

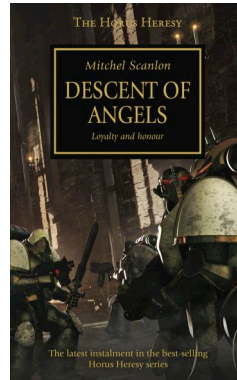
DESCENT OF ANGELS

A Warhammer 40,000 Horus Heresy novel

By Mitchel Scanlon

The next installment in the ground-breaking Horus Heresy series, telling the tale of the civil war that nearly tore the human Imperium apart, ten thousand years ago. This novel explores the dark and mysterious history of the Dark Angels Legion and their Primarch Lion El'Jonson.

When the Imperial fleet rediscovers the planet Caliban, the Emperor is reunited with his missing son the primarch Lion'el Jonson. As Dark Angels old and new join the Great Crusade, a chain of events is set in motion that will change Caliban, its people, and the Legion for ever.



About the Author

Mitchel Scanlon is a freelance author and comic book writer. He has also written a number of novels and short stories, including the Imperial Guard novel *Fifteen Hours*. He lives in the sheep-infested vales of Derbyshire.

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IF ANYTHING, THE bombardment seemed to grow more ferocious as Zahariel hurried through the siege lines on foot. The enemy guns did not have the range to hit the Order's emplacements directly, but their shells fell close enough to shower the forward positions with debris.

As Zahariel neared the front lines, he heard a series of sharp, high-pitched whines as shrapnel ricocheted from the plates encasing his body. The armour did its job, deflecting harm and keeping the meat and bone of him safe, but he was relieved when he finally saw Sar Hadariel's tattered war banner fluttering from the maze of trenches around him.

He jumped down into the trench. Armoured warriors surrounded him in the semi-darkness, the black of their armour shimmering with reflected fire.

‘You made it then, brother?’ said Nemiel, the first to greet him as he landed.

The speaking grille of Nemiel’s helmet distorted the words, but Zahariel would have known his cousin’s voice anywhere. ‘I was beginning to wonder whether you had thought better of it and decided to go home.’

‘And leave you all the glory?’ said Zahariel. ‘You should know me better than that, brother.’

‘I know you better than you think,’ said Nemiel.

His cousin’s face was hidden within his helmet, but from the tone of his voice, Zahariel knew he was smiling. ‘Certainly, I know you enough to realise you probably rushed breathlessly over here from the moment you heard the bombardment begin. You can’t fool me, glory doesn’t come into it with you. It’s all about duty.’

Nemiel jerked a thumb towards the front of the trench and indicated for Zahariel to follow him. ‘Well, come on then, brother, let’s see what your high ideals have got you into.’

The remaining eight men of the sword-line were already standing beside the front trench wall, looking out into the open ground between the siege lines and the enemy fortress. As Zahariel approached, the flash of nearby cannon bursts illuminated them at irregular intervals.

Each man was armed and armoured in identical fashion to Zahariel, carrying a pistol equipped with explosive rounds and a tooth-bladed sword. They wore black plate armour and hooded surplices marked with the Order’s identifying emblem of a sword with its blade pointed downwards.

It was traditional for the knights of the Order to keep their white surplices spotless, but Zahariel was surprised to see that every other man in the trench was daubed in mud from head-to-toe.

‘You are too clean, brother,’ Sar Hadariel said, turning from his place at the trench wall to glance at him. ‘Didn’t anyone tell you? The Lion has issued instructions that we should blacken our surplices so we will not present as much of a target for the enemy gunners when the assault begins.’

‘I am sorry, sar,’ Zahariel replied. ‘I didn’t know.’

‘No harm, lad,’ shrugged Hadariel. ‘You know now. I’d be quick to rectify it if I was you. The word won’t be long in coming. When it does, you don’t want to be the only man wearing white in the middle of a night assault.’

Sar Hadariel turned to gaze back towards the enemy fortress, and Zahariel hurried to follow his advice. Releasing the belt that held the loose surplice in place, he lifted it over his head and stooped to soak the garment in the watery mud at the bottom of the trench.

‘I always said you were an original thinker,’ remarked Nemiel as Zahariel rose and put the surplice back on. ‘The rest of us just left them on and spent ten minutes smearing handfuls of mud over ourselves. You come along, take the surplice off and achieve the same effect in fifteen seconds. Of course, I’m not sure what it says about your talent for lateral thinking that it finds its fullest expression in solving the problem of getting yourself dirty.’

‘You’re just jealous you didn’t think of it,’ Zahariel shot back. ‘If you had, I’m sure you’d acclaim it as the greatest development in warfare since they started breeding destriers.’

‘Well, naturally, if I did it then it really would be clever,’ Nemiel said. ‘The difference is that when I come up with a good idea it’s through foresight and deep thinking. When you do it, it’s usually through plain luck.’

They laughed, though Zahariel suspected it was more a reaction to the tension they both felt than any particular humour in Nemiel’s words.

It was a familiar game, one the two of them had played since childhood, a game of one-upmanship that they turned to automatically as they waited out the nervous minutes until the assault began in earnest.

It was the kind of game played only by brothers.

‘THEY’RE MOVING THE siege engines forward,’ said Nemiel, observing the assault’s early stages. ‘It won’t be long now. Soon, we’ll get the signal. Then, we’ll be right in the middle of it.’

As though in reaction to Nemiel's words, the enemy guns seemed to redouble their efforts, unleashing yet more fire into the sky. As the noise of the barrage grew to deafening proportions, Zahariel realised that Nemiel was right, the assault was beginning to move forward.

Ahead, in the no-man's-land between the Order's siege-lines and the walls of the fortress, he saw three anikols make their slow, incremental way towards the enemy.

Named for a native Calibanite animal that relied on its shell-like armour to keep it safe from predators, each anikol was a wheeled mantlet covered in an overlapping patchwork of metal plates designed to protect the men inside it from enemy projectiles. Powered by nothing more than the muscles of the dozen men who sheltered within it, the anikol was a necessarily slow and unwieldy siege weapon.

Its only advantage lay in its ability to soak up enemy firepower, allowing its crew to get close enough to lay explosive charges to breach the walls of the fortress. At least, such was the theory.

As Zahariel watched their advance, he saw a flaming missile arc through the air from the fortress battlements and crash through the lead anikol's armour. In a fiery instant the siege-engine disappeared in a powerful explosion.

'A lucky shot,' said Nemiel, dragging his eyes from Zahariel's scabbard. 'They must have hit it at a spot where the armour was weak. They'll never manage to hit the other two in the same way. One of the anikols will get through. Then, it will be our turn. The main thrust of the attack will be against the south wall of the fortress. Once the anikols have created a breach, we'll be the first wave as we take advantage of it.'

'All our eggs in one basket,' said Zahariel.

'Far from it,' said Nemiel with a shake of the head. 'At the same time, diversionary attacks will be launched against each of the north, east and west walls to divide the forces of the knights of Lupus and draw off their reserves, but that's not the cunning part.'

'What's the cunning part?'

‘To further confuse the enemy, the diversionary attacks are each going to have a different character from the main assault. The attack on the east wall is to be made using siege-towers, while the west wall assault will involve scaling ladders and grappling hooks.’

‘Clever,’ said Zahariel. ‘They won’t know which is the main attack.’

‘It gets better,’ replied Nemiel. ‘Guess who’ll be leading the assault on the gates of the north wall?’

‘Who?’

‘The Lion,’ said Nemiel.

‘Seriously?’

‘Seriously.’

As they watched the remaining anikols move slowly forward, Zahariel said, ‘I can’t believe the Lion will be heading the attack on the north gates. It’s only a diversion. You’d expect him to lead the main attack.’

‘I think that’s the idea,’ answered Nemiel. ‘When the Knights of Lupus see the Lion at their north wall, they’ll assume it’s the focus of our efforts. They’ll concentrate their troops there, allowing the real main assault an easier time of it.’

‘Still, it’s a terrible risk,’ said Zahariel, shaking his head in concern. ‘Without the Lion, the campaign against the great beasts would never have happened. And, he stands at least two heads taller than anyone else on Caliban. Even if enemy snipers don’t pick him out, there’s the chance the north assault will be overwhelmed for lack of numbers. I don’t know if the Order could stand losing the Lion. I don’t know if Caliban could.’

‘Apparently, the same points were made at the strategy meeting when the Lion put forward his plan,’ whispered Nemiel, leaning forward in a conspiratorial manner, though he had to shout to be heard over the continuing barrage. ‘They say Sar Luther was particularly opposed to it. Jonson asked him to lead the main assault, but initially Luther refused. He said he hadn’t fought side-by-side with him for all these years only to let the Lion go alone into the midst of a dangerous undertaking. He said his place was where it

had always been, right by the Lion's side, until death claimed them both. "If you die, Lion, then I die with you." That's what Luther said.'

'Now I know you're making it up,' interrupted Zahariel. 'How could you know what Sar Luther said? You weren't there. You're just spinning a tale and embroidering it too freely. This is all just camp gossip.'

'Camp gossip, yes,' agreed Nemiël, 'but from a reliable source. I heard it from Varael. You know him? He was one of Master Ramiel's students, but a year older than us. He heard it from Yeltus, who heard it from one of the seneschals, who knows someone who was in the command tent when it happened. They say Jonson and Luther had a furious row, but eventually Luther acceded to the Lion's wishes.'

'I almost wish he hadn't,' said Zahariel. 'Don't get me wrong, Luther is a great man, but when I heard we would be assaulting the fortress, I hoped to fight under the Lion's banner. He inspires all those around him, and I can't imagine a greater honour than fighting alongside him. I had hoped it would be today.'

'There's always tomorrow, cousin,' said Nemiël. 'We're knights of Caliban now, and the war against the great beasts is not over yet, never mind the war against the Knights of Lupus. There's every chance you'll fight at Lord Jonson's side sooner rather than later.'

In no-man's-land, the anikols' crews had abandoned their siege engines. Having placed their charges and set the fuses, they broke from cover and ran towards their own lines.

The enemy on the battlements opened fire when crewmen were in the open, and Zahariel saw at least half of the men fall before they reached the safety of the Order's trenches. All the while, he crouched in his trench, waiting for the inevitable explosion.

When it came, the blast was spectacular.

The two anikols parked against the fortress walls disappeared in plumes of rising flames as twin explosions rocked the ground underneath him and briefly drowned out the noise of the

bombardment. By the time the smoke and dust cleared, Zahariel could see that the anikols had completed their mission.

The outer wall of the enemy fortress was cracked and fire-blackened in two places. In one area it had held firm, but the other the wall had collapsed, creating a breach.

‘Arm up,’ yelled Sar Hadariel to the men in the trench around him. ‘I want safeties off and swords bared. No quarter to the enemy. This is not a tourney or judicial combat. This is war. We take the fortress or we die. They are our only options.’

‘This is it, cousin,’ said Nemiel. ‘Here’s your chance to use that fancy sword of yours.’

Zahariel nodded, ignoring the thinly cloaked barb of jealousy in his cousin’s tone at the mention of his sword. His hand drifted instinctively to the weapon. The hilt and grip were plain and unassuming, bare metal and leather wound with a bronze pommel, but the blade... the blade was something special.

At Lord Jonson’s behest, the Order’s artificers had taken one of the sabre-like fangs of the lion that Zahariel had slain and fashioned it into a sword for him. Its sheen was a pearlescent white, like a tusk, and its edge was lethally sharp, able to part metal or timber at a single stroke. As long as Zahariel’s forearm, it was shorter than a normal sword, but its added potency more than made up for his reduced reach.

The Lion had presented him with the sword before they had set off for the fortress of the Knights of Lupus, and Zahariel had felt the connection of the brotherhood the Order’s Grand Master had spoken of as he had drawn the blade.

Luther and his fellow knights had congratulated him, but Zahariel had seen Nemiel’s jealous eyes linger on the blade as it threw back the sunlight on its smoothed face.

Zahariel heard the sound of a serynx horn, calling across the battlefield in a long, mournful tone, and drew his sword to the admiring glances of his fellow knights.

‘There’s the signal!’ shouted Hadariel. ‘Attack! Attack! Forward! For the Lion! For Luther! For the honour of the Order!’

Already, dozens of figures could be seen emerging from the trenches around them. Zahariel heard Hadariel's battle cry taken up by hundreds of voices as more knights rose from their trenches and began to charge towards the fortress.

Zahariel recognised the sound of his own voice among the din, even as he leapt from the trench to join the charge.

'You wanted to make history,' shouted Nemiël beside him, 'now's our chance!'

With that, Nemiël took up the cry as it resounded through no-man's-land.

'For the Lion! For Luther! For the Order!'

Together, they charged into the breach.

AFTERWARDS, IN THE annals of the Order, the chroniclers would record it as a decisive moment in the history of Caliban. The defeat of the Knights of Lupus would be characterised as a victory made in the name of human progress.

Lion El'Jonson's leadership would be praised, as would Luther's bravery in leading the main assault. The chroniclers would write fulsomely of the white surplises of the Order's knights, of how they gleamed in the moonlight as their owners charged in daredevil fashion towards the enemy defences.

The reality was, of course, somewhat different.

IT WAS HIS FIRST taste of war, of mass conflict, of the life-or-death struggle between two opposing armies, and Zahariel was afraid. It was not so much that he feared death. Life on Caliban was hard. It bred fatalism into its sons. From childhood he had been taught that his life was a finite resource that could be snatched from him at any moment. By the age of eight, he had faced death directly at least a dozen times. In the Order, once he had completed his first year's training as a supplicant, he had been expected to practise with real blades and live ammunition.

As part of that same training he had stalked many of the predators that lurked in the forests, including cavebears,

swordtooths, deathwings and raptors. Finally, to prove himself worthy, he had undergone the ultimate test of his prowess, hunting one of the feared Calibanite lions.

He had confronted the creature and he had slain it, earning his knighthood.

War, though, was different from all these triumphs.

When a man hunted an animal, whatever its status, the hunt took the form of an extended duel, a contest of strength, skill and cunning between man and beast. In the course of a hunt, Zahariel would grow to know his adversary intimately. In contrast, war was an impersonal affair.

As he charged towards the enemy fortress beside his fellow knights, Zahariel realised that he could be struck dead on the battlefield without ever knowing the identity of his killer.

He might die and never see his enemy's face.

It was strange, he supposed, but somehow it did make a difference.

He had always assumed that he would die facing his killer, whether it was a great beast, some lesser animal, or even another knight. The prospect of a death in the midst of battle, brought down at range by some anonymous foe, seemed almost terrifying.

Unnerved, Zahariel briefly felt icy fingers clutching at his heart.

He did not allow it to get the better of him. He was a son of Caliban. He was a knight of the Order. He was a man, and men feel fear, but he refused to surrender to it. His training as a knight included mental exercises intended to help steel his mind in times of crisis. He turned to them now.

He reminded himself of the sayings of the Verbatim, the tome from which flowed all the Order's teachings. He reminded himself of Master Ramiel. He thought of the old man's unblinking gaze, the eyes that seemed to drill into his soul. He thought of how disappointed the old man would be if he heard that Zahariel had failed in his duty.

Sometimes, it occurred to Zahariel, it is the height of bravery in a man's life, simply to be able to put one foot in front of the other and

continue in one direction even when every fibre of his being is saying he should turn and the run the other way.

Even as Zahariel ran towards the breach in the fortress wall, he saw bright descending flares as flaming projectiles roared to earth to land among the mass of charging knights. He heard screams, the shrill cries of wounded and dying men rising above the tumult. He saw knights caught in the blast of incendiaries, their bodies wreathed in flame and arms flailing uselessly around them as they stumbled past his field of vision to their deaths.

According to the artificers, each suit was once capable of being sealed against its environment, but such days were now gone. A close enough strike from an incendiary and a knight was all but guaranteed a horrific death as the heat from the fire leaked through his armour.

Scores of knights were dying.

Dozens more screamed in pain as they were wounded.

The assault was faltering.

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