



A GREY KNIGHTS SHORT STORY

# WITNESS

JOE PARRINO

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

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# WITNESS

**Joe Parrino**

The man was screaming. An unending litany of names tumbled past broken lips. Stubble filled in the gaps where an elaborate moustache had once stood proud. Blood and grime pooled in hollow cheekbones. A uniform, once resplendent, was now nothing but torn bits of cloth held together out of habit.

‘Marye,’ he whispered. ‘Janny, Tolef.’ On and on, the names spilled out. Family, men and women, the stained remnants of the Brindleweld Ninth Division.

‘Karp, Micklaus, Alpert.’ He meant to say more. He tried to whisper more. The butt of a storm trooper’s hellgun shut him up. A broken tooth drooled from his mouth.

The lumen globes strobed in their wrought-iron cages. The man shivered, suddenly cold. Frail hands clutched wildly at the burly men dragging him.

‘Where are they?’ the man asked.

The storm troopers stayed silent behind their beetle-black helmets.

‘Where are they?’ he repeated, halfway between a sob and a shout.

Still no answer.

The man tried to sit down, there in the middle of the corridor.

The storm troopers’ hands grasped his arms and he was hauled to his feet. Not even bothering to make sure he was walking, the storm troopers dragged him.

For what seemed like hours they pulled him down the corridor. For what seemed like hours he kept asking his question, kept whispering the names.

Without warning, the passageway widened. A vast room, empty and echoing, saw them halting. The man stared at the floor.

He started screaming when one of the storm troopers grabbed him by his lank hair. ‘Look. Look,’ the trooper’s vox-corrupted voice growled. ‘What do you see?’

The man’s green eyes rolled in their sockets, not understanding. They fixed on a blank patch of wall, near the door. He felt cold. He felt hot. His soul ached. He

thought he saw silver. Tears rose into his eyes. Then they rolled on.

‘Nothing,’ he croaked. ‘I see nothing.’

The door opened.

Fear made him heavy. His eyes screwed up tight. He covered his face with his hands

Whimpering, the man roused the courage to glance between splayed fingers.

A warm glow, yellow and inviting, met his gaze through an open door.

The storm troopers marched him forward. They halted at the edge of the door. Hovering for a moment, the man caught the brief click of a private vox-message. The troopers tossed him in.

He fell in a tangle of limbs. Warm red carpet caressed his frail frame. Green eyes blinked, then shut. Curled into a foetal ball, the man tried to sleep, his thoughts far away.

Polite coughing broke into reality.

The man’s long, pale hands splayed before him, grimy and coated with filth. He grunted as he raised himself to his knees, then to his feet.

The cough sounded again.

Latching onto the sound, he turned. A massive wooden desk met his eyes.

There, crouched protectively over a nest of papers and files, was a familiar-looking man. He looked, for all the world, like an Administratum drone. Pale and sickly, with watery grey eyes, the desk-man offered an insincere smile. One pen-wielding hand stretched out towards a richly appointed chair. The dishevelled man flinched as his eyes alighted on a sigil glaring out from the centre of the other’s chest. It was a stylised ‘I.’ Prestoff shook, a memory struggling to emerge. The symbol struck fear into his heart, fear and outrage.

The dishevelled man clawed his coat closer to his chest, shivering with cold and malnutrition. He sat.

Clearing his throat once more, the man behind the desk said, ‘Interrogator Tomas Burkhart, Ordo Malleus, conducting interview.’ The man, the interrogator, spoke off to his right.

Burkhart shuffled several papers on his desk, humming tunelessly to himself. Like a conductor with his orchestra, the interrogator swiftly marked up a folio before turning his attention to the man before him.

‘Captain Danel Prestoff?’

Without waiting for a reply, Burkhart ticked off a little box on his paper.

Memories flooded back to the dishevelled man. Suddenly he had his identity back, his name, his life. A question formed on Prestoff’s lips.

Burkhart held up a forestalling finger and tutted. ‘Just a moment, captain. There’ll be plenty of time for you to speak.’

Prestoff’s mouth snapped closed.

A rapid flurry of questions followed. Homeworld: Brindleweld. Age: 34. Familial Status: Married (two children).

Prestoff almost dozed off as Burkhart asked his questions.

After minutes upon minutes of questions and self-answers, Burkhart trailed away, lapsing into silence.

Burkhart was waiting for him to speak, to finally cut through the bureaucratic formulae. A voice, rough and croaking, choked with suppressed emotion, split the silence.

‘Where are my men?’

Burkhart blinked. He smiled a cracked smile. ‘Taken care of, captain.’

‘How?’

‘They are in the custody of the Holy Ordos, pending investigation.’

Prestoff sat still. He noticed there were no windows in the room. The walls pressed in close. He couldn’t breathe. He calmed down despite himself.

‘Of what crime are we accused?’

Burkhart consulted the paper before him before answering. ‘Witness to Imperial assets reference subcode 7B-666.’

The words meant nothing to the captain. A response swam up from the dredges of his abused mind. ‘What is the sentence?’ The word felt sluggish and thick, ill-willed to being spoken aloud.

The silence stretched in the word’s wake. Prestoff grew afraid that Burkhart would not answer. He almost spoke again.

The interrogator smiled his bureaucrat’s smile. It conveyed no reassurance, no glimmer of humanity. It was a cold thing, devoid of mirth, devoid of feeling, merely a neural tic.

‘Life is the God-Emperor’s currency, captain. We must decide how best it is spent.’

Burkhart suddenly stood up. He crossed to a recessed cabinet in the wall. Prestoff stared resolutely forward at the spot the man had occupied. The sound of liquid sloshing into glasses drifted through the room. The pungent honey harshness of well-aged amasec assaulted Prestoff’s nose. His mouth watered. A memory tugged at his mind, but refused to cooperate further.

Burkhart appeared back in his field of view, two glasses in hand. He offered a crystal glass to the captain.

Distracted by the amasec, the captain did not notice the servitor that trundled into the room until it slid in front of him. Dripping with wide reams of paper spattered with dark red ink, the once-human automaton emitted a half-mechanical, half-organic scree of binaric cant.

Burkhart donned a pair of crescent-shaped eyeglasses and barked out a command to the servitor. Arms clattering, the servitor raised a quill and roll of paper before beginning to write.

The interrogator shot Prestoff a watery glance. He sucked in a breath with a consumptive's ease. 'Tell me captain, what happened on Margentum?'

Tears fell from Captain Danel Prestoff's eyes. His lips trembled. 'Where do I start?'

'The beginning, of course.'

The journey through the immaterium was a difficult one. Things scraped out beyond the hull, like nails on a scholam chalkboard. Like the song of the syrens of ancient myth.

The men tried to keep their spirits high with boasting, with the campfire music of home and by watching the womenfolk paint the regimental shields. It failed.

The commissars were busy.

'These men are green, captain,' Derokast growled. 'You are green.'

Prestoff tried to smile, tried to puff out his chest. His uniform shone, bright and blue, the colour of his home world's seas, of its open skies. He failed. He knew the calibre of his men. He knew his own. Political wrangling had provided him his rank. Political wrangling had provided for most of the division's officer corps.

Commissar Derokast stomped away to harangue and harass some other man.

Trooper Anton Karp, a great bear of a man, ambled towards Prestoff. 'Don't mind him, captain. We'll teach these heretics to fear the Throne.'

The captain stared at the bearded man, unsure of what to say. The man was a social inferior, that was clear, but he was also one of his men. What were the damned rules on such matters? He settled for a brusque nod and turned away as Karp sketched a bemused salute.

Danel Prestoff sought solace in his wife.

Busy at work in the central mess hall, Marye was a vision in her hooped blue and gold dress. Her pale, deft hands painted away at one the great plastek shields that would be carried into war by Prestoff's men.

She smiled as he approached. His two little ones, Janny and Tolef, peeked out from behind her dress, big grins plastered across paint-splattered faces. He glanced down at the huge shield, his head cocked to the side.

‘It’s the Angel Sanguine,’ Janny said.

Prestoff ruffled her hair.

‘It’s the Angel Sanguine,’ began Confessor Micklaus. The drop-ship rattled again. ‘He flies beside us. His wings protect us. He intercedes on our behalf with His glorious father. While we serve Him, no man shall fall.’

Margentum lay beneath them, gripped by heresy, gripped by rebellion. No one asked why Margentum had fallen, nor when. Such questions were beyond them. It only mattered that it had. They were Imperial Guard, the Hammer of the Emperor, men of Brindleweld. Twenty thousand men descended on this world. Twenty thousand loyal souls of the Brindleweld Ninth Division.

Prestoff could not stop shaking, the last vestiges of the memory shredding in the wake of reality. Booms rattled the hull. Prestoff switched on his comm-bead, just for a moment. He was met by relentless screaming.

He flinched and switched vox-channels. He was met by chanting in some foul tongue. Only one channel was clear. It did nothing to steady his nerves.

A calm voice was announcing Imperial casualties as they were happening. Every thirty seconds it provided a tally of totals. Prestoff vomited.

The ship rattled again.

The shieldbearers started the traditional chant, their voices hardly breaking.

Two more shudders wracked the ship. Then shouting came from the cockpit.

‘Time to touch down. Good luck, footsloggers!’ the Navy pilot yelled.

Nervous jeers came back from the Brindleweld.

The roar hit them first as the ramp descended. Karp and his men hoisted their painted shields. They were first out, providing cover for the men rushing out behind them.

Two fell as bright las-bolts caught them. The other eight formed a rough perimeter.

Prestoff struggled to his feet. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. Someone tugged at him. His view was fuzzy. Where were his eyeglasses? He giggled a nervous laugh. He didn’t wear eyeglasses. A face swam into view, mouthing words.

He focused on the face. ‘Alpert?’ he stammered.

‘Sir, we’ve got to move!’ the standard bearer screamed.

The captain cursed. Fear had unmanned him. Shame burned in his breast. He would exorcise it against the rebels.

The captain drew his sword and rushed down the ramp. Lasguns cracked as the Brindleweld opened fire. Prestoff couldn't see the enemy; he could only hear them. Manifesting as an ear-shattering roar, the rebellious filth fell back before the disciplined volleys of the Imperial Guard.

Prestoff could hear Karp's bass singing as the shields bashed forward. He found himself singing along. A great hymn rose up as the Brindleweld overcame their fear. Only the shieldbearers could see the enemy and if they were still moving forward, then surely the rebels were nothing to be afraid of.

It passed like that for weeks. The Brindleweld singing, moving forward, the rebels falling back. Struck in disarray, the vox was still a merry hell, but why did that matter when this campaign was so close to being won?

The Brindleweld grew battle-hardened. Casualties among them were light. Spirits were high.

Then strange things started happening.

'Go on,' Burkhart demanded.

Prestoff refused, having lapsed into a sullen silence.

'Captain, I really must insist.'

Prestoff spoke. 'I want to see my men.'

Burkhart tutted. 'That's not how this works.' The interrogator's gentle voice took on a menacing growl. 'What happened?'

The interrogator half-rose from his seat, his face blotched red. Burkhart blinked and seemed to remember himself. He smoothed his grey robes and sat back down. The smile crawled along his lower jaw. 'This isn't helping your family,' the interrogator said with oiled grit in his voice.

It started with lights in the sky. Lights that drove men mad.

Commissar Derokast was busy.

Gibbering howls echoed over the ruins of the cities. Strange shapes danced in the shadows. Every man was affected, but the Brindleweld pushed on, driving the heathens back, punishing them for their rebellion.

Only one city remained.

'That's big,' Alpert commented. The walls loomed before them, massive granite structures. They were huge, mammoth, imposing. Just visible behind them were the city structures. Smoke drifted from them. Banners flapped from

some, barely seen but discomfoting.

Snapping in the slight breeze, the standard of the Imperium and of Brindleweld brought pride to the men. Drums and fifes sounded as the Brindleweld began the final push. They marched in the serried ranks of the United Federates of Old Merica in the heathen ages of Terra's past.

Chaplain Micklaus, chainsword and holy book in hand, only prayed, fast and quick.

Prestoff stared. He swallowed, and thrust his sword into the air. Its power field crackled as the ash drifted. The shields rattled. Fifemen and drummers struck up the order to move.

In long, blue lines, inexorable as the tide, the Brindleweld marched forward. Shrieks sounded from behind the city's walls.

The men in the ranks shifted nervously. Commissars shouted for them to hold steady, to ignore the cries.

There was no sign of the heretical filth. No sign of resistance.

Prestoff's men were in the centre, marching on the gate. Karp, up in the front, started to laugh.

'Quiet,' Prestoff admonished.

Karp kept chuckling. The big man turned to face the captain, a grin splitting his black beard. His shield dipped low.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Purple lightning etched the sky.

Prestoff caught chanting over the wind, just for a moment. Karp was crying. He dropped the shield.

The chanting floated over the wind, growing stronger and more strident. The air grew heavy. A soldier to Prestoff's right groaned.

The vox-bead in his ear warbled. The order was given. The pace quickened.

The walls loomed large in the captain's eyes. They filled the sky until all that remained were the red brick walls and the chant-filled air.

Karp stumbled. Out of nowhere, Derokast was on him, screaming into his face. Karp said nothing, merely rolling in the green grass, his eyes screwed up tight. Karp's mouth opened.

Words, filthy and alien, streamed out of his mouth. Commissar Derokast shoved his bolt pistol up against the shieldbearer's temple.

'Say one more word...' he growled, his voice slipping into his barbaric death world accent. Karp smiled. Prestoff ran forward, desperate to do something, anything. He was a captain of the Brindleweld Ninth Division, damn it, and he

had a duty to his men.

Prestoff debated with himself whether to intervene, to show courage. Instead he said nothing. The commissar, sensing his presence, wheeled on him, bolt pistol gesturing wildly in his face. The whites of the commissar's eyes rolled.

Karp stumbled to his feet unheeded. He pointed to the colossal gate behind them. A smile spread across his face, sickly and manic. He grunted, coughed and spat on the grass. His saliva fizzed as it landed. His smile grew wider, devouring the man's face.

Four words hissed past his lips before he started screaming. Four simple words.

'The door is open.'

Prestoff's eyes grew wide with horror. What little colour he possessed drained out of him and his mouth clamped shut.

Where before Burkhart had been annoyed, angry even, at the lapses in the captain's account, here he was almost sympathetic. The bureaucratic little man contemplated stretching his hand across the desk and offering some words of comfort. The iron bands of Inquisition training clamped shut, however, and he said nothing.

Prestoff began to shake, wracked with fear-filled images.

Burkhart whispered a question that went unheeded and unanswered.

Silver thoughts flashed through Prestoff's brain, boiling away the fear. He gasped.

Troopers fell all up and down the line, collapsing into limp piles. Flesh writhed and madness danced in their eyes. Some pleaded for the God-Emperor's mercy from their comrades. Others burred and gurgled as their flesh re-knitted itself into new forms. Shots crackled as men fired on their own brothers.

Some took on ruddy red colouring, others bilious green. Their minds expanded, or imploded, shattering into mutable pieces. Screams erupted from mouths and throats that no longer resembled anything human.

Derokast was close to panic. He marched up and down the Brindleweld lines, his bolt pistol barking.

'What xenos trickery is this?' the commissar screamed, all pretence of command and control leeching out of his voice by fear.

Prestoff couldn't answer. He stared in mute horror at Karp. The big man's skin was shedding like that of some vast snake. It fell from him in long, dry folds,

revealing something that glistened obscenely in the high sun. Prestoff felt that he should do something. Karp's eyes would not leave his own.

The captain raised his laspistol in shaking hands.

Mist rose up from the ground, sickly yellow and blood red. Black clouds whipped across the sky.

Karp's eyes mirrored the storm, black with threat, alien and vile. The big man coughed out all his teeth. His jaw clicked and then distended. Thick fluids gushed out, followed by a hand.

Prestoff started firing, his laspistol spewing out little beams of incandescence. He may as well have been shining a torch for all the good it did.

Another hand followed the first. Karp started screaming.

His sword forgotten, Prestoff began edging away. Then Anton Karp ceased to exist as something tore him apart from the inside.

Still steaming with the shieldbearer's remains, caked in blood and filth, some *thing*, some xenos bastard thing, stared with eyes like green glass. Obscene fronds dripped from the creature's face, while alien thoughts of red slaughter intruded on Prestoff's mind.

Derokast fell silent, the terror muting the commissar.

Micklaus began to shout. Great entreaties to the God-Emperor and his Nine Holy Sons flew fast and true from the confessor's mouth. The beast flinched. Then it smiled, mismatched teeth glowing in the storm-tossed gloom.

It hissed a response in its bastard xenos tongue. A sword wove into being from the scattered bones at its feet. It took two steps forward, the grass withering where it walked. A man tried edging around it, emboldened by fear. The beast tore him in half. The Emperor smiled on them, however, as at some unseen noise, the beast that had been Karp sprinted and began desecrating the religious iconography on the Brindleweld shields.

Creatures akin to it were erupting all throughout the Brindleweld lines, breaking their cohesion. Men began screaming, turning on each other as alien thoughts overtook their own.

To make matters worse, the heretics revealed themselves. Massive gun emplacements, their barrels wrought like hell-beasts, opened up from the walls. Jeers accompanied volleys of hot las-fire from the parapets. The Brindleweld, disorganised and exposed, fell in droves. Whistles shrilled and drums beat as the order was given to retreat. Men screamed as they fell, trying to disengage as xenos beasts carved their way through routed troops.

Prestoff found himself running with Alpert and another clump of troopers

from a squad he did not recognise. Their colours, clutched in Alpert's white-knuckled hands, still streamed magnificently behind the running men. Micklaus, stout and portly in his black robes, lagged behind. Between breaths, prayers streamed from his mouth.

Fat drops of rain lanced down from the black clouds. A metallic odour filled the air. Soon, the retreating ad-hoc squad was slipping and sliding through rust-coloured mud as they ran away from the last city.

Through the mud and the rain they fled. Lit only by infrequent spears of lightning, Margentum became a place of terror. Faces flashed by in the darkness, pale and mocking, misshapen and foul. They were the faces of nightmares. To stare at them was to join them.

These xenos were more insidious than anything Prestoff had ever heard of, more insidious than any threat mentioned in the Primer.

His squad, grown into a sizable force of fifty men, halted in a clump of trees to rest, to recuperate. To begin to make sense of their shame.

Prestoff, his lungs spewing out mist from his panting breath, leant against Alpert. The colours were sodden now, their proud standard a wet mess.

'We broke and ran,' Alpert said, his voice a mix of shame and terror. His face was pale and mud-streaked, his waxed moustache drooping. 'We're cowards. We've shamed the Emperor. We've made a mockery of the Angel Sanguine.'

No one disagreed with him. Their faces reflected the inner conflict each struggled with.

Prestoff's head snapped up as he caught the sound of branches snapping. Lasrifles were shouldered. Shields were raised. The snapping grew louder. Something was moving through the woods.

A lasrifle crackled off a shot. The man who fired managed an awkward laugh. He'd fired at a shadow. He stopped laughing when arms shot out of the shadows and dragged him into its depths.

A wave of fear swept through the Brindleweld soldiers. More arms snaked out from the shadows. Desperate, the men fired into the darkness.

Cruel laughter, an echo of the dead man's, burbled out. The trees started necrotising as a glow suffused them. Prestoff started coughing and soon the others in his group followed.

'We need to get out of here,' he gasped.

His men didn't need to be told twice. Back out from the trees and into the fields they ran.

The laughter followed.

Deep into the night they ran, harried and harassed every step of the way by enemy counterattacks and lightning raids. They stopped only for desperate last stands and to gather with other clumps of men.

Fifty men became one hundred, one hundred became one thousand until, near the site of their original landing, the Brindleweld reformed.

The landing site had been fortified by combat engineers and adepts from the Adeptus Mechanicus. Its rockcrete walls looked too low and hastily thrown up to provide any resistance.

Nevertheless, it was here that the Brindleweld would make their final stand. Here they would face the archenemy of mankind and its xenos allies. Here they would serve their God-Emperor. Here they would die in His name.

The storms grew worse as they waited. A week went by without sight or sound of the heretical filth. The skies still roiled, wracked with storms. Men went mad from the waiting. Two troopers from Prestoff's command were executed by Derokast.

Crowded, demoralised, filthy, exhausted; these were the lot of the Brindleweld soldier.

It was a siege without besiegers.

The eighth day dawned.

Death came with it.

The chanting came first, carried over the high winds. Ethereal and eerie, the words sounded just on the edge of hearing. Shrieks and gibbers lanced out from the distance. Flashes and streaks of stars lit the sky. Rumbling, impossibly distant, shook the command post.

Prestoff, his men around him, found courage welling up within him. He'd die, aye, but he'd not die a coward. He'd do his home world proud. His only regret that he wouldn't see his daughters or wife until they stood beside him at the Golden Throne.

Micklaus was casting a benediction over their souls, his words strident in the frigid air.

The deep cough of bolt pistols undercut his words, but these were familiar, nothing to be afraid of. It was only the commissars dispensing the Emperor's justice on those who faltered.

The men rose from their campfires, cups of recaff clutched in grimy hands. The smell of salted grox, of reheated starch rations, drifted over the fug of wood smoke.

The men were walking to the walls of their own accord, driven by some instinct. Lasrifles were readied. Shields were shouldered. A man down the line began to sing. His voice did not stay alone for long.

It was a death dirge, an appeal to the God-Emperor's Holy Nine Sons. It was an appeal for service, for death before dishonour, for a chance to be ushered into the sight of His Holy Throne in Terra Above.

The enemy appeared, furtive and skulking at first, from the woods. Masked and robed, their 'uniform' a collection of motley. They were chanting as they came. The death dirge met them.

Xenos beasts towered in the rebel ranks, their forms as varied as the stars in the sky. They were proof of Margentine perfidy. They were so fallen, so depraved, that they allowed the taint of xenos on to their planet and served alongside them now. There were great bloated things with broken horns oozing from their heads, giant winged beasts with red skin and red murder shining in their eyes. All were given a wide berth by the troops around them.

The Brindleweld roared their defiance into the dawn. The shouts of ten thousand men, bruised and bloodied, echoed through the fortress. More and more Margentine rebels flooded into the clearing. Still chanting, they stood arrayed in vast rows as if to mock the Imperials. The front ranks carried painted shields of their own.

Prestoff flinched as the Earthshaker cannons behind him opened up. Geysers of men and xenos blossomed in the archenemy army. Vast numbers died in that opening salvo. It barely dented the horde.

A voice burbled in his vox-bead. The order was simple, straightforward. It was only one word. Only one word was needed.

Power sword held above his head, colours streaming to his right, Prestoff brought the sword sweeping down and shouted, along with the other officers of the Brindleweld Ninth Division, that single word.

'Fire!'

And they did.

The walls were falling, cracked in two places by the huge xenos. The Brindleweld were dead. All that was left was to claw out some meagre glory in the Emperor's name. Disciplined volleys still lanced into the archenemy, their snarling, chanting ranks falling by the dozen, by the hundred, but it was nowhere near enough to stem the tide.

Prestoff's voice was gone, lost in shouting, in singing. His laspistol was nearly

empty, his sword arm sore and shaking. His spirit, however, was undaunted. Brindleweld were dying everywhere he looked. But one man, one man was pointing up to the sky, his face a picture of joyous disbelief.

A howling heretic ran him through with a rusted sword.

Prestoff shot the Margentine and dared to turn his eyes to the heavens, just for a moment.

He saw the stars falling.

The Margentines didn't notice. Not at first. They were too busy butchering the Brindleweld.

Prestoff stared in wide-eyed wonder. There was a sense of *presence*, of some pregnant possibility. There was a pressure. It pushed in on his ears, pressed at his heart, set it to hammering, to thudding.

The Margentines froze, feeling the same sensations that gripped Prestoff.

There was a thunderclap, a bell pealing, a man shouting, an ursid growling, a woman screaming. It was all of those things. It was none of those things.

Light streamed like the glorious rays of the sun at its rising. The light was a pure blue, painfully bright. Prestoff shielded his eyes.

He could hear shouted battle cries from a great distance, impossibly loud and deep. The light faded and Prestoff gazed out in holy rapture.

There were armoured giants among the heretics, halberds flashing and bolters blasting.

A great cheer rose up from the surviving Brindleweld. The Emperor's angels of death, a living covenant between the God-Emperor and His Imperium, were here to save them, to answer their prayers.

The stars still fell, angling towards the Brindleweld compound.

The stars that landed in their compound revealed an altogether different covenant. Interlocking armour of matt-black, pieced together on the frames of men, was marked with a sigil of judgment, dread, and rumour: the stylised 'I' of the Inquisition.

They accompanied a figure who brought the fear pounding back through Prestoff's veins. The man was armoured in gold, ornate and imposing. Books dripped from chains. An array of pistols, swords and knives covered every available centimetre. Topped by a wide-brimmed hat, the man could only be one thing: an inquisitor of the Holy Ordos.

At his side wandered a watery-eyed man in grey robes. He looked for all the world like an Administratum drone.

Prestoff sputtered off in the middle of his narrative. ‘You,’ he said. ‘That was you.’

Burkhart sketched a little bow.

‘You’re the one who...’

‘Executed your commissar. Yes.’

The enemy were repelled. The silver-armoured giants disappeared, gone as suddenly as they had arrived. None of the newcomers acknowledged their absence. The Inquisition had seized control of the compound. The commissar was screaming.

Scourges whipsawed through the flesh of Derokast’s back. The commissar was bellowing words. This was not in itself unusual. What was unusual was the content of his speeches. He was preaching cowardice, annihilation and apocalypse.

The inquisitor, introduced as Alphonse Barekias, did not take kindly to the commissar’s sentiments. He believed a public demonstration was necessary. A reminder of the Golden Throne’s justice, of the price of cowardice.

While his interrogator carried out the sentence, Inquisitor Barekias declaimed and denounced the commissar.

‘This man,’ he pointed. ‘This man has turned his back on the Most Holy God-Emperor. He has embraced the wiles of the enemy. His soul is stuck in the mire, caked in the filth of heresy.’

Derokast spat at his feet.

Barekias’s lip curled in distaste. ‘Pity not this wretch! His soul is damned. Look to your own, for the archenemy is ever hammering at our souls. Gird yourself in the armour of contempt. Reject the blandishments of the fallen. By the holy authority granted unto me in the name of the Master of Mankind, I declare thee Hereticus. The sentence is death.’

Prestoff thought the inquisitor would carry out the sentence himself. He would be disappointed. The inquisitor’s assistant, small and frail looking, hefted a large bolt pistol. It coughed once.

Barekias nodded in satisfaction. ‘Sic semper Traitoris,’ he proclaimed.

Reeling in the wake of Derokast’s execution, the surviving officers of the Brindleweld were called to a meeting in the command bunker.

Far too few had survived.

Ohara, another captain, was weeping; from shock, fear or what else, Prestoff

didn't know.

The inquisitor was nowhere to be seen.

A patch on the wall kept drawing Prestoff's attention. It was blank, empty. The wall was bare rockcrete, but if he squinted he could see silver.

General Sykes, one of the commanders of the division, was shouting. 'He'll kill us like he killed the commissar. We've failed here. That's all there is to it.'

More shouting erupted as each man expressed their opinion. Prestoff remained silent.

A gunshot echoed through the room, silence exploding in its wake. Sykes fell dead.

'I do not suffer cowards. You and your men will still serve,' declared Inquisitor Barekias. 'This world will retain its loyalty to the Golden Throne' He pointed to Prestoff and the few other men who had remained silent. 'Everyone except those indicated will leave my presence.'

Glares were shot back and forth as the Brindleweld officers who had not been chosen shuffled out of the command centre. The inquisitor fixed Prestoff and the others with a stare, his gaze lingering, searching.

He appeared satisfied with what he found. The inquisitor made the sign of the aquila. Prestoff and the others echoed him. A smile twitched against the inquisitor's dark skin. Barekias glanced towards the blank patch of wall. He nodded.

The wall was no longer blank.

A man – no, more than a man – stood there, armoured all in silver.

The Brindleweld fell to their knees.

The angel was huge, made into a living saint, a son of the Holy Nine. His face, stretched to inhuman proportions by the God-Emperor himself, was scraped with scars. His voice, a deep bass rumble, was felt more in the chest than heard in the ears.

'You have faced servants of the Pestilential and Sanguinary Unholinesses,' the giant rumbled. It was not a question, merely an observation. The sides of the saint's mouth quirked up into a brief smile. 'This is no small thing.'

Prestoff found himself trying to determine which one of the Emperor's Sons had sired this angel. Was it the Angel Sanguine? The Lion, whom men called Jonson? Or Imperial Dorn, with his steadfast demeanour?

The device on the behemoth's shoulder gave him no hints. It was simple, nothing like the icons painted on Brindleweld shields. It showed only a book and

a sword. Prestoff almost asked before the angel flashed him a knowing smile.

‘It is best not to know,’ the saint said. The Brindleweld captain gasped as the silver-armoured angel knelt. With a fluid motion, almost too fast for the eye to see, the massive Space Marine drew an equally massive sword.

The blessed warrior’s eyes grew sombre.

The words that fell from his mouth had the flavour of an oath, a swearing anew of a covenant. The words were long, archaic, their language unfamiliar. They sounded like magic, like hope, like wrath. They sounded like music. They sounded like victory.

Barekias mouthed the words. His assistant, the watery-eyed man, inscribed them onto vellum.

The smell of incense, of holy smoke, suffused the air. Pressure built up, pushing in on Prestoff’s mind. Thoughts, images, deeds, and above all else pride; these were the flavours in the air. Something holy, something blessed, was happening here.

Prestoff could hear other voices raised in the angel’s voice. An angelic choir underwrote the Space Marine’s bass rumble.

It was the most beautiful thing the Imperial Guard captain had ever heard. More beautiful than his wife’s breathing, more beautiful than his daughters’ laughter.

The giant finished. He stood, his armour growling.

‘I am Brother Makon,’ he said. ‘You have witnessed my Oath of Moment. The Emperor has witnessed my Oath of Moment. We will win this war.’

Simple. Matter of fact. The words were said with such utter certainty, with such conviction. There was no room for doubt, no room for defeat. Hearing the angel speak, Prestoff could believe him, could see past this day, this moment, into the next.

Makon raised his sword into the air. It scraped the ceiling.

Prestoff felt something swell in his breast. The feeling was unfamiliar, lost for what felt like forever. He prodded at it. It ached. Then he recognized it.

It felt like certainty, like faith, like pride.

Like victory.

The angel moved forward with swift, sure strides. He seemed to fear nothing. That was in the scriptures, wasn’t it?

*And the God-Emperor, He that is Most Holy, Master of Mankind, did say on that day: I have made these Saints, these Angels of Death, my Adeptus Astartes,*

*that they shall know no fear.*

Prestoff giggled like a child. Shots spanked off Makon's armour. They dared not even scratch the paint. The Brindleweld fought with new vigour. Some of the fearlessness of their living saint seemed to rub off on them.

They fought over land the Brindleweld had marched across in triumph a week before. At least, that's what the maps said. Weird alien growths sprouted everywhere in the blood-soaked soil. Where bodies had lain, there were now frothing pools. Of the bodies themselves there was no sign.

The warrior's holy presence pushed back the xenos filth.

They could hear the sounds of battle in the distance. The barking of bolters, the screams of dying heretics, the screeching of xenos.

Makon issued orders to the Guardsmen flowing behind him. His words were clipped, his hand gestures brief. The Brindleweld men moved even before he spoke.

To their right advanced a platoon of Inquisitorial storm troopers. They were efficient, deadly and silent. They issued no commands, asked for no clarification. The storm troopers seemed more like constructs of the Adeptus Mechanicus than men.

Through smoke and fog that stank of fyceline, rot and blood, the Imperials fought, bled, died and, metre by metre, won. The heretics were falling in disarray, their xenos allies unable to stand and fight against Makon and his silver-armoured brethren.

In the burned-out ruins of a market town they fought scabrous, one-eyed things. On a red field they faced crimson-skinned aliens with long tongues and blood-soaked blades. Winged beasts flapped their way across the sky and engaged in distant dogfights with Imperial Navy Lightnings.

Bit by bit, metre by metre, the Imperium gained ground. The Silver Saints, as the Brindleweld began to call them, were hardly seen, but their presence on the battlefield was undeniable. Often they would be called or led by Brother Makon into fierce pockets of resistance, only to find the area already cleansed of heretics.

Within the span of two days the Imperium had retaken much of the planet.

Now, as before, only one city remained.

The Imperial advance was unstoppable. The heretics streamed before the righteous crusaders. Margentum remained in enemy hands only by the most tenuous of threads. Already the regimental histories were being written,

campaign names stitched onto company standards.

Here was the glory the Brindleweld hunted. No more defeat, no more retreat. They fought alongside their saints in the God-Emperor's name. No citizen of the Imperium could ask for more.

The walls loomed large in their vision once more. They had been altered. Unfettered by the laws of sanity, carved, painted, melted, the grand brick walls were now brushed by a madman's palette.

Some of the Brindleweld convulsed at the sight. A touch or glance from Makon brought them back to their senses.

The main difference lay not in the strange corruption gripping the walls. No, this time the gates were open, smashed from their hinges as if Imperial Dorn had shoved his fist through. Smouldering and smoking, the gates were open.

Smoke rose from the city beyond, hints of the works of the Silver Saints. The men of the Brindleweld Ninth Division struck up an earth-shaking cheer. Their colours streamed proudly behind them. Their drummers and fifemen played away at martial marches. The Brindleweld were diminished, but not undaunted.

Makon halted them at the entrance. One massive gauntlet held up, the other touching an encased object on his chest, he said, 'The neverborn stalk the streets beyond. Corruption is rife. Pray to the Emperor and you will not falter.'

The warning was cryptic, the threat all too real.

A rolling gun battle was pushing them through the streets. The heretics were clawing back for every metre taken. They were hitting back. Hard.

There was no regard for their own lives. They seemed in the grip of some religious frenzy. Mouths frothed, eyes lolled, fingers twitched spasmodically on triggers. The heretical filth of Margentum, once-loyal citizens of the inviolate Imperium of Man, were dancing the last steps of a hangman's jig.

'I saw things there. Things I cannot explain, cannot remember. I can't remember Makon's face. Is that important?' Prestoff was on the edge of mania, panic creeping into his tone. Tears were streaming afresh down his cheeks.

Burkhart's eyes grew hard, the watery look to them dissipating, evaporating. Here, then, were his true colours, the true badge of his office, his rank. Determination, disinterest, judgement, all these things were to be found in those grey eyes. Compassion had no place there and sympathy was repelled. These were not necessary in his trade, indeed not necessary in the Imperium. These were emotions to be abhorred and reviled. Fealty, faith, and determination: these

were the true marks of the Imperial.

‘Captain, it is very important that I know exactly what happened down there.’

The street was burning. Embers floated through the night air. Las-fire crackled in the distance, the dry noise of thousands of branches breaking. Screams, shrill and surreal, echoed among the ruined buildings.

The city was burning. Great columns of smoke stretched up towards the heavens, blotting out the stars. Reports, when they could be heard, were good. The Imperials were making inroads. The heretics were dying. Imperials, too, were dying, but this was to be expected.

The world was burning. Margentum was being cleansed in the fires of the righteous. Scoured clean of the filth, infection and heresy that afflicted it, the planet would become, once again, a productive member of the Imperium.

Prestoff was only immediately aware of the first level, perhaps peripherally of the second. What mattered to him at the moment was his continued survival and his service to the Throne. Bright streams of las-fire, their colour noxious and painful to the eye, snapped. A trooper to Prestoff’s right was snatched from his feet. His screams joined the chorus splitting the air.

They were hunkered down in the shell of some ruined hab-stack, pinned down by Margentine defenders. They had lost Makon some minutes before, the silver giant disappearing into the smoke and darkness without explanation.

Gingerly, Prestoff craned his head over the brick wall he was hiding behind. Las-fire spasmed in his direction. He fell back behind the wall, wincing as the shots pounded into its suddenly fragile-seeming bulk.

‘We’ll go around,’ Prestoff hissed to Alpert. The other man nodded. They half-crouched and ran around the side of the wall. The heretics, blissfully unaware, continued firing with abandon into the bricks.

Without their Silver Saint, the men felt diminished. The horror of war and the desperate nature of their situation began to worm its way back into their souls. Men could only face so much and retain courage.

This type of warfare was unfamiliar to the captain. It hadn’t been in any of the manuals, nor any of the stories. War was a thing conducted on great plains, sometimes in woods, but certainly not in cities.

Brick dust was soaking into his pores, abrading his neck where the collar met. The heretics grew quiet, no longer firing.

They screamed.

Some four-legged beast was loping through the shadows, tearing into the

heretic firing squad.

‘Xenos!’ Alpert yelled.

The Brindleweld started backing away, on the edge of panic. They could feel the xenos presence like an oily stain in the air. It smelled of rot and flowers and a thousand other unnameable things.

‘Captain, what do we do?’ one of the troopers hissed.

Prestoff made a snap decision. ‘We break and run.’

The troopers did not need to be told twice.

The problem was, however, that they ran deeper into the city.

Shots strobed over their head. This was a killing field. Bodies littered the streets, like discarded rubbish. The square was massive, studded with impaled corpses forming a horrific forest.

Scattered through the square, lined in concentric circles of trenchworks and gun emplacements, waited the last of the heretics. Above it all towered a statue of the Emperor Triumphant. It was the size of a Warhound Titan and one of the largest things Prestoff had ever seen. It should have been impressive, grand even. A reminder of the potent faith of the Imperium and the God-Emperor who was its patron. It should have been awe-inspiring, holy and beautiful. It would have been all of these things, but the Margentines had defiled it.

Now it was garishly painted, scored with ritual slashes, daubed with runes and sigils, dripping with blood and chains and bodies. It hurt to look at it.

A headache pounded its way into Prestoff’s skull.

The Brindleweld cautiously crept forward, taking cover behind the evidence of past assaults. They moved past rows of bodies in Inquisitorial black and Brindleweld blue, lying where they fell. They looked like they were sleeping, taking a breather before the next assault. Prestoff saw men he knew, men he had known for much of his life. They were family, kin, friends of friends, serfs, nobles, rich and poor, all united in death. All ushered into the light of the Golden Throne.

The las-fire hissing down towards them was random, literally shots in the dark.

The headache moved on to his eyes, bright, insistent and malignant. It throbbed. It pulsed. It dampened his thoughts.

He could tell his men were affected. Their eyes were pinched, their features pale and wan.

Prestoff could not stop his knees from shaking.

They brought their lasguns ready and moved forward. Fires burned unchecked

at the foot of the statue, the flames unhealthy and unnatural colours. The Margentines were chanting in some filthy tongue. Shadows stretched and roiled.

Prestoff turned to whisper an order to Alpert. His heart thudded in his chest. There was no sign of Alpert. He was alone.

A flash of silver was the only warning he had.

Death entered the square.

They countered the heretics' chanting with their own.

'We are the hammer,' they announced, swords flashing bright in the night.

Heretics screamed.

'We are the right hand of the Emperor.' Bolters barked and heretics died.

The shadows receded.

'We are the instrument of His will.'

All trace of their humanity was bled from their voices by vox-distortion. What was left sounded pure, righteous, angry.

'We are the gauntlet about His fist.'

They were approaching the statue, smashing aside gun emplacements, tearing down impaled corpses. Flamers blew apart the darkness.

'We are the tip of His spear.'

The Brindleweld could only watch in awe as the Silver Saints annihilated the Margentines.

'We are the edge of His sword.'

Now they were shouting, their voices magnified to painful heights. A hum suffused the air, deep and inhuman.

Stone cracked.

Something impossibly large groaned, then laughed.

Stars exploded behind Prestoff's eyes as his headache broke. He fell to his knees.

His last sight was of the Silver Saints, the knights in grey, faltering as they faced something impossible.

It was roaring, loud and inchoate. Choir hymns were answering, insistent and glorious.

Prestoff's hands swam into view before him, mired in dust and blood. He retched. His vision blurred. Someone nearby coughed. He felt that he should be doing something.

Nausea bubbled up from deep within. His retches became more insistent, then

they vanished. He felt a great weight thud into the ground nearby. He turned his head to the right and felt sick all anew.

One of the Space Marines lay beside him, his body mangled, armour rent and torn. 'Makon?' he stuttered.

The giant did not respond, but the armour was different, the heraldry less elaborate.

Prestoff struggled to his feet and found a lasgun. It felt reassuring.

The roaring was growing louder, laced with many voices.

The captain looked up. He immediately wished he had not.

What he saw was impossible, a violation of reality. The statue was moving, groaning, roaring, laughing.

Stone was splintering as limbs flexed.

It rocked back as a tank round caught it on the shoulder. The statue screamed without opening its mouth. It pointed. Flesh-coloured ropes erupted from the ground and snared the tank, peeling layers of armour back and ripping into the now vulnerable crew compartments.

While the statue was thus distracted, the Silver Saints pressed in, hammers and swords rising and falling. Chips of stone flew off as they battered away at the statue's legs.

The statue's face was deforming, melting, running, dripping. Where the stern visage of the God-Emperor had glared out with authority at His Holy Imperium, now it appeared almost daemonic. One moment it appeared to be weeping tears of blood, the next purple fluid drooled out from a grinning mouth.

Smoke roiled from one stretched and broken hand. It solidified into the form of a wailing sword, barbed and cruel. One sweep saw two Space Marines falling. The next caught only air as others danced nimbly away.

Feeling useless, he sighted at the statue down the length of his lasgun. He opened fire. Bright spears of light streamed towards the statue, before dissipating against the stone.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. Prestoff wheeled.

It was Alpert. Bleeding from a minor scalp wound, the standard bearer was smiling. He planted the colours in the crook of the downed Space Marine's arm and grabbed a hellgun from one of the dead storm troopers.

More Brindleweld and Inquisition forces were streaming into the square with every moment. The weight of fire staggered the statue back.

The Silver Saints pressed their advantage and surged forward, hymns of revilement streaming from their helmet speakers.

The statue screamed its defiance and pushed back. More Silver Saints fell before the onslaught. A booming laugh, as deep as any Titan's war-horn, echoed through the square as the statue advanced. Men fell back in disarray. The statue roared a challenge.

A clarion horn answered.

'Are you a hero?' the question came from nowhere. Burkhart's tone indicated interest, perhaps for the first time.

Prestoff shook his head. 'No,' he answered.

'Good. There is no place for heroes here,' Burkhart responded.

Out of the smoke strode a massive man-shaped machine, towering high over even the Silver Saints. In one hand was clutched a glowing blue hammer, the other spat massive bolt shells into the statue. Great chunks fell where they impacted.

The square shook as the statue strode forward, its own sword held high. It battered an angel aside in its race to reach the piloted machine.

The sword fell.

It was met by the angel's own hammer. Three strikes, faster than Prestoff believed possible, rang out in succession, thundering loud.

A fourth broke off the statue's left arm, dust and insects flying from the impact site. The Silver Saints bellowed in triumph, renewing a canticle of banishment.

The statue pressed on, undaunted by the loss of its arm.

Its blade stabbed forward a fraction of a second faster than the machine's block. Grease and oil spilled out from ruptured hydraulics. Now it was moving sluggishly. Then it froze.

The statue grinned. Fat droplets of green slime dripped from its broken joints. It made a mock salute. The Space Marine piloting the machine made no reply.

The Guardsmen, seeing their ally's distress, charged. Men streamed towards the statue, bayonets flashing in the darkness, las-fire streaming as they fired from the hip.

The xenos-possessed statue was taken aback. Silver Saints rushed forward. Men died in droves as the statue swatted at the blue and black ants at its feet. They fought on, trying to save the Space Marines at the cost of their own lives.

Prestoff saw Alpert fall, crushed beneath one marble foot. There was no time for mourning. That would come later.

He found himself fighting alongside one of the angels. The helmeted head

turned to look at him for a moment, never ceasing in its prayers. The saint briefly made the sign of the aquila before the statue ran him through. The sword gurgled as it withdrew.

The Brindleweld captain watched, helpless, as it rose high and knew that this was the moment of his death. His thoughts flashed back to his family, safe in orbit up above. He whispered their names as the sword flashed down.

It never reached. The pure blue weapon stopped its descent. Servos grinding, the blade was thrown back. The statue staggered. Fast as lightning, the blue hammer thudded in and broke the daemonic grin.

The statue tumbled backwards. The surviving Space Marines clambered over it, their armour glowing as they shouted sacred prayers and hymns. Their weapons rose and fell methodically while the machine withdrew.

The pall which gripped Margentum lifted as the statue began to shatter. They heard a scream, deep and full of thoughts of vengeance, thunder through their heads before the statue dissolved into dust.

Prestoff was panting. Then smiling. Then laughing.

He had survived! They had triumphed!

The Silver Saints gathered in a circle and bowed their heads in prayer. They did not sheathe their weapons.

The Guardsmen formed a rough circle around their living saints. Some were weeping tears of joy, others tears of mourning. They whooped and laughed, clapping each other on their backs. The happiness was infectious. No one noted the silence of the Space Marines, nor that of the storm troopers.

Prestoff, suddenly exhausted, waited until the angels finished their prayer before approaching. They were removing their helmets, blunt faces revealed. They looked grim.

‘We won!’ Prestoff shouted. One of the giants turned to face him. ‘We’re finished here, thank the God-Emperor,’ the captain said.

Buzzing split the air as power weapons were activated. The storm troopers raised their hellguns. Sadness aching in his eyes, the Silver Saint murmured, ‘Not quite.’

‘Enough. I’ve heard enough captain,’ Burkhart said.

Prestoff trailed off, tears streaming down his face. ‘You betrayed us,’ he whispered. ‘The Emperor’s own angels turned on us.’

Burkhart did not reply, lost in his own thoughts. Prestoff considered attacking him. He could see it in his mind’s eye, him leaping across the table and throttling

the interrogator. He shivered and sat still. He settled for a question instead. 'What is going to happen to us?'

Burkhart's watery grey eyes fixed on Prestoff. 'I don't know,' the interrogator said. 'That's not for me to decide.'

They lapsed into silence.

Some time later there was a gentle knock at the door. Burkhart stood up and answered it. When he came back to the desk, there was a silver tray with two objects on it clasped in his hands. He walked stiffly, formally. He set the tray down on the desk.

'For what it's worth, captain, I'm sorry.' The interrogator sounded almost genuine.

The ship shuddered beneath them. It felt like they were firing on something. Were they under attack?

Windows slid open on hidden tracks. Burkhart slid an object over to Prestoff. It was a medal, crafted in the division's tradition.

With the practiced air of a speech long since turned to rote, Burkhart spoke. 'Congratulations, captain. You have done the Guard, your home world, and the God-Emperor proud.'

Burkhart stood up, straightened his coat, and placed another item in Captain Danel Prestoff's hand. The object felt familiar. Prestoff turned it over, the rubber grip, the blunt nose. He realised with a start that he was holding his own laspistol.

The ship shuddered again. Now Prestoff could see bright lances of light stabbing out into the void. He could hear the screech of air rushing several decks below. Bodies in filthy blue uniforms drifted past the windows. Some still twitched.

Burkhart made the sign of the aquila to Prestoff. He bowed and then left the room. The door hissed shut behind him.

The interrogator of the Ordo Malleus nodded to the Grey Knight stationed outside the door. The Space Marine acknowledged Burkhart with a slight incline of his head. Regret tinged his blue eyes.

The distinctive whizz-crack of a discharging laspistol sounded from behind the door, followed by a thump.

Burkhart barely winced.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

A lifelong reader and unabashed fan of the Black Library, JOE PARRINO is an American writer currently adrift within the United Kingdom. Still mired in the realm of higher education, when he's not writing papers he's writing stories and working his fingers and brain into mush. Awed and eager in equal measures, he's leapt into the realm of writing with gusto. In his off hours, he reads, writes and wanders about the gothic splendour of Edinburgh.



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**A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

**Published in 2013 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd.,  
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

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**ISBN 978-1-78251-025-3**

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