

# ***LET THE GALAXY BURN***

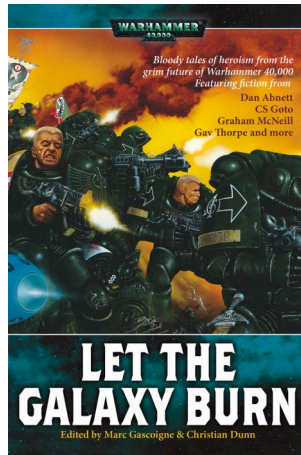
*A Warhammer 40,000 omnibus anthology*

*Featuring fiction by Dan Abnett, Ben Counter, Graham McNeill and Gav Thorpe.*

*In the nightmare future of the 41st millennium, mankind teeters upon the brink of extinction. The galaxy-spanning Imperium of Man is beset on all sides by ravaging aliens, and threatened from within by malevolent creatures and heretic rebels. Only the strength of the immortal Emperor of Terra stands between humanity and its annihilation. Dedicated to His service are the countless warriors, agents and myriad servants of the Imperium. Foremost amongst them stand the Space Marines, mentally and physically engineered to be the supreme fighting force.*

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*Featuring stories by Dan Abnett, Ben Counter, Matt Farrer, C S Goto, William King, Graham McNeill, Gav Thorpe and others.*



The following is an excerpt from the anthology *Let the Galaxy Burn*. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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*From 'Words of Blood', by Ben Counter*

DAY HAD NEARLY broken on Empyrion IX. Commander Athellenas glanced above him at the stars fading against the light of the planet's sun. He could still just see the silver dagger hanging in orbit, the renegade ship that was waiting to drop down onto the lone spaceport and rescue the heathen horde that was stranded here.

He had thirty Marines. Thirty Marines to halt an army that never gave up, never felt pain, who existed only to draw blood from the holy Imperium of man.

But Athellenas knew he must succeed. This temple on the outskirts of the planet's lone abandoned city dated back from the Great Crusade, when the people of the Imperium spontaneously elevated the Emperor to Godhood before His worship was taken over by the bureaucrats of the Ecclesiarchy – and it was by the faith that had built this temple that he swore no heretic would leave this planet alive.

Sergeant Valerian scrambled over the ruined outer wall of the temple, keeping low to avoid detection. 'Commander, they are sighted. They have left their ship.'

'Damage?'

'They came down shallow. Most of them survived.'

'Numbers?'

Valerian paused, a frown passing over his old, gnarled features. 'It is better that you see for yourself, commander.'

The devastator sergeant handed Athellenas the scope from the squad's lascannon. Athellenas made his way to the temple perimeter, from where the great smoking hulk of the crashed renegade craft could be seen, scarred and pitted, against the grey, pre-dawn sky.

He looked through the scope and saw the enemy for the first time. He counted them automatically – one batch stripping the dead, another, cavalry, dragging stubborn horses from the ship's hold, and a third group, the largest, surrounding the leader. They were cultists, and far gone – most of them shirtless and wearing the jackets of their uniforms tied around their waists; barefoot, their skins scarred and painted with blood, armed with whatever they had salvaged. Lasguns, knives, shards of twisted metal, a couple of heavy weapons on carriages pulled by the riders' horses. Every cultist had that same wide-eyed look, the look of rage mixed with desperation and unacknowledged fear, the emotions of treachery waiting to boil over at any second. Athellenas added up their numbers. Six thousand, give or take.

And the leader. If proof was needed that this was the work of the Blood God, he was it. Tall, not massively muscular, but wiry and powerful, almost glowing with pent-up energy. Dressed only in bloodstained cloth wrapped around his waist, black straggly hair, a violent, unshaven face, his skin covered in scars and branded with heathen symbols. One arm was gone, replaced with a pair of hydraulic industrial shears so big the tips reached the ground. The blades were pitted and worn, but even in the weak light the savagely sharp edge shone silver. He was talking animatedly to the heretics who surrounded him, his eyes flashing, his words so charged and evil that even though he was out of earshot, Athellenas could feel their power.

'Valerian?'

'Commander?'

'Take note. We have found the Gathalamor 24th.'

'The Manskiner? But he's–'

‘He’s a lot more than a rumour, Valerian. He’s real, and he’s here. He has the four thousand from Gathalamor and more. Probably the Guryan mutineers, and some cavalry.’ Athellenas handed back the scope. ‘Prepare a defensive position. The Manskinner will know we are here. He will attack with the sun.’

As Valerian gave instruction to the dug-in devastators, and the tactical and assault squads checked their weapons again for the fight that was to come, Athellenas ran over the rumours and official denials. That the famously pious planet of Gathalamor should supply the renegades for the Manskinner’s army was too much for the Ecclesiarchy to admit. They had insisted the Manskinner was a rumour dreamed up by their enemies in the Administratum.

Athellenas’s loyalty lay with Terra, not the Ecclesiarchy, but he, for one, would be happy to do them a favour and quell this rumour for good. And what rumours...

They said the Manskinner was nothing more than a criminal. He was being transported from a hive world – some said Necromunda, others Lastrati – when he broke out somehow. A bulkhead used to seal the brig had taken his arm off during the attempt, but the massive shock and blood loss had not killed him; he survived and fought on, and the last entries in the log of the drifting, burnt-out prison ship recorded how the plasma reactor was being tampered with and was about to go critical. The charred bodies of all those on board were recovered, save one.

It was on Gathalamor that the Manskinner turned up next and earned his name. Those officers in the regiment he infiltrated who opposed him were butchered in the night and their flayed skins run up the barrack’s flag poles. Within three days of his arrival, it was said, several thousand of the planet’s most trusted Guardsmen had disappeared, taking a troop transport ship from orbit as they did so, leaving a blood-soaked altar of skulls in the centre of their parade ground as if to mock those who stayed behind.

These were the tales that seemed to have substance. Others were just anecdotes and stories, about how the Manskinner could turn men to Chaos with his words alone, about the strange omens that

accompanied him, and the abnormalities in the Astronomican which had confounded the spacecraft attempting to pursue his army.

Athellenas had been a commander for a long time, and a Space Marine for longer. He had learned that when cautious men believe nothing they have not seen, a true leader can sift truth from lies.

And there was a truth here, of the sheer monstrosity of the Manskinner, a force that corrupted the staunchest of men with horrifying ease. From foes such as him the Imperium had the most to fear – for it was built on the souls of its subjects, those same souls that the Manskinner was making his own.

‘BROTHERS! SONS OF BLOOD! This day, we face the final enemy. Some amongst you may believe the Blood God has seen fit to test us once more before we can truly worship him with the sacrifice of a million Macharian lives.’

The words of blood cut right into their minds, driving them to further heights of bloodlust. The Manskinner had never felt more grateful for the gift of the words – no army, no Marine, could stand before men who knew nothing but the joy of carnage.

‘But the truth, sons of blood, is that such have we pleased him that he has given us yet more skulls to take! And what skulls! The Marines, the scum of humanity, the Imperium’s blind machines, are here, to die in His name and prove His power to the weak!’

The Manskinner raised his remaining arm high, and the crowd around him cheered madly, screaming their insane joy at the battle to come. Many had died in the crash, and still more were wounded or weak – their very bloodlust would kill them. Still, they were many. They would charge across the planet’s lone city and take the spaceport, and their brothers in orbit would carry them the rest of their journey to Macharia, and on that world of thirty billion souls, his army would die in an orgy of carnage in the name of the Blood God. It was impossible to imagine the numbers that would die, the mindless hordes of the weak put to the sword before the last cultist died.

Such would be the pleasure of the Blood God, that he, the Manskinner, would become his chosen, an immortal champion murdering the very stars in His name.

‘Brothers!’ he called again over the din. ‘Tend to your arms! the Imperial filth will die at the rising of the sun!’

The cultists scattered to prepare themselves: to load guns and sharpen blades, scar themselves, and contemplate the glorious acts of murder to come. Recoba, once a corporal, now commanding the four thousand Gathalamor rebels, bellowed orders and cracked heads. Kireeah, who had joined the Manskinner with over two thousand men from the Planetary Defence Force on Guryan, was rather more subtle, making sure his men could see his finger on the trigger of his duelling laspistol at all times.

‘Diess!’ yelled the Manskinner.

The rider galloped up on his jet-black horse. The beast’s nostrils were flecked with foaming blood and its eyes bulged, but even this animal was infected by the power of the words of blood. Diess himself, young and breathlessly eager, sat bolt upright, cavalry sword raised in salute, still wearing his tattered officer’s uniform.

‘Sir! My Lord Manskinner!’

‘Diess, to you goes the honour of first blood. You and your men will be the first to hit the Marines’ position. Hit hard. If you can take some alive, do so. They will provide sport for the rest. If not, let nothing survive.’

Even Diess smiled at this. ‘Thank you, my lord! This is a glorious day for Colcha!’

‘Everyone on Colcha wants you dead, Diess. This is a glorious day for the Blood God.’

‘Sir, yes sir!’ Diess galloped off, infused with that strange joy that only the Blood God could give a man in the moments before battle.

The Manskinner could taste his victory on the air. The dry ground of Empyrion IX would run red before the day was out.

The first rays of the sun broke around the hulk of the cultists’ spacecraft. Diess’s horsemen, three hundred strong, spurred their

mounts into motion as one and thundered across the plain towards the broken obsidian shell of the temple. Many of the foot troops followed them, waving their salvaged weapons and screaming with bloodlust, hoping that when they reached the temple there would be some Marines left alive for them.

Even as the first lasgun shots cut through the air, the Manskinner could feel the Blood God smiling down upon him from His throne of skulls in the warp.

Blood, keened a familiar voice in his head.

Blood for the Blood God.

*From 'Playing Patience', by Dan Abnett*

HARLON NAYL'S EYES didn't so much as blink as the fist came at him. His left hand went out, tilting inwards, captured the man's arm neatly around the inside of the wrist, and wrenched it right round through two hundred degrees. A bone may have snapped, but if it did, the sound was masked by the man's strangled squeal, a noise which ended suddenly as Nayl's other hand connected with his face.

The man – a thickset lhotas-eater with a mucus problem – shivered the deck as he hit it. Nayl kept hold of his wrist, pulling the man's arm straight and tight while he stood firmly on his armpit. This position allowed for significant leverage, and Nayl made use of it. Harlon was in a take-no-prisoners mood, I sensed, which was hardly useful given our objective.

A little leverage and rotation. A ghostly scream, vocalised through a face splattered with blood.

'What do you reckon?' asked Nayl, twisting a little more and increasing the pitch. 'Do you think I can get top C out of him?'

'Should I care?' replied Morpal Who Moves with mannered disinterest. 'You can twist Manx's arm right off and beat him round the head with it, he still won't tell you what you want. He's a lho-brow. He knows nothing.'

Nayl smiled, twisted, got another shriek. 'Of course he is. I worked that much out from his scintillating conversation. But one of you does. One of you knows the answer I want. Sooner or later his screams will aggravate you so much you'll tell me.'

Morpal Who Moves had a face like a crushed walnut. He sat back in his satin-upholstered buoy-chair and fiddled with a golden rind-shriver, a delicate tool that glittered between his bony fingers. He was weighing up what to say. I could read the alternatives in his forebrain like the label on a jar.

'This is not good for business—'

'Sir, this is my place of business, and I don't take kindly to—'

'Throne of Earth, who the frig d'you think you are—'

Morpal's place was a four-hectare loading dock of iron, stock-brick and timber hinged out over the vast canyon gulf of the West Descent, an aerial thoroughfare formed by the gap between two of the hive's most colossal stacks. Beneath the reinforced platform and the gothic buttresses that supported it, space dropped away for almost a vertical kilometre to the base of the stacks. Ostensibly, this was a ledge where cargo-flitters and load-transporters – and many thousands of these craft plied the airways of the West Descent – could drop in for repairs, fuel, or whatever else the pilots needed. But Morpal was a fence and racketeer, and the transience of the dock's traffic gave him ample opportunity to steal, replace, backhand, smuggle and otherwise run his lucrative trade.

More than twenty men stood in a loose group around Harlon. Most were stevedores and dock labourers in Morpal's employ. The others were flit-pilots, gig-men, hoy-drivers and riggers who'd stopped in for caffeine, fuel and a game of cards, many of them regulars who were into Morpal for more than a year's salary each.

All this and more was visible from their collective thoughts, which swirled around the loading dock like a fog. I was five kilometres away, in a room in a low-rent hotel. But it was all clear enough. I knew what Mingus Futir had eaten for breakfast, what Fancyman D'cree had stolen the night before, the lie Gert Gerity had



told his wife. I knew all about the thing Erik Klass didn't want to tell Morpal.

Wystan Frauka sat beside me, smoking a lho-stick, his limiter activated. He was reading a tremendously tedious erotic novel on his slate.

Surface was easy. Deep mind was harder. Morpal Who Moves and his cronies were well-used to concealing their secrets.

That was why Harlon had gone in first.

Morpal finally arrived at a decision. He had determined, I sensed, to take the moral high ground. 'This is not how things are done on my platform,' he told Harlon. 'This is a respectable establishment.'

'Yeah, right,' snorted Nayl. 'One last time. What can you tell me about Victor Zhan? He worked here once, before he went off planet. I know he worked here, because I had the records checked out. So tell me about Victor.'

'Victor Zahn hasn't been around in five years,' Morpal said.

'Tell me about him anyway,' Nayl snapped.

'I really don't see any reason to do that.'

'I'll show you one.' Nayl reached his free hand into his hip pocket, took something out and threw it down onto the cup-ringed, grimy tabletop. His badge of authority. The signet crest of the Inquisition.

Immediately all the men took a step back, alarmed. I felt Morpal's mind start in dismay. This was the kind of trouble no one wanted.

Unless...

'Damn it,' I said.

Frauka looked up from the midst of his book's latest loveless tryst. 'What's up?'

'Morpal Who Moves is about to make a miscalculation.'

'Oh dear,' said Frauka, and turned back to his novel.

Morpal had run the dock for forty-six years. For all his misdeeds and misdemeanours, some of them serious, he'd never run foul of

the law, apart from the odd fine or reprimand. He actually thought he could deal with this and get away with it.

+Harlon. Morpal's signal will be a double finger-click. Your immediate threat is the grey-haired gig-man to your left, who has a dart-knife. To his right, in the leather apron, the rigger has a pivot-gun, but he will not be able to draw it as fast. The flit-pilot in green wants to prove himself to Morpal, and he won't hesitate. His friend, the one with the obscura-tinted eyes, is less confident, but he has a boomgun in his cab.+

'Well?' Harlon Nayl asked.

Morpal Who Moves clicked both middle fingers.

I flinched at the sudden flare of adrenaline and aggression. A great part of it came from Nayl.

The rigger in the leather apron had drawn his pivot-gun, but Nayl had already stoved the table in with the face of the grey-haired gig-man and relieved him of his dart-knife. Nayl threw himself around as the pilot in green lunged forward, and slam-kicked him in the throat. The pilot went down, choking, his larynx crushed, as the pivot-gun finally boomed. The home-made round whipped high over Nayl's head as he rolled and triggered the dart-knife. The spring-propelled blade speared the rigger through the centre of his leather apron, and he fell over on his back, clawing at his belly.

Others ploughed in, one striking Nayl in the ribs with an eight wrench.

'Ow!' Nayl grunted, and laid the man out. The obscura fiend was running across the platform towards his hoy. Nayl threw another man aside, and grabbed the edges of Morpal's buoy-chair. The Mover yelled in dismay as Nayl slung the frictionless chair sideways. It sped across the platform like a quoit, knocking two of the stevedores over, and slammed hard against the dock's restraining rail. The serious impact dazed Morpal. He slumped forward.

Nayl backfisted a man in the nose, and then punched out another who was trying to flee anyway. Two front teeth flew into the air. The obscura fiend had his hoy's door open, reaching in.

A stevedore with a hatchet swung at Nayl, forcing him to jump back. Nayl blocked the next swing with his forearm, fractured the man's sternum with a jab, and threw him with a crash into the nearby row of porcelain samovars.

The obscure addict turned from his cab and racked the grip of his boomgun. He brought it up to fire.

Nayl slid the Hecuter 10 from his bodyglove and calmly shot him through the head at fifteen metres.

Blood splashed up the rusted fender of the hoy. The man cannoned backwards, dropping the boomgun from dead fingers.

The rest of them scattered.

Kara ran onto the platform, her weapon raised. It had taken her just thirty seconds to move out of cover at my command to back up Nayl, but the fight was already done.

'Don't leave any for me, then,' she complained.

'You should have been here,' Nayl said. He walked over to the rig and picked up the fallen boomgun, examining it.

'Nice,' he said.

+Harlon...+

Nayl looked over at Morpal, who was just coming round, the back of his buoy-chair rammed against the platform's rail. He saw Nayl, saw him aiming the weapon...

+Harlon! No!+

But Nayl's blood was up. The need for vengeance, suppressed for so long, was finally finding an outlet.

Nayl fired. Morpal had ducked. The shot exploded the seat-back above him, and the rail behind. The force of the impact drove the buoy-chair backwards.

Intact, unscathed, but still sitting in his chair, Morpal Who Moves went backwards, toppled, and fell into the inter-stack gulf.

'Well, damn,' Nayl hissed.

+For Throne's sake, Nayl! I told you not to—+

Thonius had just walked into the hotel room behind me.

'Good book?' he asked Frauka.

'Saucy,' Frauka replied, not looking up.

+Nayl's just ruined our lead.+  
'Never mind,' Thonius grinned, a smug satisfaction on his face.  
'It was pointless anyway. I've found a much better one.'

*From 'Unforgiven', by Graham McNeill*

DOZENS OF CULTISTS were pitched backwards by the Space Marines' first volley, blood bright on their robes. More died as the bolters fired again. Kaelen exploded from cover, a laser blast scoring a groove in his shoulder plate. The first cultist to bar his path died without even seeing the blow that killed him. The next saw Kaelen bearing down on him and the Marine sergeant relished the look of terror on his face. His power fist took his head off.

Gunfire sounded, louder than before, as more covering fire raked the robed cultists. Kaelen fought and killed his way towards the temple doors, gore spattering his armour bright red. All around him, Squad Leuctra killed with a grim efficiency. Short dashes for cover combined with deadly accurate bolter fire had brought them to within eighty metres of the temple doors with no casualties. In their wake, more than two hundred cultists lay dead or dying.

Powerful blasts of gunfire spat from the smashed windows. Too heavy to charge through, even for power armour, Kaelen knew. He activated his vox-com.

'Brother Lucius.'

'Yes, brother-sergeant?'

'You have a good throwing arm on you. You think you can get a couple of grenades through those windows?'

Lucius risked a quick glance over the rim of the fountain he was using for cover and nodded curtly. 'Yes, brother-sergeant. I believe I can, the Lion willing.'

'Then do so,' ordered Kaelen. 'The Emperor guide your aim.'

Kaelen shifted position and spoke to the rest of his squad. 'Be ready. We move on the grenade's detonation.'

Each tiny rune on his visor that represented one of his men blinked once as they acknowledged receipt of the order. Kaelen glanced round to check that Chaplain Bareus was ready too. The hulking figure of the chaplain was methodically examining the dead cultists, pulling back their robes like a common looter. Kaelen's lip curled in distaste before he quickly reprimanded himself for such disloyalty. But what was the chaplain doing?

'Brother-chaplain?' called Kaelen.

Bareus looked up, his helmeted face betraying nothing of his intent.

'We are ready,' Kaelen finished.

'Brother-sergeant,' began Bareus, moving to squat beside Kaelen. 'When we find this Prophet, we must not kill him. I wish him taken alive.'

'Alive? But our orders are to kill him.'

'Your orders have been changed, sergeant,' hissed the chaplain, his voice like cold flint. 'I want him alive. You understand?'

'Yes, brother-chaplain. I shall relay your orders.'

'We must expect heavy resistance within the temple. I will tell you now that I do not expect many, if any, of your men to survive,' advised Bareus, his voice laden with the promise of death.

'Why did you not brief me on this earlier?' snapped Kaelen. 'If the forces we are to face are so strong then we should hold here for now and call in support.'

'No,' stated Bareus. 'We do this alone or we die in the attempt.' His voice brooked no disagreement and Kaelen suddenly understood that there was more at stake with this mission than simple assassination. Regardless of the chaplain's true agenda, Kaelen was duty bound to obey.

He nodded, 'As you wish, chaplain.' He opened the vox-com to Lucius again. 'Now, Brother Lucius!'

Lucius stood, lithe as a jungle cat and powered a frag grenade through each of the windows either side of the cathedral doors. No sooner had the last grenade left his hand than the heavy blast of a

lascannon disintegrated his torso. The heat of the laser blast flashed his super-oxygenated blood to a stinking red steam.

Twin thumps of detonation and screams. Flashing light and smoke poured from the cathedral windows like black tears.

‘Now!’ yelled Kaelen and the Marines rose from cover and sprinted towards the giant bronze doors. Scattered small arms fire impacted on their armour, but the Space Marines paid it no heed. To get inside was the only imperative.

Kaelen saw Brother Marius falter, a lucky shot blasting a chunk of armour and flesh from his upper thigh, staining the dark green of his armour bright red. Chaplain Bareus grabbed Marius as he staggered and dragged him on. Kaelen’s powerful legs covered the distance to the temple in seconds and he flattened his back into the marble of the cathedral wall. Automatically, he snapped off a pair of grenades from his belt and hurled them through the smoking windows. The shockwave of detonation shook the cathedral doors and he vaulted through the shattered window frame, snapping shots left and right from his bolt pistol.

Inside was a blackened hell of smoke, blood and cooked flesh. Bodies lay sprawled, limbs torn off, skeletons pulverised and organs melted. The wounded gunners shrieked horribly.

Kaelen felt no pity for them. They were heretics and had betrayed the Emperor. They deserved a death a hundred times worse. The Dark Angels poured inside, moving into defensive positions, clearing the room and despatching the wounded. The vestibule was secure, but Kaelen’s instincts told him that it wouldn’t remain that way for long. Marius propped himself up against the walls. The bleeding had already stopped, the wound already sealed. He would fight on, Kaelen knew. It took more than a shattered pelvis to stop a Dark Angel.

‘We have to keep moving,’ he snapped. Movement meant life.

Chaplain Bareus nodded, reloading his pistol and turned to face Kaelen’s squad.

‘Brothers,’ he began, ‘we are now in the fight of our lives. Within this desecrated temple you shall see such sights as you have

never witnessed in your darkest nightmares. Degradation and heresy now make their home in our beloved Emperor's vastness and you must shield your souls against it.'

Bareus lifted his chaplain's symbol of office, the crozius arcanum, high. The blood red gem at its centre sparkled like a miniature ruby sun. 'Remember our primarch and the Lion shall watch over you!'

Kaelen muttered a brief prayer to the Emperor and they pressed on.

'THEY ARE WITHIN your sanctuary, my lord!' said Casta, worry plain in every syllable. 'What would you have us do to destroy them?'

'Nothing more than you are already, Casta.'

'Are you sure, lord? I do not doubt your wisdom, but they are the Adeptus Astartes. They will not give up easily.'

'I know. I am counting on it. Do you trust me, Casta?'

'Absolutely, lord. Without question.'

'Then trust me now. I shall permit the Angel of Blades to kill all the Marines, but I want their chaplain.'

'It will be as you say, lord,' replied Casta turning to leave.

The Prophet nodded and rose from his prayers to his full, towering height. He turned quickly, exposing a sliver of dark green beneath his voluminous robes.

'And Casta...' he hissed. 'I want him alive.'

CHAPLAIN BAREUS SWUNG the crozius in a brutal arc, crushing bone and brain. Fighting their way along a reliquary studded cloister, the Marines battled against more followers of the Prophet.

The Dark Angels fought in pairs, each warrior protecting the other's back. Kaelen fought alongside Bareus, chopping and firing. The slide on the bolt pistol racked back empty. He slammed the butt of the pistol across his opponent's neck, shattering his spine.

Bareus slew his foes with a deadly grace, ducking, kicking and stabbing. The true genius of a warrior was to create space, to flow between the blades where skill and instinct merged in lethal

harmony. Enemy weapons sailed past him and Kaelen knew that Bareus was a warrior born. Kaelen felt as clumsy as a new recruit next to the exquisite skill of the interrogator chaplain.

Brother Marius fell, a power maul smashing into his injured hip. Hands held him down and an axe split his skull in two. Yet even though his head had been destroyed, he shot his killer dead.

Then it was over. The last heretic fell, his blood spilt across the tiled floor. As Kaelen slammed a new magazine into his pistol, Bareus knelt beside the corpse of Brother Marius and intoned the Prayer for the Fallen.

‘You will be avenged, brother. Your sacrifice has brought us closer to expunging the darkness of the past. I thank you for it.’

Kaelen frowned. What did the chaplain mean by that? Bareus stood and pulled out a data slate, displaying the floor plans of the cathedral. While the chaplain confirmed their location, Kaelen surveyed his surroundings in more detail.

The walls were dressed stone, the fine carvings hacked off and replaced with crude etchings depicting worlds destroyed, angels on fire and a recurring motif of a broken sword. And a dying lion. The rendering was crude, but the origins of the imagery was unmistakable.

‘What is this place?’ he asked aloud. ‘This is our Chapter’s history on these walls. Lion El’Jonson, dead Caliban. The heretics daub their halls with mockeries of our past.’

He turned to Bareus. ‘Why?’

Bareus looked up from the data slate. Before he could answer, roaring gunfire hammered through the cloisters. Brother Caiyne and Brother Guias fell, heavy calibre shells tearing through their breastplates and exploding within their chest cavities. Brother Septimus staggered, most of his shoulder torn away by a glancing hit, his arm hanging by gory threads of bone and sinew. He fired back with his good arm until another shot took his head off.

Kaelen snapped off a flurry of shots, diving into the cover of a fluted pillar. The concealed guns were pinning them in position and it would only be a matter of time until more cultists were sent



against them. As if in answer to his thoughts, a studded timber door at the end of the cloister burst open and a mob of screaming warriors charged towards them. Kaelen's jaw hung open in disgust at the sight of the enemy.

They were clad in dark green mockeries of power armour, an abominable mirror of the Space Marines' glory. Crude copies of the Dark Angels' Chapter symbol, spread wings with a dagger through the centre, adorned their shoulder plates and Kaelen felt a terrible rage build in him at this heresy.

The Marines of Squad Leuctra screamed their battle cry and surged forward to tear these blasphemers apart and punish them for such effrontery. To mock the Dark Angels was to invite savage and terrible retribution. Fuelled by righteous anger, Squad Leuctra fought with savage skill. Blood, death and screams filled the air.

As the foes met in the centre of the cloister, the hidden guns opened fire again.

A storm of bullets and ricochets, cracked armour and smoke engulfed the combatants, striking Space Marines and their foes indiscriminately. A shell tore downwards through the side of Kaelen's helmet. Redness, pain and metallic stink filled his senses, driving him to his knees. He gasped and hit the release catch of his ruined helmet, wrenching it clear. The bullet had torn a bloody furrow in the side of his head and blasted the back of the helmet clear. But he was alive. The Emperor and the Lion had spared him.

A booted foot thundered into the side of his head. He rolled, lashing out with his power fist and a cultist fell screaming, his leg destroyed below the knee. He pushed himself to his feet and lashed out again, blood splashing his face as another foe died. Kaelen sprinted for the cover of the cloister, realising they had been lured out of cover by the fraudulent Dark Angels. He cursed his lack of detachment, angrily wiping sticky redness from his eyes.

The tactical situation was clear, they could not go back the way they had come. To reach the main vestibule was not an option; the gunfire would shred them before they got halfway. The only option was onwards and Kaelen had a gnawing suspicion that their enemies

knew this and were channelling them towards something even more fearsome.

Bareus shouted his name over the stuttering blasts of shooting, indicating the timber door the armoured cultists had emerged from. 'I believe we have only one way out of this. Forwards, sergeant!'

Kaelen nodded, his face grim as the icon representing Brother Christos winked out. Another Space Marine dead for this mission. But Kaelen knew that they would all lay down their lives for the mission, no matter what it was. Chaplain Bareus had decided that it was worth all of them dying to achieve it and that was good enough for him.

Under cover of the cloisters, Bareus and the remaining five members of Squad Leuctra sprinted through the studded door that led out of this firetrap. Sergeant Kaelen just hoped that they weren't running into something worse.

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