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UNAWARE OF THE wider Heresy and following the Warmaster's increasingly cryptic orders, Roboute Guilliman returns to Ultramar to muster his Legion for war against the orks massing in the Veridian system. Without warning, their supposed allies in the Word Bearers Legion launch a devastating invasion of Calth, scattering the Ultramarines fleet and slaughtering all who stand in their way. This confirms the worst scenario Guilliman can imagine – Lorgar means to settle their bitter rivalry once and for all. As the traitors summon foul daemonic hosts and all the forces of Chaos, the Ultramarines are drawn into a grim and deadly struggle in which neither side can prevail.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Abnett is a multiple *New York Times* bestselling author and an award-winning comic book writer. He has written over forty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies. His previous Horus Heresy novel, *Prospero Burns*, topped the SF charts in the UK and the US. In addition to writing for Black Library, Dan scripts audio dramas, movies, games, and comics for major publishers in Britain and America. He is also the author of other bestselling novels, including *Torchwood: Border Princes*, *Doctor Who: The Silent Stars Go By*, *Triumff: Her Majesty's Hero*, and *Embedded*. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

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SOROT TCHURE WALKS back to join the others. His men are mingling with the men of Luciel's company on the company decks of the *Samothrace*. They have finished the formal dinner that Luciel had arranged. None need to eat, certainly not the fine foodstuffs that Luciel provided, but it is a symbolic gesture. To dine as allies, as warrior-kings. To bond ahead of the coming war.

'Problem?' asks Luciel.

Tchure shakes his head.

'Some question about loading platforms.'

Tchure looks at Luciel.

'Why have you changed your markings and armour field?' asks Luciel.

'We are remaking ourselves,' Tchure replies. 'A new scheme to celebrate our new beginning. Perhaps it is down to the character of our beloved primarch, may the cosmos bless him. We have never quite found ourselves, Honorius. Not like you. We have struggled to realise a proper role for ourselves. I do not believe you appreciate how fortunate you are. The clarity of your purpose and position as Ultramarines. From the start you had a reputation that never needed to be questioned, and a function that never needed to be clarified.'

He pauses.

'For years, I have despised Lorgar,' he says quietly.

'What?'

'You heard me.'

'Sorot, you mustn't—'

'Look at your primarch, Honorius. So singular in aspect. So noble. I have envied you, envied the Imperial Fists, the Luna Wolves, the Iron Hands. And I am not alone. We struggle with a mercurial mind, Honorius. We labour under the burden of a brilliant but fallible commander. We no longer bear the word, my friend. We bear *Lorgar*.'

'Some fall into their roles quickly,' says Luciel firmly. 'I have thought about this. Some fall into their roles quickly. Others take time to evolve, to discover what their purpose is to be. Your primarch, great Lorgar, is a son of the Emperor. There will be a role for him. It may turn out to be far greater than any that falls to Guilliman or Dorn. Yes, we're lucky to have clarity. I know that. So are the Fists, the Hands, the Angels. Terra above, so are the Wolves of Fenris and the World Eaters, Sorot. Perhaps the lack of clarity you have laboured under thus far is because Lorgar's role is yet unimaginable.'

Tchure smiles.

'I can't believe you're defending him.'

'Why can't you?'

Tchure shrugs.

'I think we may be finding our purpose at last, Honorius,' he says. 'Hence our new resolve. Our change in scheme and armour colour. I... I was asked to join the advance.'

Luciel frowns, quizzical.

'You told me that.'

'I have things to prove.'

'Why?' asks Luciel.

'I have to prove my commitment to the new purpose.'

'And how do you do that?' asks Luciel.

Tchure doesn't answer. Luciel notices how the Word Bearer's fingers stir, tapping the tabletop. What agitation is that? Nerves?

'I learned something,' Tchure says suddenly, changing the subject. 'A little piece of warcraft that I thought you would appreciate.'

Luciel lifts his cup, sips wine.

'Go on,' he smiles.

Tchure toys with his own cup, a straight-sided golden beaker.

'It was on Isstvan, during the fight there.'

'Isstvan? There's been fighting in the Isstvan system?'

Tchure nods.

'It hasn't been reported. Was it a compliance?'

'It's recent,' says Tchure. 'The full reports of the campaign are still being ratified by the Warmaster. Then they will be shared.'

Luciel raises his eyebrows.

'Guilliman won't appreciate being left out of the loop for any length of time. Is this how the Warmaster intends to conduct the Great Crusade from now on? Guilliman insists on sharing all military data. And Isstvan was *compliant*—'

Tchure holds up his hand.

'It's recent. It's fresh. It's done now. Your primarch will hear all about it in due course. The point is, the fight was bitter. The Imperium faced a foe that had discovered the mortal power of treachery.'

'Treachery?' asks Luciel.

'Not as a strategy, you understand. Not as a tactic to surprise and undermine. I mean as a property. A power.'

'I'm not sure I know what you mean,' smiles Luciel, slightly disarmed. 'It's as though you're talking about... *magic*.'

'I almost am. The enemy believed that there was power in treachery. To win the confidence of your opponent, to mask your animus, and then to turn... Well, they believed that this actually invested them with power.'

'I don't see how.'

'Don't you?' asks Tchure. 'The potency, they believed, depends on the level of betrayal. If an ally suddenly turns on an ally, that's one level. But if a trusted friend turns on a friend. That was the purest kind of power, because the treachery ran so deep. Because it required that so many moral codes be broken. Trust. Friendship. Loyalty. Reliance. Honesty. Such an act was powerful because it was beyond belief. It achieved a potency that was akin to the most powerful blood sacrifice.'

Luciel sits back.

'Interesting, certainly,' he says. 'For them to believe that. Culturally, it speaks a great deal to the strength of their honour codes. If they believed this invested them with power, then it seems like an act of superstition. It has little strategic merit in terms of warcraft or technique, of course. Except, I suppose, psychologically.'

'It certainly worked for them.'

'Until you crushed them, of course.'

Sorot Tchure does not reply.

'What's the matter?' asks Luciel.

'It's like a sacrifice,' says Tchure. 'You identify and commit the greatest betrayal possible, and it is like a sacrifice to anoint and begin a vast ceremony of victory and destruction.'

'I still don't understand. It has no tactical methodology.'

'Really? Really, Honorius? What if it does? What if there is an entirely *other* kind of warfare, one that extends beyond all practical techniques, one that defies and eclipses all the martial law codified by the Ultramarines and recognised by the Imperium? A ritual warfare? A kind of *daemonic* warfare?'

'You say that as if you believe it,' Luciel laughs.

'Think about what I'm saying,' says Tchure quietly. He looks around the chamber, at his men talking and drinking with Luciel's. 'Think of this... If the Word Bearers turned against the Ultramarines, wouldn't that be the greatest betrayal of all? Not Lorgar turning on Guilliman, for they dislike each other anyway. Here, in this chamber, between two men who have actually managed to become friends?'

'That would be the most atrocious deceit,' Luciel agrees. 'I concede it would have some power. As shock value in the Legion. We are immune to fear, but horror and surprise might unman us briefly at the unimaginable nature of the act.'

Tchure nods.

'And it would be the centrepiece,' he says. 'The sacrificial spark to ignite the ritual war.'

Luciel nods gravely.

'I suppose you're right. It would be well to understand, and allow for, an enemy who carried such conviction in the power of infamy.'

Tchure smiles.

'I wish you understood,' he says.

'Understand what?' asks Luciel.

'I was asked to join the advance,' says Tchure.

'And?'

'I have to prove my commitment to the new purpose.'

Luciel stares at him.

For just a second. A second. And in that second, he finally realises what Sorot Tchure has been trying to tell him.

That in order not to betray one impossible bond, Sorot Tchure is required to betray another.

The goblet falls from Luciel's grip. His hand is already moving, through instinct alone, for his sidearm. Only sheer, disfunctioning shock is slowing him down.

Tchure's plasma pistol is already in his hand.

The goblet hasn't even hit the tabletop yet.

Tchure fires. Point blank, the plasma bolt strikes Honorius Luciel's torso. The bolt is as hot as a main sequence star. It vaporises armour plate, carapace, reinforced bone, spinal cord. It annihilates meat, both hearts, and secondary organs. It turns blood into dust. The shot's hammer blow impact knocks Luciel down, through the table, smashing the tabletop up to meet the falling goblet, spinning it into the air in a semi-circle of wine.

Luciel's men are turning, caught by surprise, not understanding the noise and motion, not understanding the weapon discharge or the violent collapse of their captain. Tchure's men simply draw their guns. They are not distracted by the gunfire. Their eyes never leave the men they are talking to, men who are turning away in confusion.

Luciel rolls on the deck, limbs thrashing, as the smashed table falls around him. The goblet bounces off the deck plate beside his head. His eyes are wide, straining, staring. The plasma shot has burned a massive hole clean through him. His body is cored. The deck plating is visible through his twitching torso. The edges of the gaping damage are scorched and cooked by superheating. His armour is likewise punctured, the cut edges glowing. Larraman cells cannot hope to clog or close a wound quite so catastrophic. Tchure is on his feet, his chair tipping backwards behind him, toppling. He swings the plasma weapon down, aims it at Luciel's face, and fires again.

Around him, the chamber shakes with a sudden storm of gunfire. Twenty or thirty boltguns discharge almost simultaneously. Armoured bodies, blown backwards, fall. Blood mist fills the air.

The goblet lands on the third bounce, rolls in a circle, and comes to rest on its side next to Honorius Luciel's seared and shattered skull.