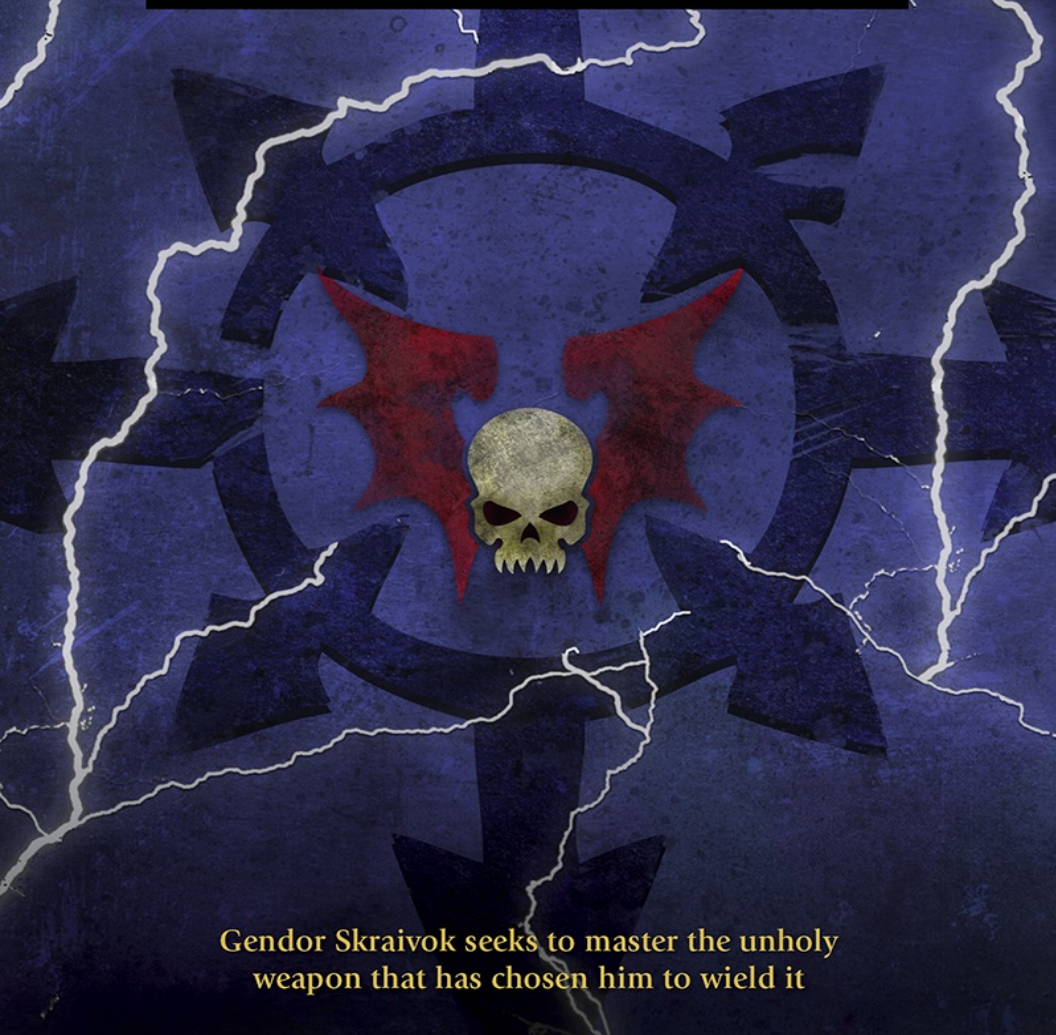


THE HORUS HERESY®

THE PAINTED COUNT

Guy Haley



Gendor Skraivok seeks to master the unholy
weapon that has chosen him to wield it

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THE PAINTED COUNT

Guy Haley

There was the sword, and there was the ship. Those two things alone occupied all of Gendor Skraivok's thoughts.

At that moment, the sword was preeminent. Skraivok lay sprawled on the large bed in the centre of the chamber, his back against the headboard. The bed was comfortable, more than most Skraivok had known since his days as a mortal lordling. The headboard was not, being cast alloy depicting a fussy pattern of interlinked ribs, spines and howling skulls. Skraivok had always been fond of comfort. He had never completely accepted the idea of the warrior aesthete. Let others prove their worth with coarse clothes and uncomfortable furniture. A soft bed did not make him any less of a killer.

He let the metal nodules of the bedhead compress the skin over his black carapace. He was too preoccupied to notice. Lately, comfort had ceased to matter.

It was dark in the chamber, Nostraman dark, the lumens modified to burn low. Ersatz flames danced in electro-flambeaux set against the walls, causing the many shadows to shiver and dance.

They were grand chambers, as befitted his rank. Orlon had stupidly suggested he take Curze's as a show of strength. Skraivok had declined. That would be a provocation too far to those opposing him.

Besides, only an insane man would wish to dwell in the primarch's sanctum,

and any sane man that took up abode there would not long remain so.

On the far side the room was the sword. It was propped in its scabbard against the backrest of a chair that matched the bedhead, and so he could not see the dull, weirdly non-reflective metal of its black blade... but he could feel it. The weapon tugged at invisible hooks sunk deep into his soul. Not so much a call as a *demand* that he take it into his hand.

It was not a sword. It looked to all intents like a sword, its well made if scuffed belt of alien-looking skin wrapped around the quillons and the length of the scabbard – the sort of battered but favoured weapon a warrior like him might have owned for a lifetime.

Only it was not. Before Sotha he had not had the weapon. It had not, by any objective standards, even existed.

At least, not as a sword.

Its appearances might fool everyone else, but Gendor Skraivok knew what it was, and it was most assuredly *not* a mundane blade.

He ground the heels of his palms into his eyes. The room reverberated to the muffled sounds of repair. They went on night and day, a constant backdrop of banging, heavy tools and screams that, outside the soundproofing of his quarters, rose to a cacophonous din. Multiple, maddening sources of vibration that managed to drown out the pulse of the ship's reactor.

'I cannot think!' he shouted at the ceiling. The racket pounded on uninterrupted, and Skraivok groaned. 'Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!'

The ship was the other thing. The ship, and the fleet, and the Legion. He should be leading it – not that morose fool Shang. The primarch's equerry was a knotty problem, one that could not be solved with that damnable sword poking into his mind.

His bare feet whispered over the human-skin divan as he swung them off the bed.

He hung his head a moment, teeth clenched. He made a strangled noise and propelled himself upright.

'You will not win,' he said to the sword.

He spoke to it often, but the sword never replied.

Sooner or later he would talk to it in front of the others. That would not be a good thing.

Skraivok blinked stupidly at the mess in the chamber, as if returning home to find it plundered. Food mouldered on fine plates. The stuffing of furniture gathered in drifts in the corners. Ewers of wine lay on their sides, their contents gone all to vinegar. Pieces of his armour were scattered where he had thrown them. A mirror showed a wild-haired, hollow-faced thing. It took a moment for Skraivok to recognise himself. The black streaks he painted over his eyes that gave him his cognomen of the Painted Count were smudged across his face.

He curled his lip at his appearance. That needed fixing too. Everything would be better when he was rid of the sword.

Once that was gone, he would feel more like himself again.

'Right then,' he said. 'Let us get this over with.'

Slowly, he gathered up the pieces of his wargear and struggled into them.

Then, forcing himself not to pause, he grabbed the sword about its middle and roughly picked it up.

He opened the door to his chambers. Of course, Phy Orlon was waiting outside, with that sickening, sycophantic expression plastered across his narrow face.

‘Ah! Lord Skraivok, it is good you emerge. Are you well rested?’

It astounded Skraivok how such a vulpine little thing had made it through the selection process. Even bulked by legionary gifts, Orlon still managed to convey the impression of feebleness. Towards the end, Nostramo had been providing only the dregs of the dregs. No wonder Curze had levelled the place.

Weakness was like the scent of blood in the water to the Night Lords. Legionaries like Orlon would always attach themselves to those they deemed powerful, for protection. That explained the ridiculous batwings welded to the top of his helm in emulation of Sevatar, and why he had appointed himself as Skraivok’s adjutant.

‘Do I look well rested, Orlon?’ Skraivok replied.

‘Well, no,’ Orlon said apologetically.

As Skraivok walked, Orlon dogged his footsteps and began to prattle. ‘There is the issue of Captain Shang to address, my lord. He has rallied a large contingent of the other captains to his side and is calling for your removal from the *Nightfall* forthwith. I am afraid you do not have long to act before the situation becomes untenable. Already Claw Masters Alvar, Tjock and Denbis are considering changing their allegiance from you to he.’ Orlon laughed modestly. ‘Of course, they do not know that I have this information, but my sources are reliable. I can only assume that—’

‘What about the others?’ Skraivok interrupted him.

‘They remain unmoved by Shang, but events are moving fast.’

Skraivok rounded on the smaller Space Marine and jabbed a finger in his face. ‘Then get back to the “Kyropteran Vicaria” and keep the rest of them from drifting towards Shang, understood? The vote is tomorrow. Surely we can keep this contained until it is done and I am officially appointed commander of the fleet.’

‘My lord, I—’

‘Do you understand, Orlon. Yes or no?’ said Skraivok loudly and slowly.

Orlon nodded emphatically. ‘Of course. Whatever you wish, my lord. I shall see it done.’

Skraivok snorted. ‘*Kyropteran Vicaria*. How dare they set themselves so high. They have no right to decide who shall be Kyroptera and who shall not. There was *one* Kyroptera on this vessel, only because I brought him here. And then I killed him. By right of conquest, I am ranking captain. That is the law.’

Orlon nodded again, but his words belied his apparent agreement. ‘It will not be easy. Shang is against your plan. He believes the primarch dead and has grown sour. He wishes to hunt down the Lion and make him pay. He is obsessed.’

‘Terra is our ultimate destination. Curze lives. Sevatar lives. Pursuing petty vengeance will bring no victory. We must go to the Warmaster.’

'How could you know the First Captain and our father are alive? The council might believe that the xenos device of the Ultramarines could show you such a thing, but you have no way of proving it – nor will you reveal exactly where either of them are.'

'I have seen Sevatar with my own eyes. If they have the information, I am more vulnerable,' said Skraivok tiredly. 'As long as it stays in my head, my head stays on my shoulders.'

He looked at the sword – not *his* sword, one could never own anything like that. Indeed, in the question of ownership, such artefacts usually went the other way.

'All this can wait, Orlon. I have something else I need to deal with.'

'Orlon, tell me, where is the nearest voidlock?'

'There are the lighter bays two decks down from here, my lord. They offer the easiest transit. Do you wish to leave the ship?'

'I said a voidlock!' snapped Skraivok. 'Not a transit route.'

'Why, it is not far...' Orlon's voice trailed off in puzzlement.

'Then show me. Now.'

Orlon led Skraivok through the battered corridors of the *Nightfall*. The ship had been heavily damaged in its encounter with the *Invincible Reason*. Whole decks had been lost to fire and evacuation into the void. The resources of a conquered planet had been put into repairing it, but it would take years to get things right, at this rate of progress. Under Shang's order, they were attempting to repair the ship in memory of their primarch. It was typical of certain of his brothers, thought Skraivok, that they worked so hard for the approval of a being who did not care if they lived or died.

Shang loved Curze, completely, but Skraivok did not think that Shang really understood their father. The Painted Count had had little direct contact with their lord in the past. Perhaps this detachment from his influence had allowed his growing understanding of Curze's character.

There were those in the Legion who wished to go their own way and reave, and those who wanted to reunite the scattered elements and hunt for their father. Skraivok favoured the latter. He did not particularly care for Horus' ambitions, seeing them as vain and self-serving as the Great Crusade, but he *did* want to hurt the Emperor.

The Master of Mankind could have redeemed all the sons of Nostramo, Skraivok was sure of that. But he had chosen not to.

That was what tormented Curze. The callous damning of them all to monstrosity.

A man should be most wary of the monsters he creates.

They negotiated corridors thick with scaffolding, Mechanicum priests, servitors, machinery and exhausted slave workers. Lighting and gravity were patchy. Plasma torches illuminated hellish scenes in phosphorescent clarity.

Skraivok pushed past, working his way methodically toward the outer hull. The voidlock emerged from the gloom of a transverse corridor as a fitfully blinking view port and green indicator lights. Skraivok went to the hatch and

looked inside. The lumens were malfunctioning, flickering on and off. Mortal-sized void suits hung out of their lockers, tools were scattered on the floor, but the panel readings on the internal and external doorways shone true.

‘Go,’ he told Orlon.

The other warrior frowned. ‘My lord? What do you intend?’

‘Freedom,’ said Skraivok. He slammed his palm onto the door switch. The door wheezed open. Stale air blew outwards and he went inside.

Orlon remained. No matter.

‘My lord! Gendor!’ bleated Orlon, as Skraivok’s purpose became clear. ‘Your helmet!’

The door slid shut behind Skraivok. He inputted the codes to override the safeties. A warning tocsin began to honk, and a red light strobed against the dark. Orlon’s face still floated in the window. He looked alarmed, and was talking, as usual, but Skraivok could not hear a word he said.

It was blissful.

The look on Orlon’s face amused Skraivok. The ordinary situation of torturer and tortured on the *Nightfall* was turned about. Skraivok did so enjoy irony.

He smiled at Orlon and went to the exterior door. He mag-locked his boots to the floor, filled his multitung with air and, with one, careful finger, keyed the door open.

The atmospheric contents of the voidlock slammed him in the back as they were sucked out into space. An empty suit wrapped itself around his legs, the reinforced fabric flapping madly in the brief gale, then fell limp in the dead silence of the vacuum.

Skraivok stared out into the void. Deep cold bit at his flesh, blistering it.

Below the *Nightfall*, the dirty world of Argosi was late into its own night. A billion lights twinkled over a continent-sized city. Brown clouds of pollutants streaked the atmosphere. Orbital shipyards hung motionless in space, their long void docks encasing the worst damaged vessels of the Night Lords fleet. Above them, at high anchor, a dozen more void-worthy ships hung as unspoken threats in the sky.

Skraivok grinned with cracking lips, and his spittle froze on his teeth as he hurled the sword out into the void. He struggled to hold onto his breath, but he stood there for a full ten seconds, watching the sword with slowly freezing eyes until it had tumbled out of sight in the darkness.

He shut the door. Air flooded the chamber, bringing the temperature back to tolerable levels. Then the pain began in earnest, as a terrible scalding upon his face. He felt like his skin was being scorched off with a torture mask studded with hot needles.

But Skraivok enjoyed it. It sharpened his mind.

The pain receded quickly. The damage was superficial. His body worked fast to put it right.

The inner hatch window was covered in melting frost, and so he did not notice Captain Shang until he opened it.

Skraivok had not known him before he had arrived on the *Nightfall*. It was said that he had been Curze’s closest confidant, once, and Skraivok could well

believe it. Wild eyes and a face lined with internal pain hinted at a mind almost as crazed as the primarch's. Shang had a reputation of being strong.

But grief, thought Skraivok, has undone you. Shang was another weakling, and affection was his vice.

'Brother,' said Skraivok pleasantly. Two hulking Atramentar Terminators flanked the captain.

'He... He threw his sword out!' Orlon yammered. 'He looked out into the void! Without his helmet!'

'You are insane,' said Shang, flatly. His augmetic fist clenched.

'I am not,' said Skraivok, wondering why no one could see that he was the only sane one left.

'I will not argue with a madman. You are not fit to lead.'

'I have the strongest claim,' said Skraivok. His eyes were clearing. 'That is obvious, since by right of combat I have won my place on the Kyroptera.'

'You executed a blind man. Your claim is weak. The Kyropteran Vicaria shall decide who will lead us.'

'They will choose me. I earned it the same way that wretched Terran Krukesh earned his captaincy. There is no argument.'

'Then we shall remove you from the considerations of the council,' said Shang. He smiled coldly as the Atramentar moved on Skraivok. 'You should have kept your sword. You are going somewhere very special. It has only held one prisoner before. You should feel honoured.'

The Terminators held Skraivok in their iron grip. A Legion thrall came forwards. Teeth clenched in determination, he jabbed Skraivok with a needle, and the Painted Count left the waking world.

The prisoner that the maze had been built for must have been important, and dangerous, to justify all this effort.

Frankly, he did not know why he was still alive. Maybe the existence of the labyrinth had tempted Shang, for the torment that Skraivok would endure within. Maybe Shang was genuinely afraid of the Kyropteran Vicaria's response should he kill Skraivok openly. Either his actions were born of unnecessary cruelty, or of fear. It was to Shang's benefit if he vanished, Skraivok supposed, rather than his bloody corpse be uncovered somewhere.

Nevertheless, keeping him alive suggested more weaknesses. That was Shang's mistake. Skraivok would deal with him presently.

When he did, he would not be so timid.

First, Skraivok had to escape. He knew he was in some sort of maze, because the moment he had regained consciousness he had approached the open door of the chamber and looked out. Three passages branched away. He had taken off his gauntlet and tossed it over the threshold, certain of traps. Nothing happened, so Skraivok had scraped a cross into the wall of his cell and ventured forth. For the first twenty or so doors and forks in the corridor, Skraivok had been cautious, each time throwing forward his gauntlet. The result was the same every time, and so he gave up.

After hours of walking, Skraivok found himself back in the starting chamber.

Everything was as he left it, with the mark he had left on the wall and the metal scrapings on the floor from its fashioning.

The only difference was the sword. That stood on its point, sheathed and wrapped in its worn belt, directly opposite the door as if waiting for him.

As if, thought Skraivok. Not as if. It is waiting for me.

He walked over and looked down at it as he thought over his predicament. It was prudent to assume that this maze would defeat even the mind of a legionary, otherwise Shang would not have placed him there. His initial foray certainly suggested that was the case. Without his helmet, he could not check his armour's status, but providing Shang had not emptied his nutrient reservoir and pharmacopia, Skraivok could count on around three weeks nourishment, if he were careful. His body and armour combined could keep liquid wastage to a minimum. After food and latterly water were exhausted, there was the option of the death-sleep and encystment in a mucranoid sheath of his own making. In such a state he could survive almost indefinitely.

That took him out of the succession for good, since he might very well remain there forever. Wherever he was.

He needed to get out, and soon. The Kyropteran Vicaria, the temporary council that had installed itself to choose a leader, would soon make their decision. Shang had been among the lead candidates until Skraivok had arrived with Krukesh the Pale, so he had some sympathy for the former equerry's uncompromising attitude towards him.

'There obviously is a way in, and therefore at least one way out, or how would I come to be here?' he murmured. He looked all around himself. 'And yet, there is some art at work here that is beyond me. Technology?' He looked back at the sword. 'Warp-craft?'

The sword said nothing.

'If I take you up, will you offer me the route?' he asked. He expected the silence it offered by way of reply. The strange thing was, he knew that it *was* listening to him.

He had never dared wield it. Only once had he held the hilt in his hand, the first time he tried to destroy it. He could still feel the unearthly taint of it on his palm – though it had been inside his gauntlet at the time – like his hand were smeared with an oil that would not wash off. Not painful, but certainly unpleasant.

When he had slept since, he dreamed of that taint spreading up his arm and into his hearts.

Before that one mistake, he had avoided touching it himself entirely, even gifting it to his headsman Kellenkir to be rid of it. Apparently, that was not what the weapon wanted, for it had returned to him. Since his arrival on the *Nightfall*, he had given it away a second time, tossed it into the ship's bilges, melted it in the furnaces of the forge, dropped it into a plasma field and, most recently, thrown it out of the voidlock.

Every time, it had returned. The sword wanted *him*.

Skraivok reached out a hand, hesitated, and drew it back. To pick it up freely was to seal a bargain that could not be broken. He knew that as well as if he

had been told.

It was also a chance at freedom from the maze, and at true power. He could reunite what was left of the VIII Legion and lead them to Terra, there to spit in the Emperor's eye for his lack of mercy and compassion.

But at what cost? Death, or damnation.

He chided himself inwardly for this superstition, though only half-heartedly. They had moved far beyond the Imperial Truth, now.

There was no choice. He reached out for the sword quickly, before he could start his vacillations afresh. He picked it up by the sheath, as had been his habit, but this time he undid the belt and fastened it around his waist.

Then he drew the weapon.

His arm tingled. That sense of *uncleanliness* came to him again, and this time it was accompanied by a sensation of weight settling onto his back – insubstantial as breath, but just as real. He felt a sense of triumph that was not his own.

That was it, he knew. The beginning of something unholy.

It was the last truly independent thought he ever had.

'Show me the way,' he said to the sword.

And for the second time, Skraivok departed the room.

Turn by turn, he passed through the labyrinth. This time, they did not return to the first chamber. He discovered that there were whole sections filled with laser grids, flamer emplacements, deadfalls, spikes that shot up from the floor and swinging blades. Before the deadly traps were triggered, the sword thrummed in his hand, imparting the knowledge somehow as to where the danger would come from, and where exactly he should move to.

In the darkest places, the edges of its blade glowed an eerie colour for which Skraivok had no name. It did not penetrate the darkness, but made it somehow deeper. Still Skraivok was led unerringly on. The sword tugged in his hand, drawing him down tunnels that he would never have thought to take, or that he would not even have identified as such. More than once he was sure it was making him double back, or return to the maze's maddening heart along paths he could have sworn he had already trodden.

But he had no other choice, and so he allowed the sword to guide him.

The workmanship of the labyrinth was exquisite, with gears and mechanisms subtly concealed behind every surface. Occasionally he would halt at the sound of distant tremors, as though portions of the structure might be moving around him.

Unlocking, perhaps?

For hours he walked until, unexpectedly, he came to a forgotten chamber larger than all the rest. In the centre of the unlit room was a podium, and what looked like a weapon rest when he regarded it more closely, surrounded by battered suits of power armour. Around the suits were dark stains, and inside were the remains of legionaries.

Skraivok walked around the bodies. Their flesh had mummified in the ship's arid air, turning obsidian black skin a dusty grey.

'Salamanders,' he whispered.

Skraivok thought then that he could guess *who* had been imprisoned in the labyrinth. He lifted the sword. 'Are you showing me this so that I am more grateful? So that I realise I have no hope of escape without your guidance?'

He smiled. The weapon felt better in his hand than it had. Comfortable, almost.

He did not tarry long. He strode on, allowing himself to be guided by the subtle shifts in the weight of the sword.

Eventually, he found himself before a round vault door fashioned from gleaming adamantium, locked by eight bolt bars radiating from a massive wheel hub. Six skull-faced cogitator units ran in serial along the centre of the door, and a long array of illuminated red numbers were displayed in the view slots to their fronts. All were set to nought.

'Locked, of course,' he said. He looked down at the sword. Its sickly sheen no longer hurt his eyes so much. 'I do not suppose you know the code, do you?'

The sword said nothing.

Skraivok stared at the lock. The cogitator housings were incorporated into the door itself seamlessly. There was no input device that he could see and, even if there were, he calculated the number of possible combinations. 'Were I to key them all in the individually,' he said to the sword, 'I would be here, well...' He laughed. 'Forever.'

And that was only if the first failure did not come with a nasty surprise.

The lock was probably there to breed hope in a bed of despair. Skraivok was well versed in those arts, and refused to play Shang's – or *Curze's*? – game. It occurred to him that there might be more of this labyrinth beyond the door, and no exit.

One thing at a time. He must get through.

'I wonder,' he murmured, hefting the sword.

He prodded it against the adamantium. The point skidded off without leaving so much as a scratch. He frowned. The sword was powerful. If it could return mysteriously from destruction, who knew what else it could do?

With great care he balanced the sword point in the angle where the left-hand bolt went from door to lock. It was difficult to keep it there without the point biting into the metal, but he managed. He placed both hands on the pommel of the sword.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. 'Get me out of here,' he said aloud.

Nothing happened. He opened one eye then the other. The door remained unmarked. Skraivok maintained his temper well, having discovered in his early years that, in a world of murderers, a cool head and a charming manner opened many doors.

But they were not opening this one.

His concentration slipped, his mind replaying all the difficulties of the last six months through his perfect legionary memory. He grew despondent, but when Shang's face emerged from the past his temper broke.

'I am going to kill you, Shang,' he growled. 'I am going to use this sword to open you up from groin to throat, and I am going to make you dance in your own entrails! I am not going to rot down here. You will pay! You will suffer!'

The sword blazed with its unholy light. The adamantium parted under its point. With a grunt of effort, Skraivok levered it down, shearing through the bar. The resistance gone, he overbalanced and went down to his knees.

A mechanism deep inside the workings of the door made an angry beeping. Smoke curled from metal surfaces that bubbled and ran, though they remained cold.

Skraivok remained kneeling, the point of the blade resting on the floor. He stood. Had Kellenkir learned the depths of power that this sword offered? He suspected not, or they would all still be on Sotha.

He lifted the blade. Seven more bolts to go. He cut the lower four easily enough, but the three at the top were hard to reach. Only by removing his pauldrons and standing on their unsteady surfaces did he have enough height to cut them. His anger grew as he worked, crystallising in his heart until it was as hard and solid as the blade itself.

A last effort saw the final bolt sheer through. He sheathed the sword and stepped back from the scarred metal. He kept his eyes on it as he carefully replaced his armour. When he pushed on the door he was surprised to find it swung open easily.

On the other side was a narrow access way. He saw that it was formed by the outer edge of the labyrinth and the wall of a hold. He turned back and looked upwards at the soaring reaches of the space. The *Nightfall's* lower holds were huge, capable of housing entire Titan maniples on the Great Crusade. This structure must have been immense to fill one so completely. As austere as this small, secondary hatchway was, this was a creation of staggering genius, and had been signed by its maker.

The outer wall was plain, but for a single, grille-mouthed, helmeted skull stamped into the metal. The sigil of the IV Legion.

Skraivok looked either way down the gap. No alarms sounded at his escape.

A few lumen work lamps hung along the way, casting pools of weak light. The spaces in between were thick with shadow. Skraivok could practically smell his primarch's touch. This had all been of his devising, at some time or another.

Skraivok drew the sword and advanced cautiously. The lumens and shadows alternated to a vanishing point, and for a while he thought he might still be trapped, and this place a part of the labyrinth's cruel trickery, until the bulkhead wall of the hold came into view, where was set a single door. He opened this quietly.

Two legionary sentries lounged at their posts. They were facing away from the door, and were probably intended to maintain the secrecy of the labyrinth rather than guarding against escape.

The first died in ignorance, Skraivok's warp-given blade bursting through his chest. The second whirled around, boltgun coming up. Skraivok cut through the barrel as it fired, and the weapon burst into flame. The warrior threw it

aside in shock, conveniently opening the way to his chest.

Skraivok ran one heart through first, then the other. The sword granted him great speed, and the edge cut through ceramite as if it were paper.

He grinned as the death croak of his foe sounded metallically from his vox-grille. It seemed absurd to him now that he had feared taking up the sword.

He waited a moment, ears straining for the sounds of alarm. The area was deserted. If the warriors had managed to alert their superiors – and that meant Shang – then they would likely be a long while coming.

There was time.

Skraivok dragged the bodies back into the hold. He looted the pauldrons from one, replacing his own livery. From the second he took the helmet and covered his face.

So disguised, he set off at a run.

Just to be sure, Skraivok killed the Atramentar warrior outside the Hall of Judgement. There was only one, and his lumbering, clumsy movements had no chance of catching the Painted Count. He pushed the dying veteran off the point of his blade with one foot, then kicked the copper doors wide and stepped over the sparking corpse of the Terminator into the room.

At the centre of the large chamber, thirteen captains and claw lords sat at a crescent table of black stone. They were each illuminated by a cone of soft light, set for Nostraman eyes. The rest of the room was in darkness. Visor lenses gleamed in the dark like the eyes of nocturnal predators. Skraivok unfastened his stolen helm and threw it down.

‘My brothers!’ he said. ‘I trust I am not too late for the vote?’

‘Skraivok!’ said the Exalted Terror Master Thandamell, coming to his feet. Half the others followed, some drawing their weapons, though Shang alone remained seated at the table, his fists clenched.

‘Yes!’ replied Skraivok, mimicking Thandamell’s surprise. ‘Are you not expecting me? I was supposed to be here, was I not?’

A number of guns were pointing at him. Skraivok was too light-headed with the mischief he was causing to care.

‘Or were you part of Shang’s little conspiracy?’ He levelled his sword. ‘I see he is sat right at the centre of your little gathering. That rather speaks to me of a foregone conclusion.’

‘Shut your mouth, Painted Count,’ said Thandamell, coming around the table and walking into the wide marble area where Skraivok stood. ‘If you were ever a contender for leadership, you no longer are. What kind of a man kills the sentry of the meeting he is to join?’

‘I can think of a few,’ said Skraivok.

‘Just... Just, take him,’ said Thandamell, gesturing to his warriors stationed around the room. ‘I knew we should never have released you after your initial confinement, Skraivok.’

‘It appears I cannot stay caught, eh?’ he replied, lifting the sword smoothly to Thandamell’s throat. ‘You meddle in the affairs of your betters, Terror Master. You are no claw leader. Order your men to stand down, or your head

will be the first I remove.'

Skraivok took a step to the left, scoring the edge of Thandamell's breastplate with the supernaturally keen edge of the blade. In this new position, he could not easily be hit without Thandamell being caught in the crossfire.

'You cannot kill me with that sword. It has no power field. It is a relic.'

Skraivok glanced at the slumped, hulking Terminator outside. 'Huh. It must be newer than it looks.'

Thandamell eyes twitched. He raised his hands slowly in surrender.

'Now, I demand that my claim to the Kryptera be recognised,' said Skraivok.

'Enough!' shouted Shang. He slammed his hands down flat on the table and stood. 'Skraivok, you are not fit to lead.'

'But you are?' laughed Skraivok. 'You would have us throw our lives away chasing vengeance. Krukesh was actually right about one thing – if the Night Haunter were dead, we would know.'

'Then we should find him.'

'But you do not *believe* that he lives.'

'Whereas you would have us attack Terra, leaderless.'

Skraivok smiled. 'Not leaderless. Horus himself moves on the Throneworld. If Curze is alive, he will be there. We should gather all of the Legion that we can, and strike out immediately for the Segmentum Solar.'

'And you would lead us in the interim?'

'You would prefer that our Legion is left as nothing but a footnote in history? More than half of the warriors in this room supported my claim before you *arranged* my disappearance. You will not win by election. If you are so sure that I cannot lead the Night Lords, and that *you* should, your only course is to fight me. Take my right, by my death.'

'Skraivok, I do not want to kill you. You would already be dead. I have had ample opportunity,' said Shang.

'No, you merely put me out of the way for a while. Or forever. Fight me!' he shouted.

Shang's body language changed. 'You forget, I fought against the Lion and his best warriors alongside our father, and I lived.'

'Yes, you did. How's the hand?' laughed Skraivok. 'Have no doubt, Shang – I may not possess their power or their pride, but I have no fear of death, and that makes me more dangerous than any primarch.'

'You think they will be afraid of you? You are insane.'

Skraivok grinned. 'I keep telling you, I am not. I do not care if you live or die. Relinquish your claim, or I will kill you. You can be certain of that.'

Shang jerked his head. Thandamell backed away slowly. Skraivok let his sword follow him for a couple of feet – he was exposed, but he was confident that Shang would not order him shot. The others would never trust him again after so blatant an assassination.

Shang drew his own blade as he came out from behind the table. It emitted a sharp crack as he ignited the disruption field.

'Think again, Painted Count,' said Shang. 'This is your last chance.'

'I have no second thoughts,' Skraivok replied.

'So be it.'

Shang came at him fast, his sword held in a double-handed grip.

Time slowed. Skraivok saw the blow coming before Shang had finished formulating his attack. As Shang swung at him, Skraivok stepped out, round, and spun, his sword skimming over the top of the captain's backpack, and cutting neatly through the skull.

Shang stumbled. His mouth gaped and went slack. His knees gave out, and he collapsed, the upper half of his head sliding free as he fell, spilling his brains across the floor.

A stunned quiet gripped the room.

'*Did you see how fast he moved...?*' someone whispered.

'None of you understand anything,' Skraivok called out. 'You are arrogant and narrow-minded. You think you know power. You think power is invested in the here and now – that it can only be won through violence, terror and cruelty, the dominance of your will over the flesh of others. That is not power...'

He brandished the sword.

'We look down upon Horus' allies that court the services of the warp, seeing them as feeble idolators. But there is *power* in the empyrean, there to be seized by those who are strong!' The words came from his mouth, and in his voice, but he could not be sure they were entirely his own. 'This is true power, far above anything in the material realm. You disdain what you do not understand.'

He sheathed the weapon. Despite its recent employment, it was bloodless. 'Are there any more objections to my command? I have proved myself twice now. I will not hesitate to do so again.'

The others looked back at him. No one said anything. Thandamell took a step forwards.

'Hail Skraivok, first among claw lords,' he said flatly.

'Hail Skraivok, first among claw lords!' the others echoed, tentatively at first, but with growing conviction. 'Hail Skraivok, first among claw lords!'

'Congratulations,' said Thandamell. The Terror Master wore an insolent look on his face and kept his eyes locked with Skraivok's, but he still knelt before him.

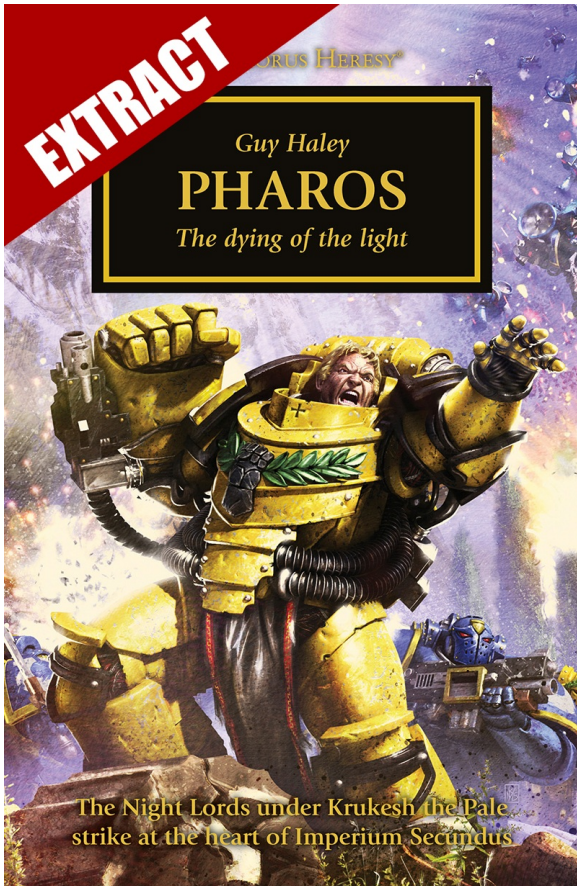
Skraivok looked at them all. The sensation of weight on his back grew noticeable for a moment, then faded from his notice.

'There are those among us who think the Legion is done,' he said. 'That stops now. We are not finished. Krukesh had a sizeable fleet, and he said more of our brothers survived Thramas. We here at Argosi represent a sizeable force, but we will find more. We are still a Legion! I give you twenty days to finish the repairs to the *Nightfall*. Redouble all efforts. Strip the planet bare if need be, and oil the work with the blood of its people. In twenty days we shall depart, and we shall be ready to strike for Terra.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Space Marine Battles novel *Death of Integrity*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Valedor* and *Baneblade*, and the novellas *The Eternal Crusader*, *The Last Days of Ector* and *Broken Sword*, for *Damocles*. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *Warstorm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

An extract from *Pharos*.



Oberdeii was in danger.

The combat servitor walked into the practice cage, slow and idiot stiff, until the cage door clanged down behind it, its combat protocols engaged, and there was nothing idiotic about it any more. A psychotic, vestigial intelligence glimmered in its eyes. Drool ran in sheets from its mouth, a side-effect of the combat drugs pumping around its body from the brass apparatus embedded in its back. Half the skull was replaced by steel. What skin it had left was corpse grey, puckered and puffy around its implants. One hand had been replaced by a motorised circular blade, the other arm had been severed halfway to the elbow and a wickedly edged sword grafted in its place. Its muscles had been thickened to a grotesque size by growth agents, the legs lent further strength by piston-levered callipers.

The servitor wore the same heavy, rubberised bodysuit that all the servitors Oberdeii had ever seen wore, and when he had activated it for the session it had looked little different from its peaceful peers, those that cleaned, cooked and carried for the XIII Legion without demur.

No longer. Electrical power surging through its remade body revealed its true nature: a murderous machine-man programmed to do its utmost to kill its opponent.

For a moment the neophyte considered that he might have made a mistake. Then the servitor's saw blade buzzed into life, it lurched into a staggering charge, and Oberdeii had no more time for doubt.

Oberdeii fought with a simple steel gladius taken from the training room's armoury. He was not yet entitled to his own, and he probably never would be. So alien at first, the heft of the short-bladed sword had become intimately familiar to him. It fit his palm perfectly, it felt right. Now that rightness sickened him. He would never be presented with the blade he had striven so hard to win. The practice sword was the failing promise of a future he would never see.

Only months away from the end of his training, Oberdeii had been tainted, and was therefore unworthy of the Legion.

The servitor swung the heavy buzzsaw up and over its head as it closed. Oberdeii screamed full in its face, giving voice to his anger and shame. Bracing the gladius' blade against his left hand, he caught the saw blade on his weapon's edge. Sparks showered from the metal and hissed onto his bare skin. He welcomed the pain. The sense of impending death sharpened his immature reflexes. If he were to fail, he would at least feel like a legionary once.

The servitor was enormously strong. Oberdeii's muscles protested against the pressure it put upon the blade, and yet they held. The servitor growled, blowing aseptic breath over his face.

Oberdeii went with the servitor's attack, turned its motion against it to fling its great mass to one side, and he marvelled at his own strength. He was still amazed at the power he had been granted. Not very long ago he had had the spare muscles of any youth, but now his arms were thick and powerful. For the last two years synthetic biochemicals had driven his metabolism into overdrive. Supplementary organs moderated every aspect of his physiology. When their work was finished, they would bring perfection to the randomly created, misfiring systems of nature. What had taken millions of years to evolve into a clumsy, unfinished state, the Emperor had perfected in mere decades.

Oberdeii was four months from his final assessment, and not grown fully. There was still an ache in his throat from the last round of implants. He had yet to attain his full height and his full might. The man-machine he battled was among the most potent training tools in the armoury. It had been created to test a full battle-brother to the limit, and as Oberdeii angrily reflected, he was not a legionary yet.

Animalistic roars blared from the vox-unit implanted into the combat-servitor's chest. It moved with a smoothness that was an absurd contrast to its ugliness. Turning its stumble into a devastating attack, it swung its entire body around, arms fully extended, sending the gleaming sword-point speeding through the air towards Oberdeii's midriff. Oberdeii bent his belly back. The tip scraped over his stomach, opening a shallow scratch. The machine whirled, bringing its whirring saw-blade in a horizontal following attack. Oberdeii barely caught the motion in time. A clumsy parry jarred the sword in his hand so hard his fingers became numb. He readjusted his grip as he danced back.

He could almost hear Sergeant Arkus – *you're gripping it too hard, lad!* Careless, he scolded himself, unworthy.

The machine circled him. Oberdeii tensed as it came at him again – pistons hissing, heavy-booted feet thundering into the cage's metal floor – to butt him in the chest with its reinforced skull, driving the wind from the Scout's lungs and carrying him back hard across the cage and into the bars. The structure vibrated at the impact. The cyborg forced Oberdeii's sword hand down and back with its forearm, the metal pins securing the prosthetic to its bones digging painfully into the youth's wrist. Twice it banged Oberdeii's arm against the bars, until the sword dropped from his treacherous fingers. It put its meaty forearm against his throat, the attached saw-blade burring away deafeningly right by Oberdeii's left ear. The blade bit into his cheek, splattering them both with blood. Oberdeii jerked away from it. The servitor

could have taken his head off there and then. Instead it pushed hard against the Scout's windpipe, attempting to choke him.

Oberdeii gasped for air. He felt his vulnerable hyoid bone flex under the pressure. The servitor's eyes glared. There was nothing of humanity in them, only a machine-born hatred and a need to kill.

Oberdeii was going to die, and he welcomed it.

He could not bear the dreams, not any more. A darkness was coming. He had heard the whispers beneath Mount Pharos, and ever since then he had been dogged by fear of a peril so vast and monstrous that it blotted out all hope in his soul, for he could do nothing to avert it.

Knowledge tyrannised him, and it would not let him sleep.

Six weeks in the apothecarion recovering. After lights out he lay with his eyes closed, his nights spent in a feverish non-sleep that took him back into the dark of the mountain and the terrible truths that lived there. When he woke, if he could call it waking, he began every day-cycle with the same foreboding.

Fear and knowledge were why he would fail. Terror was why he had come to the training room in the dead of night.

His throat closed. His physiology went into overdrive to conserve oxygen. The servitor snarled out its programmed fury. Oberdeii's veins bulged and his face reddened. His eyes felt as if they would burst.

In desperation, he spat in the servitor's face.

It was a poor spit – with his throat constricted he could not milk his Betcher's gland effectively, nor propel the poison it produced. Acid sprayed into the servitor's face in a spattering cloud.

The servitor reeled back, blinded. Oberdeii dived to the side as it recovered and swung its sawblade right through the space where his head had been. The combat augmetic connected with the cage bar with such force it tore through the metal with a horrendous squealing sound.

Its target eluding it, the servitor stopped. Oberdeii froze, his eyes fixed on his dropped blade. The servitor cocked its head to one side, searching for the boy, insensible of the acid burning its face. Oberdeii stifled his urge to draw in huge gasps of air to replenish his empty lungs, in case it heard him. Holding his breath after his choking was an ordeal. Spots whirled in front of his eyes. He should have thought to inflate his multilung before entering the ring. That would have given him minutes more oxygen. He cursed himself for not thinking to utilise his new abilities to their full advantage.

He stayed motionless as the machine-man stepped round in a half-circle. His sword lay on the far side of the creature.

There was only one possible practical. Oberdeii wasted no time on thought. He let out a shout, putting all his frustration into it. The servitor zeroed in on his position instantaneously. Oberdeii rolled as the saw-blade slammed into the floor, bit into the plating and dragged the servitor forward. Darting past his opponent, Oberdeii grabbed his gladius and ran around the inside of the bars, dragging the broad tip over them to make them sing. The servitor followed the noise. Oberdeii stopped, and it leapt. He dodged a sword thrust, grabbed the servitor's sword arm and pushed it out through the bars, jamming the elbow

hard up against a crossbrace. He stabbed through the elbow, then hacked down at the servitor's legs.

It was an inelegant blow, but it served its intended purpose. Hydraulic fluid spurted from severed lines in the calipers. The left leg sagged. Oberdeii danced away as the servitor thrashed at the cage to extract its paralysed arm. The Scout slashed through the steel-cable tendon of its ankle, then jumped back as the servitor yanked out its ruined arm and came after him. A second of elation turned to dismay as his foot folded under him and he fell backwards.

The servitor took a step, put its damaged leg down, and fell directly on top of the boy.

Oberdeii got his sword-point up in the nick of time. The weight of the servitor forced the weapon through its metal-dense body. The weapon was at an awkward angle, and something gave in his wrist. He ignored the pain and dragged the sword around in the servitor's innards. The machine made a high-pitched mechanical wheezing. Teeth clacking madly, it jerked atop him with bruising force, then went limp.

The saw-blade spun for a few seconds more, and stopped.

Oberdeii gave his sword an experimental twist. There was no response. The servitor's running lights were out.

'You are dead, then,' he said, and let his head thump back onto the deck plates.

He lay under the machine as his hearts slowed. For a few moments he lost himself in their strange dual beat. Of all the changes wrought upon him, that alteration to the fundamental rhythm of his body had taken the most getting used to.

He heaved the cyborg off and stood.

He looked down upon the shattered body leaking blood and oil in equal measure. Whatever crime the servitor had committed in life to deserve its fate would be forever unknown to Oberdeii. He supposed it had paid its dues in full. Final mercy had been granted at his hand. He felt a shudder of revulsion. If he were judged wanting he might find himself in a similar position, for there were few roles suited to failed aspirants. His arm shook violently as he raised it to wipe the sweat pouring off his forehead. He had been suffering mild palsies when under extreme duress. His implants were still not fully biochemically integrated with his body. Apothecary Taricus assured him it would pass.

A choking noise came from Oberdeii's throat.

It would not pass. The process would not finish. He would never be an Ultramarine. He was polluted by the touch of the machine in the mountain. The gladius fell from his hands. He felt sick, feeling the shock afresh yet again. No matter how many times he thought on it, the pain did not lessen.

Oberdeii grieved for the man he would never be.

A gentle cough made him turn. He wiped hurriedly at his cheeks.

'Good morning, Neophyte Oberdeii.' Sergeant Arkus, his squad leader and mentor, was leaning against the wall by the armoury door on the far side of the training room, a mild, unreadable expression on his craggy face. 'Are you going to tell me why you are not asleep in the barracks?' Taricus released you

only yesterday, and you are already overstretching yourself.'

'Sergeant!'

'Yes, that is correct. Sergeant. As your sergeant, I asked you a question. As a neophyte, you are bound to answer, yet I hear no answer.'

'I... I can't sleep, sergeant.'

'So you thought you would come and commit suicide instead? That is an extreme cure for insomnia.'

Oberdeii looked down at the dead servitor. 'I seek to better myself for the Legion.'

Arkus pushed himself off the wall and came into the cage. 'Ah, now it all makes sense.'

'Yes, sergeant.' Oberdeii looked up at his teacher. Arkus was a foot taller than the Scout. 'How long were you watching?'

'Long enough to wince at that terrible parry. Hold up your sword.'

Oberdeii stooped for his blade and adopted the stance suitable for unarmoured combat. He gritted his teeth at the pain in his wrist.

Arkus shook his head despairingly.

'Not like that – like *this*.' Arkus' massive hand engulfed Oberdeii's own and twisted it. Oberdeii stifled a yelp as the torn muscle twinged in his wrist. 'Keep the guard angled, blade edge outward towards the parry. If you fight like that a good warrior will have your arm off at the elbow as soon as you point the bloody thing at him!'

'Yes, sergeant. I am sorry.'

'Still,' Arkus said. 'You killed it.' He toed the dead cyborg. Arkus wore a sleeveless chiton and loose trousers, the garb of a farmer or artisan. These simple clothes were supposed to bring unity with the people they had been made to protect. No one could ever mistake Arkus for a normal man; he was seven feet tall, his muscles huge and his skin studded with armour interface ports.

'Thank you, sergeant.'

'That was not praise, boy. If his pain circuits had been deactivated, you would be a dead man. These combat models do not feel much, but if he felt nothing at all the match would not have gone your way.'

Oberdeii shrugged. 'I do not know how to turn them off.'

'There is a reason we do not teach you everything at once, boy.' Arkus looked down at the ruined combat unit. 'That was a theta-class servitor. You're not cleared to face them. It seems we teach you too much as it is.'

Oberdeii opened his mouth to speak, but Arkus shushed him. 'I do not wish to know how you got the activation codes. You did well to defeat it. I do not know whether to censure you or commend you.' He hooked his fingers into his broad belt. The Ultima emblem of the Legion gleamed on the buckle.

Oberdeii looked at his master expectantly. Censure, it should be censure. Arkus had been too lenient with him since the incident in the mountain.

Arkus' mouth became a thoughtful line. 'Adept Criolus is not going to be very happy with you. But... Impressive. Very impressive. Next time, stick to the combat armatures.'

Arkus smiled sadly.

'It is time, isn't it?' said Oberdeii nervously.

Arkus nodded, and his smile vanished. 'Yes, Oberdeii. It is time. The Librarian has finished with the others.'

He rubbed his own head hesitantly. Arkus, along with everyone who had spent long periods near the mountain, had experienced the dreams, although no one else had experienced anything as potent as the terrifying visions Oberdeii had when lost in the labyrinth. And that was the problem.

'He wished to see you last. You must come with me.'

The Scout glanced back uncertainly at the machine corpse as they left. He couldn't shake the feeling that it would be the last time he would be allowed into the practice chamber.

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