

Thoughts on the Gathering Storm

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You're listening to Chapter Approved. I'm your host, Tibbs, and today we're going to talk about the Gathering Storm storyline a little bit. First, I want to mention this episode is recorded with a new microphone, so please let me know what you think of the audio quality as I'm trying to dial in the settings as I go. The easiest way to reach out to me is on Twitter @chapterapproved. I can't really do much about my goofy voice, but if I can make it easier to listen to I will. Thanks!

Now on to the topic at hand. First off, I want to admit right up front that I love this story, and the fact this book series exists at all. Sure, there are some wonky bits, but I'm excited about where it's going, overall. I'll try to touch on the basics in each book, focusing on the models and characters I like the best, and I'll wrap up with some thoughts on the implications for the future of 40K.

There will, of course, be some spoilers here because I'm mostly going to be talking about the plot and story elements, so please check out a different episode if you don't want to hear anything that happens. I figured it's been out long enough that most people who are really interested have probably read it already.

Now, this is no Black Library fiction, so the story elements are presented as historical accounts with the odd fiction section here and there to add poignancy and punctuate dramatic spots. The writing is fast-paced and manages to march straight through a LOT of story in not a lot of time, each book focusing on a different aspect of the setup. It's worth noting that this entire series really is just the beginning of something else, and needs to be viewed as such.

One of my favorite bits of the book is the inclusion of sidebars, each one featuring a report of an unrelated conflict elsewhere in the Imperium. These run through each book, so by the end of it you do get the sense that things are spiraling out of control all across the galaxy, and there are some hints of things to come later as well. It's very clever, and adds a nice layer of deeper context on what could be a pretty nearsighted story.

Let's start with the first book, Fall of Cadia. The inclusion of Belisarius Cawl made this one a must-read for me. I was in love with that model from the first leaks, and when I read about him in White Dwarf I knew I needed this book. I'll get back to that in a minute, though. This book is mainly concerned with Abaddon the Despoiler's opening moves in the retelling of his 13th Black Crusade. This is NOT the same as the one in old lore, and looks like a total retcon.

We learn this time that his crusades have actually been coordinated attacks against a network of pylons built by the Necrons to reduce or subdue warp

activity across the galaxy. Belisarius Cawl puts this together at the beginning of the story, and realizes that Cadia has a bunch of them so he heads on over there with a bunch of Skitarii in tow.

Can I take a moment to talk about Cawl? We'll learn more about him later, but let me just mention that I love the way he's described. He has 3 distinct modes or levels of consciousness that can be split. It's implied he has three separate brains, so the Cawl we know may be a gestalt of all 3 that have melded over time into one personality, or perhaps he was one strong personality that added two more at some point throughout the more than 10,000 years he's been kicking around. It could also be that he has placed barriers and divisions within his one brain that allows him to divide it himself.

The effect is basically the same either way, and each of the three can concentrate on different things at one time. He can effectively dedicate his 'war-mode consciousness' to a battle whilst he puzzles out an algorithm and also takes observations and notes on the enemy he's engaging. I really like the way this plays out on the model itself, as there are enough arms and ancillary systems around to justify a tripartite consciousness. One of his arms is slaved to a tiny 'laptop-style' cogitator, whilst another is attached to his Solar Atomizer to adjust the settings on a control board. It's a really cool touch that makes sense when you read his fluff.

In terms of rules, it seems like they really just wanted to make Cawl hard to kill and give him a lot of attacks to justify all the dendrites scattered across his frame. I do like his souped-up weaponry, and his army-wide special rules make him a nice force multiplier. He feels unique and larger-than-life, and that's about all they had to do with him to be honest.

As far as the plot is concerned, he's woven throughout the first and third books as an important character, but largely serves as a catalyst in the background.

Saint Celestine is the other big, important development that makes a real impact on the lore. In the beginning of the book she is described in no uncertain terms as a denizen of the warp. Basically a daemon of order, and she's losing power slowly. It's been hinted at before and sort of half-confirmed, but in this book it's not ambiguous at all. If she's a daemon, the Emperor himself **MUST** be a God of Order, but he's being restrained or perhaps just can't fight all four of the others at once, with his mind split between the warp and his real body on Terra.

The living saint herself is a pretty interesting character, and I do like how she imbues her two geminae (resurrected from a couple of brave sisters) with a bit of her power to fight with her. It's a cool touch, but her main role is to inspire the troops and, indeed, the entire crusade to Terra as it will eventually play out.

Her model is, of course, beautiful and fully in line with the design of the older models. Of course this is a bit controversial, depending on your opinion of the

older designs. In keeping with the other recent updates to older models, the design sticks close to the original but brings it into modern scales and cleans it up nicely.

Her Geminae are a nice touch, with custom load-outs not seen in the pewter ranges. They make a very cool image flitting around on the table, even though I've heard a few complaints about how fragile the models are. If you've ever messed with the flying Stormcast models from Age of Sigmar, it's about the same thing.

I can't say too much about her rules on the field, other than she's similar to Cawl in that she's VERY hard to kill (as befitting a model called the Living Saint who's whole shtick is resurrection), and she includes some force-multiplier benefits for the whole army. She seems like a real badass, and as with all these models can be taken by any Imperial force without worrying about allies and all that jazz. Games Workshop really seems interested in making these releases as widely appealing as possible, and it seems to have worked.

The last model in the box (and major character in the book, if she even counts because she's so sidelined) is the Inquisitor, Grayfax. It's a very nice model that also shares design elements of the Sisters of Battle. This isn't really justified in the fluff, even if it's implied on the model. I think they missed an opportunity here to show a female model that didn't have your typical boob-plate design, if for no other reason than to show it could be done well on a female inquisitor in power armor. That said, it's based on existing designs and the same argument could be made about Grayfax as Celestine. They're not exactly reinventing the wheel, here. I like the way she looks personally, and I don't even have a problem with her heels. Inquisitors are weird as hell, frankly, so if she can have a candle holder built into her bionic eye that's also built into her pilly hat, her choice of shoes hardly seems more eccentric. I love the funky backpack as well. The designers said they wanted her to feel really ancient, as she had been trapped in stasis for a long time.

I literally can't say much about her rules because I didn't really read them, but I do know she's a psyker. I'd say Grayfax seems like an add-on, and maybe even represents a missed opportunity to redo Creed or another Cadian hero model. Certainly Creed plays a big part in the story, anyway.

I won't get too far into the actual battle that play out in Fall of Cadia. The planet is destroyed, well and truly, and it feels quite final. Suffice to say it's revealed that Cawl is carrying around some really important stuff and eventually the Eldar show up to help him get it where it needs to go.

The second book, Fracture of Biel-Tan, takes place at the same time as the events of Fall of Cadia, and the timelines come together at the very end. This book is pretty interesting to me, as a long-time fan of Eldar lore even though I don't play the army anymore. After reading Cadia I felt like I needed to know

what was going on, so I read this one as well.

The plot is cool enough, starting with the apotheosis of Yvraine as she becomes a prophet. She has a very colorful history, which introduces several elements that will come up later. She makes contact with Ynnead, the slumbering Eldar god of the dead, at the moment of her own death. We find out that Eldrad Ulthran's recent activities from the Deathwatch fluff have hastened the awakening of this god. Originally Ynnead was supposed to awaken only after all the Eldar had died, but that fate seems to have been altered.

I personally love Yvraine's model. Some have complained, but to me she just as batty as she should. She is, after all, a rogue from Eldar society, and in the mind of most she's mad. She talks to a whispering god nobody else can hear, says things nobody expects, and in general is a real force to be reckoned with in both the fluff and the tabletop. The fact she has a Gyrinx by her side only appeals more to me as a grizzled old veteran of the hobby. Mostly, I love the look on her face, her lack of formal armor and her tiptoeing grace. She looks every bit the ethereal Eldar, dancing her way through a battlefield with baffling liquid undulations. Even her light grip on her sword conveys a certain calculated threat.

Unfortunately, the awesome Visarch model not at all fleshed out as a character. He's a man of few words, and frankly serves more as a simple bodyguard as the newly minted Ynaari faction grows. He looks cool as hell, though, and is every bit the menace on the tabletop as he looks. A whirling dervish of death, as he should be. He looks thin and agile, as any Eldar should, but his pose conveys a lethality that Yvraine doesn't. The intricate pattern of the armor is also really cool, and the designers said they wanted something that would tie in elements of the different Eldar factions, almost as though it's from the civilization before it split off. Again, unfortunately, the book never explains where he got the armor at all. He just shows up. I wanted to know more about this guy.

This book really deals a LOT with the web way and how it affects things, as well as Infinity Circuits of craft worlds. Notably, the avatar of Yncarne is born of the Biel-Tan network of souls, which would imply that each craft world could create their own.

That avatar model is really cool, and offers a bunch of hints about what's going on. First up, of course there's the actual bits of the Biel-Tan Infinity Circuit that was shattered by a Slaanesh daemonic infestation. The spirit stones are swirling around in a vortex of souls that are manifesting as the body of the Avatar. His or her face and body are divided and androgynous, which led some to making the obvious connections to Slaanesh. The designers basically said the similarities are because the Eldar made both gods, so they have a shared set of features and characteristics. I think the deeper answer is hinted at in the fact Slaanesh so recently tainted the Infinity Circuit, and that influence is fresh. Either way, it's a great centerpiece model and worth drooling over for any collector.

Whilst the model is really cool, the character doesn't really interact with anyone and instead, Ynnead seems to use Yvraine to do all the talking for everyone.

The entire faction has some cool rules on the battlefield, using the souls of the dead (both their own and those of the enemy) to empower themselves and speed up time. The Avatar can also manifest anywhere a unit was destroyed, drawn in by the fresh deaths. The mechanics are cool and very fluffy, even if they overpower an army long thought to be very much overpowered. For fluffy gamers like myself, though, I think it's just cool.

The Fracture of Biel-Tan eventually spirals into a story of a race divided. Not just between craft world and dark eldar, but between those who believe in this radical new cult and those who see them as dangerous madmen. It's also an adventure story as they race to locate the 5 Crone Swords. If united, Ynnead is said to be fully reborn in a new and powerful form that could threaten even Slaanesh herself.

One aspect of the fluff I really like is the way Ynnead and Yvraine are able to sort of 'free' the Eldar from their reliance on Spirit Stones. Yvraine is able to implant souls directly into wraith constructs like wraithguard and wraithlords, so they perceive the world more clearly and are able to move with more agility. Also, when Eldar die around the Ynarri their souls do not flee to the warp (and thus to Slaanesh) but are absorbed by the Ynarri themselves, which means they sort of carry their ancestors with them and are empowered by them. Yvraine is even described as learning new skills from an absorbed soul. This is neat, and helps explain how exactly Ynnead could threaten Slaanesh by starving her out. If successful, this would be a huge benefit to both the craft world and dark eldar.

It's a nice yarn, but ultimately I think you COULD skip it if you're mostly interested in the Imperial stuff. The Ynarri and some harlequins continue to play a part, but mostly in the sense that they enable the Imperium with their 'death magic' to allow the plot to advance.

And advance it does, in the third book, Rise of the Primarch. This opens right where the other two leave off, and Cawl, Celestine and the Eldar travel to the Ultramar. Yvraine and Eldrad have decided that the Imperium is their best ally against chaos for obvious reasons, but mankind is in bad shape in no small part due to the waxing ascendancy of chaos. They realize a new leader is needed, and that leader is Roboute Guilliman.

Belisarius Cawl has created a special custom-fit suit of armor with crazy life-support tech build just for Roboute, but he doesn't know what to do with it since the Primarch will die if they remove him from stasis. The project has been shelved for thousands of years. The Eldar tell him they can remove the daemonic poison that's killing Roboute, but he needs to don the armor immediately (and never remove it) to stay alive. The Ultramarines are torn about whether it's even

a good idea to risk reviving him but Tigurius is all for it but others do not agree. The forces of chaos eventually arrive in Ultramar, and during the ensuing battle Cawl and the Eldar basically go rogue and revive Roboute anyway in a really cool scene.

The model for Roboute is, I think by most accounts, a win. The armor of fate is baroque and ornamented, as befitting a relic of such importance, and incorporates a mechanicus-style power plant and funky life-support gubbins Cawl added to the backpack. He's large and imposing, of course, and carries his father's flaming sword, with this amazing sculpted fire bursting from it. It took me some getting used to when I first saw it, but I came around pretty quickly once I saw it from all angles.

On the battlefield, Guilliman is basically the quintessential general and has access to tons of tactical skills and benefits, which is very much in keeping with his background lore. I can't imagine I'd ever run him in a game myself, because it doesn't seem like he would fit in well with my Raven Guard successor chapter, but I bet a lot of marine armies would love to slot him in. Not surprisingly he works best with chapters that use the Ultramarines Chapter Tactics. No complaints here.

For me, though, the best part of the story is yet to come as Roboute deals with the insanity of the Imperium. When he went into stasis, things were relatively stable even though there was war and strife. He had created the system that installed the High Lords of Terra, but he couldn't understand how much it had changed in the millennia that passed. He was appalled at the way everyone worshipped the Emperor, but even he could see the divinity of Saint Celestine. His internal struggle was really compelling to me.

I loved the way the book talked about how he had to keep all his conflict and misgivings to himself, for fear of demoralizing the troops under his command. They recognized him as a great hero, returned to deliver them from evil, and he wanted to be that for them even if we wasn't comfortable with the role. There are some neat scenes of him confronting his exalted status and being repulsed by it. On top of that, the dark gods have taken notice of his return and have already begun their attempts to corrupt him by appealing to his pride and revulsion at the state of things.

It all comes to a head on Holy Terra, and this section includes my favorite scenes of the whole series. Terra is described in detail as a decaying, sprawling hive held together almost literally with the misguided faith of the hopeless masses. It's at once a place of mind-boggling grandeur and babbling madness, and Roboute has no idea what to make of it all. I wish I had had read this when I was running a Dark Heresy campaign and my party made a pilgrimage to Terra. They really nailed it with the vivid descriptions of the pilgrims and petitioners.

To me, it's really a return to what I love about the 40K setting: humanity is not

heroic, it's desperate, and holds on to the relics of the past with manic, twitching fingers. It's a dark and oppressive society, twisted by thousands of years in a Total War standing where everyone must serve a purpose or risk losing everything they fought so hard to preserve. Just as Rogue Trader stated in '89, it's the cruelest and most bloody regime imaginable. There can be no progress in this state, and things have slowly been slipping away for centuries: technology, common sense and dignity, free will and privacy, compassion, art, and everything else we hold dear as modern people.

The Imperium in this book is a warning to all of us, just as the original fluff was social satire and critique. War is hell, and a galaxy at war for that long is a special type of hell. I've felt this was diminished in the fluff over the last decade, holding the Imperium up as the good guys, despite the fact the space marines are some of the most callous and unscrupulous warriors in the galaxy. Despite the fact the Imperial Guard values the equipment a soldier carries more than his or her life. Despite the fact the religious intolerance of the average citizen far surpasses the likes of the most militant theocracies of our time. I could go on, but I digress. As readers, we understand the Imperium must be this way, but much of the official fluff has lost the fact that it would be a terrible place to live for just about everyone. This book is the grimdark I want to read about.

Finally, in a scene that can best be described as heartbreaking, Roboute enters the chamber of the Golden Throne to confront his father. Of course the book doesn't tell us exactly what happens in there.

When he comes out, Guilliman is galvanized to restore order, such as it were, and takes his place on the council of Terra after deposing half the High Lords and installing replacements. He's determined to roll back the tide of Chaos, and he's gearing up for a fight.

It's exciting to me, because it answers a lot of questions old-timers like me had about where the fluff might be headed. There's a real sense of tension here, and it's not at all clear what's coming next. I'm going to catch hell for saying this, but it's exciting in exactly the same way the End Times campaign was for the Fantasy setting. If you dig deep enough in the fluff, you know they've been setting the Emperor up as eternal (or capable of reincarnation) basically from day one. You also know there are shadow wars within the Inquisition, not least of which deals with whether or not we should kill the Emperor. I'll get to Cypher in a moment, but he's rumored to have eyes on the Emperor for some reason, and the same goes for the Alpha Legion.

You may have noticed that I didn't really mention Voldus of the Gray Knights or Cypher up until now and there's a reason for that. Cypher's model is so amazing people were buying the Triumvirate box and selling the Primarch off just to get it, after all. The reason they didn't come up is because they may as well not even be in the story. Voldus especially is just a non-character, unfortunately. He barely has any speaking lines, as it were.

Cypher arrives to spring Roboute from prison in the Maelstrom at some point, arriving from the webway and accompanied by some harlequins. I didn't see a lot of justification that the harlies couldn't have easily done that themselves, so there was no real reason to include Cypher at all. There are some sort of interesting bits about his meeting up with a contingent of the Fallen in the webway, but again it's more like they were shoehorned it just to let people know what's up rather than something that was actually needed for the story.

Cypher leads the group through the webway all the way to Terra, and then gets pissed when they won't let him in the throne room to meet the Emperor. He's imprisoned (because Guilliman doesn't trust him) but it's not clear if he's still on Terra or escaped into the webway again. I was really hoping his story would be cool, and maybe it's all a setup for something coming soon. They did say in no uncertain terms that the sword is for sure for Lion'el Johnson, though. If that's the case I'll reserve my judgement, but his inclusion seemed very much an afterthought and not integral to the story. Again, he didn't even interact very much.

I think this is the biggest criticism I could offer, because many of the characters seemed like add-ons to a story that could have been much tighter and more focussed. If I had to guess, I'd assume the models all came first and then the writers had to weave them together into a narrative. As a writer (not of fiction, but still), I know this would present some massive challenges. I don't envy the authors of the book in this case. There are a few characters that add very little to the story, and other characters that could have filled in the gaps and done more if need be. They did a good job of connecting the dots to other recent campaigns, but this is hardly Harry Potter or Arrested Development in terms of cleverly weaving the narrative elements to reveal them later.

All in all, I love the fact the fluff is actually moving again. Games Workshop is doing a great job getting away from the freeze-frame stories that locked all the factions into the last year of the 41st millenium. I'm crazy curious to see if the Emperor dies and is reborn, or whatever happens next. Again, I really dig the way they portrayed Holy Terra not as a beacon of hope, but as a terrible reminder of how far we've fallen.

As for the gaming aspects of the new releases, I can't say I have any experience but I do like some of the new options for building lists, particularly with Belisarius Cawl and his new bag of Relics to play with. He's the first named, unique character I've ever considered running, so it's a nice break from my home-brew stuff.

I love the way these big campaigns get people talking. Some may take issue with Cadia and Biel-Tan's treatment, but frankly without a threat level none of the grimdark seems real. Now that Baal is threatened, Fenris suffered greatly, etc. I feel like anything is on the table again. It's like the early seasons of The Walking

Dead or Game of Thrones, when literally every character is on the chopping block and you feel like things are fragile and falling apart. That's exactly what 40K needs, I think. I want to feel like the end is nigh, and for once I really do.

The next campaign could be just about anything, but it's clear the fight is coming to Terra sooner or later, regardless of the details. I would bet good money on chaos getting some big updates next time around, focusing on new models. Maybe they'll flip the script and do three trimvirates for xenos and chaos. Marines, Tyranids, Orks, who knows what else? It's pretty obvious at this point the other daemon primarchs and most, if not all, the loyalists will be coming back as well. Russ and Lion'el Johnson are all but locked in at this point with the obvious setups. Dorn would make sense as well. Fulgrim was given a pretty direct hint, and GW already showed off the leaks for Mortarion and the Death Guard.

Nobody seems to know what's after the Death Guard release, and in my opinion that's a good thing. I love the fact that the sky's the limit here. I would expect the next major update to come AFTER 8th edition rolls out, though. I could be wrong because these are miniature and lore releases way more than rules, so they might feel okay releasing something with rules that will need to be updated soon. Who are we kidding? They'll be okay with that no matter what. When has it ever stopped them before?

Between this release and the stunning new models, people are buzzing about 40K again in a big way. All the recent releases over the last couple years seem to be building up to this new, more desperate storyline. I expect the next set to keep us guessing in all the right ways.

It looks like we're about out of time, so thanks for listening and let me know what you think about all this. Did you have a different take on it? Let me know in the comment section on chapterapproved.com, or look the show up on Twitter or Facebook.

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I'll leave you with this thought for the day: An open mind is like a fortress with its gates unbarred and unguarded.