused to deploy when his psychic adviser had expressed doubt. It had proved a shrewd move when the presumed-dormant volcano on the planet burst into terrible life. As the violent eruption incinerated all in its path, it became obvious that it would have swept the Space Marines away in its pyroclastic flow as well. Prognostication was a great gift that, despite the risk, had the potential to save many lives.

But amongst these gifts, all these glimpses of what the future held, the psykers of the Silver Skulls Chapter all fervently hoped they would avoid one thing.

The Deep Dark afflicted all the psychic battle-brothers at least once in their service. An anxious time when the Emperor turned His face away from a beloved child. To each Prognosticator, this was translated as something different – but most agreed that it signalled the Emperor's great displeasure. It was a terrible, mentally devastating experience for a psyker; somewhere between crushing disappointment at being denied guidance and a selfish, desperate desire for approval from their master.

And from time to time there were visions like the one Vashiro had now. One that repeated itself over and over. Easy enough to understand, harder to truly translate into an appropriate course of action.

A shattered silver skull.

*The Fortress Monastery of the Silver Skulls*  
*Argent Mons, Varsavia*

For countless centuries, the Silver Skulls had recruited from a number of worlds but all their warriors had been trained here on the far-flung world of Varsavia. A visiting dignitary from Terra many centuries ago had acknowledged that the Monastery's design would have impressed the Primarch Rogal Dorn himself. It was highly defensible and nigh on impenetrable to the outside world.

The home of the Chapter was carved out of the rock of the Argent Mons, the highest peak of a vast mountain range in the far north of the planet. The veins of unmined silver that threaded through the rock had birthed not only the mountain's name, but also the name of the Chapter who called it home.

Apart from the serf quarters, only the chapel and the docking bays were above ground level. The chapel was a vast, cavernous chamber, large enough to contain several companies at the same time with room to spare. The rays of the weak sun bled through the beautifully worked stained glass and at the right time of day dappled the stone floor in a myriad of glorious colours where it filtered through the stylised image of the first Lord Argentius. It was a place of considerable peace and reflection, a contrast to the ever-bustling embarkation decks and docking bays. Everything else within the Monastery was to be found deep in the bowels of the mountain range.

Argent Mons was difficult to reach and this was as much by design as coincidental geography. Novitiates were brought to the Monastery largely by incoming vessels that approached from the west side of the mountain range, directly into the spaceport. Some youths, more tenacious and stubborn than many others, had been known to scale the mountain range itself in adolescent determination to follow a dream. This was rare, of course, for such a journey was fraught with perils. But there were battle-brothers serving the chapter even now who had taken that very path.

Vashiro knew that they would have to discuss one such individual today and it made him uneasy for many reasons.

As was the case with Argentius, “Vashiro” was a hereditary name and in old Varsavian translated literally as “The One Who Sees”. It had passed down from the first Chief Prognosticator to each successor since the founding of the Chapter. The current incumbent had answered to the name for nigh on five hundred years.

He considered the Chapter Master, head bowed over the massive ledger before him. Vashiro’s early confidence in him had been well founded. It had been the Chief Prognosticator’s careful manipulation of the Chapter’s various personalities – like pieces in a great game – that had ensured the former First Captain had risen to the position without contest.

Argentius’s skill for strategy and planning had been second to none. As a leader, he was inspiring, intelligent, honest, even charming. As Chapter Master, he commanded unswerving loyalty and dedication from those who served him. He was an Emperor’s Angel to the core, as fierce as he was valiant.

But then, the Silver Skulls were a loyal breed. Brutal, valiant warriors with a propensity for intense close-quarters combat, the Chapter was relentless in battle. Since the time of the Second Founding, the Silver Skulls had been an active force in the galaxy. Yet in more recent years the light of their star had begun to fade.

Increasing losses at the hands of the enemies of the Imperium meant that their numbers were gradually dwindling. Recently, there had been an unexpected surge in the intake of new warriors and it seemed that things were finally regaining some sort of equilibrium. Vashiro had once again dared to believe that all hope was not lost.

And yet...

The recalled memory of the vision clung to his thoughts with grim determination. A shattered silver skull. There was very little that could be clearer to interpret.

‘Is the tithe set for despatch?’

Pulled from his reverie, Vashiro looked up at the Chapter Master’s words and nodded sombrely. Argentius sat opposite him, a golden goblet

of fine Varsavian wine in his hand. Even like this, out of his battle plate and dressed in a simple white robe, he was like a young golden-haired god. Swooping coils of spiral-inspired honour tattoos followed the lines of his face and accentuated the fierce set of his jaw and glint of danger in his deeply set hazel eyes. A prime example of the Adeptus Astartes, Argentius could have walked from the legends of old straight into their Fortress-Monastery.

‘Yes, my Lord. The gene-seed tithe has been tallied and is now readied for its journey to Terra. We are also sending four new promising Techmarines to Mars.’ This was news in itself; battle-brothers who displayed an affinity with the machine spirits were almost as rare as Prognosticators.

‘Was it as bad as we anticipated?’ There was a brief heartbeat before Vashiro responded.

‘The gene-seed tithe is, as we predicted, significantly reduced in number.’

The Chapter Master pursed his lips briefly and continued, consulting the vast ledger before him. ‘The powers that be on Terra will hopefully remain content that our chapter thrives. And the God-Emperor willing, it will be so.’ He swirled the wine around in the goblet, considering its crimson depths thoughtfully.

‘We are the Silver Skulls,’ said Vashiro, watching the Chapter Master’s obvious consternation. ‘We will prevail.’ The words were automatic, but heartfelt nonetheless.

‘Aye.’ Argentius lifted the goblet to his lips and downed the contents in a single pull, setting the vessel to one side. A silent serf stepped forward from the shadows and took the goblet away. He received no thanks. He did not expect them.

‘And what of...’ Vashiro moved to the next item, consulting his own dataslate. A ghost of a smile drifted across his face. ‘Eighth Company?’

‘Ah, yes. *That* matter.’ Argentius mirrored Vashiro’s smile with one of his own. ‘Captain Meyoran, may the ancestors protect his soul, certainly

recommended him highly enough in the past. Gileas's combat record speaks for itself. He is the most appropriate choice to take command. Young perhaps, but our best option.'

News of Keile Meyoran's recent death at the hands of eldar raiders had made its way back via astropathic telecommunication to Varsavia. Another unfortunate loss, but the story of his sacrifice had joined the annals of legend and was already being recited in the training halls. Keile Meyoran's legacy would live on.

'Gileas Ur'ten. Andreas Kulle's prodigy. Ah, now. Would that Kulle were still here to see how Gileas has risen above and beyond the foolish prejudices of his youth.' The Chapter Master paused and reached up to stroke his jaw thoughtfully.

'But?' Vashiro had no difficulty sensing the hesitation and gently teased it from his commander. Even one of the younger Prognosticators, without the years of practice, without the personal familiarity with the mighty warrior, could have sensed the inner turmoil. Not so many could have extracted the heart of the Lord Commander's worries so easily.

Another smile, this time slightly abashed and rueful. 'You know me too well, Aerus.'

'Of course.' Entirely comfortable with Argentius's use of his birth name, Vashiro inclined his head respectfully. 'It is, without wishing to offend, my job.' Argentius laughed warmly and slapped his hand on the vast desk in approval. Eventually the laughter died away. Watching the serious mien return was like seeing a cloud pass over the face of the sun.

'Gileas is a fine warrior,' he said, considering the dataslate carefully. 'That is without question. He is a good, honest man and such a promotion would lead Eighth Company to great things.' Argentius took a deep breath.

'Unfortunately, it seems that there are those amongst us who do not think a man of his...' The Chapter Master hesitated to use the word that had been bandied around, disliking its connotations immensely.

'Heritage, my Lord?' Vashiro offered the word softly.

Not much better, Argentius thought, but certainly something of an improvement on ‘breeding’. The word had smacked too much of animal husbandry, a very carefully contrived and almost certainly intentional insult to Gileas Ur’ten’s birth amongst the more savage and poorly educated tribes of Varsavia’s far southern continent.

‘Heritage. Background. Whatever it is, there has never been a south-born in the position of company Captain,’ said Argentius. ‘It would be an unprecedented move. Some say it would be dangerous to allow – how was it Brother Djul phrased the problem? “It would be dangerous to allow a borderline savage to wield that much control over a company of Adeptus Astartes.”’ Argentius’s lip curled slightly. ‘I do not truly understand these comments. Such old, petty distrusts. Are we not yet ready to move beyond, Vashiro?’

‘Old wounds run the deepest, my Lord. Brother Djul is set in his ways, perhaps more so than others.’ Djul was a Chapter champion, one of the Talriktug, First Company. Without psychic power, he was not one of the most elite, the Prognosticators.

Djul was well known for his piety, his zealous nature and his complete and utter dislike of change.

‘Objectively,’ Vashiro continued, ‘the reason that none born in the south have ascended the ranks is well-known.’

‘They burn brightly and they die fast.’ Argentius sighed and got to his feet, moving to the stone terrace that overlooked the training quadrant. He felt surest when he stood here, when the cages rang out with the sounds of sparring and training or when companies drilled there. The clash of sword on sword, the ordered shouts and noisy, easy banter that drifted up to his chamber were somehow soothing; a reassurance that despite their continued hardships and challenges, the Silver Skulls *would* prevail.

‘Gileas’s temper is almost as famous as his prowess in battle,’ the Lord Commander acknowledged reluctantly. ‘I have received assurances however that he has gained much mastery of it in recent years. The fact that he is still living is testament to that truth.’

‘I understand your dilemma, my Lord,’ said Vashiro, coming to stand behind him. ‘Promotion would surely inflame those who do not approve. And yet there are those who may resent the decision not to promote him.’ The Prognosticator spread his hands wide. ‘Your choice will upset one group or the other.’

‘The future of our Chapter hinges on many things, Vashiro. The decision to promote a stalwart, honest warrior should not be one of them. And yet even I, not blessed with the Emperor’s sight, can feel the importance of this choice. I fear that if I make the wrong decision, our chapter will feel the consequences.’

At Argentius’s words, Vashiro’s vision swam back into sharp focus and all too clearly, he understood the full scope of the Emperor’s subtlety.

A shattered silver skull.

Vashiro’s head reeled. Steadying himself against the wall of Argentius’s chamber, he employed his many years of training and calmed his churning psyche. Gradually, he got the flashing parade of images under his control and brought his considerable ability to bear.

Fumbling at the pouch he wore at his waist, he withdrew a handful of runes. Stumbling just ever so slightly, he moved back to the Chapter Master’s massive desk.

‘Aerus?’ The Chapter Master turned away from the training quadrant and fixed his companion with a concerned look. Vashiro held up a hand for silence and scattered the runes on the desk, closing his eyes and murmuring the litany of guidance.

‘The people of the south are barbaric, my Lord,’ he mumbled. ‘Gileas Ur’ten epitomises that barbarism every time he enters battle. He is a tame savage, yes. But he is a savage nonetheless. There are those who cannot see past that to the warrior beneath.’ He drew in his psychic strength and prepared to receive the Emperor’s will.

The runes tumbled from his hand with a clatter, their lovingly polished silver surfaces falling where they would. Each silver-coated rune was hand-carved from a splinter of skull bone, which had once nestled within

the cranium of the first Lord Commander Argentius. The first Chapter Master's skull had been bequeathed to the Prognosticatum thousands of years ago. The runes were one of the Chapter's most valued treasures and only Vashiro, or his elected lieutenant, had the right to cast with them.

Unleashing his psychic potential, he opened his mind to the Emperor's will and opened his eyes to the future.

*Genara*  
*Orbiting Virilian Tertius*

It had been a long, hard campaign and it wasn't over yet.

Since the death of Captain Meyoran, Eighth Company had been engaged in hunting down and battling eldar forces. Following the loss of their leader, the Assault Company had followed the trail the insane raiders had left, systematically cleansing neighbouring systems of their presence.

Eighth Company had paid a heavy price to reach this point, but they had finally found the main base of operations. This battle would see an end to xenos activity in this sector for the foreseeable future.

Barely large enough to even be considered a moon, let alone a planet, the misshapen lump of rock that passed for a satellite orbited the larger, densely populated hive world of Virilian Tertius. The eldar had been planning from this vantage point, plotting attacks against the human populace on the various inhabited worlds in the Virilian system. They planned to strike, to abduct humans for slaves and torture – and to take the mineral spoils of the worlds for themselves.

During the course of the campaign, the eldar had snuffed out a good number of Silver Skulls lives, not least of which had been their own Captain. But sheer, bloody determination and well-coordinated strikes had seen the balance start to tip. The enemy forces they faced had been

increasingly unprepared for such an intense counter-strike from the Adeptus Astartes. Unlike the Emperor's finest, the xenos had not been equipped for a lengthy campaign. Their weapons and ammunition supplies were running short – and the systematic destruction of their webway portals had limited their access to extra supplies. Their time now was counted in hours.

The Space Marines had only needed to wait for the right moment to take the enemy by their exposed jugular and tear out their throat. And now that the eldar had been weakened exponentially, that moment had arrived.

‘Deployment in ten minutes, sergeant.’

There was a barely responsive grunt from Gileas Ur'ten, who was presently absorbed in battle preparations, his eyes intent on the physical rituals necessary to arrange his equipment. His dark face wore an almost pained expression that barely concealed the battle lust pounding through his veins.

This was it. This was the moment he would carry out his promise to avenge Keile Meyoran's death.

He slammed a fresh magazine into his bolt pistol, then attached it to the magnetic holster on his thigh. He straightened up and looked around the interior of the Thunderhawk. Filled with almost all the remaining Space Marines of Eighth Company, every single one of them was looking to *him* for instruction. Just as they had done since Meyoran's death.

Gileas had meditated for long periods on his personal concerns regarding the fact that he had ended up in unofficial command of the Eighth. They were concerns that he did not share with anybody else and if it fazed him right now, he certainly did not let it show. He let his eyes roam over each of the assembled warriors – his warriors – in turn, assessing, judging, unconsciously encouraging.

‘As planned, the Reckoners – led by myself – will form the core of the initial strike unit.’ His voice was thickly accented in comparison to the majority of the fighting force, but his tone was calm and measured. ‘We

will occupy their remaining ground forces in close combat. That way, we can draw them out into the open. At that point, we strike.'

He grinned wickedly, his sharpened canines glinting dangerously. 'I cannot stress this point enough, my brothers. This is our last chance. This will be a vital strike. The xenos have gotten used to us advancing as a unit. Skirmish attacks such as we are throwing at them today will catch them unawares. Techmarine Kuruk will coordinate from above and feed reconnaissance data to us on the ground.'

He cast dark eyes around the interior of the gunship once again. Its occupants were all locked into their restraint thrones – bar himself and the other four warriors who were preparing to drop. 'We will end this today. We will quell the xenos threat and we will ensure the continued safety and compliance of the Virilian system. The Imperial citizens on that world down there will continue their contented, safe existence without ever once knowing what their fate may have been. We are the Emperor's own. We will execute His will. We will prevail!'

A roar of approval sounded from the Silver Skulls at this pronouncement, the acoustics of the ship's interior boosting and distorting their deep voices unnaturally as they echoed the sergeant's sentiment. The sound was a vocal call to arms and sent a thrill of impending battle fury coursing through them. The eagerness to fight was fierce and infectious.

Now fully prepared for the battle ahead, Gileas pulled on his helmet. The armour locked into the helmet's catches with the familiar, calming *hiss* of servos. The locks snapped closed, and he twisted his head this way and that to ensure the seals were secure. The systems check flickered in front of his eyes. His internal life support systems interfaced with the helmet and made a number of subtle, but vital adjustments. The familiar scent of recycled air and his own blood fired him still further. Runes flickered into being one after the other.

Data scrolled in front of his eyes and he bypassed his own readings until he located the runes that represented the status of his four squad members. All were presently displaying full health and their armour was at optimal

functionality. The jump packs, while less satisfying, were as good as they could expect them to be after months of battle. Since Theoderyk's death during the last battle, they had only one remaining Techmarine. Kuruk had done what he could to appease the increasingly erratic temper of the machine spirits. It would have to be enough.

They were ready. They were Space Marines. They were *always* ready.

Space Marines in assault squads had always led with the simple promise of 'death from the skies'. To drop five of them into the depths of the enemy from a passing Thunderhawk was merely adding literal weight to that concept. The idea amused Gileas and inside his helmet, he grinned slightly manically.

His chainsword, lovingly maintained, was already held tightly in his gauntleted fist. Too many of his battle-brothers had fallen to the weapons of the eldar. Today, *Eclipse* would help him even that score. He brought the hilt of the blade up to his helmet and rested his head against it, murmuring a battle litany under his breath.

*Eclipse* had served the Silver Skulls even before it had become Gileas's. It had belonged to his former commanding officer, Andreas Kulle, who had bequeathed it to his protégé with his dying breath. Before Kulle, it had belonged, so it was said, to a former Lord Argentius. It was a jealously coveted weapon and Gileas knew well the honour of being its bearer.

No other blade in the company's armoury was as carefully cleaned and treated as *Eclipse*. Its owner was fiercely protective and proud of it and when he was not exercising it in war or in the training cages, he would maintain it; oiling, greasing and polishing it until it gleamed as brightly as the skull runes cast by Vashiro. In Gileas's hands it ceased to be a deadly inanimate object, still and silent, something as feral as its wielder, threatening teeth and death. Once it was in the Space Marine's hand, it became a living extension of Gileas; a shining silver serpent of whining doom. He connected, so he claimed, with the weapon's machine spirit the moment he thumbed it into life. The machine spirit responded to his

litanies every time and the two certainly seemed to share a harmonious co-existence.

It was thirsty. *Eclipse* was desperate to drink the blood of the eldar – and he would grant it that need imminently.

Absently, he allowed his hand to rest against the flat of the blade as though he were appeasing the spirit within. Inactive, the chainsword did not move beneath his touch, but he fancied that he felt the thrill of its quiescent power nonetheless.

‘Soon,’ he promised. ‘Soon.’ He resumed his quiet battle prayers.

The Thunderhawk banked slightly with a grating whine of its port engines and Gileas steadied himself, distantly irked at the interruption. The gunship steadied itself once again and levelled out for its approach to target.

‘One minute to deployment.’ Kuruk’s voice sounded in his ear and the sergeant nodded his understanding. He concluded his prayer and put a hand to the newest purity seal affixed to the pauldron of his battle plate.

The oath, written in flowing script, had been witnessed earlier that day and the ink was hardly dry on the parchment. He had spoken the words with dedicated conviction. On the witness of *Eclipse*, in the eyes of my brothers, this ends today. Death to the eldar. Vengeance for Keile Meyoran.

‘Four... three... two... one... Reckoners, deploy.’

Gileas’s squad launched themselves without a second’s further hesitation from the rear ramp of the Thunderhawk, plummeting like deadly silver meteorites to the ground below. The gunship continued on its way, presenting a useful temporary distraction to the assembled pocket of eldar raiders who stared up at it, firing heavy weapons in an effort to bring it down.

Unfortunately for them, all that came down were five argent-clad angels of retribution.

There was no wind on this virtually airless rock, but the gentlest of breezes nonetheless seemed to pre-empt the murderous descent of the

Silver Skulls. They streaked into view, the roar of the jump packs heralding their enemy's doom.

As one, the closely packed knot of xenos turned, the movements synchronising perfectly with the five bodies thudding to the rock's surface. A vast cloud of amethyst-coloured dust billowed up, obscuring them from sight. The dust blossomed quickly from the point of impact, swirling wildly like a harbinger of doom. Eventually, however, the purple curtain began to dissipate and the scene resolved.

Having landed slightly to the fore of his squad, in a shallow crater formed by the solid blow of his own ceramite and plasteel body striking down, Gileas raised his head slowly and stared with unemotional detachment at the hated enemy. His huge Adeptus Astartes body was stooped in a deadly crouch and his fist was planted down before him on the ground. He was like some kind of primal animal, coiled and ready to spring at his prey. The eldar weapons temporarily ceased firing as they rapidly assessed this new, unexpected threat. Swift orders were barked. But not swift enough.

This time there was no humour in the smile that quirked Gileas's lips beneath the mask of his helmet. The glowing red lenses met the direct gaze of one of the eldar and the accumulated centuries of hatred for that race of xenos and all their foul kind fuelled him. The lenses stained his vision as red as the blood he planned to exact from the enemy. The desperate hunger that had burgeoned on board the Thunderhawk, the desire to purge the enemy, bloomed fully in his body. Responding almost instantly, his power armour channelled a fresh infusion of combat stimms into his system.

*I am the arm of retribution, he thought. In my hand, the weapon of the Emperor's divine justice. In my heart, the Emperor's light. Through me, may the Emperor's wrath know no bounds until the enemy are annihilated. Through me, may these filthy creatures know what it means to cross the Silver Skulls.*

Almost lazily, he thumbed the activation stud on *Eclipse*. It growled menacingly into life, responding to his touch on the throttle as efficiently as it had done the day it had first left the armoury.

*I am Gileas Ur'ten of the Silver Skulls.*

The chainsword's throaty roar ebbed down to a belligerent purr.

*I am your doom.*

'Reckoners,' he broadcast on the squad vox, as calmly as though he were taking a head count. 'Attack.'

Gunning their jump packs back into life, the squad leapt with deadly accuracy into the midst of the enemy, the orchestrated sound signalling that the end was more than nigh for the eldar.

*Eclipse* sang its song of visceral fury as it tore into the alien warriors and Gileas felt his heart soar alongside its melody. The foul xenos helmets wavered and blurred in his sight and become nothing more than targets. He roared his defiance and anger at their pathetic resistance and drew on the strength of his unshakable beliefs to deliver them to their end.

*The Fortress Monastery of the Silver Skulls*

*Argent Mons*

*Varsavia*

'There has to be a decision, Vashiro!'

Argentius slammed his bunched fist into the formerly flawless marble surface of his desk. It cracked beneath the power of his rage with a loud noise that sent the many chapter serfs scattering in terrified alarm at their master's rage.

'I understand your anger at this, my lord, but the Emperor's will remains unclear.' Vashiro kept his tone calm and his expression neutral. In

a deep state of meditation, he had cast the runes over and over and every time they had given him the same response.

*Uncertainty. Doubt.*

And more. Something far, far worse. Something that many of the Silver Skulls were ill-equipped to deal with. It was a harshly honest realisation, but Vashiro knew it was truth.

*Change.*

‘Cast the runes again.’

‘I have already communed with the Emperor no less than a dozen times, my lord. There is no easy answer to this conundrum.’

*‘Why must it be a conundrum?’*

Abrupt, almost shocked silence followed Argentius’s moment of fury and the bellowed words. For a heartbeat, even the noise in the training quadrant stilled. Argentius sat down heavily on his seat which creaked alarmingly under the Chapter Master’s considerable weight.

‘My apologies, my friend.’

‘Not needed, my lord.’ Vashiro remained standing. ‘You must understand my position on this. I have been granted a vision. Should I interpret the Emperor’s will incorrectly, then any damage done to the Chapter may be irreversible. I need to take my time. I beg leave to arrange a meeting of the Prognosticatum.’

Argentius considered Vashiro’s weathered, nut-brown face for a long while. How the man could remain so calm in the face of what – to him at least – was the most tiresome of situations defied all logic.

‘We are outdated,’ he observed, bitterness in his voice as he looked at his adviser. ‘I have felt it for a long time, but this is... beyond all I have ever known. I ask merely for the Emperor’s blessing in rewarding a good, loyal warrior. In return, all I get is procrastination and endless requests for old men to sit around in a darkened, incense-filled room and talk about “the conundrum”.’

Argentius hesitated. He knew he was bordering on insulting the psyker with his words, but Vashiro’s face remained impassively neutral.

‘You are angry, my lord, so I will let the insult go this time.’ Vashiro gave Argentius a look that he recognised all too well. The Chapter Master shifted uncomfortably, feeling like a chastised child. ‘The Prognosticatum will discuss the matter and we will find your solution. Trust to us.’

Argentius did not reply. As a former First Captain, he had once sat as a member of the Prognosticatum. He knew exactly what it entailed. Vashiro continued.

‘Were it any warrior but Gileas Ur’ten, I believe the decision would be much easier. But he is volatile. He is unpredictable.’

‘Does that not describe our Chapter’s very core ethic?’ There was unmistakable pride in Argentius’s tone.

‘The Silver Skulls pride themselves on their ferocity, of course. And Gileas is a sword of the Chapter, most certainly. But a sword that is not tempered, is not controlled... that, my Lord, is a sword that can cut both ways.’

‘He is a superlative warrior. His eye for detail is outstanding. He is brave, noble, honourable and fearless. Damn it, Aerus, he has the potential to be a Chapter hero.’

‘If notoriety equates to heroism, then he has that honour already.’

Argentius fell silent once again.

‘Then by your leave...?’ Vashiro had already turned to walk out of the Chapter Master’s chambers and Argentius let him go, too angry to continue the argument. He would have to apologise for his words later.

Formed at the time of the Second Founding, the Silver Skulls earliest history was shrouded in mystery. The Chapter’s records were amongst those lost long ago. The identity of their founding Chapter was unknown, but they had never let their lost parentage deter them in their steadfast loyalty.

Electing to settle on Varsavia, the Silver Skulls had initially adhered carefully to the Codex Astartes. Over time, however, they had begun to adopt aspects of native traditions. Their numbers were largely made up of the planet’s tribal warriors, all of whom had brought something different

with them. The one thing, however, that each tribe had had in common had been the shamanistic ‘wise men’ who led them. Apart from a few charlatans, most of these men had been psykers who latterly formed the core of the Prognosticatum. Few in number, but remarkably powerful, they were highly revered both by the humans of Varsavia and by the Adeptus Astartes of the Silver Skulls.

Inspired and guided by such spiritual leaders, the Chapter rarely – if ever – questioned what they were told. Only those with the strongest personalities dared to insult a Prognosticator. They had more power than the Chapter Master himself.

Far more power, Argentius thought as he rose from his seat. *Too* much power.

The time was ripe for a review of their practises. He knew that it had to be so and yet the genes and indoctrination of thousands of years dammed the flow of desire for that change.

Argentius knew that there would be questions soon, when the Administratum received a gene-seed tithe that was markedly smaller than it had been. Questions regarding their practises would be raised, practises which Argentius well knew that others in the Imperium of Man would consider barbaric. Questions that raised issues previous Chapter Masters had never had to address. It had been many years since the last tithe request, a generation at least. Much had changed.

If he could not answer these questions satisfactorily, he knew what the outcome would be. The great fighting force of the Silver Skulls would be disbanded, broken apart and the warriors incorporated into other Chapters to make up their numbers.

Perhaps this was the root of the vision the Vashiro had seen. Perhaps it was this that represented the shattering of the Chapter.

Argentius could not bring himself to believe it would come to a sundering. They were the Silver Skulls. For many thousands of years they had shone as a bright star in the blackness of space.

They would prevail.

They *must* prevail.

*Genara*  
*Orbiting Virilian Tertius*

The initial strike was swift and brutal. The five warriors of Gileas's Reckoners squad barrelled into their enemy with furious passion. Chainswords and bolt pistols met with little resistance from the beleaguered enemy and they were mown down in the onslaught. The Reckoners destroyed the eldar warriors in a matter of minutes.

'Talk to me, Kuruk,' Gileas voxed to the Techmarine who was coordinating the data their scout passes had received. Three Thunderhawks, including the one they had recently dropped from, were in low orbit ready for the final attack run. 'Tell me where we need to be.'

'Due east, sir.'

Gileas still couldn't get used to the respect that had come with his unofficial command. He had known Kuruk for many years and considered him one of his closest friends. Hearing the word 'sir' from him felt strange.

He signalled to his squad to move to the east and they obeyed immediately, stepping on the bodies of the dead and dying eldar as they left. One reached up with a long-fingered hand as though it was trying to reach out to those who had just felled it, but the Silver Skulls ignored the grasping, dying xenos.

'For too long these bastards have raided our recruiting worlds,' Gileas said across the company vox channel. 'For too long they have stolen our most precious of commodities. They have stolen our future, brothers. Young men of this system who might otherwise one day have received the

honour of ascension. They are the cause of much of our Chapter's hardship – and today we draw the line.'

They marched relentlessly on towards the final conflict.

'You all know the problems we face. Our numbers are low. Our resources begin to deplete. And yet, we are the Silver Skulls. We continue, against all the odds, to prevail. And the Emperor is with us today. He watches over us as we make this stand against our ancient enemy. Their effect on us will lessen eventually. I say the time has come to tip those odds in our favour. What say you, Eighth Company? Are you with me, brothers?'

Scattered cheers and roars of solidarity came across the vox, filling Gileas's heart with the pride of his brotherhood and great strength of purpose. There was also a certain element of relief that his motivational words had been so well received.

Reuben, by his side as he had been for so many years now, caught his elbow and nodded to a rising hill. Gileas switched back to his squad vox channel.

'Our quarry lies beyond that ridge,' he said to his squad, looking from face to face. They all wore the same helmets, but even if they hadn't been identifiable by the markings on their armour, he could tell each one apart with the practise of years. The way Jalonis stood with his head cocked slightly to one side. The way Tikaye held his chainsword over his shoulder. Each one had unique mannerisms that made them who they were, that marked them as individuals in a world where conformity was the norm.

'We will lead the final assault. We strike – the rest of the company deploys and the Thunderhawks support us from above.'

He put his hand out. Reuben was first to lay his own gauntlet over his sergeant's.

'Brothers all,' he said.

'Brothers all,' the others chorused.

'Incoming recon data, Sergeant Ur'ten.' Kuruk's voice cut across the moment and Gileas nodded, blink-clicking his acceptance of the incoming

intelligence. New runes streamed across his vision and his enhanced senses took everything in with barely a glance. The battle ahead would be prolonged, but the eldar they had fought during this campaign so far had demonstrated little martial prowess and even less intelligence. They had once had superior numbers, but Eighth Company's diligence in picking them off gradually had levelled the playing field exponentially. Had they the wits, they would already have fled back to the darkness from whence they had spawned.

‘Then we end this.’

With a roar of fury, the Reckoners fired their jump packs into life and bounded skywards. They were over the ridge in seconds, beginning their descent into the midst of the remaining enemy.

There was no webway portal here. There had been, about two days ago, but a successful bombing raid had put paid to any thoughts the eldar may have had about leaving the planet that way. They were isolated from their people and the webway and were at the Silver Skulls mercy.

Not that the Silver Skulls planned to show any.

‘For Argentius and the Emperor!’

The battle cry was sounded and the Reckoners dived towards the foe, ready to obliterate them from the face of this rock.

‘Kuruk, deploy the company!’

‘On the way, sir.’

Gileas gave no further orders. He was engaged almost instantly by two splinter-rifle wielding eldar who opened fire on him. The weapon discharges barely had strength enough for him to even feel any sort of kinetic force against his armour and he turned to the two warriors, *Eclipse* screaming its hunger once again.

He tore through them with ease, blood splattering the weapon and his battle plate, dismembered body parts flying. For good measure, he removed their heads. There would be many skulls to collect later; trophies that would mark Eighth Company's prowess. *Eclipses* sang its approval as it ground through their spinal cords.

The five-man squad was soon surrounded by a veritable sea of xenos, but they did not concern themselves with the fact they were presently outnumbered. Indeed, within minutes, the thunderous roar of the deploying Thunderhawk's engines was heard. All around the small, natural crater where the eldar had begun their operations, Silver Skulls dropped from the skies to deliver the Emperor's judgement.

Gileas watched the sight, a swell of pride causing a brief halt in his ceaseless attack. These were his brothers. This was what he had been reborn to. This, he thought with a soaring sense of righteousness, was who he was.

Bhehan, a young Prognosticator who had only recently formally been recognised by the Prognosticatum, was fighting alongside a different squad. He had fought with the Reckoners out on Ancerios III, when they had encountered the horror of psychic kroot. He had fought many more battles since then and as his blue-clad form strode through the enemy, scything them down with powerful swings of his crackling force axe, his confidence was almost palpable. His hand came up and swept outwards, unleashing his psychic attacks with disconcerting ease. Even in the short time since he had fought alongside the Reckoners, Bhehan's power had grown.

Everywhere Gileas looked, he could see signs of their impending victory. Brother Diomedes was on standby, the venerable Dreadnought brought to wakeful readiness and ready to deploy at a single word – but for now at least, the assault squads were holding their ground. The ancient could rest a while longer.

The brief interlude over, the sergeant subtly adjusted the grip on his chainsword and ploughed back into the fray. He swung the weapon with casual ease, its teeth chewing into any obstacles it met.

To his right, he became aware of Tikaye facing down an onslaught of no less than six eldar. He had no doubts at all that his squad brother would have any difficulty in dealing with the threat but fired his jump pack into

life. He bounded skyward and made the leap that closed the distance between himself and Tikaye.

‘I am more than capable of handling this situation, Gileas.’ Tikaye’s voice over the vox sounded faintly irked. ‘There are more than enough of the enemy to keep you busy.’

‘Surely the Emperor smiles upon he who shares, brother?’

Although he could not see Tikaye’s face behind the steel-grey helm, he knew the other man shared the same grin he was wearing right now. Fighting side by side, the two warriors ripped the eldar apart in moments.

The last one standing flung himself wildly onto the point of his chainsword, inching his way towards Gileas, its pointed helm leering. Drawing back his fist, the Space Marine punched the xenos in the face. The thing’s helmet shattered under the impact and it was knocked to the ground. Within moments, the alien asphyxiated; its physiology unable to survive in the thin air.

With a roar, the two Space Marines took to the skies once again, ready to complete their mission.

*Chamber of Elucidation*

*Argent Mons*

*Varsavia*

‘You are sure?’

The question was directed to Vashiro by First Captain Kerelan. A veteran of many battles, Kerelan’s face was marked by only a single tattoo. Worked in molten silver that had been mixed with the tattooist’s ink, the insignia of the chapter – the stylised skull – was etched onto his face in a full skeletal mask. It had been an unusual choice of design. Its effect was nonetheless quite considerable and achieved its goal of marking him as a

Silver Skull and, perhaps more importantly, it instilled fear in his enemies. Many a foe had seen that grinning, shimmering death mask encroach on their vision right before he despatched them.

‘I am sure, captain. The Emperor’s will in this matter is unclear.’ Vashiro looked around the assemblage. Formed of nine senior Prognosticators and the First Captain, the Prognosticatum’s Council of Elucidation was one of many such councils formed within the Silver Skulls to deal with issues of varying triviality. It was a place of wisdom and knowledge.

Right now, it was also a place of great anger and tension.

‘The Chapter Master cannot possibly see this as anything other than an omen against recruiting Ur’ten to the position.’ Kerelan stood forward from his designated spot and took a place at the table. Formed from black granite, the world map of Varsavia was reproduced below him, picked out in glittering crystalline shards. Kerelan’s hands rested over the Sea of Sorrows, the land-locked ocean that separated the north continent from the south.

He leaned forward and spoke earnestly, the archaic words coming with difficulty to lips that were far more used to dealing with battle orders than they were with politics. He detested this part of his role. It was only because tradition dictated that the Chapter Master must not be allowed to sit on an advisory council that he had to attend these things at all. The burning incense filled the air with its sickly, cloying scent and made him feel more uncomfortable than he was already.

‘The First Captain decrees that due to the lack of an apparent outcome, the Prognosticatum should refrain from taking this matter any further. The First Captain therefore moves that the matter should go to a vote.’

‘The First Captain’s comment is noted,’ returned Vashiro gravely. Then he sighed a little and relaxed the formality. ‘You know our creed, Kerelan. In matters of promotion, the Emperor’s will is the deciding factor.’

‘And yet you tell me that the Emperor’s will is unclear.’ Kerelan’s tone was challenging, but not hostile.

Vashiro inclined his head. ‘This is true. It is impossible for me to fully explain the methods we employ in these divinations, but there is a certain... obfuscation surrounding our young sergeant. It is as though the empyrean itself holds its breath waiting for him to make a decision, or a choice that will affect the outcome of this communication with the Emperor.’

‘Gileas Ur’ten is not that important.’ Kerelan sneered slightly, the skull mask taking on a ferocious aspect.

‘With all due respect, First Captain, you are wrong. All denizens of the Imperium are important. Their decisions, no matter how small, cause ripples in the patterns of fate.’

Chastised, but not allowing it to show, Kerelan stepped back.

Vashiro shifted his gaze to one of the other psykers, who stepped forward to the table. Kerelan recognised Brother Andus.

His voice, when he spoke, was filled with reverential respect. ‘Vashiro, of all of us, you are the most gifted with the ability to feel the shape of times yet to come. If your sight is unclear, the First Captain is right.’ Andus bowed to Kerelan and continued. ‘Yet I cannot, in good faith, agree to let this go to a vote. Not yet.’

Kerelan opened his mouth to comment, but Andus continued. ‘I put to the First Captain that the decision is still in the hands of Vashiro. He must divine the Emperor’s word here, in the presence of his peers and equals. I do this not out of disrespect, you understand, Vashiro?’

Vashiro nodded again. ‘I see nothing but sense in your words, Andus. I know what you are thinking. If indeed the matter will not be settled by Gileas’s actions, then it is likely that the Deep Dark is upon me. Perhaps I have displeased the Emperor in some way and he will not show me the answer until I have atoned.’ Vashiro sighed, suddenly looking to Kerelan every bit as old as he was rumoured to be.

‘My strength is yours, brother.’ Andus laid his hand on the table, palm down. ‘My strength is yours. Draw on my abilities to strengthen your own.’

One by one, the other Prognosticators stepped forward and rested their hands alongside his. Kerelan stepped back, sensing that his presence at this point was some kind of intrusion.

Vashiro, who seemed to have forgotten the First Captain's presence entirely, allowed his eyes to roam over his brother Prognosticators.

'So be it,' he said and brought forth the soft, black velvet pouch that contained his divining runes. 'I am the instrument of the Emperor's will. Through me, may He show us the way forward in this matter.'

Kerelan watched impassively as Vashiro cast the runes across the map of Varsavia. As one, the Prognosticators leaned forward. The ghost of a smile flickered across Vashiro's face.

'Well, now,' he said. 'Something has changed. A decision has been reached.'

### *Genara.*

### *Orbiting Virilian Tertius*

'We are victorious.'

The scene was a charnel house. Dead and dying eldar lay where they had fallen in the wake of Eighth Company's passage. Sightless eyes stared up at the amethyst skies.

'We are victorious.' Gileas repeated the words. Yes, they were victorious, but there had been a cost. The death of more of his men was an inevitability that they had all faced when they had deployed. But the losses weighed heavily on his broad shoulders.

Amethyst dust, thrown up from the violent skirmish was still settling and the glittering motes shone as they settled on the sergeant's armour, subtly altering the hue from silver to mauve. Absently, he brushed the dust away. Around him, his brother Space Marines were collecting the bodies

of the fallen, taking heads for skull trophies and piling them up in one place. They would be incinerated on the sergeant's say-so.

Despite the thin atmosphere, Gileas reached up and removed his helmet, shaking out his hair and inhaling the coppery tang of death. He had fulfilled the oath he had taken that morning. Keile Meyoran's death was avenged and the eldar were scrubbed from this system. The future recruitment of Silver Skulls from this system was, for now at least, secured.

As Eighth Company worked, so did Gileas. Without the company Apothecary present, the job of recovering the gene-seed from the five fallen battle-brothers fell to the commanding officer. It was an unpleasant job, not from a clinically detached viewpoint, but more from the fact he had to transcend the grief he felt for each of his dead brothers in order to carry out the procedure.

He recovered four of the five pairs of progenoids. Silas was appallingly injured, his body burned and destroyed in the wake of the explosion that had destroyed his jump pack, him, and four of the enemy simultaneously. His death touched Gileas the most. Silas, like him, was an Adeptus Astartes whose life had begun in the far south. He had shown great promise. Now his star was no longer in the ascendant, but was forever snuffed out.

'You fought well, my brother,' Gileas said softly, getting slowly to his feet. 'The Emperor protects your soul now.' He felt a particular sting at the loss of Silas. Whilst there was solidarity and deep friendship amongst the Eighth Company as a whole, Gileas found natural affinity with those who had grown up, like him, in the lethal surrounds of the Ka'hun Mao, what he now knew as the Southern Wastes; those who had fought from childhood just for the right to survive in the face of threats from neighbouring cannibalistic tribes or the countless predators and who prowled across the great plains.

A flash of recollection flickered and died. His childhood memories were mostly lost to the indoctrination and reprogramming he had received

on his initiation into the Silver Skulls, but they were there, somewhere.

Shaking himself back to awareness, he gave the precious containers holding the progenoids to one of the other Space Marines and stretched out an ache in his shoulders. His gauntlets were smeared with the blood of the fallen Silver Skulls. But through the pervading mist of grief that he would save for later, something else crept from the shadows. A sense of certainty. The knowledge that he had made the right decisions here today. A sense that he was more than capable of assuming the mantle of leadership.

A change in attitude that would radiate unconsciously across the starry blackness that separated Gileas Ur'ten from Varsavia.

He moved to stand with his brothers and stared impassively at the pile of xenos. He spat on the ground, then turned.

‘Burn them,’ he said.

Promethium snaked out from the flamers in the hands of his battle-brothers onto the pile of dead aliens. From the weak cries that could be heard, it was evident that not all of them were quite dead. No matter, Gileas thought. Their existence would be ended swiftly enough.

The fire burned brightly and swiftly, eating up the meagre oxygen that fed it. The stench of charred flesh was stronger even than that of the spilled blood, but Gileas did not replace his helmet. He could survive in this weak atmosphere for a considerable length of time. He would watch this near-ritualistic burning of their fallen enemy with his own eyes.

The moment was only slightly marred by Kuruk's voice intruding across the vox.

‘Sergeant Ur'ten?’

‘What is it, Kuruk?’

‘I have been contacted by the Astropath Primaris on board the Silver Arrow. There has been a communication from Varsavia. From the Lord Commander himself.’ Kuruk's voice was filled with the reverence due the Chapter Master. Gileas nodded. He had been expecting this, but now that the moment had arrived, words failed him.

Sensing his brother's moment of discomfort, Reuben spoke up for him in order to fill the silence.

'What is the message, Kuruk?'

'Come home.'

There was a pause as Gileas assimilated this. He waited patiently for the rest of the message. When Kuruk said nothing else, he finally found his voice.

'Is that it?'

'That's the essence of it, sir. Brother-Sergeant Gileas Ur'ten; Greetings from Lord Commander Argentius. My apologies, brother, but I must ask you to end your campaign and bring Eighth Company back to Varsavia. Come home, Gileas.'

Gileas and Reuben exchanged glances. The Chapter Master was recalling Eighth Company to their homeworld, a place that Gileas had not seen for countless decades. A thrill of anticipation ran through him; an eagerness to see the Fortress-Monastery once more, the chance to look out over the peaks of the highest mountain ranges at the snowy landscape of his birth.

Gileas took several deep breaths and stooped to retrieve the head of the eldar leader he had taken as his trophy. He cast a final glance at the funeral pyre and began to walk away.

'Then let us not keep the Lord Commander waiting,' he said to his men. 'We are going home.'