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## LEGION OF THE DAMNED Rob Sanders

Following the trajectory of a blood-red comet, the berserk World Eaters blaze a path of destruction across the galaxy in its wake. The small cemetery world of Certus Minor appeals to the Space Marines of the Excoriators Chapter for protection, but the force dispatched to deal with this grim threat is far too small and their losses against the renegades are high. Just as all seems lost, salvation is borne out of legend itself as sinister spectral warriors descend upon this planet of the dead, and the enemies of the Imperium come face to face with those who have already travelled beyond the realm of the living...



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rob Sanders** is a freelance writer, who spends his nights creating dark visions for regular visitors to the 41st millennium to relive in the privacy of their own nightmares, including the novels *Atlas Infernal* and *Legion of the Damned*.

By contrast, as Head of English at a local secondary school, he spends his days beating (not literally) the same creativity out of the next generation in order to cripple any chance of future competition. He lives in the small city of Lincoln, UK.

*Legion of the Damned* can be purchased direct from this website and GW mail order, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, and better bookstores.

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IT WAS LIKE no amphitheatre or training dome he had experienced. The arena was large, perhaps the length of two gunships arranged nose to tail in diameter, Kersh estimated. The pit floor was uneven, an angular landscape of blocks, crafted from dark Samarquandian stone. There were square pits and perpendicular rises, steps and crenellated bulwarking. High above, through a caged dome, Kersh could make out the tiered gallery. This was no feral world gladiator pit. There were no howling onlookers or the frenzy of battle wagers that usually accompanied such contests. Rows of dark, armoured figures stood in silence, like impassive statues. The audience had the composure and still interest of those visiting a museum, with Chapter serfs, invited guests and gaunt servitors standing about the Emperor's Angels, as the demigods looked on in expectation and judgement. Kersh swiftly picked out Oren and Old Enoch gathered about the dull white sheen of Ezrachi's armour. Bethesda was at the bars, her knuckles blanched and her face a mask of fear and forced fortitude.

Kersh slowed to a standstill, looking up through the cage roof. There it was. Behind Bethesda was the horrid figure from his unending nightmare. His recent haunting. The phantasm in plate and bone. It stood amongst his brother Adeptus Astartes, watching him. As Kersh walked into the pit the sombre glow of its helm-optics followed him across the arena with dark interest.

The gate closed behind him. Kersh scanned the angularity of the Cage for any sign of a gladius. Breaking into a run, the Excoriator set off for higher ground and a better vantage point to spot a weapon. The soles of his boots scuffed the stone as he leapt lightly from block to block. His kept his shoulders low. His gaze was everywhere. His movements were athletic and economical. A predator's approach.

Kersh heard a sudden roar of exertion as his waiting enemy revealed himself. The Space Marine slammed into him from the side with the force of a freight-monitor. Slabs of muscle and shoulder plates clashed as Kersh was knocked clean off his feet and down a steep flight of steps. The Excoriator's kaleidoscopic tumble was punctuated by the harsh stone edges of the steps until finally Kersh met the grit and stone of the mezzanine level below.

Prone and vulnerable, Kersh turned. His attacker had cannonballed him off one floor of the busy, vertiginous arena and down onto another. His objective became immediately clear. The Space Marine clambered swiftly up an angular column. Kersh heard the scrape of metal on stone. Turning to face him, his opponent held in his gauntlet one of the two gladius blades left about the chamber.

Ezrachi had been right. Kersh had been drawn against a Chaplain. A heavy amulet dangled down by his opponent's waist on a necklace of precious prayer-beads. The amulet itself was a stylised, adamantium aquila, which Kersh recognised as the Chaplain's rosarius, deactivated for the competition, as honour dictated. His shoulder plate identified him as a member of the Fire Lords Chapter, but Kersh would have known this from the Space Marine's tattoos. The Chaplain was a walking illustration – every part of his body inked to represent the swirling inferno he wished to bring to his foes. His canvas-flesh curled with flame and fury, while the blackened dome of his skull was spiky and soot-smeared, like the burned stubble of agri-world fields.

With another roar, the Fire Lords Chaplain launched himself from the top of the steps. He hungered for a swift end to the contest and closed with the distracted Excoriator. The gladius cut through the air. Kersh rolled to one side, allowing the blade to fall where he had lain,

chipping the stone. Rolling back, the tip of Kersh's boot made contact with the Fire Lord's jaw, sending the Chaplain off balance. By the time Kersh was back on his feet, the Fire Lords Space Marine was coming at him with the envenomed blade, flicking it this way and that, exploring the Excoriator's defences. Kersh danced away on the toes of his boots. He arched and angled his body, retracting his limbs and skipping back out of the blade's path.

The Chaplain's style demonstrated flair and expert choreography. The movement of the gladius flowed, stabbing and slashing with a razored poetry. It reminded Kersh of flames dancing in the darkness and was no less entrancing. The Scourge brought up his plated gauntlets, allowing the tip of the blade to glance rhythmically off the back of his fists. Kersh envied the warrior's grace. The Excoriators were attrition fighters. Fluidity, timing and technique were all subservient in Kersh's Chapter to the simple, primordial desire to be the last man standing. Survival was everything. Magnificence with a blade was worth little to the dead.

Kersh allowed the gladius to snake its way through his defences. As the Fire Lord sensed an opening, he extended his reach, allowing the Scourge to lay one of his gauntlets on his opponent's wrist and the other around his throat. The Fire Lord's blade danced no more as the two Space Marines fought for the right to direct it. For a moment the Adeptus Astartes stood in a stone embrace – immovable – faces taut in a contest of strength and will. The Chaplain grasped Kersh's own wrist, attempting to break the lock the Excoriator had on his throat. He swiftly exchanged this for a desperate grip on the Scourge's chestplate and the two Space Marines spun around. The Chaplain ran Kersh back into the brute architecture of a block obelisk. The surface of the Samarquandian stone shattered and fell in pulverised fragments. Kersh pushed back, slamming the Chaplain into the thick iron wall of the Cage. The Fire Lord's shoulder plate screeched against the metal as Kersh pinned his shuffling opponent against the wall. The metal surface boomed with the repeated impact of the Chaplain's gauntlet as Kersh smashed the Fire Lord's fist and weapon into the wall. The Chaplain released his hold on the Excoriator's carapace and began slugging him in the side.

The Fire Lord's hand opened and the gladius fell to the floor of the Cage. This surprised Kersh, who hadn't expected his efforts to be rewarded so swiftly. His immediate desire to lay his own hand on the tumbled blade slackened his grip, and before he knew quite what was happening, the Chaplain had hammered the Excoriator with a skull-bouncing blow. Kersh went down with the sword. Skidding around on the grit of the Cage floor, he slapped a hand out, feeling for the gladius's hilt. The heel of the Fire Lord's boot found his grasping gaunt-let first. With his hand pinned, Kersh braced himself for impact. The sole of the Chaplain's other boot hovered above him and then came crashing down again and again on the fallen Excoriator's face.

Opening one bruised and bloodied eye, Kersh realised that the abuse was over. The Fire Lord was no longer above him and he heard the scrape of the gladius being reclaimed. There were other disturbing movements. The architecture of the Cage, mirroring the nightmare of the Iron Warriors' Eternal Fortress on Sebastus IV, was moving. The section of stone upon which he lay was either rising or the floor around him falling away. Rolling off the moving block, Kersh landed messily on the Fire Lord below. The Adeptus Astartes both went down, and once again the gladius became a prize wrestled between them. Grasped with gauntlets at both hilt and blade tip, the Fire Lord and Excoriator battled for supremacy of the weapon. The Chaplain found his grimacing way on top, the inked globes of each bicep thumping with might as he attempted to force the blade down across Kersh's throat.

The Scourge gagged as the Chaplain leant in closer. The Fire Lord's breath was a chemicular wheeze. It was as though the Space Marine had been swilling promethium. The blade fell a little further and Kersh's eyes widened. Raw effort had drawn the Fire Lord's lips back in an ugly snarl. Instead of the perfect teeth of an Angel, the Scourge found himself staring at a maw of flint. The teeth had been replaced with shards of razor-sharp stone, each with the appearance of a primitive arrowhead or spear tip. Biting down, the Fire Lord's clenched jaws sparked. The Chaplain hissed through his teeth, sending a gout of flame at the Excoriator's face.

Kersh threw his head to one side, allowing the gladius to fall even further towards his throat. He felt the flesh on the side of his bulging neck roast and blister. Jerking his head in the opposite direction, Kersh felt the flames of a second searing breath burn his ear and the side of his face.

Writhing and stretching, Kersh caught a glimpse of the silent crowds above. He could feel Ezrachi's disappointment. He saw Bethesda's stricken beauty. He then caught a glimpse of the sickening apparition that haunted him still. It stood there amongst the still figures of the audience. Waiting. Watching. It seemed not to be looking at him, Kersh suddenly realised. Following the angle of the phantasm's dread helm, the Scourge cast his eyes across the brute landscape of the Cage, the mock courtyards and battlements of the Eternal Fortress in miniature. Where the stone blocks of a mezzanine platform had rumbled aside, Kersh could now see the dull glint of the second gladius on the other side of the arena.

The sword became everything to Kersh. He hungered for the solid satisfaction of its grip, the cutting sheen of its leaf-shaped blade and the blunt punch of its broad, tapering point. With one concentrated effort, the Excoriator pushed the poisoned blade away and heaved the firebreathing Chaplain off him. The two Space Marines rolled until Kersh released his foe and threw himself across the arena floor. The Scourge stumbled to his feet as fast as he could, but felt the bite of the Fire Lord's sword-tip clip the back of his thigh and knew he had not been fast enough.

The effect of the Mechanicus-engineered toxin was almost instantaneous. Like the sting of some giant arachnid, a crippling deadness spread through the muscle of Kersh's leg. With the Chaplain still on the ground, Kersh made a dash across the Cage, but his sprint soon became a hobble and the hobble a limp. The leg became rapidly useless to him. A handicap in flesh and bone. It refused to bear weight or answer the Excoriator's desperate desire. The Excoriator flailed across the dread architecture of the arena, falling rather than dropping off blocks of black stone and crawling rather than climbing over crenellated bulwarks and barriers. As he slipped down into a depression in the Cage floor, he found himself in a shallow pool. Splashing through the dark water, he felt the breeze of sword swipes brush his skin. The Fire Lord was moments behind.

Ahead, Kersh could see a tower of blocks. It was atop the tower he'd spotted the second gladius. The stone blocks were unusual in as much as they were decorated with a neat pattern of equidistant holes. The Scourge slid down onto his palsied leg, showering water at the tower side.

The clunk of a firing mechanism reverberated through the stone. Iron spikes shot out of the holes in deadly unison. Kersh had heard of the Eternal Fortress's nightmare design, its labyrin-thine layout and nests of traps. The Imperial Fists had designed their representation of the Iron Cage with peerless attention to detail.

The Scourge skidded down below the reach of the lowest spike. The Fire Lord, in his desire to acquire his enemy, had not been as fortunate. He peeled off to one side but was still gouged through his shoulder by a sharpened iron shaft. As he groaned and began the agonising process of extricating himself from the metal barb, Kersh began hauling himself up the spikes. Using them as a ladder, the Excoriator climbed gauntlet over gauntlet up the side of the block tower. His paralysed leg dangled uselessly as he pulled himself over the angular edge and up onto the flat summit. There the gladius was waiting. Crafted. Sharp. Glistening with paralytic toxin.

Looking down through the forest of spikes Kersh saw that his opponent had gone, leaving a length of bloodied iron as evidence of his difficulty. From the block tower, the Scourge commanded an excellent view of the Cage, but with blocks rising and sinking, and entire floors moving, it was almost impossible to get a fix on his enemy. His superhuman hearing and vision swam with the rumble and disorientation of the arena's motion. He had lost the use of one limb, but with the gladius in his grip, the Excoriator felt like he had gained the full use of another.

Dropping down the opposite side, Kersh faltered. His leg gave out immediately and he fell. Scrambling back to one foot he hopped about, sword held out in front of him. Dragging his paralysed leg around he slowly turned, expecting his enemy to erupt from anywhere. The Fire Lord, however, was nowhere to be seen. As he hopped full circle he came to the sinking conclusion that he had been fooled. The Fire Lord stood on top of the block tower from which Kersh had descended. He dropped in the fashion favoured by his brothers during their specialist planetary assaults, landing with the surety and barbaric grace of a drop-pod. The Fire Lord tossed his gladius from one hand to another. The puncture wound through his shoulder plate leaked blood down the side of his yellow carapace, but the Chaplain seemed unconcerned. His eyes burned into Kersh and his flint teeth ground together, flashing and sparking. The two shared a moment of calm before the Fire Lord assumed his familiar fighting stance. With both gauntlets on his sword and his leg like an anchor on his own movements, the Excoriator did likewise.

'Come on, meat,' Kersh growled.

The Iron Cage sang with the clash of fevered blades and the grunts of superhuman exertion as Kersh and the Fire Lords Chaplain did their utmost to best one another. Kersh was a killer of champions. It was his duty on the battlefield to neutralise the direst individual threats and cut down the best the enemy had to offer, freeing his Chapter Master to strategise and direct his Adeptus Astartes forces. His swordcraft was clean, brutal and, like his primarch, often demonstrated flashes of inspired invention that were difficult for his enemies to counter. The Chapters attending the Feast of Blades only sent their best, however, and his opponent was an equally gifted brute. His blade swirled and swooped like the raging of an inferno. He passed the gladius rapidly from hand to hand with ambidextrous skill and confidence. Where the blade wasn't the Chaplain's fists and boots were, and it was all Kersh could do to parry and deflect the rhythmic barrage. The Chaplain's movements were entrancing and his form, despite his grievous injury, perfect.

The Fire Lord's blade slithered through Kersh's savage defence and nicked the Scourge above the brow. A curtain of blood washed over his eye. As the paralytic seized him, Kersh felt one half of his face freeze up. The eye closed and his lip began to droop on one side. He compensated with a desperate lunge unworthy of his training or Chapter standing. The Fire Lord hissed through his flint-clenched jaws once more. This time Kersh realised that the tongue of flame was aimed at his gladius. The orange gout evaporated about the blade, leaving the metal steaming and tacky. With horror, Kersh realised that the Fire Lord had cleansed his blade of the paralytic toxin.

The assault continued and, as Kersh's sword was battered this way and that by the Fire Lord, blocks shifted and the dark landscape of the Cage changed about them. A block had descended immediately behind Kersh creating a small pit. Half-blind and hobbled, with the pit edge behind and the irresistible onslaught of the Chaplain in front, the Scourge was trapped. He felt the audience's expectation and his own desperation on the air. A seed of doubt blossomed within him, and he felt the weight of the apparition's gaze. For a moment the Darkness returned and Kersh knew a universe without hope. Perhaps his affliction had damned them all and the Excoriators were doomed to failure. To fail at the Feast. To fail as a Chapter.

Kersh became intensely aware of the limitations of his Adeptus Astartes body; what it could do and what it couldn't. He was to be bested by a brother more worthy of the Emperor's beneficence. A true son of Dorn. A master of the blade. An actual champion of champions.

The Fire Lord had found him. The Chaplain's blade struck out with such fluid force that it not only smashed the Excoriator's plated gauntlet to pieces, but broke several bones in his hand and knocked the gladius through the air like a propeller. Both warriors watched the blade clatter to the ground nearby. The end had come. They both knew it. The Fire Lord arched. It was to be a strike from above. Something suitably dramatic to finish the Excoriator. To cut him down and drop his beaten body into the grave that had opened up beyond. A warrior vanquished. A Chapter routed. Honour tarnished.

One side of Kersh's lip curled. His gauntlet shot up, batting the Fire Lord's arm back. Snatching up the Chaplain's rosarius, the Excoriator back-slashed the Space Marine across the face with the adamantium aquila. Gritting his teeth and holding on to the wire cord with both his gauntlet and smashed hand, Kersh leant into a centrifugal swing. Using his weight as the counter-balance, the Scourge swung his opponent about him. Dragged around, the Fire Lord fell back over Kersh's trailing leg. The two Space Marines toppled. Kersh fell to the floor, but not before he had tossed the Fire Lord into the pit behind him.

Even prone, Kersh saw the flailing Chaplain strike the edge of the opening's far side. The impact knocked the gladius from his hand and together both sword and Space Marine disappeared into the darkness. Kersh pushed himself up, balancing on one leg. He hobbled over to his own sword and scooped up the weapon with his unbroken hand. Limping back, he proceeded to half-scowl down into the depths. The Fire Lord lay on his broken back, his ragdoll form spread out across the bottom of the pit. Grasping fingertips reached out for his gladius, the weapon having fallen just out of reach.

'Yield, brother,' Kersh called down to the Fire Lord.

'Not to you,' the Chaplain finally managed, his voice just above a strangled hiss. 'Not to the dishonourable wretch they call the Scourge. Not to the unfavoured of Dorn.'

Kersh narrowed his eye. He nodded slowly.

'As is your right, brother.'

The Excoriator spun the gladius around in his gauntlet, so that he gripped the cross guard and the weapon's pommel and grip protruded between his fingers. The blade he held parallel to his wrist and forearm. Sliding down onto his chest, Kersh dropped down into the pit. He knelt on the Fire Lord's chestplate and brought back the sword hilt, ready to strike. The Chaplain's eyes said it all. He would not surrender. The gallery waited. The Fire Lord would not yield. Kersh retracted his arm, ready for the first, merciless blow.

'Kersh!' the Apothecary called down, unable to disguise his disgust – even in a single word. The Scourge turned his head slightly. Above him, at the edge of the pit, was an Imperial Fists contest arbitrator. The aged Adeptus Astartes looked down on them both. With grizzled hesitation, the arbitrator raised a solemn gauntlet at the Excoriator's gate. The Fist nodded to Ezrachi and left.

Kersh sagged. Returning his gaze to the Chaplain he found a little of the fire gone from the Space Marine's eyes. Using the sides of the pit for balance, he stood as best he could and threw the gladius down at the still body of his mauled opponent.

'It seems I was favoured by Dorn today, brother,' he announced before spitting some of his own blood at the stone wall. Kersh looked up at the domed cage ceiling and the stunned audience above. He saw Bethesda – her face unreadable – and Ezrachi, whose bleak revulsion was all too easy to read. The apparition, it seemed, had gone. With no little revulsion of his own, Kersh finally called up to the gallery.

'Who's next?'