

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN

# VOID STALKER

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# VOID STALKER

## Aaron Dembski-Bowden

They don't Fear Death.

The hunters have become the hunted. The Night Lords flee to the dark fringes of the Imperium to escape their relentless pursuers – the eldar of Craftworld Ulthwé. Their flight takes them to the carrion world of Tsagualsa, where their primarch died and their Legion was broken. There, history will repeat itself as a deadly assassin stalks the shadows, and the Night Lords are drawn into a battle they are destined to lose.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is a British author with his beginnings in the videogame and RPG industries. He's written several novels for the Black Library, including the Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach* and the *New York Times* bestselling *The First Heretic* for the Horus Heresy. He lives and works in Northern Ireland with his wife Katie, hiding from the world in the middle of nowhere. His hobbies generally revolve around reading anything within reach, and helping people spell his surname.

*Void Stalker* can be purchased direct from this website and GW mail order, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, and better bookstores.

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HE WOKE LAUGHING because of Malcharion. The war-sage's deep, rumbling declaration from over a year before rattled through his aching head, when the Dreadnought had woken with the words *'I heard bolter fire.'*

He could hear bolter fire too. There it was, that unmistakable drumbeat – the heavy, judgering chatter of bolters opening up against one another. The distinctive thuds of fired shells and the echoing crash of them detonating against walls and armour set up a familiar cacophony.

The prophet dragged himself to his feet, smacking a hand to the side of his helm, forcing the retinal display to re-tune. He stared at his surroundings: the confined troop bay of his own Thunderhawk gunship.

'Fifty-three minutes, master,' said Septimus, relaying the exact duration of his unconsciousness. Talos turned to see his servant, clad in his usual ragged flight jacket, low-slung pistols at his hips.

'Tell me everything,' the warrior ordered. Septimus was already handing him his weapons, one after the other. The human needed both hands to lift each one.

'I know little. All claws were recalled before a brief void battle began. We've been boarded by the enemy. I do not know if our shields are still down, but the enemy cruiser isn't firing with their own men on board. We came into the cortex hangar, under Lord Cyrion's orders. He wished to be close to the bridge for the defence.'

'Who boarded us?'

'Imperial Space Marines. I know nothing more. Did you not dream of them?'

'I do not remember what I dreamed. Just the pain. Stay here,' Talos ordered. 'My thanks for watching over me.'

'Always, lord.'

The prophet descended the gangramp, into the hangar. Mute servitors and skull drones watched him impassively, as if expectant he might offer them orders.

'Talos?' one of his brothers voxed.

'Was that Talos laughing?' came another voice.

'Fall back!' That was Lucoryphus. That was definitely Lucoryphus, he could tell from the bass-edged rasp. 'Fall back to the second concourse!'

'*Stand your ground!*' Cyrion? Yes... Cyrion. The vox made it hard to tell. '*Stand your ground, you carrion-eating bastards. You'll leave us without support.*'

From there, the vox-network degenerated back into a melee of conflicting voices.

'Is that Talos laughing?'

'This is Xan Kurus of Second Claw...'

'Where is that damned Apothecary?'

'This is Fourth Claw to First, we need Variel immediately.'

'Falling back from the tertiary spinal. Repeat, we've lost Spinal Tertius.'

'Who was laughing?'

'Talos? Is that you?'

The prophet heaved breath in through a throat that that felt atrophied from disuse. 'I am awake. First Claw, status report. All claws, report in.'

He didn't receive an answer. The vox broke apart in a fresh gale of bolter fire.

Talos staggered from his small hangar, weapons loose in fists that still spasmed with

residual pain. He followed the sounds of bolter fire, and made it no more than five hundred metres down the winding corridors before he found its closest source.

Indeed, he staggered on weak limbs right into the middle of a firefight, and promptly took a shell to the side of the head.

IT LEFT HIM blind for a moment. The shell that cracked against the side of his helm was deflected by the angle, but hit with enough force to scramble the delicate electronics for an irritating cluster of seconds. Vision returned in a static-laden wash of red-tinted sight and flickering runic displays.

'Stay down,' warned a voice. Mercutian stood above him, hands shaking with the kickback from his bolter cannon. Bolt weaponry offered little in the way of muzzle flash, but the ignition from every self-propelled shell flickered a splash of amber across Mercutian's midnight armour.

'This is Mercutian of First Claw,' he voxed. 'The Bleeding Eyes have broken ranks. We are cut off in the primary concourse, strategium deck. Requesting immediate reinforcement.'

A voice crackled back, 'You are on your own, First Claw. Good hunting.'

Talos turned as Cyrion moved into view. His brother held a gore-wet gladius in one hand, and his bayoneted bolter in the other. Cyrion cracked off three shots, one-handed, barely aiming.

'Nice of you to wake up,' he commented with commendable calm, never once even glancing at Talos. Cyrion threw his gladius into the air, reloaded with smart precision, and caught the sword as it fell back into his grip. Several dozen metres down the corridor, the vague figures of their foes never moved from cover. The reason for their tactical concealment was Mercutian. Or, more accurately, Mercutian's booming heavy bolter.

'We're going to die here,' Mercutian grunted over the cacophony of his pounding weapon. He never stopped firing, the cannon kicking in bellowing three-round bursts, bathing himself in stark, amber flashes.

'Oh,' Cyrion agreed amiably, 'no doubt.'

'Those *kalshiel* Bleeding Eyes,' Mercutian swore as he dropped to one knee, reloading as fast as he could. Cyrion took up the screen of fire, bolter shells detonating down the length of the corridor.

'They'll charge any moment, Talos,' he warned. 'You could use that pretty bolter of yours, you know. There's no better time for it.'

Talos half-dragged himself into cover behind a wall arch. Both his blade and bolter were on the decking by his boots. These, he retrieved with a grunt at his unclear vision and the pain weaving its way down his spine. It took him two attempts to level his massive bolter, before he added its weight to the chorus of gunfire. Torrents of explosive shells barked down the yawning corridor. Thirty seconds passed in the stuttering melody of drumming gunfire.

'What happened?' he asked. 'Who boarded us? What Chapter?'

Cyrion laughed. 'You don't know? You dreamed this, didn't you? You said "armour of scarlet and bronze" before you lost consciousness.'

'I recall nothing,' Talos confessed.

'Reloading,' Mercutian called out. He dropped to one knee again, eyes still fixed on the tunnel, hands moving in dark blurs. A crunch, a click, and the heavy bolter sang its throaty song once more.

'What happened?' Talos repeated. 'Blood of the False Emperor, *someone* tell me what's happening.'

Cyrion's explanation broke off as Uzas crashed into the middle of the corridor. He dropped from the ceiling, falling from a crew ladder with his hands around the throat of a red-armoured Imperial Space Marine. Both warriors tumbled through the line of fire, causing

the opposing squads to break off their attacks, even if only for a moment.

'Idiot,' Mercutian breathed, finger idling by his trigger.

The Imperial warrior threw a fist to Uzas's faceplate, snapping the Night Lord's head back with a bone-jarring echo. As their brother staggered, the rest of First Claw cut the Space Marine down with a blistering hail of bolter fire.

The Space Marine fell with a cry of his own. Unimpeded now, the enemy squad at the other end of the corridor advanced, bolters up and crashing with the same *thud, thud, thud* as First Claw's kicking guns. Shells exploded around Talos's cover, showering him with debris.

Uzas ran, and for once he maintained enough sense to run in the saner direction, back toward his brothers. Talos watched the warrior stagger as a shell took him high in the spine, and another clipped the back of his leg. Uzas smacked against the wall at Mercutian's side, rebounding from the steel in a hideous squealing crackle of abused ceramite. When he sank to the decking, his helmeted head crashed against the floor with the ringing finality of a funeral bell.

'Idiot,' Mercutian repeated, his heavy bolter rumbling. The enemy squad reached halfway along the corridor, leaving their dead and dying on the deck behind them. And still, they kept to the cover of the gothic-arched walls.

Talos's retinal display showed First Claw's vital signs still beating strong. With more trouble than he cared to confess, he moved to Uzas's side, dragging the twitching fool into cover. His brother's armour was scorched black, the shreds of flayed flesh serving as his cloak now burnt to cinders. Uzas had been drenched in flamer promethium more than once in the recent past. The chemical stink rose from his blackened battle plate in a miserable tang.

'Son of a...,' Uzas mumbled, and fell into a coughing fit. His heaving chokes were sickly wet.

'Where's Variel?' Talos asked. 'Where's Xarl? I'll kill you myself if you don't start answering me.'

'Xarl and Variel are holding the rear tunnels.' Cyrion was reloading again. 'These wretches had already engaged the *Echo* in orbit before we docked. One way or another, the Imperium was waiting for us.'

Mercutian retreated a couple of steps as a lucky shell detonated against his shoulder guard, spraying all three of them with ceramite wreckage.

'Genesis Chapter,' he growled. 'Boarded us an hour ago. Scum-blooded cousins to the Ultramarines.'

'Perhaps we left the warp too close to Newfound before we drifted into the Tsagualsa system,' Cyrion admitted. 'I doubt it, though. More likely that they tracked us from warp beacons left by their Librarius division. Cunning fellows, these thin-bloods.'

'Very cunning,' Mercutian grumbled.

'You can blame your Navigator, of course,' Cyrion remarked. The wall by his head burst in a spread of sharp fragments. 'She should have sensed the beacons these tenacious dogs left in the warp.'

Talos slammed back into cover as he reloaded. 'She said she sensed something, but she had no idea what they were,' he said. 'We need to fall back. This corridor is lost.'

'We can't fall back from here; we're the only defenders on this arc. If they get onto the bridge, we'll lose the ship. The void shields are still down, as well. Deltrian is sweating oil and blood trying to repair the primary generator.'

'And we can't run,' Mercutian muttered. 'The Bleeding Eyes were holding the southern walkways. The Imperials are closing on us from behind now, too.' Mercutian cursed and fell back another few steps. 'Oh, hell. *He* looks dangerous.'

The prophet left Uzas slouched and bleeding against the wall, moving to his brothers and aiming down the corridor they were generously feeding with explosive fire. His vision had fully re-tuned at last, targeting locks flickering and zeroing in on individual enemies. He could make out the ornate chains and tabards draped across the foes' armour, and the emblems inscribed,

worn with righteous pride. One warrior stood out above all, walking closer with inevitable purpose.

'Oh,' Talos said. What followed were several multi-syllabic curse words in Nostraman, with no literal Gothic translation. They were not fit for polite society, or even the less decadent tiers of impolite society.

Cyrion fired with his bolter at his cheek, laughing as he replied. 'At least we'll be killed by a hero.'