

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**



A SILVER SKULLS SHORT STORY

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# THE PACT

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SARAH CAWKWELL

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The Pact – Sarah Cawkwell

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# THE PACT

Sarah Cawkwell

*'And the stolen voices of his venerable kin will welcome him, embrace him and bear him to the heart of our scarred past, the first home of the Argent Order. There, the ashes of the great destroyer lie mingled with the fading embers of our birth, two banners falling as one to call him back. Back to the beginning. Then will the past be revealed.'*

– From *The Orthodoxy of Varsavia*, Author Unknown, 221.M37

Nothing had survived.

Once, according to the records, the planet Lyria had boasted fertile and verdant grassland which generated seemingly endless supplies of food for the people of the Imperium. Agri-habs had dotted the landscape in the south of the single large continental mass and people had worked the soil diligently. The mountains and rockier terrain in the north had been far less hospitable. But as the saying went, where there was a will there was a way and the indigenous tribal people of the world settled wherever they could find flat ground. Thus they had lived and thus they had prospered as was humanity's way.

Now it was all gone. The combined might of the Silver Skulls fleet as they had unleashed the full wrath of the Emperor's fury on the surface had made certain of that. Rendered essentially sterile with a hostile, barely breathable atmosphere by the missiles and guns of the fleet, Lyria fell into decay and became a forbidden place; an unsightly mark on the exceptional record of those who consider themselves amongst the Emperor's most loyal.

Lyria, a world of beginnings; the former home of the Silver Skulls Chapter had become a tomb world, rendered to ashes and dust.

The air was acrid and stifling from the heat that bubbled up through rifts in the ground. Volcanoes that had lain long dormant had been awakened by the orbital onslaught and seismic activity rocked the planet almost continually. It was a world that would have been better left dead.

Six figures picked their way across the broken landscape, ascending a mountain path that would take them to the long-deserted fortress-monastery. For eight thousand years, no Silver Skulls battle-brother had laid eyes on their ancestral home. Now they did so in silence, each absorbing the impact of this horrific sight in their own way.

Five of the figures were massive, clad in ancient Terminator armour. The other was wearing the blue battle plate of a Prognosticator, a psychic hood rising about his bare head and a force axe slung comfortably across his back. It was this warrior who crossed into the entrance first.

By Adeptus Astartes standards, Prognosticator Bhehan was young. Barely thirty solar years old, he had nonetheless acquitted himself admirably upon the field of battle. His ability to divine the skeins of fate had proven itself over and over again. He had served with both Eighth and Fifth Companies with distinction, but had never once imagined that he would end up deployed with the *Talriktug*; the First Company's elite squad. Especially following his vision; a vision that had led to Chapter Command agreeing that the time was right for them to return. A vision that had married up unfailingly with words penned in the *Orthodoxy* millennia before. The two war banners.

He should be honoured to be amongst them, he knew. Led by the courageous, plain-speaking and stalwart First Captain Kerelan, they were heroes of the Chapter. They had been heroes of the Chapter for hundreds of years before Bhehan had even been born. Perhaps it was this last fact which made him uncomfortable and which had led to much of the silence that had accompanied their journey here. Whenever he *had* spoken, their respect for him seemed disproportionate given their standing and experience.

Such was the way of the Silver Skulls. They valued their psychic battle-brothers highly, no matter their age or seniority.

As the rest of the warriors lumbered into the vestibule behind him, he allowed his senses to roam freely amongst the rubble. A smashed stained glass window stood several metres above his head, admitting the only light that the interior of the place had seen for years. Closing his eyes, he tried to picture it as it had once

been. A thousand ghostly echoes rippled through him, clamouring for his notice. Voices that had been desperate to be heard for millennia. It was a near-overwhelming din and Bhehan employed every ounce of his training to keep his calm. The filigree-fine crystal mesh of his psychic hood glowed softly as he walked. The First Captain glanced at him.

‘What are your senses telling you, Brother-Prognosticator?’ The ruby lenses in Kerelan’s helm gave away nothing.

‘No less than I anticipated. This place swarms with memories, First Captain,’ Bhehan replied in his soft voice. ‘So many voices crying out at the horrors wrought upon this world.’ His youthful face creased in a frown. ‘There is more, too. Something... I cannot quite place. I may be able to concentrate more if I make direct contact with the stone.’

‘Do what you must, brother. We will ensure there are no interruptions. Our primary duty is to defend and protect you on this mission.’

‘Aye, First Captain. I warn you, however. This process is not likely to be swift. The echoes here are old and worn by time.’

The warrior glanced from side to side, then shrugged. ‘I see no other pressing engagements demanding my time and resources, brother. Proceed as you see fit.’

A smile flickered over Bhehan’s lips. He had learned that for all his stoic reticence and unshakable pragmatism, Kerelan possessed a dry wit that was frequently startling. He reached down and unsnapped the fastenings of his gauntlet, sliding his hand free. He turned his body sideways to the wall and set his bare palm against the stone.

Amongst the Prognosticators of the Silver Skulls, Bhehan was rare. Not only did he have a staggeringly accurate ability to read the skeins of Fate with the use of his rune stones, but he had discovered an affinity for forging tenuous links with past events, simply by laying hands upon the thing of interest. It didn’t always work. If psychic echoes were not deeply embedded then an inanimate object would remain just that. Inanimate.

But the walls of this desecrated fortress ran thick with tendrils of memory and the moment Bhehan’s hand came into direct contact with them, he was thrown instantly into a thronging mass of bodies. His body stiffened. The psychic hood about his shoulders crackled with energy and the unmistakable ozone-like odour of spilled power joined the aroma of dust and burning ash that filled the air.

He no longer saw the ruined fortress and the five Terminators. Instead, he was...

...somewhere else entirely.

‘...interference. My vox has stopped receiving. Do you have a situation report, brother?’ The voice came from his left. Opening his eyes, Bhehan was mildly startled, but not surprised, to see that the ruined wall he had been leaning against was once more intact. Fires burned in the wall sconces throwing flickering, eerie images against the stone. Above him, the stained glass window was intact once more, but no light shone through it. Beyond, it was night.

This was no crumbling ruin, but a fortress-monastery in its prime. The walls rose gracefully to curve in a high, vaulted arch far above him. A slight breeze lifted the hanging war banners and they swayed gently. But for all the peace, Bhehan recognised a war footing when he saw it.

Chapter-serfs hurried past him – and occasionally through him. In their midst were a number of warriors wearing the steel-grey battle plate of the Silver Skulls. They towered above the humans and Bhehan focused on them.

Two battle-brothers, one wearing the laurels of a veteran and bearing a battle standard at his back were standing close by, their hands tightly closed around the hilts of chainswords. They were rocks of solidity amidst the sea of bodies heading deep into the mountain.

‘I have, Brother-Sergeant Igneus. It is as we expected. The Chapter Master has had no choice but to give the order.’

‘As you say... we expected this news. Still, we must bear it with staunch determination.’ The other warrior nodded vigorously and Igneus sighed. ‘Our world must die. There is little worth in dwelling upon the matter. What of the brothers below?’

‘On their way up from the training level. It is barely a handful, sir.’

‘A handful will be good enough, Varlen. We will hold our fortress against these... things... for as long as we are able. We can only hope that our external defences have prevented an egress. If the xenos scum have broken through, then while we live we will defend our Chapter’s home with our very last breath.’

Such certainty. Such passion. It quite took Bhehan’s breath away as he listened to the phantom veteran sergeant’s voice, coming across the millennia as though he stood only a few feet away.

‘It is no longer the eldar we should concern ourselves with. They are all but defeated. It is the taint we should worry about.’

A loud scream, a male scream, sounded and Bhehan whipped his head the other way. Barely visible at the dark end of the corridor, Bhehan saw the flailing of a man running towards them. He passed through the Prognosticator’s body as

though it were insubstantial mist and fell prostrate at the feet of the veteran sergeant.

‘They have breached the outer walls, my lord!’

‘Then we will meet them in battle.’ The veteran sergeant stared down at the cowering Chapter-serf and without hesitation, aimed a bolt pistol at the man’s head.

‘No...’ Bhehan spoke, but no sound left his lips. The echo of the bolt pistol reverberated around the corridor and the man fell dead at the veteran sergeant’s feet. Bhehan’s lips formed the question, but it was Varlen who spoke the words.

‘Why did you do that?’

‘It was necessary,’ he said. ‘He may otherwise have brought the corruption within.’

Corruption. Bhehan knew his history well enough. Invasion and plague had wrung the meagre defences left on Lyria almost dry. The rest of the Chapter had been deployed at war elsewhere, engaged in one of the endless battles that had raged through the galaxy in the years following the Great Heresy. Bhehan knew that the planet had been lost. He knew that in order to prevent the pestilence spreading, they had been forced to take the ultimate step.

‘How can we be sure that the taint has not already reached the inner walls?’ Varlen stared down at the corpse of the unfortunate Chapter-serf, then raised his head to Igneus.

‘How can one ever be sure of anything, Brother Varlen?’

There was a distant sound of gunfire and the ghost of Igneus raised his chainsword.

‘They are coming,’ he said. ‘Or perhaps they are already here.’

Bhehan felt a knot in his stomach and slowly he removed his hand from the wall.

There was a distant sound of gunfire.

Caught momentarily between two worlds, Bhehan was disoriented and confused. He swayed slightly and looked as though he might fall.

‘Prognosticator?’ Brother Djul had stepped forward and rested a steadying hand on the smaller warrior’s shoulder.

‘I am well. Let go of me.’ He snapped the words before he remembered exactly who he was talking to. Djul’s massive, armoured hand released his shoulder immediately. As his equilibrium righted itself, other senses kicked into gear; the senses that had been bred into him. He may have been a psyker of considerable

power, but first and foremost he was a warrior. His killer instincts pushed the vision to the back of his mind and every muscle, every nerve and every synapse of his brain switched to alertness.

‘Your timing is impeccable, brother,’ said the First Captain. ‘Whilst you were engaged in your communion, the rest of the squad took the opportunity to scout ahead. We have found more than just ruins here.’

‘There are intruders in this sacred place.’ Djul sounded outraged, as well he should. ‘The captain and I remained behind to protect you during your communion with the Emperor. We would obviously have consulted you on the matter first, but you were distracted. We did not think it seemly to...’

‘How long was I *distracted*?’ Bhehan interrupted abruptly. Djul’s ponderous response was tinged with the faintest hint of reproach.

‘The time is not of importance, brother. Were you successful? Did you divine anything of use?’ Kerelan intervened.

‘After a fashion. I needed more time.’ Those final words had left a heavy feeling somewhere deep in Bhehan’s gut, but there was no time to linger on the matter.

‘My apologies, brother.’ Djul sounded genuinely remorseful but Bhehan waved it away.

‘No matter. As you rightly point out, there are other more pressing matters that must take precedence. We can study the past in greater detail later. For now, let us deal with the here and now. The Emperor’s Blessing is with us.’

At these words, Djul touched his hand to the Crux Terminatus on his shoulder guard before turning away and heading deeper into the complex to find the battle.

‘You should prepare for combat, Prognosticator.’ The eye lenses on the Terminator helm seemed to bore into Bhehan, weighing and measuring his capability.

Prior to their deployment on the planet, Bhehan had spent several hours in deep meditation and contemplation of the runes. He had decreed that the Emperor’s Blessing was with them on this matter and had added a carefully worded caveat that should the warriors need to engage any enemies on the planet, then they should do so. At the time, he had not believed such a thing would be necessary. Now he felt pleasure at his own foresight.

Kerelan fell into easy lockstep beside the Prognosticator. The First Captain had unsheathed the relic blade that was his favoured weapon. A huge double-handed monster of a weapon, it looked remarkably small in his huge hand. He turned his

head slightly towards his companion. 'Are you ready for this, brother?'

'I am always ready for battle,' replied Bhehan and he unsheathed the force axe at his back. He could not imagine a smile on the face of the rugged warrior beneath the helmet but Kerelan's voice seemed filled with approval.

'Trouble is here on Lyria,' he said. 'Let us go and find it.'

'Brother Djul implied that we have already found it.' Kerelan's gaze lingered on the Prognosticator for a moment. The First Captain was apparently deeply amused by Bhehan's literal interpretation of his words.

'Indeed,' was all he said. 'And it wears the face of the eldar.'

It was an insult like no other. The eldar, the very xenos whose presence had caused the downfall of this world, had returned. As Kerelan, Djul and Bhehan moved down the spiralling pathway, their infrared lenses detected every disturbance. Air that had lain still for so long was stirred and restless, raising twinkling particles of fine dust into the air.

'Vrakos, report.' Kerelan activated the vox and spoke to one of the advance group. Weapons continued to discharge below them; a storm bolter's unmistakable sound, but there was no answering report to be heard. Bhehan willed the two Terminators to move more swiftly. The time spent with the fast-moving battle-brothers of Eighth Company had spoiled him, he mused. The Talriktug were admirable. But speed was not amongst their assets.

'We have counted ten xenos moving to the lower levels of the fortress,' came the calm and measured reply. 'All heavily armoured and loaded with weaponry... but they have not acted in a hostile manner. Neither have they made any attempt to communicate with us.'

'That hardly matters, Vrakos. Those vermin are transgressing in the halls of our ancestors. That in itself is a blatant act of war. They will pay the price.' Djul made his displeasure known and began to recite a litany across the vox. Bhehan was well aware of Djul's reputation as a deeply zealous warrior. He had heard the Catechism of Hate recited many times before, but never with such passion as the words that filled his ears now.

'We have picked off two of them,' said Vrakos, 'but the cowards are fleeing deeper into the fortress-monastery.'

'Then we go with them,' responded Kerelan. 'Hold your position for now, Vrakos. We are on our way.'

'I can go on ahead and join with the others,' said Bhehan. 'I mean no disrespect First Captain, but I move far more swiftly and my talents may be of use to

Vrakos and the others.’

‘Your eagerness does you great credit, Prognosticator. However, I am charged with your wellbeing. As such, you remain with us.’ Again, there was an underlying hint of amusement in Kerelan’s voice. ‘Do not concern yourself with missing the fight. Where would they go, after all? We will corner them and deliver our retribution for this transgression.’

‘Yes, First Captain.’ Bhehan fell silent once again and listened to Brother Djul as he recounted more litanies and prayers across the vox. The Terminator’s zeal was infectious and the Prognosticator felt a great swell of pride. He allowed his psychic senses to extend once again, reaching downwards this time.

His exploratory range was considerable and as his attention drifted into the depths of the fortress-monastery he pulled up short with a loud gasp. Fortunately for him, Kerelan had been several paces behind, otherwise the First Captain would have ploughed straight into him.

‘Brother? What do you see?’

‘It is less what I see and more what I sense, First Captain,’ Bhehan replied. Something had brushed against his consciousness; something inexplicably alien. Over the few comparatively short years he had lived, he had honed his mental bulwarks until only the most accomplished could get around them. He had stood in the company of the Chapter’s most powerful psyker and received a softly-worded compliment on the strength of his defences. Then Vashiro had broken them in order to complete the lesson.

He had fought against numerous foes since he had ascended to the rank of battle-brother. He knew what their minds felt like. He had mentally sampled the flavour of the tyranids; a never-ending and insatiable hunger. He had touched the mind of a tau and had been surprised by the driven, single-mindedness. Every eldar mind he had encountered was cruel and twisted. This was not. This was unknown to him.

The thoughts and presence of his own battle-brothers were like shining beacons amidst the xenos thoughts that had brushed his psyche in the past. It was his mind, his sanctuary and he knew it better than he knew the back of his hand. No psyker could afford anything less than complete control over their power. Countless enemies had attempted to break his considerable will and, one by one, they had all died when he had lashed psychically back at them.

Now, though, this new consciousness had bypassed those defences with all the ease of a spectre and was probing his mental landscape. Its presence was unwanted and he held it back easily.

*You are... mon-keigh. You are not one of my people.*

*I am human. And I am coming for you. I will not allow this violation. Be gone.*

*You have great strength for one so young... you could help us.*

The voice that came was undeniably female. Summoning up every ounce of mental strength he possessed, Bhehan visualised closing a fist around the presence in his mind and flinging it away.

*Wait! Help us. We need your power... do not... at least allow me...*

With a concerted effort, Bhehan cast the alien presences from his mind. The second it was gone, he immediately got to work fortifying his psychic barriers. It was only then that he realised that Kerelan was practically shouting at him.

‘Prognosticator!’

‘My apologies, First Captain. Something was trying to break through my defences. A mind was attempting to infiltrate my consciousness.’

‘Are you compromised, Brother-Prognosticator?’ The question came from Djul and Bhehan realised immediately that the Terminator would have no compunction about dealing with such a matter in the way he best saw fit.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘My wards can withstand anything the xenos throw at me.’ He forced himself to hold his head proud and stared defiantly at Djul for a few moments. The warrior shrugged slightly and continued onwards. The skulls chained together and looped as a decoration around his belt clanked together as he moved, a gory herald of his arrival.

Djul’s reputation amongst the Chapter was well-deserved. There were those who said Brother Djul was more fearless even than the Lord Commander.

‘Do not mind him,’ said Kerelan as though clarifying the rumour. ‘Djul was born spoiling for a fight. What did you learn from your divination?’

‘Very little,’ admitted the Prognosticator. ‘Regardless, I recommend extreme caution here. The xenos female who spoke to me seemed a little distracted. She suggested that she needed assistance of some kind. Those of her kind we are pursuing... perhaps they have been summoned to her aid. Thus, we would do well to presume we are being led into some kind of trap.’

Kerelan nodded. ‘As I said... where would they go? Once we corner them, once we get to the heart of the monastery, they will be ended. Have faith, brother.’

‘I have more faith than you could imagine, First Captain. When you place yourself at the mercy of the warp, a little faith goes a long way. Imagine how far a lot will take you.’

The taciturn Kerelan was silent for a moment, then he laughed warmly. ‘I like

you, boy.'

Strange how that pleased him more than he could have expected. Bhehan inclined his head graciously in acceptance of the compliment and fell in beside the Terminator.

The weapons fire had ceased and the silence was loaded with ominous portents.

'They have begun a descent,' Vrakos reported. 'We are in pursuit, but they can move a lot faster than we can.'

'And they still have not returned fire?' Kerelan exchanged a look with Bhehan. *A trap*, the Prognosticator had suggested.

'Not a shot, Kerelan. Although we have taken down a few of their number, they have not even so much as thrown a rock at us.' Vrakos sounded disappointed by the fact.

'We are almost with you,' said the First Captain grimly. 'If they *are* about to lead us into a snare, we will walk into it together.'

'And we will end it together,' added Djul.

The lowest level of the fortress-monastery was as black as the depths of night. The air here was sour and stale and Bhehan's physiology worked hard to compensate. But no matter how astonishing the Adeptus Astartes implants were, they could not work to clear the overwhelming stink of the death and decay. The combined scents of rotting meat and vegetation were strong and overlaid with the pervading musty smell of old, stale air.

The walls were sticky, with ichor that oozed from pustules growing like tenacious fungi along their length. Whatever it was that they produced was drab olive in colour and it pooled on the ground, creating sticky puddles that sucked at their boots as they advanced.

But the foul liquid was the least of their concerns.

'Xenos!' The roar of triumph came from Vrakos who was advancing ahead of the others. The tone of his voice altered slightly as he added to his report. 'And worse.'

'The only thing generally worse than xenos is *more* xenos,' said Kerelan, his relic blade ready. 'Talriktug, on my mark, advance. Prognosticator, you remain behind us. Extend a shield, if you would.'

The squad needed no further encouragement than those words. As a unit, they advanced, keeping their line tightly held. Bhehan fell into place behind them and drew on his psychic might, projecting a force shield that extended the length of the battle line and was wide enough to ensure he remained within its area of

effect as well.

What they saw as their infrared lenses filtered through the darkness was quite horrific. A number of eldar warriors of various castes, different armours marking the one from the other, were engaged in combat with what looked on first sight like human figures.

‘What in the Emperor’s name...?’ Djul left the question half asked as another figure suddenly sprang up directly in front of him. His reactions were lightning-fast and he brought up his arm. The chainfist that snarled at the end of it was cumbersome and slow to bring down, but he was grimly resolute. His weapon chewed through the creature before he had even managed to get a direct look at it. It splattered more of the ichor-like goo in every direction and it was with some obvious difficulty that Djul dragged his chainfist free from it. The humanoid creature, sheared in half, fell to the ground and began to immediately decompose.

‘Assessment of enemy forces,’ said Vrakos who had been taking in the scene. ‘Fifteen eldar warriors engaged in battle with... whatever these things are.’ Djul dropped slowly to a crouch and studied what remained of the thing he had killed.

‘Bio-matter,’ he said, his voice terse. ‘Similar in some ways to the tyrannid biomass pools that we have encountered. Only these appear to be spawning these creatures. Or...’ He peered more closely and stood again, disgusted. ‘They are corrupted in some way.’

Bhehan’s brows feathered together at Djul’s words and he brushed his senses across the room, attempting to ignore the anxiety and fury that was coming from the eldar minds. The psyches of the things that they were fighting were disturbingly blank with no spark of intellect coming from them at all. They were psychically arid and seemingly without life.

‘They can be killed,’ began Kerelan.

‘No,’ interrupted the Prognosticator. ‘You cannot kill what is already dead. You can merely slow it down.’ He stepped forward to crouch down where Djul had recently been. ‘Look.’ He scooped up a handful of the jelly-like matter and held it up. They could all see what he meant; there, in his hand, were fragments of bone just like those that they had trodden underfoot. ‘These are... animated things that have been created by something greater. They are created in a human image. A memory, perhaps, of what they once were? It is hard to say.’

There was a lingering stench of the warp, a scent he was well accustomed to. But although Bhehan was familiar with the ozone taint of warp power as it leaked from every psychic being he had ever encountered, it rolled from this

stuff in a near-overpowering wave.

He let the stuff slide from his gauntlet with a foul *slurp* and stood once again. ‘This place is filled with decay and death. There is...’

He broke off again as he felt a sudden battering at the wall around his mind. He stepped backwards and renewed the surge of psychic energy. Whatever it was that was trying to break through would not succeed. And yet still there was a trickle of a thought, that worked its way in through the small cracks with a skill and deft precision the Prognosticator would not have believed possible.

*Help us. Alone, we cannot do this thing. Together...*

*Get out of my head.*

‘Kill everything that moves,’ said Kerelan grimly, noting the Prognosticator’s sudden distraction. ‘The eldar and these things. We can work out the specifics when there are no xenos scum standing between us and them.’

‘As the First Captain commands,’ chorused the Talriktug. They fanned out, equidistant from one another. Brother Djul’s voice began to once again recite the Catechism of Hate.

‘While vile mutants still draw breath, there can be no peace. While the hearts of obscene heretics still beat, there can be no respite. While faithless traitors still live, there can be no forgiveness. In the name of the Emperor, in the name of Argentius, in the name of all Silver Skulls... brothers, we fight!’

Three storm bolters immediately opened fire as the line of Silver Skulls began to advance towards the enemy, their staccato reports echoing in the vast caverns of the fortress-monastery. Smoking shell cases dropped to the ground at an incredible rate and the muzzle flares briefly lit up the darkness. The orange and white glow from the flamer in Asterios’s hand burned brightly and served as an effective weapon against the enemy.

Djul and Kerelan moved in closer. The First Captain swung his relic blade in a murderous arc towards the closest eldar warrior. It raised a blade of its own to fend off the attack, but Kerelan’s superior strength and skill served him well. He pressed back with all his power and the eldar warrior crumpled beneath his assault. Kerelan raised his blade again and let it come down against his opponent. It did not penetrate on the first blow, instead tearing a ragged gouge across the alien’s segmented armour. The eldar staggered back.

‘You do not know...’ it began, but Kerelan cut short its words with another swing of his blade. The eldar’s head rolled clear of its shoulders, blood fountaining from the stump of the neck. The warrior crashed heavily to the ground.

‘I know enough,’ retorted the First Captain, his voice barely audible above Djul’s zealous declarations. He had already moved onto the next challenge. To his right, Djul carved his way through more of the faceless humanoid golems with his chainfist. The warrior never ceased his recital as he fought, hardly even pausing to draw breath. Bhehan let the words wash over him, let them fill his hearts with more strength and he began to draw his power to him.

This was the moment that he would open his mind up to a psychic onslaught if the owner of the female voice was so inclined. It was a chance he was going to have to take.

Something thudded into the shoulder guard of his armour and he turned reflexively. A sharp-bladed disc had embedded itself into the ceramite. He tore it out and flung it to the ground with a clatter. Then he stood straight and pointed his force axe at the eldar who had dared attack him. A crackling bolt of lightning burst from the end of the weapon as he channelled his power through it. The bolt struck the unfortunate target squarely in the chest, flinging him back into a knot of three of the monsters. They bent and buckled under the impact and then sprang back into shape.

Almost immediately on making contact with them, the eldar began to struggle to free itself, but it was caught fast. The three creatures switched attention to their captive and even as Bhehan watched in macabre fascination, the eldar’s armour began to disintegrate before his eyes. The shreds of fibre that came from the intricately wrought battle gear seemed to be absorbed into the golems and they grew noticeably larger.

The eldar, now without his armour continued to struggle, but the unnatural force that animated these things continued without remorse. The flesh of the xenos was devoured even as the eldar still lived and his screams echoed throughout the corridors until finally nothing was left but the bones. Then they too were consumed. The entire process had taken only seconds. The three golems congealed and came together to form a single, larger creature which began to slowly lumber towards the Silver Skulls.

Revolted by the foulness of the entity, Bhehan unleashed another torrent of psychic force at it. It burst apart in a thousand flaming pieces, returning to a liquefied state.

‘When they are animated, do not touch them. Do not let them keep hold of you,’ he voxed to the rest of the squad. ‘If you are trapped by them, it...’

*Follow the corruption.*

It was her voice again.

*Follow the corruption and it will lead you to the source. Hurry. There may not be much time. Look down. Look at your feet. You will see...*

Despite his determination to ignore the voice, Bhehan's lowered his eyes to stare at the ground. The floor, which was coated in a fine film of ooze and now a veneer of blood from the eldar warriors who were dying swiftly beneath the guns and blades of his battle-brothers, was *moving*. It carried the very visible shreds of armour, chunks of blood and muscle and even recognisable internal organs. They slid in a sticky mess down the tunnels.

'First Captain!'

Kerelan did not respond immediately, engaged as he was with the battle. Bhehan called to him again, a little more urgently than before.

'Prognosticator, a moment if you would.'

Another round of shells disgorged with a resounding clatter from Vrakos's bolter and Kerelan nodded with satisfaction before turning towards the agitated psyker.

'The daemon calls to its own, First Captain! The source of this evil is at the end of this flow.'

'Then we will finish our work here and we will move on.'

Bhehan did not mention the voice in his head. Instead, he caught a tight hold of his force axe and threw himself with easy confidence into what remained of the battle.

Eliminating the remaining eldar afforded no hardship. They were struggling to survive the onslaught of the vile creatures. Two more of them suffered the same fate as the one Bhehan had sent flying into their clutches and their screams as their bodies were dissolved were horrific. Yet Bhehan could not help but feel satisfaction. Ancient enmity between the races ran deep.

'What *are* these things, Prognosticator?' The question came from Vrakos who had fallen into step next to Bhehan, the weapon in his hand still spitting out shell after shell.

'I am not sure, brother,' replied Bhehan, swinging his axe round in a neat arc, severing another golem in two. Like the others, it simply seeped into the greater flow and moved slowly down the corridor taking pieces of flesh, bone and armour with it. 'But there is the touch of the warp at work here. Of that I *am* sure.'

'Daemons, do you think?'

'Aye. I suspect.' Bhehan pointed down at the ground, at the slowly snaking river of debris. 'I cannot think of anything else so powerful as to be able to

manipulate matter in this way. Wherever this flows... it will lead us to our answers.'

The two warriors fell silent as they executed one of the few remaining eldar. They worked in harmony as though they had fought together on many occasions before. Vrakos fired his weapon into the chest of an eldar who flew backwards. The xenos's armour soaked up most of the initial damage, but before the alien could even get to his feet, Bhehan had unleashed psychic hell on it. He thrust his hand forwards, the axe held tightly in the other. Jolts of psychic and electrical energy found their target, frying the enemy's brain. It slid down the wall, far from the pools of ooze.

From somewhere further down, the Silver Skulls heard a sudden roaring. It was a deeply unnatural sound, somewhere between rage and pain. The two warriors exchanged glances.

'That was not a noise made by any xenos I have encountered,' observed Vrakos in a mild, almost conversational tone. 'I would say it lends weight to your daemon hypothesis, Prognosticator.'

The last remaining eldar let out a bellowing phrase in its own language and turned, hurtling at full speed down the corridor in the direction of the sound which was still echoing along the walls.

Raking fire scraped down the rock behind the fleeing eldar and the six Space Marines formed up as a single unit once again. The saving grace was that in the wake of the bestial roar that had resounded down the tunnels, the golems had collapsed. The stream of debris continued to flow.

'Pursuit,' said Djul, breaking off from his endless litanies to speak the word. He was almost visibly trembling with zealous fury. 'It is our only choice. We cannot stand here in idleness whilst the xenos still desecrate our ancestral home.'

'Aye, brother. At least one remains and I fancy we will find more at the end of this tunnel. More than eldar too if that noise was anything to go by. Brother Prognosticator? The Emperor's Word, if you would?'

'Aye, First Captain.' Bhehan reached down to the rune bag at his waist and drew a stone at random. It was his preferred method of divination in fraught situations. He studied the beautifully carved stone as he raised it to his eyes. 'This rune symbolises death,' he said.

'Ours?'

'Nothing so obvious, First Captain. Merely a suggestion that something is coming to an end. It can also suggest success, that we reach our goals.' Bhehan dropped the rune back into his pouch. 'The rune is a positive one,' he said. 'We

should proceed. With caution, obviously. These are eldar we are dealing with. As I observed, this may be some elaborate trap on their part.'

'This is something that had not escaped my own consideration,' replied Kerelan. He glanced around his squad and nodded. 'The Prognosticator has spoken. It is the Emperor's will that we pursue.'

Djul had already started walking.

'Your helmet, Prognosticator?'

'In due course, First Captain. Whatever it is that is trying to invade my thoughts, I want to look on its face properly when I kill it.'

'Spoken like a true Silver Skull.'

There were three minds at war.

The female voice still whispered at the edges of his awareness. He could sense its sheer desperation and that bothered him. If she was powerful enough to insert herself into the highly defended mind of an Adeptus Astartes psyker, then what could possibly cause her such anxiety?

Then there was his own mind. Young, but gruellingly trained to deal with this kind of invasion. He had expended some considerable psychic energy during the altercation with the eldar and the daemoniac beings, but he was still more than in control of his faculties. He was keeping the woman at bay – for now at least – and he still had plenty to give.

But the third presence was new, as though it had only lately become aware he was there. An insidious, creeping presence that sought to break through the first gap in his defences that it found. Where the alien's voice was like a constant hammering on the door of his mental fortress, this new consciousness was like a noxious gas attempting to seep in.

Despite not having replaced his helmet, Bhehan was not struggling to see where he was going. Barely any light reached this far down into the tunnels but Bhehan had long ago learned to compensate for lack of vision with other, preternatural senses. He *felt* the shape of the room around him and was able to pinpoint his battle-brothers with accuracy. A soft blue glow from his psychic hood and the silvery thread of power that rippled around the head of the force axe loaned a little light to the proceedings but the squad forged ahead mostly in darkness.

'There is a chamber up ahead.' Asterios spoke from the front of the line of Terminators. 'Bodies. Movement. Something I cannot quite...'

Another roar sounded, this time so close that they could all feel the shifting air that accompanied it. Death. Disease. Rot and plague.

‘Replace your helmet, Prognosticator,’ Kerelan began as red warning runes began to flash across his eyes. ‘There is poison in the air.’

The young psyker had already begun the task of putting his helmet back on. It was not a quick thing to do to manipulate it around the psychic hood, but he managed it. As the seals hissed into place, he blinked heavily to adjust his eyes to the infrared. Taking note of the analysis of the air, he was confident that he would not have suffered any undue harm.

‘First Captain!’

The shout from Asterios dragged Bhehan’s attention away from the scrolling data and they moved as fast as their armour would allow them towards the chamber. Not heeding Kerelan’s order about remaining by his side, Bhehan accelerated his speed and moved ahead of the others, arriving at the mouth of the chamber before they did. Asterios shot him a glance. He said nothing. He did not need to. What was visible in the chamber spoke for itself.

A swift scan of the inhabitants of the vast, high-ceilinged room revealed eight eldar warriors, including the one who had fled from the previous battle. All wore segmented, form-fitting armour apart from one. The second Bhehan’s eyes rested on her, he knew at once that this was the source of one of the two voices in his head. She was clad in flowing robes of deepest purple that draped around her slender frame, protected by an ornate breastplate and pauldrons. She stood firm and defiant, her hand out before her and was shouting words in her own language at a monster of unimaginable proportions. Her voice was muffled by the rebreather mask that protected her from the poisonous air.

‘In the Emperor’s name,’ breathed Asterios through the vox. ‘What horror has been wrought in this place?’

It was massive, fully four metres in height and at least that across. It had no real form and seemed to be nothing more than a huge, shapeless mass of vile and putrid decay. Its skin spilled in rolls that rippled as it moved and the slimy trails of corruption that had led the Silver Skulls here flowed directly beneath it. Occasionally, whenever an eldar weapon or projectile made contact with it, a great gash that approximated a screaming mouth would open up. Bhehan stared for a few moments, realising what it was made from. Its epidermis was entirely transparent and beneath its roiling surface the young Prognosticator could pick out bone fragments. He saw skulls, torn strips of flesh and muscle... all the living matter that had been torn from the eldar in the previous chamber. Organic matter that had been absorbed over the millennia.

*It is a spawn of the Unclean One. A lesser daemon of Nurgleth.* It was the eldar

woman's voice in his head and this time, Bhehan did not reject her presence. *We came here in response to a vision and we seek to defeat it. It has fed for so long on the decay and death that infects everything on this world. Please, mon-k... human. Please, you must aid us in this venture. We cannot succeed without your help. It may only be a minor creature but this place is so strong in decay that it thrives.*

'A creature of Chaos,' he responded to Asterios's question. He chose carefully not to reply to the eldar. Her pleading tone disgusted him. 'A daemonic entity that thrives on atrophy and decay...'

'I do not purport to understand the nature of daemons,' said Kerelan. 'But I do understand how to fight them. Concentrate your fire on that thing first. We will deal with the eldar later.'

'How do we know that the filthy eldar witch is not controlling it?' Djul's response was startlingly predictable and he raised his storm bolter, levelling it at the eldar woman's head. 'If we kill her then it will die.'

*Do not let this happen, human.* A slightly sharper psychic probe that made Bhehan gasp. She turned from what she was doing, lightning or some other, unknown force dancing from her hands and stared at the Silver Skulls directly.

*Our goal is shared,* she said to Bhehan and the desperation returned. *Surely you can see that? There is a time for animosity between our species, but it is not now. Now is the time for us to combine our strength, to join together. I felt your presence the moment you arrived on this world. We must do this thing together.*

'Please,' she said aloud.

'Do not even speak, alien,' said Djul and prepared to fire. But Bhehan moved to stand between him and his target.

'Stay your hand, Brother Djul.'

There was a tone of command in the young Prognosticator's voice that brokered no argument. Kerelan nodded but said nothing, allowing Bhehan the moment he needed to take control of the situation.

'The witch is right,' he said, not elaborating on the fact that his communication with the woman had been mostly private. 'There is only one way we are going to defeat this thing. The eldar and I have to...' He swallowed, the words struggling to leave his lips. 'We have to combine our powers. We have to work together.'

'What you say is dangerously close to heresy, brother.' Djul's face was hidden behind the skull-faced Terminator helm, but Bhehan could easily picture his wild-eyed fury.

'What I say is what I see,' he retorted. 'Do not believe for one second that I am

in favour of this course of action, of forming this unwelcome alliance. But if I do not, then the rest of us are dead.'

'Better death than cooperation with the xenos...'

'Brother Djul, I agree with you. But this is the sacred home of our ancestors. Or have you so soon forgotten? We do not fight to save ourselves. We fight to preserve what we were. What we *are*.'

'The Prognosticator speaks wise words, Djul. I do not agree to this pact at all, but the boy is right. Stay your hand. Concentrate your weapons on that... *thing*. Do not fire upon the eldar.'

Every member of the squad picked up his mental addition.

*Yet.*

'The guilt and blame for this action will be mine to bear, brothers,' said Bhehan and he moved towards the eldar woman.

'Bhehan.'

It was the first time Kerelan had addressed him directly by name rather than rank. He turned to look at the First Captain.

'At the first hint that you are losing control, you oust this creature from your mind.'

'Such a severance could kill me, First Captain.'

'I am aware of that. It is either that or die at my hand afterwards when I believe you to be compromised.'

The certainty was oddly reassuring. This was the only chance they had of destroying the daemon. If it failed, Kerelan would not allow him to suffer for long. He inclined his head in obeisance to his commander.

*So be it*, he told the eldar mentally and the walls of his defences lowered, letting her in.

Her unwelcome arrival in his mind was like a malignant tumour, its presence spreading to fill what little space he had granted her. Yet it did not feel malevolent. They were sharing their power. She was not stealing it. She had spoken truth. Psychic tendrils curled deeper into his mind, seeking the strength that he bore.

*You are powerful for one so young.* Her surprise was insulting.

*Yes. So I am told.*

*You must release the power. Our strengths must meld or we will not be strong enough. You must trust me.*

*I do what I do because I must,* Bhehan responded and his anger flared as a red spot on the landscape of his thoughts. *I will never trust you and your kind.*

Memories of engagements against the eldar rose, unbidden to the surface and Bhehan tried to quell them but it was too late. The farseer's brow rose.

*Curious. I said before that we are not all the same. These warriors you have battled against are those who Fell. We will talk more of this when the matter at hand is dealt with. Now are you ready, human?*

Bhehan did not respond immediately. *Was he ready? Was he ready to commit the atrocity of working with this xenos filth? Was he able to prevent her from doing as she pleased with his mind?*

Trust me, she had said.

He had blocked out all the ambient sounds in the dark, dank chamber but now it slowly crept back into his awareness. Gunfire was sounding; discarded shells ringing against the stone floor as they were spewed from the heavy weapons that were being discharged. His battle-brothers were holding the enemy at bay, but it would take more than physical damage to deal with the threat. The weight of expectation was heavy and the young Silver Skulls warrior stood straight and bore it with the stoic pragmatism of his ancestors.

A sudden memory of Brother-Sergeant Igneus, the warrior he had seen in his vision flashed before his eyes and he remembered the ancient hero's words.

*We will defend our Chapter's home with our very last breath.*

He released the self-imposed restraint he had placed around his full psychic might and it burst into his psyche like an unstoppable river. The farseer gasped at the sudden influx of strength and elsewhere, in the corporeal world, he felt her hand close tightly around his. The touch made his skin crawl, but he tolerated it. For the sake of his brothers. For the honour of the Chapter.

The two psychic forces duelled briefly for supremacy and finally they joined together. Without ever understanding how he achieved it, Bhehan subsumed the power of the eldar woman into that of his own and she did likewise.

For the briefest of moments, post-human warrior and eldar farseer were as one. They knew all there was to know about each other. Her memories were coloured with images of a youth and young manhood spent in endless study; of years of unforgiving training in increasingly harsh environments. A youth who had known anything but war. His memories were interspersed with those of the farseer and what he saw would change his perspective forever. He discovered that the Silver Skulls had been incorrect in believing that all eldar were the same. Despite the pressing nature of their situation, curiosity drove him to dig deeper.

He saw her vision, that which had driven her kind to Lyria. That were this thing allowed to continue its existence, the time would come when the followers of the

corpulent god would free it from its prison. That the traitor once known to the Imperium as Typhus would come here, to this holy place and unleash its horror on unsuspecting worlds.

In return, the farseer saw his vision. She saw the entwined war banners and she saw them fall, burned and ruined. He felt her grief at the sudden understanding of what that meant and he knew no pity.

Everything happened fleetingly. Their powers burst forth in a rush of white flame that spread like a ripple from where they stood. The corridor funnelled the psychic burst, channelling it directly towards the vile creature. It was bleeding black ichor from countless wounds, its ability to repair itself severely impaired by the sustained fire pouring down upon it and the roaring breath of the heavy flamer. At Kerelan's order, the Talriktug continued fighting, firing into its gelatinous form. If it was weakening at all, it gave no sign.

The first wave of energy touched it seconds later and the noise it made was other-worldly. It was not pain; the psychic burst had not apparently hurt its physical body, but something had happened. The formless daemon shifted its massive bulk and turned towards the psykers, its attention taken from the other warriors.

*Again*, the farseer said and Bhehan complied without hesitation. He could not afford the risk of doubting her. Not now he was this deeply invested in the outcome.

Another flare of energy and this time the daemon did scream. So did the farseer. Bhehan felt her body start to crumple and grabbed hold of her shoulder dragging her back upwards.

*Again*, he told her in the same way she had spoken to him. One more and we will defeat it.

*I... cannot...*

*You must and you will, witch. You will take my power and you will complete what you have started here.*

Her plan was exquisite. The creature was a daemon of death, rot and decay. She was defeating it with life. Too much life. She was taking her own life-force, combining it with the purity of the young Space Marine and she was using their joint powers to amplify it.

The daemon fed, unable to stop itself. The desperate need to take any sustenance it could from everything that lived or died around it took over and it absorbed the energy into itself. But such purity and faith, amplified at such vast power levels was the antithesis of everything it was.

Silver Skulls and eldar warriors continued to pound away at the flesh of the thing whilst Bhehan and the farseer burned at its ties to reality. The harder the two psychic beings pressed their attack, the more damage the weapons of the warriors was doing. Bolter rounds embedded themselves beneath the surface and exploded, spraying an acidic substance across the room. It damaged eldar and Space Marine alike, eating into Djul's pauldron. But it did not go far. Whatever organisms or whatever warp magic gave it its power seemed to be fading.

'Whatever you are doing is working, Bhehan,' bellowed Kerelan. 'Do not stop.' He was slicing strips of gangrenous flesh away from the daemon as though he carved a beast. His relic blade glistened, coated with the once-lethal substance that had devoured countless men, women, children and xenos across the years. This *thing* stood on the sacred, holy ground of those who had come before and his fury was unmatched.

When the daemon finally stopped moving, when all the fight went out of it, Bhehan was surprised. He had anticipated it bursting like an overripe fruit. He had been ready to seek cover to avoid the inevitable rain of acid that would come with its destruction. But instead, it merely wailed as it began to lose size and cohesion. Where once a gelatinous giant had stood, now there was only a quivering lump the size of a Space Marine.

It continued to diminish, spreading across the chamber floor and littering the ground with splinters of bone and rock. One object stood out as different, unusual; glancing more closely at it, the Prognosticator felt a shock of recognition. The last time he had seen that war banner, it had been worn at the back of the noble Brother-Sergeant Igneus, the warrior he had seen during his earlier flashback.

And he understood how the plague had come into the fortress-monastery. He realised what the creature they had just destroyed had been. It sickened him almost as much as what he had done to defeat it. One of their own, twisted and distorted into something so...

*Do not linger on what was, came a weary voice in his mind. Instead, give thanks for what is no more. See? It dies, Bhehan.*

The psyker was utterly exhausted and drained by his mental exertions, but it was as to nothing compared to the dying spark of the woman who stood beside him. For the first – and only – time, he felt admiration for her.

When the creature finally dissolved into nothing more than a lingering smell and a fading death wail, a harsh silence descended. The sounds of gunfire died away, their echoes fading to nothing. The eldar woman fell to her knees, her

breath coming in a low rasp.

She had withdrawn her presence from Bhehan's mind; he could sense that and it was a welcome relief. He snatched his hand from her, stepping backwards.

'Prognosticator.' Kerelan's voice was quiet and filled with concern. 'Speak to me. Is it over?'

Bhehan knew that the First Captain was not just referring to the battle with the daemon. He nodded his head. 'It is done. My mind is my own once more, First Captain.' He was calm and controlled and Kerelan grunted his satisfaction. The farseer raised her head with obvious effort.

'I want to thank you...' she began, but Bhehan shook his head.

'I did what I had to do. Do not thank me for exposing my mind to you.' He unclamped the bolt pistol he wore at his thigh.

'Listen to me, Bhehan,' she said, reaching a hand up to him. He winced at her use of his name, the insult cutting him deeply. 'I know what you must do. I always have known how this must end. But you have seen, now. You have seen that we are not all that you believe us to be. That even though there cannot be peace between our two peoples, there can surely come some tolerance.'

'Heed my words, xenos. I have purged your taint from my mind already,' was the reply. 'When I return to my ship, I will cleanse my soul of this experience. By the time I return to my home world, you will not even be a memory. I promise you that much.'

Tears filled her eyes. 'I had hoped...' she said, simply and then held her head high. The pride in her expression was worthy of Bhehan's respect even if it... if *she* was not.

'In time,' she said, 'I hope you remember what you saw here.'

'Do not count on it,' he replied, pressing the bolt pistol against her head.

The killing shot echoed loudly through the fallen fortress. Bhehan stared at her fallen, broken body without expression. Reacting to their leader's death, the few remaining eldar prepared to attack, but despite their bulk, the Terminators were faster. Within seconds, the enemy were destroyed. Not one of the eldar remained alive.

'I would say that this place is now purified,' rumbled Djul. 'Let us give thanks for the Emperor's hand in this.'

Another litany began and Bhehan joined in wholeheartedly. Kerelan moved towards the war banner and crouched to look at it. 'That thing destroyed almost everything that remained here,' he observed. 'But this artefact held true. It held firm across the ages. A precious relic indeed. Vashiro will be pleased.' He

carefully gathered it up and stood. 'For eight thousand years, this war banner has stood as a testament to the tenacity of our Chapter. Imagine, brothers. Imagine the heroes who have carried this into war. Imagine what we can learn from it...'

He glanced at Bhehan. If the Prognosticator let his talent extend to the banner, many of the Chapter's lost secrets could be divulged. But from the expression on the youth's face, it was the furthest thing from his mind. Kerelan changed tack.

'Brother Prognosticator, the honour of taking the witch's head should fall to you in recognition of the part you...'

'First Captain. I put myself in your custody.' Bhehan raised his head, pride and conflicting guilt warring on his expression.

'What are you talking about, Prognosticator?'

'I allowed myself to become tainted. I am... impure. There will be penance to pay for my heresy and I welcome it gladly. I know my duty.'

'Your duty, Prognosticator...' Kerelan's tone changed slightly. 'Listen to me, Bhehan. Do you sincerely believe that we are all free from guilt? Look around you, boy. This very place is a guilty mark on our entire Chapter's record. This whole mission, everything that you have done today should teach you that there will come times, during your service to the Golden Throne, when you will be forced to take uncompromising action. The ends in this instance more than justified the means.'

'But I...'

'When we return to the ship, commune with the Emperor. Put your future in his hands. Our entire Chapter holds by that tenet. What would it be if our own Prognosticators did not trust to their own readings of fate?' He reached up and for the first time, removed his helmet. Beneath, his face was fearsome. A full skull had been inked into the skin from chin to forehead and gave him a ghastly appearance. But his eyes held the wisdom of the years.

'Your actions were not questionable,' he said, laying a hand on the young psyker's shoulder. 'You did your duty. Nothing more.' His face contorted in what Bhehan could only presume was a smile. 'Now take her head and let us depart with our prize.'

'Aye, First Captain,' said Bhehan.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**S P Cawkwell** is a freelance writer based in north-east England. Her work for Black Library includes the Silver Skulls novels *The Gildar Rift* and *Portents*, and the *Architect of Fate* novella, *Accursed Eternity*. For Warhammer, she is best known for her stories featuring the daemon princess of Khorne, Valkia the Bloody.

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