

THE HOUR OF HELL



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An Imperial Guard short story



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From *To Serve and Suffer: A Personal Account of the Pericles Crusade and other Campaigns of the Glorious Cadian 39th*:

If the Pericles Crusade was the great saga of the Cadian 39th, a long defining series of victorious battles over many years, then Kelthorn was the short and bloody coda, the proof that all regiments, and the men and women who serve in them, no matter how successful, will eventually face a reckoning, an enemy that brings down their elevated view of themselves.

On that fortress planet we found a population fallen to the foulest heresy, of a kind that we were entreated to not speak of once the campaign was done, and the details of which I am inclined to not remember, never mind commit to parchment.

Of those horrors I will not write, but I shall write instead of the acts of heroism and valour amongst the men and women I served with, and the officers they served under.

While the Pericles Crusade was gruelling and hard fought, it was on Kelthorn that my impressions of so many of the 39th were fixed in my mind, defined by how they faced the terror.

These were often final moments. Though we were victorious and our regiment fights on, our losses were huge. It is in that adversity that myths are forged.

We reached Kelthorn under the leadership of a man already on his way to becoming a myth, or at least a legend, in the annals of Cadian commanders.

Castellan Blakov had led us to victory in the Pericles Crusade and would prove pivotal in the short, brutal hours of conflict at Fellguard. For his

actions, he will doubtless have a place in the history of our regiment, and perhaps the wider history of Cadia.

Did those achievements make him a hero worthy of remembrance, or something else altogether? Even in the earliest hours of the Siege of Fellguard, before what came to be known as the Hour of Hell, some of us had doubts...

‘I had heard the Cadians were great fighters,’ Commissar Chavaria screamed into the vox-bead under his rebreather, the visor misting up as he shouted. ‘Instead, I see motherless pups, ready to die in the dirt! Get up and charge, you filth! Follow your Castellan or shame your ancestors even in death.’

Chavaria had no way of knowing how much of that was audible over the explosions as shells ripped up the ground all around, churning up the mud and tearing up any Cadian unfortunate enough to be in the vicinity. The entire field between the outer wall of Fellguard and the Bastion, which rained death upon them from its firing slits and rooftop battlements, was a killing ground covered with poisonous gases and seeded with mines, where the unwary could fall into deep trenches filled with rank water.

That they were still alive after five or six minutes was a miracle, and if they were to survive for much longer Chavaria knew that the men and women whose morale was his responsibility needed to stay as close as possible to the trail led by Castellan Blakov, commanding officer of the Cadian 39th, a man who in Chavaria’s opinion was only marginally less dangerous to his allies than his enemies.

Blakov was a predator, and Chavaria knew that the only safe place to be when in the presence of such an entity was in its wake.

So Chavaria shouted himself hoarse while trying to keep low as red-hot bolts cut through the air above his head and shells impacted around him, and encouraged the Cadians as best he could through the fog of the battlefield, all the while trying to keep himself alive as his boots sank into treacherous mud and the body parts of his allies threatened to trip him up.

Crossing the killing field between the blessed outer wall of Fellguard and Bastion Beta-3, heavy bolt shells continued to chew up the filthy ground around them and obliterated many of the Cadians trying to cross it, Chavaria kept himself as close to Blakov’s heels as possible. All the while,

he kept Blakov, charging ahead with his lieutenants at his heels, in his sights, tried to keep up and encouraged those around him to do the same.

Staying in Blakov's shadow was their best chance of living, and Chavaria had come to the conclusion that, on balance, he preferred to continue the grinding misery of human existence than be reduced to paste by the traitors' heavy weaponry as it barked from the firing slits and parapets of Bastion Beta-3.

The Bastion was a looming block of rockcrete and metal on the hill ahead, a blackened molar against a clear white sky, square with a rough edge on top. This dark mass was speckled with the light of blazing weapons at its firing slits and battlements.

Blakov ran straight for the Bastion. His gift for self-preservation, his instinctive avoidance of a seemingly inevitable demise, did not constitute caution or cowardice. Far from it, Blakov's gift was one of being able to charge headlong into danger and survive it on the fly.

Throwing himself flat against the wall of the Bastion, the tombstone-like fortified structure that overlooked the killing field, Blakov – imposing even for a Cadian, with close-cropped black hair, piercing eyes and a sword at his waist – drew a grenade and, weaving to avoid fire from above, tossed it through a firing slot into the interior. Before the grenade even detonated, Blakov was screaming follow up orders at the remnants of Eighth Squad, directing a Guardsman with a flamer to pour fire into the Bastion, and another to blow the bulkhead open with a melta bomb.

Chavaria, who had been scrabbling up the hill as this happened, reached the blasted entrance to the Bastion just as Blakov kicked open the remains of the internal doors and charged in. The commissar entered the Bastion itself to see the Castellon duelling with a hideously scabbed and mutated traitor.

The traitor's disease seemed to act as a protective shell and Blakov was flailing around, trying to find a weak spot in that shell with his sword. To Chavaria, who had fought a few duels in his time, Blakov's fighting style was flawed – showy, grandstanding, leaving himself open to counterattacks as he whirled and struck.

Chavaria didn't think much of Blakov's technique, and tensed with the presumption that this armoured beast would smash through Blakov's guard and deal a killing blow.

That blow never came. As Blakov bobbed and weaved, the traitor, slowed down by his own heavy mutations and crippled by the very armoured scabs that made him hard to kill, lumbering around, unable to keep up. Blakov kept dodging and weaving, stabbing again and again at the creature, striking sparks as his blade hit its armour plating, until eventually he struck a weak spot, drawing a wince of pain from the monster.

Weakness revealed, Blakov twisted around to a ridiculous angle, pushing his blade up through this vulnerability and shoving it into the creature's tender internal organs.

The traitor commander, this mass of armoured scabs, died with that single blow, presumably having had its heart pierced. Blakov withdrew the sword, his blade covered with vile black residue, and the creature fell to the floor with a thud.

Chavaria wouldn't be able to do his job if he wasn't aware of when the eyes of others were upon him and, feeling that familiar bristle of hairs standing up on his neck beneath the stiff material of his commissar's collar, he turned to see that, just as Chavaria watched Blakov, so Lieutenant Rawl was watching Commissar Chavaria.

Chavaria tipped his head slightly, and gave Lieutenant Rawl an informal salute, two closed fingers tapped against the visor of his cap, snapped forward. It was a mark of pure respect and reassurance – commissars stood outside the ranks of the Guard, and for one to acknowledge the rank of anyone below a Colonel was a great honour.

Rawl, decades older than Blakov, with wiry grey hair and artificial eyes glowing behind thick goggles, gave Chavaria a cautious twitch of a smile in return, acknowledging his respect, but also holding back, making sure he knew that she wasn't entirely comfortable with his approval.

While a man like Blakov doubtless saw the rank of lieutenant as an inconvenient stepping stone to higher standing, a tedious formality – Chavaria had seen the records, and knew Blakov only held the rank of lieutenant for five months before accumulating sufficient honours his superiors had to promote him – for men and women like Lieutenant Rawl that position, of being a senior officer's iron right hand and the conduit between strategic leadership and the ranks, was closer to a calling.

Rawl had risen to the rank of lieutenant decades ago, and her ascent had stopped right there. She had never sought glory or promotion for herself but equally never retreated from duty, and had served loyally alongside three senior officers, of which Blakov, a man her junior in years, was only the latest. She had assisted many a member of the 39th, whether above or below her in rank, to glory and honours rather than seizing them for herself.

As many of those honours were posthumous, and she was still alive, her caution – which never shaded even close to cowardice – suggested a strategic mind sharper than most of her supposed betters.

If Rawl was cautious in accepting Chavaria's respect, it was because she was shrewd enough to know that, while she might not want further promotion, Chavaria did not feel the same way. If Blakov fell, struck down either by the enemy or the suspicious commissar at his back, Rawl must know that Chavaria would have her field-promoted into the Castellan's position, leading the 39th, before Blakov's body was even cold.

Chavaria tried to make an expression to suggest that he was not about to take hasty action and, although Rawl's expression was virtually unreadable beneath the thick goggles that kept her augmented eyes in place and dust-free, she seemed to get the message.

They both stood with Blakov, for now.

As Blakov's lieutenant, Rawl took charge of ordering the clearing of the Bastion and the positioning of the troops, many of whom were reluctant to step into the shoes of traitors, even once the bodies had been disposed of. The lingering smell of promethium could not quite shift the stench of decay.

The Bastion was a building about two storeys high, but the top floor was an open roof with battlements, a rough rockcrete staircase leading from the high-ceilinged chamber on the ground to the firing positions above.

'Ninth Squad, on the roof,' she ordered. 'Vurtch, go with them once you've done the blessings.'

Vurtch, the regimental priest, saluted as he sprinkled sacred water over the guns previously manned by traitors. Rawl didn't know whether it made any difference, but she knew the troops would feel better about stepping

into the firing positions of dead heretics if Vurtch had cast a prayer over them.

‘Eighth squad, take positions down here. I want those guns manned as soon as Vurtch is done with them.’

There was a murmur of assent. Rawl glanced around to check that everyone was where they should be, and caught the eye of Chavaria once more.

Of all the problems to have with commissars, Lieutenant Rawl had never expected an excess of mutual respect to be one of them. The men and women of the Commissariat were mostly hard, merciless characters and a scourge to the common Guard, relentless with the pistol and lash to instil terror in the ranks.

This Chavaria was irritatingly different, belying every bit of Rawl’s experience through a long military career and in the process daring to suggest that, perhaps, she could still be surprised after all these years.

Commissar Chavaria was a hard man, as he should be, and entirely capable of delivering field discipline when needed. Pin-black eyes stood out from the olive skin of his face, the collar of his black coat turned up so that it almost touched the brim of his cap. He terrified the lower ranks when caught by those eagle-sharp eyes, and they’d seen him kill enough cowards and miscreants to know their terror had foundation. If an example needed to be set to prevent a rout, Chavaria would set it with a single shot to the back of a head.

But over time Rawl had noticed that Chavaria preferred to use the threat of violence to motivate the troops into action rather than the actual application, and that rather than driving the Guard to their deaths with his words he was often keeping them alive.

He had done so today, screaming over the vox as they charged Bastion Beta-3 head on. Rawl had no doubt that many of the men and women taking positions around the Bastion now would not be alive if not for Chavaria’s threats and insults to drive them on.

Now the Bastion was taken, and a brief sense of victory swelled amongst the ranks, one which grew further as the first waves of cultists to try and retake the Bastion were mercilessly suppressed, the heavy guns blaring as they blasted the heretics to pieces before they got near the Bastion. They

had taken the high ground and Blakov was in his element, throwing out orders as he peered through the firing slits.

In spite of this victorious mood, as Rawl exchanged looks with Chavaria she could see that both of them had reservations about the human cost Blakov had expended on taking the Bastion, and the recklessness of leaving so many dead on the field behind them when the rest of the city of Fellguard remained to be taken.

Rawl knew that it was within Chavaria's power to remove Blakov from command, if he saw fit, and place her in charge. Rawl didn't want the job, but she would have no choice if Blakov died or was removed. Her loyalty to her mission, to her regiment, to the Emperor would demand that she step up.

Those same loyalties made her want to gag at even the thought of it. Blakov, whatever his faults, was her commanding officer, and she would serve him as loyally as she had the other commanding officers before him.

Suddenly, more immediate concerns took hold, as a wave of energy hit the Bastion, followed by a murmur of discontent and a single word to identify the cause.

'Psyker!'

From the centre of the Bastion's ground floor, where Rawl was giving orders, it was hard to see out of the firing slits, and she could barely tell what was going on when the sorcerer attacked, although she felt the Bastion being wracked by his powers as much as any of them.

She caught a glimpse of the sorcerer through the firing slits, a glowing figure covered in swarming flies, loosing witchfire from his staff that caused humans to rot and the Bastion itself to decay around them. She saw those nearest the firing slits touched by that witchfire, reeling as their flesh began to blacken and rot, and she was ready to relay the order to strategically retreat before Blakov even shouted it. The Bastion, so defensible up to seconds before, was a trap now.

As they abandoned the Bastion, encircling the robed heretic as he screamed and collapsed to the ground, Rawl was not the only one to feel relief as the man seemed to be consumed by his own powers, exploding in a hail of bloody, steaming chunks.

What happened when those boiling human remains touched the ground soon put paid to that brief surge of optimism.

Where the remains of the sorcerer hit the ground, the hot liquid mass stirred and stretched, turning the mud beneath into something pliant, through which shapes began to press. There was something about looking at these patches of ground that caused Rawl's vision to blur and her head to swim, as if she was looking not just at a patch of ground but a pit, infinitely deep, stretching into another reality.

Through these indeterminate spaces, clawed limbs began to burst out of the bloodied ground, diseased inhuman fingers gripping rusty swords and other sharp implements. Twisted hands grasped the solid ground around these bubbling portals to provide purchase so that the creatures could haul themselves through.

Rawl had heard rumours, of course she had. Whispers beneath the hearing of commissars and priests, talk that could earn you a fatal visit from the Inquisition. Stories of creatures that were not just hated xenos, but something more heretical. The stuff of the warp, pure evil, beings of cruelty. Abominations that should not be spoken of. Powers that those who shunned the teachings of the Emperor worshipped, and could bring forth into the world.

Daemons. That was the only fit word for them, looking at them now, their skin yellowed and covered in suppurating sores, intestines hanging loose from split skin, as foul and diseased as a ten-day-dead plague victim. They came surrounded by fat, black flies that swarmed out, and all around Rawl the Cadians were backing away. Some prayed, some seemed frozen with terror, while others were gibbering to themselves.

Rawl felt her sanity tested, a childlike impulse making her want to fall to her knees in the face of such horrors. Their stench alone was worse than the most infected wound she had encountered, viler than a grave pit. They were everywhere, emerging now from rents in reality that had expanded well beyond where the sorcerer's blood had fallen.

It was too much. The sky had blackened, and Rawl felt she was a very tiny human falling into some dark abyss. It had become cold, a frost spreading across the muddy ground beneath her feet.

'Pull yourself together!' shouted a voice nearby. It was Chavaria's voice, and Rawl could detect a quivering note of fear in it, but the tone was assertive enough to snap her out of a frozen panic. 'These are your

enemies, stand up and fight them! How dare you fear them more than the Emperor, when he demands you stand up and strike these filth down.'

Chavaria wasn't actually talking to her. He was shouting at Vurtch, the regimental priest, who had clearly dropped to his knees while Rawl wasn't looking. He was now dragging himself to his feet, Chavaria's words giving him new strength.

Rawl was glad of those words too, and suspected Chavaria knew what he was doing by shouting them louder than needed, projecting to as many Cadians as he could.

Override their shock, keep them motivated, keep them alive. The daemons were swarming towards the Cadians, and while many of the troops were opening fire, the line was in disarray.

Cultists and less mutated traitors were emerging from Fellguard's west gate and the bunkers, screaming as the daemons attacked them too. Daemons were crawling up Fellguard's inner wall, and their unearthly shrieking and the screams of their mortal servants as they died combined into an almighty din.

The blackness in the sky had spread over the whole of Fellguard, and a distorted shimmering in the air suggested that the tears in reality that were letting the daemons into this world weren't restricted to the battlefield but were within the city too. Clearly the daemons had no loyalty to these cultists – perhaps they considered the treacherous humans to have failed them, or perhaps they were offering the human lives to some greater power?

Fellguard was ablaze, black swarms of insects dark against the burning city as they rose and fell, presumably descending to consume the inhabitants of the city. A tower on the skyline, taller than most of the other buildings, began to crumble and fall, as if consumed by decay.

'Retreat!' Blakov shouted. 'Abandon the Bastion, we regroup at the outer wall. Spread the order down the line, let these monsters and heretics fight each other. We'll attack when they're done.'

'We'll retake the Bastion and hold them back for you as long as we can, sir,' shouted Sergeant Yanson from Eighth Squad, firing shots at daemons, who seemed to brush them off. Then she turned and started shouting orders to her squad.

Blakov gave a crisp salute to the woman, acknowledging Eighth Squad's courage as everyone else began their retreat.

It was a mark of respect. If anyone in Eighth Squad noticed it, no doubt they took it on face value. Their sacrifice was well-meant and eager, heroic in a way that Rawl respected deeply.

Blakov's easy acceptance of that sacrifice impressed her less. As they began to descend from the hill on which Bastion Beta-3 stood, clambering over the bodies of Cadians who had died taking the Bastion, Rawl was sickened by the lives lost, the lives still being thrown away, all for a fortress that they were abandoning on Blakov's whim.

'Be ready,' someone said nearby, the voice so close she felt outward breath on her ear as the words were spoken. She snapped around only to see Chavaria running ahead, continuing to motivate the troops to keep moving, insisting that his commissar's pistol remained the devil they should really fear today.

Be ready, Rawl thought. Be ready.

Commissar Chavaria had seen talentless officers crumble under overwhelming odds before, the elevated self-impression that came with their official status punctured by the harsh realities of the battlefield. Faced with a situation that their training had not prepared them for, these rotten apples in the officer class would usually go one of two ways, either lashing out or retreating inwards.

The former type would start raging against cruel reality, screaming and maybe even descending into tears and wails. They would blame everyone but themselves and start shooting the most able of their own side until someone, usually a commissar, took them down for the good of all.

The other type, whether they were in denial or finally accepting reality, would clam up and become useless that way, either offering timid orders or no orders at all. They would delegate, back away from their responsibilities, start distancing themselves from their own command and preparing excuses for their inevitable defeat.

Those type of officers were just as damaging as the ones who lashed out, but far harder to find a pretext to remove from their station. It was that category of officer Chavaria hated the most and if, as seemed to be the

case, Blakov was going that way, Chavaria was damned if he would let the Castellan walk away from Kelthorn and pin the losses incurred on someone else.

‘Keep out of its reach!’ Rawl shouted to Tynon, but it was too late. A clawed finger grazed Tynon’s face just as the corporal pulled the trigger on his combat shotgun, blasting the creature in the second, sickening mouth that stretched across its belly. The daemon flew back, that second, horrific face blasted into an open bloody wound, but with one touch the damage was done. Tynon’s eyes blackened in his head as infection spread through his skull where the daemon had touched, his tongue bloating in his throat so he couldn’t even scream.

‘Maintain your fire but keep back,’ said Rawl, stumbling backwards herself, taking shots at the daemons lurching towards them down the hill. They were tall, gangly creatures with bones and organs visible through yellowing, greenish skin. That skin seemed to sag from their bodies, and was peppered with pink sores and wounds. Many had only a single eye above a mouth full of grey teeth, and blackened horns protruded from their heads.

Everything these daemons touched was soiled with decay and disease. Under Blakov’s orders, the Cadians were tactically retreating to the sacred outer wall of Fellguard, but to do so they needed to cross the no-man’s-land between the inner and outer walls, a thick muddy circle of land strewn with traps, and they had to do so while keeping the daemonic hordes at bay.

Rawl tried to keep an eye on her footing, carefully avoiding a mine. As she glanced down a daemon lunged for her and she threw herself to one side, its rusty sword cutting through the air where she had been. She landed hard on her side, and was raising her own gun when another corporal charged forward, firing her own lasrifle at the daemon. The daemon swung towards the woman as Rawl was getting to her feet, raising its sword and stepping forward to engage this new attacker.

The daemon stood on the mine Rawl had just avoided, and she found herself thrown to the ground once more, hot debris scorching her face as

she rolled out of the way. Her sleeve was on fire, but the wet mud put it out.

Rawl dragged herself to her feet to find that not only had the daemon gone, but the corporal had been killed too, half of her upper body destroyed in the blast.

There was no time for regret. While there were no daemons immediately moving on her position, further down the line she could see other squads still in the thick of it. Nearby, she could see the regimental priest, Vurtch, helping a wounded sergeant to his feet, and the air was thick with las-fire as they continued their retreat to the outer wall.

They were close now. The outer wall, built from the bones of martyrs on the shrineworld of Arabella's Hope, was in itself a two part structure: an outward facing wall with battlements on the top, taken by the Cadians early that day, and a shorter barricade facing into the no-man's-land between the outer and inner wall. It was that barricade they ran towards now, where they could drop into a safe trench and fire upon the advancing daemons from some kind of secure cover.

As she ran, concentrating on not dying and keeping those around her from also not dying, Rawl tried to keep her mind off Chavaria's words.

'Be ready.'

Be ready to take command, when Chavaria struck against Blakov.

Even now, with her doubts in Blakov at their highest, Rawl didn't like the sound of that. So she pushed the thought away. Be ready? She was always ready. She would deal with the next crisis as it occurred.

The next crisis came in the form of a distant roar, and a pulsing thump through the already unstable ground beneath her feet. It came from the city.

Rawl looked ahead to see Blakov, who had already reached the barricades of the outer wall, looking past her, open-mouthed.

She had never seen him shocked before.

Rawl turned herself, looking up at Bastion Beta-3, which had been raining fire down on the ranks of daemons to keep them back as the rest of the 39th made their strategic retreat to the outer wall.

A giant Daemon was tearing itself out of a rent in reality near the Bastion, an unearthly aura surrounding it. Were those the souls of the

cultists that the daemons had killed, paving the way for this appalling thing to escape from hell?

Even from a distance, Rawl felt sickened by the puckered, diseased skin of its bloated body as it strode towards the Bastion. It hurt her artificial eyes, this unnatural thing, this abomination against the Emperor, this towering mass of decaying flesh, alive against all reason. Even against the tumultuous darkened sky, this thing from hell seemed out of place in the real world, hard to focus on. The horror was hard to bear, and a small voice inside Rawl was screaming for her to give in, to bow down before it.

As the giant daemon advanced upon the Bastion, looming over it, the other daemons moved towards it, screeching in incomprehensible worship, warbling a horrific war cry in its honour.

They had held on longer than Sergeant Yanson had ever hoped, to the point where some small voice inside her skull had suggested that they, Eighth Squad, might actually survive this. From within Bastion Beta-3, a squat, crude building already undermined by the sorcerer's attack earlier, support beams stretching at unnatural angles, surfaces corroded, ceiling leaking unnatural fluids, they had somehow fought the daemons back with the few heavy weapons still functioning and their personal armaments, lasrifles and shotguns, hopefully buying a little time for the Castellan's withdrawal to the outer wall.

Yanson had no illusions as she had volunteered her squad to hold the Bastion. Irvan lay dead inside the Bastion already, crushed by a falling beam. The mottled bones of unfortunates too close to the firing slits when the sorcerer attacked had been evidence to the enemy's hideous power.

But still they had fought on, and while they hadn't stopped the tide of daemons pursuing their comrades, they had at least punched a hole in their advance, delaying them a little.

It had been enough to allow a sliver of hope.

Looking up at the thing, this abomination, Yanson lost all that hope. She said a prayer to the Emperor, pleading that, even now as she was about to die, at least, please, would the Emperor of Man keep her from being torn apart or eaten alive by these daemons.

Even that wish seemed forlorn. As she looked through the firing slit she kept firing, as did the rest of Eighth Squad, pouring las-fire at the colossal daemon as it lumbered towards the Bastion, its putrid existence bending her sanity, making her want to throw her weapon down.

But Yanson kept firing. Whit, who had been trying to get one of the corroded heavy weapons working again now that the sorcerer's taint seemed to have worked its course, shouted in jubilation as a shell shot from its barrel, tearing into the gigantic daemon as it stared down on them.

The shell struck with an impact felt throughout the Bastion, and gobbets of rancid flesh were blasted away from the giant daemon's body. It was a wound, a blow.

The thing could be hurt, was there hope again there?

But no, the daemon didn't fall or even rock back under Eighth Squad's attack. Instead it just laughed, the noise carrying all the way to Rawl's position, a disgusting, self-satisfied, humourless gurgle. As the heavy weapon tore chunks out of its body, as the lasguns of Eighth Squad fired upon it, the daemon shuffled slightly on the spot, its bloated, obscene body quivering.

It was as if all that firepower was just tickling it, an amusing nuisance.

Damn you, thought Yanson. How dare you laugh as we fight for our lives?

Then the beast stopped laughing, opened its mouth, and vomited a stream of bile at the Bastion. It was a torrent of glowing filth, and Yanson barely had a moment to register the foulness of it before it flooded the Bastion, pouring through the firing slits and through every crack in the shattered building. It covered her and her skin was on fire, the corrosion consuming her whole body and then she felt nothing at all.

The guns of Bastion Beta-3 went silent. Neither Rawl nor Blakov needed to check over the vox to know that all of Eighth Squad were dead – nothing mortal that wasn't already under the thrall of the enemy could survive contact with the excretions of something that vile.

On the hilltop, the Bastion began to collapse in on itself, the structure already shaken by the sorcerer's assaults crumbling altogether as the huge daemon's bile ate through anything that could be corroded.

The monstrous daemon wasn't looking at the damage it had wrought. High up on the hilltop, it stomped around to face the outer wall where Blakov and many of the 39th had gathered, staring out across the wasteland from its high vantage point. Rawl almost expected it to spray a stream of vomit right across the intervening space, drowning them all in corrupting, corrosive filth without even bothering to step forward.

While the huge daemon did open its mouth, it did so not to projectile vomit but to let out a blasphemous, rattling shout that made Rawl's ears ache. As it cried out, the creature, this lord of the daemons, raised a sword above its head, shaking it in the air.

Though the language – if language it was – spoken was indecipherable beyond its vileness, the nature of the shout and the gesture was unmistakable.

A battle cry, a call to arms.

The army of daemons turned their attention back to the Cadian 39th.

Nearby, Rawl heard one of the men begging the Emperor for forgiveness. Another began to babble heresies, begging for the giant daemon to consume him whole.

Chavaria shot the man from a distance but only injured him. The man, eyes rolling back in his head, continued to shout obscenities. Someone tried to shout down these heresies, swearing at the fallen man until Chavaria walked over and shot the babbling lunatic in the head.

There were tears and moans all around, the shaking of heads and muttered prayers, but no more heresies. Chavaria waved his pistol back and forth as they withdrew to the outer wall, as if challenging anyone to utter heresy in his presence.

Rawl thought she saw his hand shake as he did so.

As the battle roar of the 'Great Unclean One' echoed around the outer wall of Fellguard, and the last survivors of the 39th dropped down into the trench between the wall of martyrs and the defensive barriers, uncertainty shook through the ranks. Cadians they might be, born under the glare of the Eye of Terror, but they were face to face with daemoniac forces beyond their comprehension, the very presence of which threatened to break their will and shake their sanity.

Chavaria knew how they felt. Every time he looked at these vile beasts he felt the urge to flee or kill himself rather than face hell itself. As he holstered his pistol he realised his hand was shaking.

He forced his hand and nerves to steady. He did not have the luxury of fear or doubt, he needed to drive it out of the men and women around him. As they prepared at the barricades, readying to defend the outer wall from the attack that would soon come, Chavaria was amongst them, doling out threats and insults, pistol in his hand, eye open for anyone who might seek to flee beyond the Wall of Martyrs, deserting their post to disappear into the wastes outside Fellguard.

As he did so, Chavaria was also watching their commanding officer. This was the moment Blakov would crack, he was sure of it. A battle with heretics had turned for the worse into a full-blown outbreak of daemonic horrors, and Castellan Blakov's colossal ego would surely splinter under the terrible awareness that, far from being a warrior of legendary status, he was a triviality in a universe full of terrors like this towering daemon.

If Blakov showed any sign of cowardice or instability, Chavaria would take him out and trust Rawl to lead them competently to, if not victory, at least a more honourable and well-planned death.

Show me what you're made of, Blakov, thought Chavaria. Break down in front of these battered, shaken men and women, show you aren't worthy to lead them and I'll end this right now.

Blakov seemed confused as he stepped down from the barricades, searching for something in the wall of sacred bones, and Chavaria quietly released the clasp on his pistol holster, ready to draw it once more.

Then Blakov found what he was looking for, and the great man reached out and dropped to his knees. Chavaria stood frozen in shock, hand hovering above the butt of his still-holstered gun.

What Blakov had found was a skull embedded in the Wall of Martyrs, a skull with the symbol of the Ecclesiarchy engraved into the bone of its forehead. Then, Castellan Blakov touched two gloved fingers against the skull, dropped into a position of supplication, and began to speak.

He was whispering, but Chavaria, Rawl and a few others were near enough to hear what Blakov was saying. Though not Cadian himself, Chavaria had fought alongside Cadians long enough to recognise that Blakov was muttering the words of an old, very common Cadian prayer.

Its words were simple, an entreaty to the Emperor for protection, for courage, for the strength and fortitude to fight on for the glory of the Emperor without wilting under the gaze of hell itself.

It was a prayer known by all those who were born near the Eye of Terror, and overhearing what Blakov was saying, Regimental Priest Vurtch, a quivering wreck only a short while before until Chavaria snapped him out of it, began to repeat the prayer loudly so that others could hear.

While Blakov's whispers were hoarse and stilted, Vurtch's voice was clear and almost musical, bringing out the rhythm of each line so that, as the prayer carried down the line, it sounded more like a hymn, a slow and purposeful song expressing the fears and hopes of every Cadian, the desire to serve well in the Emperor's name and not be crushed by the monumental horrors they faced.

And as Vurtch sang, others joined in, quietly then louder, as each line of the prayer went around the outer wall of Fellguard, presumably to units and squads unseen since the 39th first breached the outer wall earlier that day, uniting them all in faith and loyalty and common cause.

Chavaria knew loyalty, he believed in the Emperor and the cause of the Master of Mankind they all served, but at the same time he was a pragmatist who had little time for ritual.

Yet he too found himself saying the words, and as he repeated these humble pleas to the Emperor, started by Blakov – who remained in his position of prayer, head down, seemingly not noticing anyone repeat his words – Chavaria resealed the clip on his holster and took his hand away from his gun.

When his prayer was done, Blakov stood, taking his hands from the wall and opening his eyes. When he issued an order, it was only two words, but they were infused with moral certainty.

‘Make ready.’

Cadians lined the barricade within Fellguard's outer wall, the barricade constructed from the bones of martyrs as was the wall behind them. Part practical defensive wall, part sacred relic, these walls had been meticulously constructed on the shrineworld of Arabella's Hope, a prayer said over each bone as it was painstakingly slotted into place.

Chavaria wasn't sentimental about the bones of the dead, but he prayed for them to protect him now, even if that prayer was just inside his head. He stood against that barricade of bone, the outer wall looming behind, and hoped the martyrs looked favourably at a commissar who had dealt harsh justice to many of their kind.

The skies were still dark, and as the daemons approached the outer walls, marching in the shadow of the gigantic creature in their midst, Chavaria and those around him opened fire the moment they came within range.

The daemons looked more dead than alive, decaying creatures with their innards exposed, and as Chavaria and the others fired, las-fire cut through their soft, decaying bodies, yellowing flesh burning away. The daemons were slowed by these injuries, but did not stop unless concentrated fire crippled them.

They were also not alone. A handful of cultists who had survived the culling ran among them, taking cover and firing on the Cadian positions, while the Great Unclean One had unleashed smaller daemons, spore-like beings of pure filth that scuttled along the ground, mouths wide with rotten teeth.

Daemons were disintegrating under concentrated fire, las-fire from two or three sources managing to burn through to what passed for a heart in these foul beasts, causing them to evaporate as if their hold on the mortal world had been broken.

These few small victories raised muted cheer amongst the ranks, and Chavaria took comfort from the fact that these daemons could still be sent back to the warp, that Kelthorn had yet to become irredeemably polluted.

Such comforts did not provide any solution as to how they would deal with the greatest of their number, though. Unmolested by anything other than stray las-shots, the foul tower of rotten flesh rumbled behind the advancing daemon lines, plucking the corpses of Cadians and traitors alike from the battlefield and throwing them in the direction of the outer wall. As these corpses flew through the air they were consumed with disease and pestilence, exploding into swarms of flies and maggots as they hit the ground.

Plague grenades, the battlefield fallen turned into disease bombs by the Great Unclean One's corrupting power.

One landed near Chavaria's position, and he barely escaped as flies swarmed over an entire squad of Cadians, the men and women screaming as their skin blackened and insects burrowed into them. Knocked over by the impact, he shuffled away on his back, heels scrambling against the ground as the Cadians caught in the fly swarm reached out in mute despair for aid, their mouths already choked with flies.

There was nothing he could do to help them. Chavaria was left with seconds to work out how to save himself before the swarm consuming the fallen bodies descended upon him. He fumbled with gloved hands to remove an incendiary grenade from his belt, tossed it a perilously short distance away from him into the mass of black flies, and rolled on to his front.

The rush of heat over his head scorched his uniform, but didn't reach the flesh. He rolled back over to see motes of ash drifting towards the ground, with no living flies to be seen. Blackened bones in the mud were all that remained of the squad hit by the plague grenade.

Chavaria was barely on his feet when the gigantic daemon spoke.

Its words were yet again unintelligible and made Chavaria want to weep for the horror of that gurgling, foul tongue, but nonetheless the sentiment behind the order given was clear, if not the specifics. An order to attack, to destroy.

The daemons responded to the voice and surged towards the barricades, the inner part of the wall of martyrs. Chavaria felt a swell of panic in the air and he, Rowl and Blakov overlapped as they shouted at the 39th to stand firm and fire on all targets, quelling the threat of a rout.

Then the daemons were nearly upon them, blades raised and claws gouging forward, hitting that low wall and about to push over the top and into the 39th's line of defence...

...when they halted, reeling, contact with the blessed wall causing them to pull backwards, disgusting flesh burning where it had touched the bones of martyrs.

And in that moment of hesitance, those precious few seconds where the daemons were vulnerable, Blakov and his lieutenant and commissar acted as one to urge the troops forward, lasrifles blazing and tearing the weakened first line of daemons to pieces, sending them scuttling backwards as the fury of Cadia struck at them, emboldened by the power

of their faith and the presence of the martyrs, their spirits coursing through those walls of bones to defend them.

Chavaria hadn't even time to process his shock at such a manifestation of the pure light of the Emperor and his followers burning through corruption and evil, as he was already over the barricade and setting an example, firing upon daemons at either side. Rawl was up there too, lasrifle raised to her shoulder, and Blakov's sword crackled with power as he cut a daemon's arm off, causing it to reel away with foul-stinking ichor dripping from the wound.

The pushback didn't last. It couldn't, not with the presence of the huge daemon to counterbalance the pure influence of the wall of martyrs. It screamed abuse at the lesser daemons scuttling around its feet like grotesque children, batting some of them forward with brutal swipes of its limbs. Steadily the tide began to turn and the daemons pushed forward once more.

The Cadians were horribly outnumbered, even having killed dozens of the daemons in their first attack. Having pressed their brief advantage, the 39th were also partially spread beyond the safety of the barricades.

The bloodshed escalated within seconds. The daemons lashed out at the Cadians with claws and blades, slicing Guardsmen and women to pieces, the wounds instantly festering as the daemoniac taint entered the Cadians' bodies.

'Concentrate your fire and hold your ground,' shouted Blakov over the vox, which was crackling with uncanny interference, an underlying sound of tormented howls. 'Keep them back from the wall, don't give ground, and stay together.'

Chavaria and Rawl found themselves following Blakov's lead, staying close to Vurtch and a couple of others, concentrating las-fire on the daemons as they advanced and driving them back, even injuring one. Chavaria could see Blakov ahead, leading the charge with half a dozen or so Cadians surrounding him, lasrifles blazing.

Along the line, Blakov's words were helping to keep some of them alive, but not enough. Cadians were lying on the ground, gutted, suppurating sores spreading over their skins from contact with the enemy, the disease and the bleeding racing to kill them. Others had been killed swiftly, heads detached from bodies with one swipe of a cursed blade.

It was a noble last stand, thought Chavaria, but a last stand nonetheless. He hoped no one else had to set foot on this world to face its horrors after they were dead, that Exterminatus was ordered and Kelthorn was blown to pieces, these daemons condemned to oblivion in one blinding white moment of destruction.

Through this last stand, Blakov was rallying the troops, no trace of doubt in his words or gestures, and Chavaria could see now that the Castellan was the leader the 39th needed at this hour, to rally them forward with faith and fanaticism when all hope was lost. They didn't need a realist or a strategist, they needed Blakov. Maybe he was a lunatic, but he was the right lunatic for this hour of hell.

As he had this realisation, Chavaria glanced towards the Castellan again and saw that Blakov had lost two or three of the squad accompanying him on his charge, and was now exposed as daemons closed in. Blakov's duelling stance came into its own as he wheeled around, lopping off diseased limbs from the daemons surrounding him while keeping out of their reach.

Then a roar echoed from the towering daemon, and the daemons encircling Blakov backed away slightly. The huge daemon lord was advancing, arm outstretched, one diseased finger pointing at the Castellan. Its eyes were small and embedded deep in its grotesque face. The hatred in those eyes as it stared at Blakov, advancing upon him, was easy to read. Did it see the Castellan as a threat, or just despised the fact that he dared to defy it, rallying his troops to fight back?

For whatever reason, this monster clearly intended to crush Blakov personally, batting aside its own daemoniac followers and ignoring the Cadians who stumbled out of its path, futilely firing their lasguns into its body in a vain attempt to defend their commander.

Such efforts were useless. The gigantic daemon didn't even bother to shrug off the shots, just ignoring the scorches on its diseased skin as it advanced on Blakov, and the small number of surviving troops who surrounded him.

Castellan Blakov did not flinch as the abomination approached. The urge to bow or flee rose in him, but he suppressed these urges and held his

position. He was a Cadian, born in the gaze of the Eye of Terror, and he would not give even this insult to the Emperor the satisfaction of seeing him hesitate. Smaller, spore-like daemons scurried in the shadow of the great beast, but Blakov let the troops around him target them, instead maintaining his eye line with the towering daemon.

As it got closer, Blakov could see that the giant daemon, many times Blakov's own height, was not entirely unscathed from the battle so far, though it had deep gouges in its flesh left, presumably, by the heavy weapons on the now-destroyed Bastion.

Perhaps this thing could be killed after all? Blakov had to believe that. The light of the Emperor was stronger than the foulest beasts the warp could spew out.

Blakov began to recite the same prayer he had uttered earlier, barely audible to himself but transmitted over the open vox via the bead at his throat. He didn't look around as the giant daemon loomed over him, but over the vox he could hear Cadian voices repeating the prayer as they had before.

Good. His Cadians were strong in faith, they would hold the Wall of Martyrs and step forward to fight again, to follow in his footsteps. It felt to Blakov as if the wall itself was supporting him, even as he stood far away from it in no-man's-land, glowing with the power of the martyrs and the faith of those who still lived.

The great daemon raised its sword, and Blakov took a defensive stance, he knew that the rational move would be to turn away from facing the daemon head on, to retreat to a strategic position then hit back under more favourable circumstances.

But it would be the wrong move now. He needed to hold his ground, to set an example, to show that these daemons could be fought.

'For Cadia and the Emperor!' he shouted, hearing the war cry echoing over the vox.

As the Great Unclean One's sword came down, Blakov's realised something that shook his immense self-belief.

He couldn't block the blow that was about to descend on him, it would cut straight through his sword then his body.

He was going to die.

Blakov couldn't die now, Chavaria knew that. The 39th needed them to lead him, to defeat this and all the other daemons on Kelthorn. The Castellan was the right man to lead them and he had to survive, even if Chavaria fell in his place.

Chavaria broke into a run the moment he realised Blakov's attempt to stand his ground was doomed to fail, pushing the Castellan out of the way of the falling blade and raising his laspistol. He fired even as the monster's blade tore into him instead, slicing through his body so effortlessly that he wasn't sure whether there was no pain, or that his entire body was so suffused with pain he knew nothing else.

As the blade tore through his shoulder, cut straight down his torso and halfway through one of his legs before sinking into the ground below, Chavaria felt panic, and fear swelling in him, but also a distant satisfaction as the last shot he ever fired hit the monster in one eye, causing it to flinch just slightly.

That injury, however minor, gave Chavaria a brief moment of satisfaction at the end. Even as agony bloomed within him, his mouth opening in a scream that was choked off before it began, Chavaria briefly felt the kind of burning faith that Blakov did, that absolute confidence and sense of self-sacrifice.

Then, in an agonising instant, Chavaria's consciousness was wiped from existence by the monstrous power of the weapon that had cut him in two, and the corrupting power of Chaos consumed his body.

Blakov, shoved aside in the instant he had become aware he was about to die, landed on his side in time to see the huge sword bisect Commissar Chavaria. As the two halves of Chavaria fell apart, the commissar's fingers seemed to claw the air, reaching out for something, his mouth open in a final question, his eyes blank and wide.

As Chavaria's body fell it was not blood that gushed forth, but a tide of maggots writhing in yellow and black liquid, the touch of the great daemon's blade causing his body to decay instantly. Chavaria's skin blackened and slipped off his skeleton as the body fell apart, his clothes chewed apart by a swarm of fat moths, and as the remains hit the ground even the bones crumbled and liquidised with corruption, leaving nothing

but a tide of decayed ooze splashing outwards, maggots and other insects crawling and tumbling out of the puddle that had once been Commissar Chavaria.

Blakov, still on the ground, realised he had lost his sword. Not bothering to stand as the giant daemon stepped towards him, one vile, claw-like foot squishing in the liquid remains of the commissar, Blakov sighted and crawled towards his best source of a potential weapon, the body of a dead Guardsman. He could see just what he needed emerging from the Guardsman's prone corpse...

'Castellan!' Rawl shouted, running towards the giant daeman and firing her lasrifle as the monster turned to Blakov once more, sweeping down with one of its claws to seize him.

Rawl's las-shots bounced off the skin of the daemon, and the arm came around, sweeping Blakov up. Rawl just got a glimpse of the Castellan snatching something metallic up in his grasp as he was lifted close to the daemon's face.

Blakov didn't even know what he had grasped as the daemon seized him, but he never doubted it would be important. His life had been a straight line of certainty, an arrow shot through the history of this time, a progression of battles in the Emperor's name leading to where he was today. He had fought and won and never doubted, not even as the great daemon's sword had descended and death had seemed imminent. He didn't doubt now, even as the daemon squeezed, and Blakov could taste its foul breath shrivelling his lungs and feel his ribcage and hips crack in the daemon's grip.

He had never feared death when he evaded it and he would not fear it now it was inevitable.

Through tremendous pain, and fighting back the terror the daemon struck into his soul, Blakov looked at what he had pulled from beneath the dead Guardsman, and in spite of his agony and impending demise, he smiled.

The Emperor provided. The Emperor knew best, and guided Blakov's hands and those of the men and women who served under them. Even here

at the end, he was aware of the Emperor's grace in what fortuity had provided him with.

A melta bomb, gripped in his hand.

The melta bomb was like a key, and as the daemon lifted Blakov up to devour him whole in its maw, he didn't have any problem finding the lock it slotted into – there was a ragged gash in the daemon's chest.

Blakov smiled as he twisted the melta bomb's primer and thrust it into the wound. He felt giddy now, the pain increasingly distant, and after a life of feeling the burden of duty, the weight of his own significance, Blakov suddenly felt pleasantly small. He was a tiny part of the Emperor's plan, after all, and he had served his role well.

The Emperor provides, he thought before the melta bomb detonated. He always did.

Rawl was thrown off her feet as the colossal daemon, still holding tightly on to Blakov, was consumed by an expanding field of white. She felt a hot rush of air scorch her skin as she was thrown face down into the hot mud, the roar of the explosion drowning out any other noise.

Then the explosion died out and she pulled herself to her feet.

The giant daemon was gone, and so was Blakov. Where they had been, a crater had been gouged out of the ground, a perfectly round steaming pit amongst the uneven undulating churn of the battlefield. Both the Castellan and the huge daemon had been utterly vaporised.

Above her, the darkened skies began to clear slightly, revealing patches of the clear white sky that had been there before. In the distance, a shaft of thin light shone down on the shattered remains of Bastion Beta-3.

Around Rawl, her fellow Cadians were still battling daemons, and she tried to collect herself as she fired on those nearby. The daemons were still a terrible threat, but with the greatest of their number gone they seemed to have lost some of their direction.

One ran at Rawl, and she fired it straight in the head. She fired again straight after, knowing that it took more than one shot to banish one of these things – but it had already gone, the first blast of las-fire causing it to lose its grip on the corporeal world, disappearing into the warp with a blur of light, dissolving into a sickening pool of fetid liquid.

The 39th needed to strike hard and fast while the daemons were vulnerable, but they were now without either a commanding officer to give the orders or a commissar to back them up with threats of field justice. Rawl needed to act as both in the absence of Blakov and Chavaria, and in their last moments they had shown her the way, shown her the faith and determination she needed now.

‘Cadians,’ she said into the vox-bead at her neck so that her voice would be heard all around Fellguard, wherever men and women of the 39th still stood.

Rawl paused, licking her dry lips. She needed to be clear, to show absolute certainty of purpose.

‘Cadians,’ she repeated. ‘Castellan Blakov is dead, but in doing so he has struck a great blow against our enemies. We must not falter in our mission now, we must strike hard against these horrors and drive them from this world once and for all. We have survived the worst of these daemons and heretics, and only death awaits them now.’

‘Forward, Cadians!’ shouted Rawl, maintaining fire on the daemons and the heretics as they continued to surge towards the Wall of Martyrs, to be met by fire and steel. The daemons and the scattering of cultists were vulnerable now, Rawl could see it, and though many more Cadians would become martyrs before the day was done, she was sure now that day would bring victory.

Fellguard would be retaken, for the Emperor, and his light would shine on the Wall of Martyrs once more.

From *To Serve and Suffer: A Personal Account of the Pericles Crusade and other Campaigns of the Glorious Cadian 39th* by Castellan Merlene Rawl:

Having seen the worst that our enemies could conjure forth, I led the survivors of the Cadian 39th to retake Fellguard. While many of the enemy had died, and the leadership of the rebellious forces removed, pockets of resistance remained, and it took many days to fully retake the city, and weeks after that for support to arrive and the cleaning up that follows such a campaign to commence.

For reasons I cannot disclose in this account, due to the nature of the enemy we fought on Kelthorn the city of Fellguard was cleansed with fire, to be blessed and reconsecrated before it was repopulated.

The space between the inner and outer walls of Fellguard, that battlefield we had crossed under enemy fire and where much of the combat took place, was scourged, burned, dug over and salted. Many artefacts relating to the enemy were either destroyed or taken away as contaminated waste.

I did manage to retrieve one of Commissar Chavaria's pins of office from the spot where he had died. It looked a thousand years old, tarnished and blackened, but it was intact, and Regimental Priest Vurtch made a blessing over it to ensure it was safe for me to remove.

I attempted to pass the pin to the 39th's next commissar, as a token of honour, but she considered the gift of an item belonging to her deceased predecessor to be either a veiled threat or an irrelevance, and told me to keep it.

I did, and have it still, as a reminder of what we could achieve with faith and determination, and the sacrifices required to attain victory in the face of the most terrifying of enemies.

It may seem odd to you, that the memento I keep closest to me is of Chavaria rather than Blakov himself, but it has always seemed that Blakov's sacrifice was not something I could commemorate personally.

Instead, he is a martyr and example to many, the few scorched bones retrieved from the battlefield preserved as relics and returned to Cadia, while a thrice-blessed silver replica of his skull is now part of Fellguard's Wall of Martyrs.

What I took from Blakov was not some token of his heroism, for I am still not sure that he was a hero. Instead he is commemorated in the way I have led the 39th, the example he set for me in that last hour of hell.

Though I doubted him many times, and have many less-than-fond memories of the man, in our moment of greatest need his fanaticism was exactly the madness we needed to survive, and in all the horrific warzones the 39th has been dispatched since, I believe it is the little shred of Blakov's madness I carry within me that has helped ensure our victories and survival.

In a universe like this, Blakov taught me, sometimes the right kind of madness is a more sensible response than retaining your reason.

+++ Extract from confidential Inquisitorial communication +++

To Junior Propagandist Second Class Kelnhofer,

While Castellan Rawl's account of the events on Kelthorn a decade ago is inspiring in many respects, the portrayal of conflict between the officers of the Cadian 39th and their commissar is utterly unacceptable. The rank and file must understand that their officers are always correct, and the Commissariat is always correct, even if they are correct in conflicting ways. Doubt in authority cannot be tolerated, and neither can the persistent references to Guard leadership as 'insane'.

As such I order the suppression of this account for the greater moral good.

Yours in loyal service,

Senior Inquisitorial Clerk Menshon Lytle

+++ Message ends +++

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARK CLAPHAM was born and raised in Yorkshire, studied and worked in London for over a decade, and is now an itinerant writer and editor based in Exeter, Devon. His short stories have appeared in the *Fear the Alien* anthology and the monthly magazine *Hammer and Bolter*. *Iron Guard* was his first novel for Black Library.



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