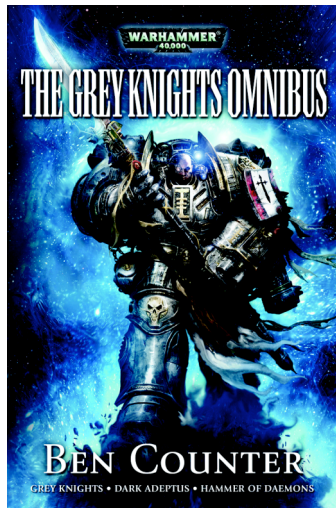


# ***THE GREY KNIGHTS OMNIBUS***

*A Space Marines Omnibus*

*By Ben Counter*

The Grey Knights are servants of the Ordo Malleus, imperious, incorruptible warriors, whose very purpose is to seek out and destroy the most dangerous foes that humanity will ever face: daemons. Armed and armoured with the trappings of the daemonhunter, these stalwart Astartes bring death and destruction to the immortal denizens of the warp. Girded by faith, wielders of the nemesis force halberd, the Grey Knights step where others will not tread. There is the hardest task, risking their immortal souls in pursuit of the hungry entities of Chaos, the Imperium's most arch foes, who, without the Grey Knights, would be but a feast on the sacrificial altar of darkness...



## **About the Author**

Ben Counter is fast becoming one of the Black Library's most popular authors. An Ancient History graduate and avid miniature painter, he lives near Portsmouth, England..

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DAEMON WORLD

The following is an excerpt from *The Grey Knights Omnibus* by Ben Counter

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It was a heaving sea of hatred, an ocean of pure evil. Far below, the surface of Khorion IX was covered in a seething forest of torture racks, crosses and squares and stars of bloodstained wood on which were broken hundreds of thousands of bodies, mangled and wound around the wood like vines around a cane. It was like a huge and horrible vineyard, with rows and rows of crucified bodies spilling a terrible vintage of blood into the earth. The victims were trapped between life and death, their bodies exsanguinated but their minds just lucid enough to understand their agony. They were the servants of the Prince of a Thousand Faces, the cultists and demagogues summoned to their master's planet in the hope of an eternal reward that was all too real. Their bodies were merged with the wood that had grown as the seasons passed, twisting their limbs into canopies of fleshy branches and deforming them until there was barely anything human in them save for their suffering. They said the screams could be heard from orbit. They were right.

At an unheard signal, the ground began to seethe. The crucified of Khorion IX began to wail even louder, their agony supplanted by fear, as the sodden earth burst into

fountains of bloodstained soil and a hideous gibbering rose up from beneath. Iridescent, shifting creatures crawled up to the surface, some with long reaching fingers and torsos dominated by leering, huge-mawed faces, others with bloated fungoid bodies that belched multicoloured flame. There were ravenous swarms of tiny, misshapen things that gnawed at the roots of the crucified forest and immense winged monsters like huge deformed vultures that spat magic fire. Every one was a shining multicoloured vision of hell, and each was just a pale reflection of their master. The Prince of a Thousand Faces, the Forger of Hells, the Whisperer in the Darkness – Ghargatuloth the Daemon Lord, chosen of the God of Change.

A tide of daemons burst like an ocean from the ground and flooded through the crucified forest, shrieking in anticipation and hunger, the greater daemons marshalling the lesser and the lowest of them, forming a mantle of daemon flesh that covered the ground in a sea of iridescence.

The daemoniac tide poured onto the surface until from far above it looked like an ocean of daemonskin, the lesser daemons sweeping between the rows of the crucified and the greater crushing Ghargatuloth's slave-victims beneath clawed feet. The will of Ghargatuloth resonated through the very crust of Khorion IX; every single one of the Tzeentch's servants felt it.

The next turning point will be here, it said. Thousands of the Change God's plots were coming to a head in this battle, a tangled nexus of fates that would set the path for the future. It was fate that formed the medium through

which Tzeentch mutated the universe to his will, and so this was a holy battle where fate was the weapon, the prize and the battleground.

The cackling of the daemon army mixed with the screams of the crucified and the air vibrated with the din. For light years in all directions the insane babbling and screams of desperation gnawed at every mind, whispering darkly and shrieking insanely. Though the space around Khorion IX was largely devoid of human habitation, many of those few who heard the call of the daemon lost their minds in the prelude to the battle. But the minds that mattered, the minds of those who would face the horde of Ghargatuloth, were unwavering. They had trained since before they could remember in resisting the trickery of Tzeentch himself and the creeping corruption that had brought so many to the fold of Ghargatuloth. They were armed with the best weapons the Ordo Malleus could give them, protected by consecrated power armour hundreds if not thousands of years old, shielded from sorcery by hexagrammic and pentagrammic wards tattooed onto their skin by the sages of the Inquisitorial archives.

They were ready. Their very purpose was to be ready, because when the time came to fight something like Ghargatuloth, who else could do it? They were the Grey Knights, the daemon hunters of the Adeptus Astartes, tasked by the Ordo Malleus of the Inquisition and hence the Emperor Himself to fight the daemon in all its forms. They were just a handful in number compared to the trillions of citizens making up the Imperium but when a

threat like Ghargatuloth was finally brought to bear, the Grey Knights were literally the Imperium's only hope. There were three hundred of them bearing down on Khorion IX to have their say in the confluence of fates. And Khorion IX was waiting for them.

The first things Grand Master Mandulis saw of Khorion IX were the thick bands of cloud, white and streaked with red, as they rushed past the viewport of the drop-pod that plummeted through the planet's lower atmosphere. The screams from below sounded even through the din of the descent and the pod's lander engines, a million voices raised in praise and anticipation, calling out for blood and for new spirits to break on the anvil of Ghargatuloth's sorcery. The Grey Knights' briefing sermon had told them that an ancient pre-Imperial barrows complex was their landing zone, but the plans they had to go by were from exploratory records three hundred years old. There could be anything on Khorion IX. It had taken more than a century to track Ghargatuloth to the planet, and the daemon prince would know the Grey Knights were coming. It would be savage. Very probably, nothing would survive. Grand Master Mandulis knew this and accepted it, for he had sworn long ago that the destruction of the daemon was of greater importance than his life. He had decades of experience in the ranks of the Grey Knights, he had fought across a hundred worlds in the unending hidden war against the horrors of the warp, but if he had to die to see Ghargatuloth banished from real space then he would gladly die.

But it wouldn't be that simple.

The drop-pod's proximity alarms kicked in and filled the cramped interior with deep red light. It picked out the face of Justicar Chemuel, whose squad Mandulis was accompanying in the assault. Chemuel was as good a soldier as the Grey Knights had, and Mandulis had seen how he led his Purgation squad. His Marines carried psycannon and flamers and Chemuel had drilled them until they could lay down massive pinpoint fire. It would be Chemuel's task to help clear the path through Ghargatuloth's servants so the veteran Terminator assault squads could close with the greater daemons and even with the Prince of a Thousand Faces himself.

That was the plan, but plans never lasted. The Grey Knights could fight the battles they did precisely because every one of them was trained and psycho-doctrinated to survive in the forge of battle alone if needs be; Chemuel like his battle-brothers would fight alone when the battle broke down into a slaughter.

That was when, not if. That was the way of daemons.

They wrought bloodshed and confusion because they enjoyed it. Ghargatuloth had surrounded himself with an immense army of such creatures, and if the Grey Knight had to fight them all at once, then they would.

The restraints holding Mandulis and Squad Chemuel into their grav-couches wound in suddenly for the impact.

Blood-streaked clouds rushed past the viewport and then they were gone. The pod's lander engines fired and again the pod decelerated suddenly, swooping as it came in to land. For a moment Mandulis was looking out on the twisted nightmare that was Khorion IX – the landscape

shattered as if struck by a giant hammer, row upon row of tormented bodies staked out or nailed to crosses and arranged in terraced fields stretching between horizons. A waterfall of blood poured into a churning red sea in the distance.

A network of pre-Imperial barrows, the only recognisable landmark from the ancient maps of the planet, was ringed with banner poles from which hung innumerable flags of flayed skin. And worst of all, the daemon army seethed, hundreds of thousands strong, surrounding the closest barrow in an unbroken sea of daemon flesh.

Mandulis had been a Grey Knight since before he could remember. He had fought the Chaotic and daemonic from the heart of the Segmentum Solar to far-flung daemon worlds, from the halls of planetary governors to the endless slums of hive cities. Mandulis had seen so much that volumes of his battlefield reports filled shelves of the Archivum Titanis, and yet still in all his days he had never seen anything like the horde of Ghargatuloth.

He was not afraid. The Emperor himself had decreed that a Space Marine shall know no fear. But Grand Master Mandulis's soul still recoiled at the sheer magnitude of evil.

'I am the hammer,' he intoned as the landing jets pushed even harder against the drop-pod's descent. 'I am the right hand of my Emperor, the instrument of His will, the gauntlet about His fist, the tip of His spear, the edge of His sword...'



The Marines of Squad Chemuel followed Mandulis as he led them in the final battlefield prayer, intoning the sacred words even though they could barely hear them above the scream of the drop-pod's final braking jets. The impact was immense, like slamming into a wall. The grav-couch restraints jolted back as the pods ploughed through the branches of wood and bone, into the middle of the daemon throng. A great scream rose above the din of the impact as daemons were vaporised by the impact, and the viewport was suddenly covered in their many-coloured blood.

'Pod down!' yelled Justicar Chemuel. 'Blow the restraints!'

The servitor-pilot controlling the pod's systems responded to the pre-programmed order and the bolts holding the pod's sides together burst with a series of sharp reports. The sides of the pod burst open and Mandulis's restraints fell away. Baleful reddish light and a truly appalling stench of decay flooded in, so thick it was like plunging into a sea of blood. The screams of the engines were replaced by the unearthly and hideous keening of thousands of daemons, like an atonal choir howling out a wall of sound. The weeping sky was scratched by the reaching branches of crucified limbs, the forest swarmed with daemons, the pure hatred of Ghargatuloth's army was like a wave of pain pouring into the drop-pod.

Mandulis had a split second before the daemons closed in again. The pod had blasted a crater, thick with daemon gore, ringed by broken crucifix-trees. Blood spurted from tears in the ground as if from severed arteries. The

stench that got through Mandulis's helmet filters was of burning and blood, and the howling of the daemons hit him like a gale.

'Squad, suppression fire!' called Chemuel and his Marines, their psycannons already loaded and primed, thudded off a single, huge volley that blasted apart the daemons scrambling over the ridge of the crater. Mandulis saw another pod hitting home close by, throwing up a foul rain of blood and daemon body parts. 'That's Martel!' voxed Mandulis. 'Chemuel, give him cover and link up!'

Two Space Marines ran up the crater ridge and their incinerator-pattern flamers poured gouts of blue-hot flame into the tide of daemons pouring towards them through the woods. Mandulis stomped after them, the servos of his ancient Terminator suit whirring, his wrist-mounted storm bolter barking as he sent blessed bolter shots streaking into leering daemon faces. He reached the lip of the crater and saw the army for the first time from ground level – gnarled limbs of iridescent pink and blue, bloated creatures that belched flame, the lopsided shapes of avian greater daemons lurching towards the drop zone.

Mandulis drew his Nemesis sword from its scabbard on his back. The blade leapt into life, its power field calibrated to disrupt the psychic matter of daemons' flesh, the stylised golden lightning bolt set into its silver blade glowing hot with power. He lunged forward and cut a wide arc through the daemons clambering through the burning remains of their brothers; he felt three unholy bodies come apart under the blade's edge.

It was a good blade. One of the Chapter's best, given to Mandulis when he first attained the rank of master. But it would have to drink more daemon's blood than it had ever done before if he was to succeed in his mission now.

Psycannon fire from Chemuel was shrieking past, the modified bolter shells exploding in spectacular starbursts of silver that shredded the attacking daemons. The flamer troops moved up and were beside Mandulis, pouring more fire into the attacking daemons as Mandulis's Nemesis sword carved through any that got within range.

Martel's Terminator squad cut their way towards Mandulis, the huge tactical dreadnought armour battering aside the crucifix-trees as volleys of storm bolter fire cut through the forest.

'Brother Martel,' voxed Mandulis. 'Chemuel will cover you. We are close to the first barrow, follow me.'

'Well met, grand master,' replied Captain Martel as he speared a daemon with his Nemesis halberd. 'Justinian is close behind us. I think we are cut off from any of the others.'

'Then we will carry the attack ourselves,' voxed Mandulis. 'We knew it would come to this. Give grace to the Emperor for our part in this fight and keep moving.'

'In position!' came the vox from Justicar Chemuel. Mandulis turned to see the Purgation squad lined up on the lip of the crater, surrounded by the dissolving remains of charred daemons, ready to send volley after

disciplined volley from the psycannon into Ghargatuloth's horde.

Grand Master Mandulis could feel, thrumming through the bloodsoaked earth and cutting through the screams of the crucified, the deep angry growl of something waking. Below the ground, huge and malevolent, making ready to play its hand if the time came. The pre-battle guesswork had been correct – it was beneath the barrows and would be surrounded by the deadliest of its servants. Mandulis mouthed a silent prayer to the Emperor as the daemon tide came again, gibbering and screeching as they swung through the trees and loped along the ground, shining with flame and foul sorcery. Mandulis pressed down on the firing stud in his gauntlet and sent a stream of bolter shells ripping into the advancing daemons. He hefted his Nemesis sword ready to strike and, with Martel's Terminators at his side, he charged.

\*□\*□\*

The Grey Knights' strikeforce that attacked Khorion IX was the strongest the Ordo Malleus could assemble. Compact, fast, led by three grand masters of the Grey Knights and composed of the best daemon-hunting warriors the Imperium had, it was nonetheless far from certain that the force would succeed. It had taken a century to hunt down Ghargatuloth, the power which, through dozens of avatars and aspects, directed thousands of Chaos cults in acts of depravity and terror. Ghargatuloth's purpose was to spread chaos and carnage in the name of its god Tzeentch, following an infinitely obscure plan that was all but impossible to trace. The

Ordo Malleus had fought long and hard to find out that it lived on Khorion IX, an uninhabited and largely unexplored world deep into the Halo Zone of the Segmentum Obscurus where the beacon of the Astronomican barely reached. All that time Ghargatuloth had prepared and the Ordo Malleus had no choice but to send their troops into his trap, because they might never get another chance. Khorion IX was too isolated for a planet-scouring Imperial Navy assault and normal troops would last a matter of seconds on the planet. Even the Exterminatus, the ultimate Inquisitorial sanction, would not be enough – someone had to see Ghargatuloth die and, even with a devastating strike from orbit, the Ordo Malleus could not be sure.

It had to be the Grey Knights. Because if anyone could survive long enough to face Ghargatuloth in battle, it would be them.

The fast strike cruisers Valour Saturnum and Vengeful carried over two hundred and fifty Grey Knights, as large a force as could be moved quickly enough through the vastness of the Segmentum Obscurus. Lord Inquisitor Lakonios of the Ordo Malleus was in ultimate command but once the drop-pods were launched and the atmosphere of Khorion IX was breached, it was the Grey Knights themselves who gave the orders.

Grand Master Ganelon, who had personally killed the Vermin King of Kalentia when still a justicar, landed well off-centre in the thick of the daemon army. With nearly a hundred Grey Knights under his command he fought a valiant battle of survival against wave upon wave of daemons, back-to-back and completely

surrounded. Marine after Marine died under sorcerous lightning or the talons of rampaging greater daemons and Ganelon himself began the Prayer of Purification, readying the souls of his men for the inevitable journey after death to join the Emperor in the final battle against Chaos.

The Marines under Grand Master Malquiant smashed into the edge of the crucified forest and formed a fearsome spearhead of seventy Grey Knights, tipped with the Terminator-armoured assault squads and ultimately the sanctified lightning claws of Malquiant himself. Huge portions of the horde swarmed to blunt the attack but those who bypassed the Malquiant's Terminators were cut to pieces by the massive, well-ordered crossfires from the Purgation and Tactical squads that followed. Malquiant's assault drained vast numbers of daemons from the forest, bleeding Ghargatuloth's horde dry in an awesome display of sheer bloody-minded aggression. But the horde was too vast and the broken terrain slowed the assault – Malquiant knew he would not reach the objective, and could only do what he could for his battle-brothers by forcing the bulk of the horde away from the barrows. As the assault ground to a halt Malquiant turned it into a killing zone, overlapping fields of fire and launching counter-assaults into anything that got through.

Grand Master Mandulis had landed closest to the barrows. Along with Squad Chemuel and Squad Martel, and Squad Justinian's tactical team who arrived in time to help cover the advance, Mandulis made the first strike into Ghargatuloth's lair. Over the static-filled vox he

learned of Ganelon's sacrifice and Malquiant's relentless but bogged-down assault, and knew as he had somehow always known that it was up to him. Those who could told him that the strength within him was the Emperor's and that with His will he would prevail. Then Mandulis led the charge up the slopes of the barrows and all contact was lost, as sorcery flickered like lightning in the clouds ahead and the daemon horde began to sing the praises of their master.

The crest of the barrow was lined with bodies whose skeletons had been deformed into tall spears of flesh and bone from which hung pennants of skin rippling in the hot, blood-damp breeze. The pennants were emblazoned with symbols that would have burned the eyes of lesser men – Mandulis recognised the same sigils that had been carved into the skin of Ghargatuloth's cultists and written in blood on the floors of their temples.

Beyond the crest of the barrow, something huge roared. Mandulis, his gunmetal armour now black with blood and smoke coiling from the charred twin barrels of his storm bolter, turned to see the Grey Knights who had followed him. One Terminator from Squad Martel was down, along with several from Squad Justinian who had followed in the path blazed by Mandulis. Justinian himself had lost an arm and his helmet had been wrenched off by the gnarled hands of a daemon – his face was streaked with grime and his breathing was ragged and bloody.

Further back, Chemuel was forming a cordon to protect Mandulis's men from a counterattack. Mandulis had no

doubt that Justicar Chemuel would sell his life at the foot of the barrow, holding back the daemonic tide with flamers and psycannon. It was a good and honourable way to die, but it would mean nothing if Mandulis could not press home the attack now.

‘Martel! With me!’ voxed Mandulis. The captain ran up the slick earth of the barrow, his Terminators following. ‘Grace be with you, brother. Over the top.’

Under cover from Justinian, Mandulis and Squad Martel charged over the crest of the barrow. Before them stretched the whole barrows complex, a series of concentric circular mounds surrounding a ruined stone tower like the stump of a huge tree. Twisted trees, once Ghargatuloth’s most loyal cult leaders, grew in tormented tangles everywhere, forming knots of screaming, blackened flesh. In the depressions between the mounds, blood had drained into deep moats, blood that churned as something massive writhed beneath the ground.

As Mandulis watched, the ground seethed and he saw pale shapes clawing their way from the earth. Stone coffins broke the surface and spilled mouldering bones and grave goods onto the ground. So massive was the evil beneath the barrows that those who had originally been buried there, thousands of years ago before Khorion IX had ever been discovered by the Imperium, were clawing their way from their graves to get away from it. Mandulis led the charge. As he ran full pelt down the reverse slope of the first barrow there was a titanic eruption of earth nearby and something pale, towering and monstrous burst from the surface. A wave of



daemonic sorcery washed over everything and the wards tattooed onto Mandulis's skin burned white-hot as they fought off the daemon's magic. He saw a hunched, twisted body, with a foul distended stomach, rotting skin sprouting feathers, and a long neck from which hung a wickedly grinning beaked head. Wings of blue fire spread from its back as it lunged and stamped down on Brother Gaius, shattering the Grey Knight's leg with a taloned foot. Storm bolter fire streaked up at it and Brother Jokul's psycannon punched holes into its decaying chest, but it just shrieked with joy as it picked up Gaius and tore him in two with its beak.

'Press on!' yelled Mandulis into the vox. 'Brother Knights, with me! Chemuel, Justinian, move up and give cover!'

Mandulis heard Gaius die over the vox, the Grey Knight's last breaths gurgling prayers of hate as he hacked at the greater daemon with his Nemesis weapon. Brother Thieln, Justinian's flamer Marine, died a moment later, cut in two by a huge rusted metal glaive wielded by a second greater daemon that tore itself out of the slope of the barrow.

Ghargatuloth's inner circle of daemons – Lords of Change, the cultists called them, generals of the Change God's armies – were bursting from the barrows to slaughter the Grey Knights who dared attack the Prince of a Thousand Faces. This was the heart of Ghargatuloth's trap. Mandulis had known it would end like this – a mad charge in the faint hope that the Grey Knights would reach Ghargatuloth in enough numbers to stand a chance of defeating him.

A daemon erupted from the ground close by, showering Mandulis with blood and earth. Captain Martel lunged in with his halberd, spearing the avian daemon through the thigh. Mandulis ducked the staff it swung, sorcerous lightning arcing off his armour and pushing his antipsychic wards to the limit. He swung his sword into the heart of the iridescence and the daemon's head was sheared clean off, the severed neck spewing viscous, glowing blue gore onto the ground.

Mandulis strode on as bolter fire and lightning streaked everywhere. He waded through the waist-deep gore of the moat and scrambled up the crumbling earth of the next barrow, crunching through ancient graves.

He could hear voices whispering and screaming inside his skull, a babble of madness that would have swamped a lesser man's mind. But the mind of a Grey Knight was built around a hard core of pure, depthless faith. Where other men had fear, the Grey Knights had resolve. Where others had doubt, Mandulis had faith. An Imperial guardsman, no matter how courageous or pious, still had that unprotected hollow of despair, greed, and terror at the heart of his soul. A Grey Knight did not.

Ghargatuloth's mind tricks broke against Mandulis's mind like waves against rocks.

That was why it had to be the Grey Knights assaulting Khorion IX. The Lords Militant could assemble armies hundreds of millions strong, but not one of those Guardsmen would have kept his mind for a minute under the gaze of Ghargatuloth. So it was up to the Grey Knights, and now it was up to Mandulis.

Glowing hands were reaching from beneath the soil, large enough to pick up Brother Trentius and hurl him so hard that his body smashed into the stone tower at the centre of the barrows. One of the daemons held a staff of bloodstained black wood, pink lightning spilling from the bundle of skulls nailed to its top, arcing off power armour, blasting Space Marines off their feet where the other greater daemons could move in for the kill. Squad Chemuel were buying time with their lives. They were surrounded, the towering avian daemons ablaze with blessed burning fuel and smoking from holes blasted by psycannon rounds. Chemuel himself had drawn his Nemesis weapon, which the artificers on Titan had fashioned into a spear, and was stabbing at the nearest daemon even as it tore off his other arm. Squad Justinian had tried to keep pace with Mandulis and Martel but their charge had faltered. Justinian himself died in a sea of pink fire that boiled up from below, dragged down by daemon talons and torn apart. His battle-brothers were scattered by the daemon that rose from the fire, wielding a great spiked metal block on a long chain that scythed through two Marines before their battle-brothers could turn and riddle the daemon with storm bolter fire. Mandulis scrambled up the slope of the final barrow. Martel's Terminators, only a handful of them left now, turned to cover Martel and Mandulis. The swarm of lesser daemons broke over the far barrow and poured into the complex to join their master in a waterfall of daemons' flesh. The last sight Mandulis had of Justicar Chemuel was of his body being thrown by a greater

daemon into the advancing tide, to be played with and torn apart like prey.

Mandulis pressed on. The ground itself was fighting him, collapsing beneath his feet into great fissures. The tower loomed overhead, ancient stones spilling off its ruined walls, and beneath him the pure hatred reached a screaming pitch as Ghargatuloth tried to force his way into Mandulis's mind.

The daemon prince would not succeed. That meant he would have to stoop to defending himself personally. And that was Mandulis's only chance.

The tower was shattered and thrown into the air in a shower of stone. The ground tore open and Mandulis dug his feet into the crumbling earth as the storm tore over him.

The sky rotted and turned black. A shockwave of corruption ripped outwards and turned the landscape of Khorion IX into tortured, screaming flesh. Mandulis glimpsed Captain Martel being picked up by the howling wind and thrown into the sky and out of sight, fire still spitting from his storm bolter.

In the centre of the storm a huge, dark column shot up from the site of the tower, so tall it punched through the black clouds overhead. It was a spear of twisted flesh, something living but never alive, and it was accompanied by a seething chorus of pure madness that tore at the barriers of Mandulis's mind with such frenzy that Mandulis, for the first time in his long life, felt a spark of doubt that he would hold out against the assault.

He crushed that doubt and held his Nemesis sword in both hands, storm bolter forgotten because not even holy bullets could harm something like this.

The eyes of the storm swept over Grand Master Mandulis and suddenly the air was calm, the cacophony of screams clear and horrible, the assault on Mandulis's mind a pure keening.

The true face of the Prince of a Thousand Faces looked down on Mandulis. The grand master of the Grey Knights mouthed a final, silent prayer, and charged.

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