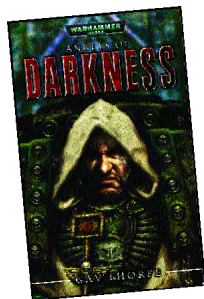


ANGELS OF DARKNESS

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL BY GAV THORPE

IN A FEW MOMENTS, they were at the lip of the crater. Boreas looked cautiously over the top and could plainly see the lights of the Fallen's lair against the dark sky. He could also see the silhouettes of dozens of figures advancing across the ground towards their position.

'Attack! Attack!' Boreas bellowed, rising from his position and raising his crozius above his head. The opportunity for subtle plans and complex strategies had been taken from them the moment the Thunderhawk had crashed; now all that they could rely on was their superior weapons and superhuman abilities. 'In honour of the Lion, attack!'



THE DARK ANGELS Space Marines are amongst the most devout of the God-Emperor's servants. Their loyalty is seemingly beyond question and their faith almost fanatical. But the Chapter harbours a dark and horrific secret that stretches back over ten thousand years to the time of the terrible Horus Heresy. The long-buried secrets from this dark time threaten to be unleashed when Interrogator-Chaplain Boreas discovers that the line between good and evil is too easily crossed!

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IT TOOK SEVERAL days for the *Blade of Caliban* to return to Piscina IV. Unlike the feral fifth world, Piscina IV had maintained a veneer of civilisation through the Age of Strife, and when the Dark Angels had reclaimed the world during the Great Crusade, they had been welcomed with open arms by the humans living there. In many ways, Piscina was perfect for the Dark Angels' purposes. The barbaric warriors of the fifth planet provided excellent recruits – natural and hardy warriors that could only be found on such deathworlds, or in the savage depths of a hive-world. But the semi-cultured fourth world gave them a place for their outpost, a haven they could dwell in without interfering with the development of the tribesmen of Piscina V.

It was towards the capital, Kadillus Harbour, that the Thunderhawk gunship now descended. As the aircraft entered the upper atmosphere, Hephaestus called to Boreas to join him in the cockpit.

Through the armoured windshield, the Chaplain saw the massive oceans of the world and the thousands of scattered volcanic islands that ringed the planet in thousand kilometre-long chains. Almost all were still active and uninhabitable. The largest island, Kadillus itself, rose amongst those nearby, thousands of kilometres high and formed from five huge volcanoes. Long dormant, the same geo-thermal activity that had created such a world now provided the inhabitants with much of their power, and Boreas could see the thermal venting from the power stations hanging as a thick haze over the island, obscuring the ground below the tips of the volcanoes.

'Sergeant Damas at our keep has re-directed an emergency comms signal from Colonel Brade,' Hephaestus told the Interrogator-Chaplain. Brade was the commander of the Imperial Guard forces stationed on Piscina for the last few years, ever since an ork invasion had almost conquered the world. Pockets of orks still held out in the wilderness areas, and despite regular cleanse and burn operations to destroy the spores left by the greenskin aliens, never would Piscina be free from the threat of their wild attacks.

'Thunderhawk communication,' Boreas commanded the comms pick-up in his armour, which was then boosted by the gunship's longer ranged array. 'This is Interrogator-Chaplain Boreas, how may we be of assistance, colonel?'

'Lord Boreas, there is a serious ork attack under way at Vartoth,' Brade's crackling voice told him. Vartoth was one of the old mine heads, disused now, but for a warren of buildings and underground tunnels. Boreas realised immediately that if the orks were allowed to establish themselves there, it would take nothing short of a full-scale assault to drive them out.

'Please be more specific, colonel,' Boreas said, shaking his head slightly with unconscious disapproval.

'We estimate that nearly five hundred orks have broken through the perimeter walls of the complex, and have holed up in the mine buildings,' Brade explained. 'I have three infantry platoons already at the battle zone, and three armoured fist platoons en route, but the greenskins will be well and truly dug in by the time they arrive. The orks seem to be very well armed somehow. Please assist.'

Brade's men were currently outnumbered, Boreas calculated quickly, and despite the armoured personnel carriers and light support tanks of the armoured fist platoon, they would find it hard to establish any foothold with which to launch a concerted effort on the mine head.

'Of course, Colonel Brade,' said Boreas. He glanced at Hephaestus, who had been listening in on the exchange. The Tech-Marine manipulated the controls of one of the displays and brought up a tactical schematic.

'We will be with you inside ten minutes, colonel,' Hephaestus told the Imperial Guard commander, checking the digital map.

'Be ready to push forward when we arrive,' Boreas warned.

'I am a kilometre south of the mine head, I await your arrival,' Brade said. 'We shall discuss how best you can assist.'

'You misunderstand me, colonel,' replied Boreas. 'We will commence an immediate assault, please have your troops prepared to exploit any breakthrough.'

'Oh, I...' Brade stammered. 'Of course, we shall start our advance immediately and will be prepared to provide additional troops on your arrival.'

'Thank you, Colonel Brade,' Boreas replied before he cut the comm-link and looked at Hephaestus. 'Engage machine-spirit to take us in. Open the armoury and distribute jump packs.'

'Understood,' replied the Tech-Marine with a nod. His large hands danced quickly over the controls of the gunship before he stood up and made his way to the armoured section at the back of the Thunderhawk. Controlled by its own artificial mind, the gunship steered its way down through the clouds towards Vartoth.

The young aspirants huddled in the corner watching the Space Marines preparing for battle, plugging each other into their jump packs and tightening the grip-harnesses. The jump packs were even bulkier than a normal power plant backpack, most of their mass taken up with two flared engines designed to allow the wearer to bound through the air at high speed. They fixed their helmets and drew bolters from the weapons rack, while Boreas opened his small reliquary and brought forth his power sword.

He tested the activation stud and the long blade was enveloped by a shimmering blue haze of energy, capable of shattering armourplasm and slicing through bone. Satisfied that all was in working order, he sheathed the sword and took out his rosarius, the symbol of his position. The ornate badge was wrought in the shape of a square set with a glinting ruby which doubled as projector for the compact force field generator contained within. Taking the winged-skull key from the reliquary, he fitted it to the rosarius and it hummed into life.

'Approaching drop zone,' warned Hephaestus from the cockpit and Boreas nodded to him.

'Check seals, clear for debarking,' the Interrogator-Chaplain told the squad and they assembled in single file in the belly of the gunship, facing towards the forward assault

ramp. He walked over to Varsin and Sanis, who were dwarfed by the warriors around them, sitting silently in bewilderment near to the cockpit.

'Strap yourselves in tightly, we would rather you were not harmed before we get you to the keep,' he told them, pointing at the safety harnesses hanging from the inside of the hull. 'The Thunderhawk will take you to safety once we are gone. Do not attempt to rise from this position even when you have landed. The Thunderhawk may be recalled at any moment and it could prove unfortunate if you were not secure at that time.'

Both the aspirants nodded meekly. They had soon learned of the Dark Angels' discipline aboard the *Blade of Caliban*, and knew that they had to obey every order to the letter.

'Lowering ramp,' Hephaestus said, activating the gunship's hydraulics when he saw that the boys were safely secured in the crash harnesses.

'What will become of us?' asked Varsin shrilly. 'Can we not come with you when you land?'

'Land?' laughed Zaul. 'That would take too long. You'll not be following us anywhere, just stay in the Thunderhawk and you'll be safe.'

The roar of the engines grew to deafening proportions as the ramp opened and revealed the grey-blue of the Piscinan sky. Wind whipped into the gunship's interior and the boys grabbed the straps tightly as it blew their hair and lashed at their faces. The ground could be seen screaming past some hundred metres below, and Boreas looked at the others from the front of the column.

'Weapons check complete?' he asked, and they responded in unison. Breaking into a run, Boreas threw himself down the ramp. 'For the Emperor! Glory to the Lion!'

The Interrogator-Chaplain hurled himself off the end of the assault ramp and into the sky, the others quickly following. Above them the Thunderhawk banked sharply away from the conflict zone, its semi-sentient machine-spirit guiding it to a safe landing zone to await recall by Hephaestus.

A burst of fire from his jump pack slowed Boreas's decent for a couple of seconds and his lighting-fast mind assessed the scene below. The Vartoth facility was a group of five buildings clustered around the mine head itself. A high curtain wall had

been breached to the north, the rubble strewn across the rock-concrete apron within.

Muzzle flare and las-bolts flickered in the darkening twilight as the orks within the buildings exchanged fire with the Guardsmen desperately trying to force their way through the gate and the gap in the wall. But the humans were pinned down, there was little cover for them to shelter behind once they got inside the wall and the ground was dotted with dead and wounded.

Inside the compound, the buildings were mostly three and four-storey rectangles of grey ferrocrete, pitted by erosion and cracked in many places from subsidence in the over-mined ground beneath them. There were orks at every glassless window, firing wildly at the Imperial Guard, spraying the courtyard with bullets and spent shell casings. The greatest concentration of fire seemed to be coming from a ten-storey tower to Boreas's left.

'Nestor, Zaul, with me to the left!' he commanded. 'Hephaestus, Thumiel, take the pump house to the right.'

The ground rushed up to meet the squad and they fired their jump packs just before landing. Even with the retro-thrust they all landed heavily, their boots cracking the rockcrete ground with the impact.

Boreas drew his sword and thumbled the power blade into life whilst drawing his bolt pistol from his belt with his left hand. They had landed in the middle of the firefight and bullets and lasfire whistled around their heads as the squad split and headed off towards their objectives at a pounding run.

A bullet zinged off Boreas's left shoulder plate and he turned slightly and returned fire at the fanged face of the ork who had shot him. Three bolts flared across the gap in a single burst of fire, and the wall of the building exploded into dust and shrapnel as their explosive tips detonated a moment after impact.

The ork was flung back with shards of ferrocrete in its face, its gun tumbling from dead fingers.

As Zaul and Nestor gave him covering fire, Boreas ran towards the door to the tower. More bullets zipped harmlessly off his armour as he sprinted forward, and his bolt pistol barked continuously with his return fire.

The whole front of the tower was now pock-marked with bolt craters, and several of the brutish aliens hung dead out of the windows. Suddenly a rocket smoked across the courtyard from

one of the other buildings and a tremendous explosion shook the ground close by. Zaul was hurled from his feet by the detonation and clattered loudly to the ground. Nestor spun and hurled a grenade across the open space through one of the windows, his aim rewarded with a billow of fire and smoke from the occupied building, and a scattering of dark blood and green flesh showered out of the opening.

Zaul pushed himself to his feet, firing his bolter one-handed at the tower's windows, his right shoulder pad ripped away. The twisted actuators sparked and whirred as they malfunctioned, and thick blood oozed from a crack in Zaul's upper arm. Nestor glanced at the injury but Zaul waved him away.

'Heal me later, apothecary,' the battle-brother insisted, gripping his bolter in both hands and starting forward again.

'A scratch like that doesn't need my attention,' Nestor replied with a deep laugh.

The door to the tower was made of sturdy wood, but was no barrier for the power-armoured Boreas. A single kick from his booted foot splintered it in half and tore the hinges out, sending the door crashing onto the orks inside. The Interrogator-Chaplain's power sword blazed as he swung it left and right, lopping off heads and limbs with easy blows. The orks mobbed him, battered at his armour with the butts of their stolen guns, but were thrown back as his rosarius burst into life, blinding them with its white glare.

Boreas blew the head off another ork with a close range shot from his bolt pistol, while behind him Zaul and Nestor battered their way through the green-skinned aliens with their fists, smashing bones and tearing at flesh with their inhumanly strong hands. The orks were no weaklings, their slab-like muscles more than capable of viciously wounding a normal man, their tusks and claws capable of tearing flesh from the bone. But they were as children when matched against the armoured might of the Dark Angels.

The Space Marines cleared the ground floor quickly, stepping over the piled bodies of the dead aliens to blast at those behind. Zaul cleared the stairwell with a few well-placed bolter salvos, and their hold was secured for the moment.

The other two Space Marines looked at Boreas and he nodded at Zaul. Ramming a fresh magazine into his bolter, the battle-brother started up the stairs. Almost instantly, volleys of fire

rained down on him, scoring deep grooves into his armour and sending flecks of paint swirling in a cloud around him. Settling to one knee, he returned fire, the bodies of two orks plummeting down from the landing above to land at Boreas's feet. One shook its head dizzily before the blazing tip of Boreas's sword caved in its skull.

With covering fire from Zaul, Boreas and Nestor stormed up the steps, their bolt pistols roaring in the close confines of the stairwell. The orks fell back before the assault, retreating into the two rooms either side of the landing, and Boreas paused to pull a fragmentation grenade from his belt. Nestor followed suit, and they tossed them through the doorways simultaneously.

Even as the grenades detonated, the Space Marines rushed the landing, sprinting through the smoke and shrapnel, the flashes of their guns like blossoms of fire in the dusty haze. Reeling and coughing, the orks were stunned by the attack, as shots from Boreas's bolt pistol punched a hole through the skull of one and ripped through the thigh of another. Recovering, the green-skinned aliens hurled themselves at the Chaplain, smashing at him with their guns and trying to prise an opening in his armour with their knives. Four clung on to his armour, trying to drag him down.

The first was hurled back as a bolt exploded in its stomach, and the second stumbled away clutching its face as Boreas head-butted it squarely between the eyes. A short kick stove in the chest of the third, and the fourth was quickly despatched by a blow from Boreas's sword, which ripped its jaw clean off and threw the alien across the room. There were eight more orks in the room, but as they prepared to charge, Zaul appeared at Boreas's side and tossed a grenade forward. Two were shredded instantly in the blast, the others hurled to the ground. With bolter and pistol, the two Space Marines quickly despatched the survivors.

Floor by floor, the Space Marines waded bloodily through the orks. Boreas's armour was cracked and dented in dozens of places by the time they had cleared the top floor, and underneath it his thick blood had congealed over cuts and gashes to his arms and legs. After a few gory minutes, not a single ork was left alive within the tower.

Boreas glanced out of one of the windows to see the Imperial Guard swarming over the courtyard, firing up at the windows of

the other buildings now that the deadly crossfire had been stopped.

'Progress report,' Boreas signalled the other two Space Marines who had attacked to the right on landing.

'Pump house clear, Imperial Guard have secured mine head, little resistance remaining,' Thumiel told him.

'Understood, withdraw to the courtyard and regroup,' Boreas transmitted to the squad.

Dust and smoke clogged the air inside the compound, but through his auto-senses Boreas could see Colonel Brade clearly, directing the extermination operation from just inside the gateway.

The Imperial commander looked up as the giant figures loomed out of the murk, his expression guarded. The Space Marines' armour was pitted and scarred, the paint scraped away in places, dents and cracks all over their bodies. One of Boreas's eye-lenses had been cracked by a point-blank shot from an autogun, and the colonel could see the mechanical probes from the helmet punched into the flesh around his eye. Breaking his stare, he offered a hand to Boreas.

'Many thanks for your help, Lord Boreas,' Brade said. The Interrogator-Chaplain's fist dwarfed the colonel's hand as he shook it.

'Your gratitude is welcome, but the death of the Emperor's enemies is reward enough,' Boreas replied, staring over the colonel's shoulder.

'Of course, of course it is,' agreed Brade, dropping his hand to his side and glancing backwards at the telltale jets of the approaching Thunderhawk closing in. He turned his gaze to the Tech-Marine who was guiding the craft back to its masters.

'I am confident that you and your men are capable of dealing with the current situation,' Boreas stated, looking at Brade once more.

'Yes, there's relatively few orks left now. We just need to burn the bodies to prevent them shedding more spores,' the colonel agreed. 'However, these attacks are becoming more frequent and more organised. Might I ask again when your esteemed Chapter will be able to spare more battle-brothers to aid us in our efforts?'

'When the Tower of Angels returns, Master Azrael will be notified of the situation here and will make his decision.' Boreas

replied firmly. Though always respectful and well meaning, Brade's frequent requests for more Dark Angels to be stationed on Piscina were beginning to wear Boreas's patience. He had explained numerous times that Space Marines were not intended to garrison worlds en masse, and were it not for the recruiting world of Piscina V, the Imperial Guard would have been left to defend the planet on their own without even the aid of Boreas and his squad.

'I understand. I'll contact the Departamento Munitorium again with a request for more troops,' the colonel replied, looking away with disappointment.

'Good, then I will bid you goodbye.' Boreas turned and signalled for the others to leave as the roar of the approaching Thunderhawk's jets drowned out the crackle of flames and sporadic gunfire.

Follow the story of Commander
Boreas's hunt for the Fallen in
ANGELS OF DARKNESS.

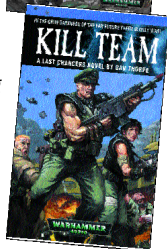
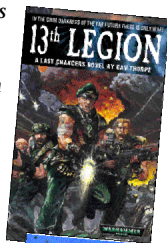
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