

GREY KNIGHTS

A Warhammer 40,000 novel by Ben Counter

HIGH SPEED ACTION and adventure with the elite Grey Knights as they struggle to banish the powerful daemon Chargatuloth before time runs out and the creature is free to rampage around the universe!

Ben Counter's latest foray into the war-torn far-future is packed with white-hot action featuring the superhuman daemonhunters – the Grey Knights! From the epic clash between man and infernal daemon to the dark horrors of Chaos, Ben Counter hits the target on every level!



Ben Counter has made several contributions to the Black Library's *Inferno!* magazine, and has been published in 2000 AD and the UK small press. An Ancient History graduate and avid miniature painter, he is also secretary of the Comics Creators Guild. *Grey Knights* is his fourth novel.

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from GREY KNIGHTS

'IN POSITION, LORD provost,' voxed Alaric. Santoro, Genhain and Tancred sounded off in similar fashion. Alaric glanced back at his Marines, who were sheltering behind the massive sloping plasteel barricade. 'Lykkos, stay with me. Dvorn, you're up front. Break the doors down if you have to.' Dvorn nodded. Of all Alaric's squad he had the highest muscle mass and raw physical strength – his Nemesis weapon was a hammer, a rare form that had almost died out amongst the Chapter artificers but was perfectly suited to Dvorn. 'The rest of you, keep firing and keep moving. The Arbites will do the fighting, we must get into the heart of the place and crack open whatever lies in the centre. Tancred will be doing the same. Remember, we do not know what the enemy is capable of. We cannot guarantee that we can hold our own if we get bogged down. We have lost too many brothers to the Prince's followers already.'

Lykkos gripped the psycannon. Dvorn, Vien, Haulvarn and Clostus placed hands to the compartment in their breastplates that held their copies of the *Liber Daemonicum*, letting its sacred knowledge guide their hands.

'I am the hammer,' began Alaric.

'I am the hammer,' replied his squad. 'I am the hate. I am the woes of daemonkind...'

It was an old pre-battle prayer, one of the oldest. One of Alaric's roles as justicar was to prepare the minds of his men before battle, just as they prepared their bodies and their battle-gear. Over the vox he could hear Tancred leading his squad in a similar prayer, as Santoro joined in with Alaric. The officers nearby watched them warily, intimidated by having to witness this ancient battle-rite.

'...from the frenzy, temptation, corruption and deceit, deliver us, our Emperor, that the enemy might face us in Your wrath...'

'Marechal to all units,' came the provost's strident voice. 'Assault plan primary! All units advance!'

The front plates of the barricade were rammed outward, and the plaza opened up before Alaric. Almost instantly bright streaks of fire spattered down from the upper floors of the ugly, black-windowed Administratum building. Return fire from Arbites sharpshooters coughed up in reply, kicking showers of broken glass from the sides of the building.

The riot-equipped Arbites were in front, their shields held up to protect the offic

'Clostus, give me range!' called Alaric as the building loomed closer – he could see where upper windows had been blown out, where the shapes of heretics could just be seen taking up firing position. Clostus, the best shot in Alaric's squad, fired a roaring volley of shots from his wrist-mounted storm bolter, firing at a run when the recoil of the bolter might break the arm of a normal man. Explosive shells ripped around the frame of one of the windows – the heretic sheltering there broke cover and ran, only to jerk suddenly as a sharpshooter's long-las round punched through his throat.

'Haulvarn, Vien, keep their heads down!' called Alaric and bolter fire ripped up from his squad, slamming into the building. The fire coming down at them in return was thicker now – they had a rapid-firing lasweapon, probably a multilaser, that stitched glowing red spears of fire through the advancing officers. Men tumbled to the floor. Haulvarn stumbled as las-shots spattered up one leg, leaving glowing dents in his armour.

Santoro was at the door. He had kicked in one door and brother Mykros was pouring a gout of flame from his incinerator into the lobby.

'Dvorn!' called Alaric. 'Take the doors!'

The squad broke into a headlong run as heavier fire spattered down from above. Dvorn reached the doors and without breaking stride swung his Nemesis hammer in a wide arc, shattering the flak-glass of the doors in a shimmering crescent of shards.

Alaric was next in. His auto-senses adjusted instantly to the shadowy interior of the lobby and in a heartbeat he took in his surroundings – several floors rose around him, hung with banners bearing litanies of obedience and diligence, the mantras of the Administratum. A fountain in the form of a statue of the current High Lord of the Administratum dominated the lobby, its hands sheared off and its stone eyes gouged out. The water was black and foul, pouring from the base of the statue into a fountain pool choked with bodies. Gunfire ripped down from the first and second floors – Alaric saw faces wrapped in scarlet, Administratum uniforms worn like a badge of treachery. The bodies were Administratum, too, workers in drab fatigues or foremen’s greatcoats, except for the black-armoured bodies of officers by the doors.

Alaric opened fire, bolter rounds streaking upwards. The fire blew the arm off one heretic and he tumbled raggedly over the railing around the first floor, but there were still dozens more of them up there. They had upturned desks to use as cover and, though they would offer scant protection against storm bolters, the Grey Knights could not fight it out here; enough fire could be brought to bear to pin them down.

Santoro was already moving into the building, vaulting over the scattered furniture of the lobby into the networks of offices.

Alaric made a sharp, stabbing hand signal to the chapel entrance leading off from the lobby’s near side as the rest of his squad charged in through the broken doors and heavy fire suddenly stitched down from above. Chunks of marble were ripped from the floor and stray shots blew half the head off the stone High Lord.

‘They’ve got an autocannon up there!’ voxed Dvorn.

‘Suppress fire and move!’ shouted Alaric. An autocannon was a loud, inefficient, old-fashioned weapon that fired shells of sufficient size to crack even power armour. Alaric’s squad fired streaks of rapid storm bolter fire up at the source of the autocannon fire as they ran through the arch leading to the chapel.

The chapel was a long narrow room of black marble crowded with pews, with an altarpiece depicting diligent Imperial citizens locked in lives of holy obedience. The body of an

Administratum under-consul lay draped over the lectern, where he had apparently been killed while lecturing the adepts.

Alaric knew they were in here – it was little more than an instinct, a sound, a flicker of movement. Even as he turned they screamed and charged out from between the pews, a dozen cultists, tattered bloodstained cloth covering their whole faces except for their hate-filled eyes.

One of them dived onto Alaric, a knife flashing down. Alaric threw the man aside and heard him slam into the wall, ribs crumpling. Alaric’s Nemesis halberd flashed out and beheaded another before he stabbed the butt-end of the halberd into the stomach of yet another, pitched him into the air, and brought him smashing down through a pew that splintered under the impact. Storm bolter fire streaked past Alaric, punching through the wood of the pews and through the bodies of the cultists trying to shelter there. They screamed as they died, not with pain but with hate.

Laspistol fire rattled up from the survivors – Alaric grabbed the nearest and fired the storm bolter mounted on his wrist, blasting the cultist out of his hand to spatter against the far wall. Dvorn charged right through the pews and knocked two more flying with a single swipe of his hammer while Haulvarn impaled another with his sword.

The squad ran forward to secure the chapel, sweeping the shadows between the pews with the barrels of their guns. Alaric bent down and turned over the closest body. The scarlet cloth wrapped around the cultist’s head fell away and Alaric saw the face of a young adept, the same as billions of men and women who ran the endless bureaucracy of the Imperium. But this man’s skin was altered. Scales, like scabs over burnt skin, surrounded the dead staring eyes and ran under the cultist’s throat down into the redolent remains of his adept’s uniform. Those truly marked by Chaos carried a mark on their bodies as well as on their soul, and the cult on Victrix Santoro had sunk deep indeed.

Gunfire rattled from the lobby where the Arbites and officers were swapping volleys of fire with the cultists. Alaric knew that if the momentum of the assault was lost, the Arbites

could be surrounded and massacred. The Grey Knights had to keep moving.

'Dvorn!' said Alaric nodding to the closest wall of the chapel. 'Get us moving.'

Dvorn nodded and sprinted at the stone of the wall, hitting it with all his running strength. The thin covering of marble shattered and Dvorn's armoured body ripped through further into the building, crashing through wood and plaster.

Haulvarn followed, sword flashing. Alaric went next, charging through the ragged hole. He saw rows of glowstrips up above, networks of workdesks in front of him in a wide, low-ceilinged room. Cogitators were surrounded by reams of paper. Supervisors' pulpits broke the sea of partitioned workstations like columns, and above them slogans of obedience looked down sternly from the beams of the ceiling. 'Diligence is salvation', read one. 'The Emperor's eye is upon you.'

Las-fire splattered out at Alaric even as his eyes took all this in. He dropped low, behind the flimsy partition of the closest workstation, as lasblasts rang off his armour. Cultists were shouting and Dvorn was bellowing as he charged through the workstations to get to grips with the closest cultists. Dvorn understood very well one of the tenets of any Space Marine – when you fight, fight up close, where your strengths count for so much more.

Alaric ran forward, using the workstations for what little cover they provided. He could see the cultists sheltering behind the wooden partitions as they fired – two of them died as Haulvarn's return fire chewed up their flimsy cover and ripped through their bodies. Dvorn was at the centre of a storm of splintered wood as he charged into the closest knot of cultists, hammer swinging, storm bolter blazing at point blank range. More fire streaked past as the rest of the squad entered.

Alaric heard the voice as clearly as if it were in his own head. It cut through his auto-senses and right into his very soul. It was a language Alaric had heard before on a benighted forest world where Chaotic witch-cults haunted the woods, a language taught to the cultists through communion with the dark power they had sworn themselves to. It was understood only

by high priests and champions of Chaos, and what Alaric knew of it told him the speaker was ordering his men to charge.

Dozens of men and women charged in a storm of las-fire. They had been waiting in the offices of the Administratum building, waiting for the first assault to break through so they could counter-attack. They were adepts and menials, supervisors and even one in the uniform of an under-consul, armed with lasguns and autoguns looted from Departmento Munitorum shipments. They had bayonets and swords, pistols and bare hands, and as they charged they screamed foul curses in the tongues of Chaos.

'Hold!' yelled Alaric and, in the seconds it took for the charge to hit, his squad gathered around him, Nemesis weapons ready to receive the weight of the assault, las-blasts spattering against their armour and shredding the air around them. Alaric could feel the faint hum in the back of his head as the anti-daemonic wards woven into his armour overlapped, their feedback echoing in his psychic perception.

He could feel the hatred, too, pouring off the cultists like a stink.

The wave of forty or fifty cultists broke against the Grey Knights. Their priest kept yelling his orders as Alaric and his battle-brothers slashed and bludgeoned around them, every stroke severing a limb or a head. Dvorn's hammer carved great red crescents from the throng. Alaric saw mad eyes rolling between folds of red cloth, men and women, old and young. The din was appalling as the living howled curses and the dying screamed in pain.

Alaric reached forward and hauled himself out of the mass of bodies, throwing attackers aside. The priest was on the far side of the workroom – it was an under-consul, the highest Adept rank likely to be found on a world like *Victrix Sonora*, resplendent in a black greatcoat trimmed with silver braids and the golden sash of his office. His face was covered in layers of scabby scales, so thick that his features were just ugly lumps.

He held out a hand as Alaric clambered over the workstations towards him. A lance of lightning spat out and a blue-white flash burst around Alaric, but his wards kept his body

safe and the rock-solid wall of faith shielded his mind. Alaric's storm bolter barked out a dozen rounds but they shattered in purple starbursts in the air just in front of the priest.

The sorcerer turned and ran, and Alaric followed. From the noise of the fight behind him he knew his squad were wading through the cultists to follow him but Alaric had to give chase. The sorcerer ran through the workstations and through a narrow exit deeper into the building. Alaric charged through the wooden partitions and smashed through the narrow doorway, his auto-senses adjusting to the darkness beyond it.

At one time the main Administratum workhouse had filled the centre of the building, where the most menial adepts slaved at long wooden benches, stamping forms and marking timesheets in their hundreds. They had been surrounded by icons of diligence and berated by the building's under-consuls, who constantly sermonised them on the meaninglessness of any labour save that in the Emperor's name.

The workhouse was gone now. The floor and ceiling had been ripped away to form a cavernous space filling most of the inside of the building. Below was a tangled mess of smouldering wreckage. From the bared rafters above hung scores of banners, foul symbols and heretic words daubed in blood and filth.

In the centre of the room, three storeys high, was a monstrous cogitator. Like a massive mechanical church organ, teetering stacks of datacores jutted from the top and fumes belched from the grotesque furnace-like body. Every working cogitator from the workhouse must have been combined into one huge calculating engine, and the whole mass sat in a nest of printouts. Its tarnished black surface writhed with dull red runes and it groaned menacingly as it worked, valves and armatures chattering like a swarm of insects.

The sorcerer was running in the air above the mass of wreckage, sorcerous energy crackling around his feet. He turned, saw Alaric following him, and began to wail a hideous high-pitched chant as he flew towards the monstrous cogitator.

Flashes of blackness began to burst around the cogitator and it rumbled hungrily. Alaric's wards flared hot as the wall between realities was pulled thin and began to fracture.

Horrible cackling laughter echoed around the chamber. Leering faces and gnarled limbs reached from the black gashes in the air.

'Daemons!' yelled Alaric over the vox. 'Squad Alaric, Squad Santoro, to me now!'

Daemons were Chaotic will made flesh, at once a part of the dark gods and their servants. They were the tempters of foolish humans and the foot soldiers in the armies of darkness. Daemons were a threat both moral and physical, capable of corrupting the human armies sent against them. That was why the Grey Knights had been created. To them, the words of daemons were not temptations but just another sign of their evil.

It looked like Ligeia was right, thought Alaric as he leapt into the pit. He could hear his squad close behind him. Alaric landed on his feet and carried on running as the shimmering, reaching shapes coalesced from the darkness.

He reached the closest daemons at a sprint and he could feel them recoil from the shield of faith around his soul – a dozen of them formed a wall of iridescent flesh around him and Alaric used their revulsion to get in the first blow. He carved through one with a stroke of his halberd, but suddenly he was surrounded by them. The sorcerer must have been more powerful than even Ligeia had suspected, because he was pulling a veritable horde of daemons from the warp.

Alaric stabbed and hacked at the unbroken mass of daemon's flesh around him. Deformed hands grabbed at him, howling mouths vomited flame over his armour, mad eyes spat hate. Alaric's battle-brothers were trying to pull the daemons off him as storm bolter fire ripped overhead from squad Santoro, arriving at the edge of the pit.

Alaric plunged both hands into the mass, dragged a daemon above his head and ripped it in two. He forged through the gap, storm bolter ripping shells into the daemons behind him. Over him loomed the cogitator, deep red fires burning inside and steam billowing from malignant vents. Alaric saw that there was a ring of crude wooden statues surrounding the machine's base, and black lightning was playing around them. The sorcerer himself was standing on top of the machine, lit

by the silver fire surrounding his hands. Alaric took aim, hoping to knock him off-balance and prevent him from completing the sorcery he was working. The Grey Knights were proof against direct attack from sorcery or psychic powers, but that did not mean the sorcerer could not summon yet more daemons or collapse the building around them.

'I am the hammer!' yelled a voice over the vox, and Alaric saw the enormous form of Justicar Tancred clamber up beside the sorcerer. The sorcerer turned and silver fire streamed from his hands over Tancred, framing the Terminator armour with a blazing halo. Tancred swung his Nemesis sword and, with a single stroke, carved through the sorcerer's body, the blade passing into the heretic's shoulder and slicing down through his body to come out at his waist. The upper half tumbled off down the casing of the monstrous cogitator and silver fire sprayed from the lower half, which blazed and guttered as it disintegrated with the force of the power released.

There was a terrible, high-pitched scream as the sorcerer's soul was immolated in the power gushing out of his ruptured body. The runes on the giant cogitator flared white as if they were drinking the energies of the sorcerer's death, before the two halves of the corpse thudded wetly to the floor and the runes faded.

'Well met, Brother Tancred!' voxed Alaric. 'You made good time.'

'Had to go through a few of them to get here,' replied Tancred as his fellow Terminator Marines took up firing positions on the machine beside him.

A scream went up from the daemons. Justicar Santoro directed his Marines to fire a savage volley of fire through their ranks, and squad Genhain on the far lip of the pit did the same. Daemon flesh dissolved in the crossfire. Tancred led his men down the side of the cogitator, charging past Alaric and into the broken mass of daemons. The screams as the daemons disincorporated were hideous and they rose higher as Tancred's Marines trampled their bodies and impaled them on their Nemesis weapons. Alaric saw Brother Locath strike off a head, Brother deVarne cut one in two. Alaric's squad helped them and Dvorn drove another daemon into the ground with his

hammer. In a few moments, all the daemons had dissolved into gory stains of many-coloured blood, leaving only the echoes of their dying screams.

Squads of officers were starting to emerge around the pit, and shotgun blasts echoed from elsewhere in the building as the rest of the heretics were hunted and cut down. Provost Marechal's voice was barking orders over the Arbites vox, organising squads to dissect the Administratum building and cut their heretic defence into pieces, using the pandemonium wrought by the Grey Knights to press home the attack. Arbites were leading the officers in kill-sweeps, partitioning the building into zones where each squad killed anything that moved. The Victrix Sonora cult was dying, with their under-consul leader dead and the cogitator at the heart of their worship in Imperial hands.

Alaric walked through the wreckage and picked up one of the looping strips of paper that spooled from the cogitator. The giant machine was still billowing smoke but its rumbling was becoming quieter.

'...and when the Prince rises, so shall the galaxy become His plaything, and mankind will become His lieutenants in the ways of the Change just as shall the stars themselves be blotted out by the Alterer of Ways with the Prince of a Thousand Faces at His right hand...'

Rantings covered every sheet of paper. The cogitator had evidently been the means by which Ghargatuloth communicated with the cult. The fires in the heart of the machine were dying now and, without the cult leader's magic to keep it going, ugly grinding noises came from within as its workings tore apart.

Alaric dropped the paper and walked to one of the statues that surrounded the machine. It was a crude wooden figure hacked from the trunk of a tree, the dark wood charred black. The figure was vaguely humanoid but it had dozens of hands and a face covered with eyes, staring out from around a wide leering mouth. The statue was carved in a harsh, angular fashion that made it even more grotesque.

'Alaric to Marechal,' voxed Alaric, 'We're done here. We'll take what we need and leave the rest to you. I suggest you burn everything here.'

'Understood,' replied Marechal. 'I hear what you have found there. Is it true?'

'Too true, lord provost. Do not let your men tarry here. Destroy it all.'

'Of course, justicar... my men are honoured that they could fight alongside you. I do not think any of them thought they would see they day when the Astartes joined them.'

Marechal was just like the officers in a way – he had been shocked by the Space Marines, and he couldn't entirely keep it out of his voice. 'We all have the same enemies, lord provost,' said Alaric. 'Your Arbites led well here. Just be sure to finish the job and make sure nothing of this cult remains.'

'Of course, Emperor be with you, commander.'

'Emperor be with you, lord provost.'

Alaric picked up the statue and a handful of the printouts. The statue was heavier than it should be, as if it didn't want to be picked up. 'Alaric to all squads, get back to the Thunderhawks. We have what we need. Santoro, cover us over the front plaza. Genhain, we'll meet you at the landing zone. Tancred, with me.'

Alaric waved his squad back through the wreckage of the pit. They passed back through the body-strewn offices and chapel, and through the lobby where a massive fire had erupted between the Arbites and the heretics on the upper levels. The Arbites were counting the dead and helping their wounded, and the floor was smeared maroon with blood.

The Grey Knights crossed the bullet-scarred plaza back towards where their Thunderhawks were waiting. Alaric glanced back and saw smoke billowing from the top floors. Marechal had followed his advice. Already, the Administratum building was starting to burn.

**Justicar Alaric has destroyed the first nest of
heretics, but the hunt for the daemon
Ghargatuloth continues in:
GREY KNIGHTS**

Also by Ben Counter

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