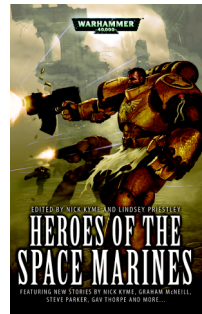


# ***HEROES OF THE SPACE MARINES***

*A Warhammer 40,000 anthology*

*Edited by Nick Kyme and Lindsey Priestley*

In the grim darkness of the Warhammer 40,000 universe mankind is best by foes in a galaxy wracked by eternal war. Set forth the Space Marines, superhuman warriors and the ultimate protectors of humanity. Heroes of the Space Marines is an anthology of stories about these brave champions and their dark counterparts, the Chaos Space Marines. Written by such Black Library luminaries as Mike Lee, Gav Thorpe and Steve Parker, together with new authorial talent, this collection sets the stars ablaze with the fury of the Space Marines!



## **About the Editors**

Lindsey Priestley is one of Games Workshop's longest serving employees. A lifelong science fiction and fantasy fan, she currently works as the senior editor on the Black Library fiction line.

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You can catch up with Nick and read about all of his other published works at his website: [www.nickkyme.com](http://www.nickkyme.com)

**•SPACE MARINES•**

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Ian Watson

The following is an excerpt from *Skull Harvest* by Graham McNeill, taken from the anthology *Heroes of the Space Marines*..  
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Dead, glassy eyes stared up at the bar patrons from the floor as the rolling head finally came to a halt. It had been a swift blow, the edge of the killer's palm like a blade, and the snarling warrior's head was ripped from his neck before the last words of his challenge were out of his mouth.

The body still stood, its murderer grasping the edge of its crimson-stained breastplate in one gnarled grey fist. Blood pooled beneath the head and squirted upwards from the stump of neck. The body's legs began to twitch, as though it sought to escape its fate even in death. The killer released his grip and turned away as the body crashed to the dirty, ash- and dust-streaked floor in a clatter of steel and dead meat.

The excitement over, the patrons of the darkened bar returned to their drinks and plotting, for no one came to a place like this without schemes of revenge, murder, pillage and destruction in mind.

Honsou of the Iron Warriors was no exception, and his champion's bloody display of lethal prowess was just the first step in his own grand design.

The air was thick with intrigue, grease and smoke, the latter curling around heavy rafters that looked as though they had once been part of a spaceship. Irregular clay bricks supported a roof formed from sheets of corrugated iron, and thin slats of harsh light, like the burning white sky of Medrengard, shone through bullet holes and gaps in the construction.

The killer of the now headless body licked the blood from the edge of its hand, and Honsou grinned as he saw the urge to continue killing in his champion's all too familiar grey eyes and taut posture. It called itself the Newborn, and was clad in tarnished power armour the colour of wrought iron. Its shoulder guards were edged in yellow and black, and a rough cloak of ochre was draped around its wide shoulders. It was every inch an Iron Warrior but for its face; a slack fleshmask of stolen skin that was the image of a man Honsou would one day kill. Stitched together from the skins of dead prisoners, the Newborn's face was that of the killer in the dark, the terror of the night and the lurker in the shadows that haunts the dreams of the fearful.

It turned towards Honsou and he felt a delicious shiver of vicarious excitement as he glanced at the dead body on the floor.

‘Nicely done,’ said Honsou. ‘Poor bastard didn’t even get to finish insulting me.’

The Newborn shrugged as it sat across the table from him. ‘He was nothing, just a slave warrior.’

‘True, but he died just as bloodily as the next man.’

‘Killing this one might make you the “next man” to his master,’ said the Newborn.

‘Better he dies now than we end up recruiting him and he fails in battle,’ said Cadaras Grendel from across the table as he finished a tin mug of harsh liquor. ‘Don’t want any damn wasters next to me if we have to fight anything tough in the next few days.’

Grendel was a brute, an armoured killer who delighted in slaughter and the misery of others. Once, he had fought for a rival Warsmith on Medrengard, though in defeat he had transferred his allegiance to Honsou. Despite that switch, Honsou knew Grendel’s continued service was bought with the promise of carnage and that his loyalty was that of a starving wolf on a short leash. The warrior’s face was a scarred and pitted nightmare of battered flesh, his cruel features topped with a close-cropped mohican.

‘Trust me,’ said the warrior next to Grendel, ‘the Skull Harvest weeds out the chaff early on. Only the strongest and most vicious will survive to the end.’

Honsou nodded and said, ‘You should know, Vaanes. You’ve been here before.’

Clad in the midnight-black armour of the Raven Guard, Ardaric Vaanes was the polar opposite of Cadaras Grendel; lithe, elegant and handsome. His long dark hair was bound in a tight scalp-lock and his hooded eyes were set in a face that was aquiline and which bore ritual scars on each cheek.

The former Raven Guard had changed since Honsou had first recruited him to train the Newborn. Honsou had

never fully believed that a warrior once loyal to the False Emperor could completely throw off the shackles of his former master, but from what Cadaras Grendel had told him of Vaanes's actions on the orbital battery above Tarsis Ultra, it seemed such concerns were groundless. 'Indeed,' agreed Vaanes. 'And I can't say I'm happy to be back. This isn't a place to come to unless you're prepared for the worst. Especially during the Skull Harvest.'

'We're prepared for the worst,' said Honsou, leaning over and lifting the severed head from the floor and depositing it on their table. The dead man's expression was frozen in surprise, and Honsou wondered if he'd lived long enough to see the bar spinning around as his head rolled across the floor. The skin was waxy and moist, the iconic mark of a red skull branded into its forehead over a tattoo of an eight-pointed star. 'After all, that's why we're here and why I had the Newborn kill this one.'

Like his warriors, Honsou had changed a great deal since his rise to prominence had begun on Hydra Cordatus. His unique silver arm was new and a bolt-round had pulverised the left side of his face, leaving it a burned and bloody ruin and making a glutinous, fused mess of his eye. That eye had been replaced with an augmetic implant and as much as he had changed physically, Honsou knew that it was nothing compared to the changes wrought within him.

Vaanes reached over and lifted the head, turning it over and allowing the blood to drip down his gauntlets.

Honsou saw Vaanes's eyes widen as he touched the head, his nostrils flaring as he took in the scents of the dead man, while running his fingers over the cold flesh. 'This was one of Pashtoq Uluvent's fighters,' said Vaanes.

'Who?'

'A follower of the Blood God,' said Vaanes, turning the head around and tapping the sigil branded on its forehead. 'That's his mark.'

'Is he powerful?' asked Grendel.

'Very powerful,' said Vaanes. 'He has come to the Skull Harvest many times to recruit fighters for his warband.'

'And he's won?'

'Champions that don't win the Skull Harvest end up dead,' said Vaanes.

'Killing one of his men ought to get his attention,' said Honsou.

'I think it just did,' said Grendel, nodding towards the bar's door with a wide grin of anticipation.

A towering warrior in armour that had once been black and yellow, but which was now so stained with blood that it resembled a deep, rusted burgundy, marched towards their table.

Grendel reached for his weapon, but Honsou shook his head.

The warrior's helm was horned and two long tusks sprouted from beneath the visor of his helmet. Honsou couldn't tell whether they were part of his armour or his flesh. The same symbol branded into the head was cut into the warrior's breastplate, and his breath was a

rasping growl, like that of a ravenous beast. He carried an axe with a bronze blade that dripped blood and shone with the dull fire of a smouldering forge.

The warrior planted his axe, blade down, on the floor and banged his fist against his breastplate. 'I am Vosok Dall, servant of the Skull Throne, and I have come to take your life.'

Honsou took the measure of the warrior in a heartbeat. Vosok Dall was former Astartes, Scythes of the Emperor by the crossed-scythe heraldry on his shoulder guard, but a warrior who now killed in the name of a blood-drenched god that revelled in murder and battle. He would be strong and capable, with a hunger for glory and martial honour unmatched even by those who still fought for the Imperium.

'I thought your Chapter was dead,' said Honsou, pushing himself to his feet. 'Didn't the swarm fleets turn your world into an airless rock?'

'You speak of events that do not concern you, maggot,' barked Dall. 'I am here to kill you, so ready your weapon.'

'You see,' said Honsou, shaking his head. 'That's what you followers of the Blood God always get wrong. You always talk too much.'

'No more talk then,' said Dall. 'Fight.'

Honsou didn't answer, simply sweeping his axe from beside the table. The blade of the weapon was glossy and black, its sheened surface featureless and seeming to swallow any light unfortunate enough to touch it.

Honsou was fast, but Dall was faster and brought his own axe up to block the strike. The warrior spun the axe and slashed it around in a bifurcating sweep. Honsou ducked and rammed the haft of his weapon into Dall's gut, spinning away from his opponent's reverse stroke. The blade passed millimetres from his head and he felt the angry heat that burned within the warp-forged weapon.

He took a double-handed grip on his axe and widened his stance as Dall came at him. The warrior of the Blood God was fast and his roar of hatred shook the very walls, but Honsou had faced down more terrifying foes than Vosok Dall and lived.

Honsou stepped to meet the attack, throwing his arm up to block the blow. The axe slashed down and bit deeply, the blade stuck fast into Honsou's forearm. Like the Newborn and Cadaras Grendel, Honsou wore the naked metal colours of the Iron Warriors, but the arm struck by Vosok Dall's axe appeared to be incongruously fashioned from the purest, gleaming silver.

Dall grunted in shock, and Honsou knew this warrior would expect anything he hit with his axe to go down and stay down.

That shock cost him his life.

The warrior tugged at his weapon, but the blade was stuck fast and Honsou swung his axe in a mighty downward arc, hammering the glossy black blade through the top of his foe's skull. The axe smashed through Dall's helmet, skull and neck before finally lodging in the centre of his sternum.

Vosok Dall dropped to his knees and toppled onto his side, his dead weight dragging Honsou with him. Dall's entire body convulsed as the malevolent warp beast bound to Honsou's axe ripped his soul apart for sport. Blood fanned from the cloven skull in a flood of crimson, and even as Dall's soul was devoured, his grip remained strong on his weapon.

A bright orange line, like that of a welder's acetylene torch hissed around the edge of where Dall's axe was buried in Honsou's arm and the weapon fell free with a crescent-shaped bite taken from it. Even as Honsou watched, the fiery lustre of the blade faded as its power passed into Honsou's weapon.

Where Dall's blade had penetrated Honsou's arm was unblemished and smooth, as though it had come straight from the silversmith's workbench. Honsou neither knew nor cared about the source of the arm's power to heal itself, it was enough that it had saved him once again. He rose to his full height, standing triumphant over the dead body of Vosok Dall as the patrons of the bar stared in amazement at him.

'I am Honsou of the Iron Warriors!' he bellowed, lifting his axe high over his head. 'I am here for the Skull Harvest and I am afraid of no man. Any warrior who thinks he is worthy of joining me should make himself known at my camp. Look for the banner of the Iron Skull on the northern promontory.'

A man in a battered flak vest with a long rifle slung over his shoulder and a battered Guardsman's helmet jammed

onto his rugged features stood up as Honsou made his way to the door.

‘Every warlord that comes in here thinks he’s got a big plan,’ said the man. ‘What’s so special about yours? Most of them never come back, so why should I fight for you?’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Pettar. Hain Pettar.’

‘Because I’m going to win, Hain Pettar.’

‘They all say that,’ said Pettar.

Honsou shouldered his axe and said, ‘The difference is I mean it.’

‘So, who you planning to fight if you live through the Skull Harvest?’

Honsou grinned. ‘The worlds of Ultramar are going to burn in the fires of my crusade.’

‘Ultramar?’ said Pettar. ‘Now I know you’re crazy; that fight’s suicide.’

‘Maybe,’ said Honsou. ‘But maybe not, and if it’s not a fight worth making, then this galaxy has run out of things to live for.’

The mountain city simmered with tension and threat. Warriors of all size and description thronged the paths, squares and narrow alleys that twisted between the city’s ramshackle structures of brick and junk. This close to the Skull Harvest, the city’s inhabitants were on edge, hands hovering near the contoured handles of pistols and skin-wrapped sword grips. Honsou could read the currents of threat as clearly as the transformed magos, Adept

Cycerin, could read the currents of the empyrean and knew violence was ready to erupt at any second. Which was just as it should be.

The sky was the colour of a smeared borealis, swirling with unnatural hues known only to the insane. Lightning flashed in aerial whirlpools and Honsou tore his gaze from the pleasing spectacle. Only the unwary dared stare into the abyss of such skies and he grinned as he remembered his flesh playing host to one of the creatures that dwelled beyond the lurid colours.

The streets were sloping thoroughfares of hard-packed earth, and Honsou scanned the crowds around them for an old enemy, a new rival or simply a warrior looking to make a name for himself by killing someone like him. Hawkers and charlatans lined the streets, filling the air with strange aromas, chants and promises, each offering pleasures and wares that could only be found in a place this deep in the Maelstrom; nightmare-fleets, blades of daemon-forged steel, carnal delights with warp-altered courtesans, opiates concocted from the immaterial substance of void-creatures and promises of eternal youth.

In addition to the swaggering pirate bands, mercenary kin-broods and random outcasts, lone warriors stood at street corners, boasting of their prowess while demonstrating their skills. A grey-skinned loxatl climbed the brickwork of a dark tower, its armature weapons flexing and aiming without apparent need for hands. A robed Scythian distilled venom before a gathered audience, while a band of men and women in heavy

armour demonstrated sword and axe skills. Others spun firearms, took shots at hurled targets and displayed yet more impressive feats of exceptional marksmanship.

‘Any of them taking your fancy?’ asked Cadaras Grendel, nodding towards the martial displays.

Honsou shook his head. ‘No, these are the chaff. The real warriors of skill won’t show their hand so early.’

‘Like we just did?’ said Vaanes.

‘We’re new here,’ explained Honsou. ‘I needed to get my name into circulation, but I’ll let Pashtoq Uluvent build it for me when he comes against us.’

‘You had me kill that man to provoke an attack on us?’ queried the Newborn.

‘Absolutely,’ said Honsou. ‘I need the warriors gathered here to know me and respect me, but I can’t go around like these fools telling people how powerful I am. I’ll get others to do that for me.’

‘Assuming we survive Uluvent’s retaliation.’

‘There’s always that,’ agreed Honsou. ‘But I never said this venture wouldn’t be without some risk.’

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