



L J GOULDING

# ANIMUS MALORUM

A LEGION OF THE DAMNED SHORT STORY





L J GOULDING

# ANIMUS MALORUM

A LEGION OF THE DAMNED SHORT STORY



# ANIMUS MALORUM

L J Goulding

The vaults shook with the ferocity of the conflict raging on the surface. Even here, beneath more than fifty metres of reinforced rockcrete and plasteel, the xenos' assault sent tremors running through to the very foundations of the basilicae.

Brother Marco knew that it would not be long, now. He had to work quickly.

Each muffled impact brought a fresh rain of debris and masonry dust from the tortured stonework over his head. Beneath the gaze of shrouded saints and the lifeless eyes of uncounted Imperial heroes, he retraced his path with an artisan's care, and considered whether what he was about to do might be remembered as anything other than sacrilege, once this war was done.

His suit-lamps cast a pair of twin spotlights before him; although the augmented systems of his battleplate could run diagnostics on the circuit before it went live, there was no substitute for one last visual confirmation that the line itself remained unbroken. Stooping low in the cramped confines of the tunnel, he brushed away handfuls of dusty, shattered bone with his gauntleted fingers and slowly, delicately, checked the connections to the forty-sixth demolition charge. In that moment, it would have been difficult to imagine anything else existing in the almost oppressive darkness beyond.

He almost started at the sudden burst of static over the vox-bead in his ear.

*Steady...*

There were a few seconds of filtered battle din before any voice came. The identi-rune displayed upon his vambrace readout showed that the link had been opened by Captain Erices himself, but it appeared that he was somewhat preoccupied. Marco heard the staccato bark of boltgun fire, the war cries of the greenskins, and the shriek of chainswords hewing xenos flesh.

*'Marco, report.'*

The captain's tone was curt, and spoke of desperation and exhaustion in equal measure. This glorious endeavour had become nothing more than a forlorn hope.

‘It is almost done, my lord,’ Marco replied, one hand cupped over the side of his head as another tremor shook the catacombs. ‘I have sealed off the access tunnels at points nineteen, twenty-six and twenty-seven. The charges are set around all of the primary junctions, and under the foundations of the main shrine complex. I await your command.’

There was another pause. A particularly loud detonation clipped out the vox-channel from Erices’s end, and Marco even felt it reverberate through the gritty flagstones beneath his feet. A greenskin’s roar was cut short by a fresh flurry of bolter fire, and the captain grunted in pain.

*‘You are prepared to remain in position, when the order is given?’*

‘Of course, my lord. If this holy ground is to be denied to the enemy advance, then we cannot risk a technical failure. This is my true calling, as a Techmarine – my worthy sacrifice will be to ensure that the demolition–’

Fresh static began to creep into the channel, rising in faint pulses like an erratic heartbeat. Marco realised that the identi-rune had flickered out, though Erices’s vital signs remained strong.

‘My lord. My lord, can you hear me?’

Fragmented bursts of vox-chatter, crazed with squealing interference, were the only answer he received. It might have been rad-fallout, or crude xenos teleportation fields fouling the Chapter’s comm-frequencies.

That, or the thousands of tonnes of earth and rock separating Marco from his battle-brothers.

‘My lord, please confirm instruction.’

The channel dissolved into pure white noise, before cutting to a sudden, gaunt silence. Marco cursed and tried to open a fresh link.

Then his suit-lamps flickered; first one then the other guttered out like a weak flame in the night wind. His enhanced sight could still pick out the rough shape of the tunnel stretching away before him in either direction, but the subterranean darkness was almost impenetrable. He recalled leaving his helm upon the hololith table in the billet chambers and gritted his teeth in frustration.

The auspex unit at his belt chimed. He took it up, expecting to see rising rad-levels or the structural integrity of the architecture above him shifting beneath the weight of the apocalyptic battle raging on the surface.

He frowned.

Movement?

There was movement inside the perimeter.

Impossible. All of the access routes had been closed off. There was no way

that the xenos could have penetrated beyond—

He froze, feeling a chill creeping through the stale air of the catacombs.

*Crude xenos teleportation fields.* Had they managed to achieve a locus? Somewhere in the vast underground reliquary chambers where there was more open space, perhaps?

He drew his plasma pistol without thinking, training it into the black maw of the tunnel. There was nowhere for him to go, even had he wished to abandon his sacred appointed duty. So he simply stood where he was, and waited.

The auspex began to chime more insistently. There were multiple contacts, approaching from the eastern vaults. His twin hearts hammered in his chest.

The vox crackled, just for a second, and Marco swore that he heard something beneath it.

A whisper. A *voice*.

He put a finger to the vox-bead. ‘Brothers, this is Marco. Your signal is weak. I have multiple inbound contacts, presumed hostile. Requesting immediate assistance, or confirmation of the demolition order.’

No response came.

He was alone. Alone in the dark.

*But for how long?*

The walls shook again, sending a whole alcove of interred remains clattering to the floor. Marco stared down the sight of his pistol, trying in vain to focus on the fitful shadows that were only half-illuminated by the weapon’s power coil.

He glanced at the auspex again. The enemy were almost upon him, though he could hear nothing of their approach. He frowned – orks were not known for their stealth.

Resigned to his fate, he dropped the unit and took up the detonator switch. If Erices and the rest had already fallen, then the order still stood and Marco would not hesitate to bring down the whole basilica district as planned. He sensed that death was near.

And then he saw them.

They were black on black, like deeper shadows in the darkness. They filled the space of the tunnel with their armoured bulk, and their eye lenses burned darkly.

These were not orks. They were Space Marines.

Marco let out a breath that he did not realise he had been holding, and lowered his pistol. ‘Holy Terra, brothers – why did you not observe approach protocols? I could have shot you down where you stood.’

The warriors did not reply, but came on. As they drew nearer, their faceplates

resolved into grim death-masks, their livery dark and fearsome.

These were not orks, but nor were they Marco's Chapter brethren.

With a fresh surge of hyperadrenaline, Marco brought his pistol back up. His back-mounted servo-arm, too, snapped around almost reflexively, the manipulator claw spinning in an improvised combat stance.

'Hold!' he called out, raising the detonator. 'Identify yourselves.'

The silent warriors halted. They gazed impassively back at him, their weapons held low.

Marco took half a step backwards. 'Identify yourselves. Now. Or I will bury us all.'

Though he could not see clearly *how* in the gloom, the foremost of them seemed to step aside in the narrow tunnel to allow another of their number to pass. He approached Marco with slow, measured strides, a chainsword sheathed at his hip.

Marco flinched at the sight of the newcomer's face. This surely could not be any servant of the Emperor...

The warrior's flame-touched pauldron bore a discoloured scroll, upon which was a name. It was a name that, for some inexplicable reason, Marco found that he did not like to linger upon for too long.

*CENTURIUS.*

Erices fired, felling a howling greenskin at almost point-blank range. Without pause, he spun inside the guard of another as it lunged, his sword flashing out to spill the brute's innards onto the dusty, rubble-strewn earth. Then he stamped down upon the throat of one that had stumbled mid-charge, before striking the head from the shoulders of a fourth.

There was no time to confirm each kill. The xenos were seemingly without number; it was as though the city had fallen beneath a dirty green tide and the only men who would not drown would be those who could kick back to the surface, with blade or boltgun. The battle-brothers of Seventh Company had fought to the bitter end, but now it seemed that the tide would claim them too.

Amidst the riotous din of battle, Erices thumbed the vox-link in his helm again.

'Marco! This is Captain Erices – damn you, fire the charges! We are overrun!'

The captain's breathing was laboured. His breastplate was already cleaved open, down to the bloody, armoured undersuit beneath it, though that was only the most noticeable of his many injuries. Mercifully, the heady cocktail of supra-

hormones and armour-shunted stimulants coursing through his system would keep the pain at bay for as long as...

Well, long enough, at least.

‘Marco, respond!’

Another thunderous impact shook the street some two hundred metres away, the blast hurling dozens of ragged xenos bodies – and body parts – into the outer walls of the buildings on either side. The line-breaker tank squadrons had suffered heavy losses themselves, but at Erices’s command had pulled back to the basilicae, firing as they went. Only two of the six Vindicators now remained, but they would continue to reap a bloody harvest until their magazines ran dry, or the enemy overwhelmed them.

A stray shot clipped Erices’s pauldron, spinning him around and pitching him to his knees in the rubble. Within the space of a heartbeat, three of his surviving warriors had muscled through the press of bodies to shield him, determined to protect their captain with their lives. It would likely come to that, too.

With a roar of effort, he powered himself back to his feet and impaled a hulking greenskin with his blade as it shouldered into the group. The beast roared and spat thick blood into the captain’s face, before swinging its right arm up – a rusted, clanking pneumatic claw that fixed around Erices’s sword arm at the wrist, and began to close.

Diving in, Brother Janner whipped out his combat blade and stabbed repeatedly at the crude pistons, but the beast merely swatted him aside and howled at Erices again.

The captain could not pull his sword free from the ork’s guts, nor could he find purchase enough to free his arm from the grip of the claw. Ceramite squealed and integrity warnings flashed inside his visor display. He planted a boot into the dying creature’s chest as it sank to the ground, desperate to haul himself away before it could shear his hand off. He felt the bones begin to grind under the inescapable pressure; then, first the ulna and then the radius splintered like dry wood. Erices gritted his teeth against the jagged blooms of pain.

Bellowing a wordless war cry, Janner hurled himself back at the beast. He had taken up a chainsword from one of his fallen brothers, and hacked again and again at the greenskin’s elbow joint, the teeth of the blade spraying blood and pneumatic fluids in a foul rain.

The creature shrieked in agony as, with one final overhand blow, Janner severed its mechanical arm before swinging around again to cleave through its bullish neck.

The sudden dead weight of the claw pulled Erices down, though mercifully he fell away from the dead greenskin and his sword slid free of its belly. He toppled onto his side, trying to open the seized mechanism and release his crushed wrist while Brother Janner and the others laid about themselves, driving the horde back.

Two more Vindicator shells streaked low over their heads from behind. The first tore into the arched fascia of a scriptorium building, filling the street with shrapnel and billowing plascrete dust, while the second blasted out the pedestal of the towering bronze statue of Saint Theobellius that dominated the ruined plaza beyond the next intersection. For an agonising moment the saint appeared to stumble, before pitching forwards with a groan of twisting metal, falling to crush those hapless greenskins who had somehow managed to survive the explosion.

Pinned in place and unable to release his sword hilt, Erices wiped the xenos blood from his helmet lenses with his free hand. He tried to open a link to Marco again.

‘Marco... this is... Erices,’ he gasped, his chest feeling leaden and tight. ‘There are only... seventeen of us left. Make... your sacrifice. Destroy the—’

Janner’s voice cut in over the vox. ‘*My lord. Beyond the plaza. Look.*’

Erices twisted his body, trying to turn and look back towards the fallen saint. In the shadow of the Cathedral of the Emperor’s Undying Magnificence, the ork advance had faltered. There seemed to be some confusion – they were firing in opposite directions.

Were they attacking one another? Was this some fractious display of animosity between the warbands, at their moment of victory?

No.

The captain blinked hard behind his visor, trying to clear his vision.

Surely, it was some madness, some illusion or hallucination brought on by the many physical traumas that his transhuman system had endured. A Space Marine might only withstand so much, he reasoned, and when his body was not allowed to fail then his mind might step in to take the hit instead.

Surely, his eyes now betrayed him. Only, no matter how hard he tried, he could not reconcile the scene that appeared to be unfolding before him with the reality that he had known only moments earlier.

Darkly armoured Space Marines strode out from the low, balustraded walkways at the base of the cathedral, their bolters blazing magnesium-bright as they cut into the xenos ranks. Through the haze of smoke and dust, more than

half a company of battle-fresh angels of death stalked down the bewildered orks, lashing out with flickering blades or unleashing gouts of green-white flame from their strange weaponry. Their livery was unknown to him, a scattered collection of bonework, fire and leering skulls upon plate as black as the depths of night, without any uniformity or suggestion of rank that Erices could discern.

Something about that gave him pause; where he should have been rallying his own men and issuing orders for a combined counter-offensive, instead he found himself transfixed by the sight of this silent, dark brotherhood.

At their head fought... who? An officer? A champion? The warrior was unhelmed, sallow and pale skinned. He hewed left and right with a chainsword whose motorised whine seemed to pierce the melee like a banshee's call, setting Erices's teeth on edge even through the filters of his armour's auto-senses. Though he was more than a hundred metres distant, the warrior's eyes blazed with murderous intent, and his resolute brothers followed him as he cut a new swathe into the xenos lines.

Before this hellish host, against all reason, the orks began to fall back.

Not daring to question the providence that had delivered the remains of his company from certain death, Erices returned his attention to the severed claw still gripping his ruined vambrace. As Janner and the rest joined the rout, the captain started to feel the inexorable pull of unconsciousness tugging at his limbs, and only then did he notice just how much of his own blood had slicked the rubble beneath him. With trembling fingers, he tried to prise the claw open even as the sounds of battle seemed to fade into the grey fog that was growing in his head.

Then the vox-link chimed, clear and clean.

'*Captain,*' came Brother Marco's voice in his ear, '*the light of Terra shines upon us, for certain.*'

Erices looked back towards the cathedral, and saw the silhouette of the Techmarine trudging up from the same walkways – the entrance to the vaults beneath the shrine complex. He held the detonator switch in his hand, with the safety catch closed.

Though he meant to reprimand Marco for failing to trigger the demolition, Erices found that he could only let out a weak, juddering gasp before his legs gave out and darkness took him.

It was a fearful darkness, haunted by half-glimpsed faces and half-recalled legends.

Light. Cold and sterile.

The chemical tang of counter-septic. The faintest scent of burnt metal.

There was a pressure in Erices's chest, and a pleasing analgesic numbness to the lack of sensation in his extremities. His cerebral interface jacks ached, his armour clearly having been pulled from his body by force.

He opened his eyes slowly, trying to counter the disconcerting spin of the chamber. The elderly regimental surgeon, Gideon, was working on him, kneeling at his side and assisted by one of the drafted medicae personnel from the civilian sanctuaries. The girl seemed too young to be proficient with a scalpel.

Rheum-blurred, stumm-addled, Erices winced when he realised that his shattered wrist was open to the air.

His eyes rolled with the movement of the chamber, and he turned his head away. He tried to reach up with his other hand to remove the ventilator mask from his face, but found that he could not summon the strength.

Two figures stood at the foot of his pallet.

He recognised Marco by the bulky servo-arm folded at his back. The Techmarine raised a gauntleted hand.

'My lord, be still. Let the sawbones do his work.'

Gideon grunted, his expression haggard and weary. He was holding a retractor pin between his teeth until he was ready to insert it. 'Aye, captain. You risk worsening the tendon and nerve damage if you move. Besides, this young adept seems to have no stomach for her work today, and my task is already hard enough.' The old man sniffed, distracted. 'I've seen some strange and terrible things in my time, but this...'

Erices turned to regard the medicae adept again. Above her surgical mask, her eyes were raw with tears and her gloved hands trembled uncontrollably. As he looked at her, she stole another fearful glance towards the foot of the pallet before sobbing openly and murmuring to herself.

She was terrified. Even someone as unused to human contact as Erices could see that.

'Ack, damn you then,' Gideon snarled, snatching the suction tube from her quivering grasp. 'Get back to your refuge. I don't need you.'

The girl blundered to her feet, bawling and making a dash for the chamber doors. The surgeon ignored her, muttering quietly.

'I'll not see you ended by civilian incompetence, captain, after surviving all the terrors of the greenskin horde.'

Erices let out a pained gasp of laughter, before sucking down the cool air of

the makeshift apothecarion in greater lungfuls through the ventilator. His eyes settled again upon Marco and his companion.

For a long while, he stared at them as Gideon closed him up.

Eventually, the old man rose to his feet, wiping his hands on a blood-stained apron.

‘My lord, I’ve done the best I can. You will not be combat-ready for at least forty-eight hours, not until the grafts in your chest pink up and the sealant gel has hardened. Your wrist will be stiff for a while, though. Your fencing days are over.’

The poor attempt at levity was met with silence. Gideon shrugged, being careful to keep his back to the chamber.

‘You only narrowly escaped an augmetic. Let me know how you feel in a week, and if you’re not happy with the movement recovery then I’m sure Brother Marco will be only too happy to take you for a bionic fitting.’

Erices could only continue to stare.

The surgeon frowned. ‘I’ll leave you to rest. Your body will recover with time, my lord.’

As Gideon left, Marco stood quietly, watching him go. In the corridor beyond the chamber, the local *Militarum* troops waited uneasily – some knelt in prayer, while others tried to steal a look into the apothecarion before the door pistoned closed. None of them seemed particularly concerned by the war that until very recently had threatened to be the final chapter in the chronicle of this world.

Erices continued to stare. He could feel his heart rates quickening.

The Techmarine smiled. ‘My lord, it gladdens me to see that you remain among us still. I was convinced that you had fallen, when we lost contact before.’ He gestured to an arming post in the corner of the chamber, lit on either side with votive candles and incense. ‘As you can see, I have restored your pistol and your helm, and they await your inspection, when you are ready. I regret that your battleplate and sword will require my further attentions before they are worthy of blessing once more.’

The captain wheezed in groggy disbelief. Was Marco blind?

He tried to speak, but his tongue felt thick and heavy. He swallowed a few times, and each time it caught in his throat.

‘Captain, is something wrong?’ Marco asked, leaning closer to him. ‘Let me know what you would have me do, and I will see to it.’

Weakly, Erices pulled the ventilator mask aside, and coughed bloody spittle onto the back of his hand. It felt like his lungs were filled with razor blades.

Each breath was a fresh agony, but he managed to choke out a single word.

‘Dead...’

Marco nodded, and straightened. ‘Let me bring you water, my lord. You are weak, and old Gideon, for all his talents, is not blessed with gentle hands.’

The Techmarine crossed the room to a still-pump and basin, and drew a cupful of cold, slightly brackish water. Erices lay helpless on the pallet, his chest heaving; he could no longer tell if the whirling disorientation he felt was a result of the injuries he had suffered, or the maddening horror of the sight before him.

Marco brought the metal cup to the captain’s unsteady lips.

‘Here, my lord. Drink. It will help.’

Erices gagged, but managed to take a few painful sips. True enough, it soothed the wretchedness of his throat, and he shifted his weight to bring his head and shoulders up. He blinked, and stared hard. Once again, he willed himself to disbelieve what he saw, but to no avail.

All the while, the *other figure* remained utterly silent.

‘Marco,’ the captain whispered. ‘There is a dead soul here.’

Marco rose again, holding the cup in both hands. ‘Not dead, my lord,’ he said, looking down at Erices. ‘Not in the sense that you or I might have once understood the term, at least. Dead men do not perform the Emperor’s will.’

The words confused Erices. It felt like they should be true, their logic undeniable – and yet, *something* was amiss. The creature that regarded him with those cold, lifeless eyes had no place in the material realm. Of that he was certain.

‘Abomination,’ he muttered. ‘That’s what it is. This is no servant of the Emperor.’

‘Ah, but that’s exactly what I thought too, my lord! When he came to me, down in the catacombs, at first I thought that we had been undone by sorcery or the perils of the warp. Mine is a rational calling, requiring a specifically practical mindset. I understand things in terms of quantifiable evidence, cause and effect, and physical truths.’ Marco scoffed. ‘What place is there in that world-view for spectral warriors and their ghost-fire?’

Walking slowly around the pallet, he gestured to the dark figure.

‘The people of this world cried out for deliverance, and when our noble company could not provide it, fate stepped in. He is their saviour, just as he is ours.’ After a moment’s contemplation, Marco smiled again. ‘Just as he is yours, my lord.’

Erices found that he did not like the tone of the statement, nor the implications

behind it. But instead of anger or indignation, an irrational, animal panic began to build in his wounded, transhuman hearts.

‘Marco...’ he gasped. ‘Marco, why does it not speak?’

The Techmarine looked slightly baffled. ‘But he does speak, my lord. He speaks to me. He tells me that his name is Brother-Sergeant Attica Centurius, and that he and his brothers were sent here to ensure that the basilicae could not fall.’

The ghoulish figure still did not move, though for the first time Erices saw that it held in its gauntlets a blackened wooden box, perhaps thirty centimetres across. It held the box as though it were a treasure, or at least something to be guarded jealously. Marco did not seem to find anything unusual in that fact.

‘He tells me that there must be a reckoning, Captain Erices. A reckoning for what has taken place here today. He tells me that no miracle is without cost, no loss without ultimate recompense.’ Then Marco’s expression became darker, and more stern. ‘There is a rising tally, captain,’ he said, ‘and the debt must be paid in souls.’

At that, Erices balled his one good fist and slouched forwards on the pallet. His words were slurred with the blood on his teeth, but his rage lent him conviction.

‘Does *it* threaten the people of this world, Brother Marco? Does this revenant creature hope that by masquerading as one of the Emperor’s finest and walking among us as some kind of hero, it can take whatsoever it pleases from the Imperium?’ He lurched, bringing his hand up to point accusingly at the figure, in spite of the pain. ‘I shall not countenance it! Not while I yet draw breath! I would spend my own life to defend the people and the sanctity of the reliquary-cities, be it from orks, heretics or even this half-dead *filth*.’

The cup slipped from Marco’s gauntlets, and it clanged to the floor in a wet splatter. He looked aghast.

‘My lord!’ he exclaimed, before regaining some sense of decorum and lowering his voice. ‘I might expect such a reaction from the common soldiery, or those poor, ignorant wretches who cower in the civilian shelters, but not from you.’

He raised his hands placatingly, sparing a look towards the silent figure.

‘There have been... *incidents*. Panic. As thankful as they are for the intervention of Centurius and his warriors, the people are unsettled by them. You have seen this for yourself – they fear them almost as much as they did the xenos brutes. The war is as good as over, but still we should seek a resolution quickly.

Out of respect for the brother-sergeant's heroism, of course, but also so that we might spare the survivors any further unnecessary distress. Let us repay the debt, my lord, and let the Legion be on their way.'

Alarm fluttered in Erices's gut.

'The *Legion*?' he croaked. 'I see only the ghoul before me.'

Marco nodded. 'They remain with us still, in the halls beyond, though it is only this unfinished matter that holds them here.'

He pointed to a battered old viewscreen mounted high up in the corner of the chamber. Erices strained to look, pain cramping his chest as he turned.

It was a closed circuit security feed. Though the frames were flickering and indistinct, they showed more than a dozen of the darkly armoured warriors standing sentinel over the billet and armoury chambers. They were still – almost unnaturally so – and stood in stark contrast to the few remaining battle-brothers of Seventh Company who tended to their duties as though nothing were out of the ordinary. The dismounted Vindicator crews were hauling a refitted cannon barrel up from the reserves, even as a distraught mortal retainer scuttled past them in the opposite direction.

The captain squinted. 'Do our brothers not see them?'

'They do, my lord,' Marco replied, 'though I have already spoken with Janner and the rest – the Legion will remain watchful while we tend to our fallen.'

Erices saw, then, the bodies that lay in the open quadrangle outside.

There were easily three score armoured forms, shrouded in rough tarpaulins and rendered as grainy silhouettes upon the screen. He winced and looked away for a moment, clutching feebly at his chest, though the pain he felt was not from the wounds that he had suffered.

'Brothers. Oh, my brothers... Forgive me.'

The feed tracked slowly to the left, to reveal the company Apothecary going about the sombre task of reclaiming the warriors' gene-seed. Gideon had joined him, the old man's head bowed reverentially as he catalogued each retrieval on a data-slate.

Marco, too, bowed his head. 'Rest well, brothers,' he murmured.

Erices could not bear to watch for a moment longer. He slumped to one side on the pallet, trying to turn his back to the viewscreen.

'Is this it?' he choked, his words almost failing him. 'Is this the price of our victory?'

The Techmarine inclined his head. 'The price, perhaps, but not the true cost. As I have said already, captain, there is a debt here to be repaid.'

Erices's sorrow soured once more. 'You speak of debts, and tallies. Speak more plainly. Does this Centurius hold *me* to blame for the dreadful loss that our Chapter has borne, here? Or does our tragedy perhaps reflect poorly upon his own efforts this day? We called out to the others, Marco – you know that. We sent out our pleas for assistance, and while some did respond, not a single company *came*. For whatever reason, our Chapter-brothers abandoned us. They abandoned this world to the horde.'

Marco stood, listening quietly. His impassive, sympathetic demeanour was the foil to Erices's grief and frustration, and the captain felt his voice cracking as he went on.

'I will take the blame for the deaths of those under my command. I will take the blame for my poor tactical decisions, or the loss of the outlying complexes. But I will never accept that this was all that could have been done here. No one can blame me for the xenos reaching this far.' Erices gritted his teeth. 'We were not sufficient, Marco. We alone were not enough to save this world, and I'll be damned if I ever say otherwise.'

From the pallet, Erices finally found the strength of will to lock eyes with the ghastly figure of Centurius. He did not falter for even a moment.

'We alone were not enough,' he repeated, at length. 'If I must repay you, then it will be only for my failings as a commander in the field. I will not accept responsibility for the judgement that stranded us here. We could never have won this war.'

Slowly, Centurius shook his head, though his eyes remained bereft of anything resembling emotion.

Erices frowned. Marco leaned towards him.

'You misunderstand, my lord. The debt is not yours.'

Confusion fogged Erices's thoughts. 'But, you said—'

Releasing the corroded seals, Centurius drew back the lid of the wooden box to reveal what lay within.

For what seemed like the longest while, the chamber was as quiet as a tomb.

Erices swallowed, steadying himself. He felt cold. Detached.

'What... What is that?'

'It is the Animus Malorum, my lord,' Marco replied. 'It is the most sacred artefact of the Legion. Brother-Sergeant Centurius would have you know that your courage and honour are second to none – you remained steadfast and true in the face of overwhelming odds, and doubtless you would have led us all to a glorious end even though you knew we could never prevail over the xenos. But

this world has great significance, even if that significance has been forgotten by the Imperium at large. He could not allow us to destroy the reliquaries. He could not allow the Animus Malorum to be lost.’

Time seemed to stretch out for an eternity in each direction. Erices could not tear his gaze from the relic – the curve of the polished brow, the deep hollows of the empty sockets. It all seemed oddly familiar.

‘The debt...’

Marco’s voice became somewhat more stern again. ‘The debt is the Imperium’s, my lord. For time immemorial, the Legion has watched over the galaxy. They are the last hope, the thin line drawn against the enemies of humanity, and they will stand where even we cannot.’ He shook his head mournfully. ‘But no one, save perhaps the almighty Emperor himself, can ward off death forever, and so much has now been lost. The tally is always rising, my lord. The Legion has suffered—’

Without warning, Centurius’s eyes snapped towards the Techmarine, glaring hard. Marco bowed his head in apology.

‘Forgive me. It is not my place to speak of such things.’

Erices barely heard him. He was entranced.

‘What does it want from me, Marco?’

Surprisingly, it was Centurius that answered, though his voice was just as haunting and terrible as Erices could ever have imagined.

*‘We would have you, Captain Erices. We would claim you as a worthy member of the Legion. You were ready to give your life in defence of this world, and even in death to deny it to the foe. From the bones of your noble kind were the foundations of the Imperium once built. Where you lead, others follow without question.’*

Erices could barely speak. Disbelief, horror. Righteousness. Humility. All fought within his being as he struggled to take in the dead warrior’s words, though he found that he did not want to hear them.

*‘As a martyr, you would be wasted. As a legionnaire, you will be eternal.’*

Fumbling weakly at the edge of the pallet with his good hand, Erices tried to reach out to Marco.

‘Brother... Brother, am I... dead?’

The Techmarine smiled one last time. ‘Not dead, my lord. Dead men do not perform the Emperor’s will.’

His eyes growing dim and his gaze drifting, Erices lay back upon the pallet. He would have sworn that he could hear voices in the growing shadows at the

corners of the chamber. ‘What must I do?’ he whispered.

Marco laid a hand upon the captain’s brow, his fingers tracing the three titanium service studs embedded there.

‘Give yourself to it, my lord. Give yourself to the Legion, and redress the balance.’

Erices stared at the polished, oversized skull in the box held out before him – into the infinite, timeless abyss that yawned in its sightless eyes. It was like a grim mirror held up to reveal the fate of all men that lived and died in this cold and pitiless galaxy.

And in that moment, he saw the truth of Centurius’s brotherhood.

It was the truth, too, of the Animus Malorum, and Erices would have wept for them all, had he any longer possessed eyes, or hearts, or even a soul of his own.

Brother Marco offered up a prayer, and drew the thin blanket up to cover his captain’s lifeless features.

‘He will be missed,’ he said, truthfully. ‘Of all his brother-captains, he was the most loved by the warriors of the Chapter. Word will reach the others, and they will mourn him. Perhaps they will finally see the folly of–’

He started at the sound of a crash in the hallway outside the apothecarion chamber. A woman shrieked in terror, somewhere further away.

Marco spun to look up at the pict-feed viewscreen, but it was fouled with formless static. Every frame was dead. Cursing, he reached instead for the vox-bead in his ear.

‘Brother Janner, send a–’

Bolter fire erupted over the open channel. Marco heard the cries of his battle-brothers, and the screams of terrified mortals.

‘Janner!’ he yelled, making for the chamber door. ‘Janner, report!’

No reply came. Nothing coherent, at least.

He barged through into the hallway, only to be greeted by a gout of green flame that overwhelmed its target and licked hungrily at the bare walls. The passage blazed with spectral light as the burning form of Brother Janner staggered into view around the corner, his flesh crisping and his eyes burning white-hot in the unnatural conflagration.

Marco drew his plasma pistol, but could only watch as his brother’s silhouetted form crashed to its knees and toppled forwards onto the flagstones.

In spite of the fire’s intensity, barely a few metres away a pair of drafted civilian personnel in grubby fatigues cowered behind an upended table. Both of

them were screaming and screaming, though they seemed untouched by the emerald heat that spiked hazard warnings all across Marco's battleplate systems.

Then, one of the Legion warriors stepped into view.

Wreathed in flame, he was like some spectral, avenging angel of darkest myth, and his cold glare froze Marco's hearts where he stood.

Forgetting his pistol almost entirely the Techmarine turned to pull back into the apothecarion chamber, only to draw up face-to-face with the grim form of Brother-Sergeant Centurius.

'T-This...' he stammered. 'This isn't w-what you...'

Marco's protestations died in his throat. He realised that it did not matter what he had thought before.

Centurius raised one hand, the Animus Malorum gripped firmly in his outstretched gauntlet. The disembodied skull's eyes now shimmered with a malignant, ethereal radiance.

'*Serve,*' the revenant sergeant intoned. '*Serve or die.*'

'No!' Marco cried, bringing his pistol up. He opened fire, the bright plasma flare briefly illuminating the bonework upon Centurius's armour. But the shots passed *through* the legionnaire, blasting impotently into the wall beyond and splattering super-heated matter in wide bursts down to the floor.

'No!' he cried again. 'Erices did not speak for all of us in this!'

Centurius seemed to consider this for a moment, before unsheathing his chainsword. '*Indeed. Your captain would have given his life selflessly and unconditionally in the service of the Emperor. But your sacrifice was hollow. Expected. Commanded. For that, your soul is forfeit.*'

Marco faltered, his vision swimming. The legionnaire was no more than a metre away from him.

'*The debt is too great, and the tally is rising. With each passing decade it is rising.*'

A cold numbness crept into his fingers, and the pistol fell from his grip. He could hear nothing but his brothers' death-agonies over the vox-link, before it crackled into a frightful silence.

'*Not for you, the immortal servitude of the Legion. You will pay what is owed.*'

The abyss beckoned. Marco felt it gaping beneath him, shot through with the howling, tormented souls of all those who had been found wanting in their final moments of service to the Emperor.

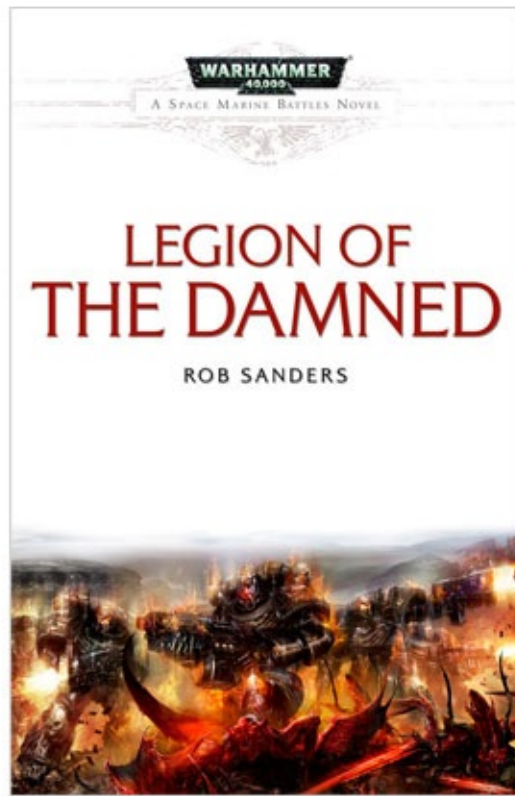
The Animus Malorum. It was all that he could see.

Then Centurius touched the unearthly relic upon Marco's forehead, and the

Techmarine knew that he was undone.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

L J GOULDING has written many stories for Black Library, including 'The Great Maw', 'Last Watch' and 'The Oberwald Ripper'. By day he works as a member of Black Library's editorial team, proving that an obsessive and encyclopaedic knowledge of the Horus Heresy can be a useful thing after all. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.



The Excoriators seem powerless to protect the small cemetery world of Certus Minor from the berserk World Eaters, but their salvation soon comes from a wholly unexpected quarter...

**BUY NOW**



**READ IT FIRST**

EXCLUSIVE PRODUCTS | EARLY RELEASES | FREE DELIVERY

[blacklibrary.com](http://blacklibrary.com)

**A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

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

**© Games Workshop Limited, 2013. All rights reserved.**

**Black Library, the Black Library logo, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy logo, The Horus Heresy eye device, Space Marine Battles, the Space Marine Battles logo, Warhammer 40,000, the Warhammer 40,000 logo, Games Workshop, the Games Workshop logo and all associated brands, names, characters, illustrations and images from the Warhammer 40,000 universe are either ®, ™ and/or © Games Workshop Ltd 2000-2013, variably registered in the UK and other countries around the world.**

**All rights reserved.**

**A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.**

**ISBN: 978-1-78251-232-5**

**No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise except as expressly permitted under license from the publisher.**

**This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.**

**See Black Library on the internet at**

**[blacklibrary.com](http://blacklibrary.com)**

**Find out more about Games Workshop's world of Warhammer  
and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at**

**[www.games-workshop.com](http://www.games-workshop.com)**

## **eBook license**

This license is made between:

Games Workshop Limited t/a Black Library, Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, United Kingdom (“Black Library”); and

(2) the purchaser of an e-book product from Black Library website (“You/you/Your/your”)

(jointly, “the parties”)

These are the terms and conditions that apply when you purchase an e-book (“e-book”) from Black Library. The parties agree that in consideration of the fee paid by you, Black Library grants you a license to use the e-book on the following terms:

\* 1. Black Library grants to you a personal, non-exclusive, non-transferable, royalty-free license to use the e-book in the following ways:

o 1.1 to store the e-book on any number of electronic devices and/or storage media (including, by way of example only, personal computers, e-book readers, mobile phones, portable hard drives, USB flash drives, CDs or DVDs) which are personally owned by you;

o 1.2 to access the e-book using an appropriate electronic device and/or through any appropriate storage media; and

\* 2. For the avoidance of doubt, you are ONLY licensed to use the e-book as described in paragraph 1 above. You may NOT use or store the e-book in any other way. If you do, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license.

\* 3. Further to the general restriction at paragraph 2, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license in the event that you use or store the e-book (or any part of it) in any way not expressly licensed. This includes (but is by no means limited to) the following circumstances:

o 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal

person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.2 you make the e-book available on bit-torrent sites, or are otherwise complicit in 'seeding' or sharing the e-book with any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.3 you print and distribute hard copies of the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.4 You attempt to reverse engineer, bypass, alter, amend, remove or otherwise make any change to any copy protection technology which may be applied to the e-book.

\* 4. By purchasing an e-book, you agree for the purposes of the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 that Black Library may commence the service (of provision of the e-book to you) prior to your ordinary cancellation period coming to an end, and that by purchasing an e-book, your cancellation rights shall end immediately upon receipt of the e-book.

\* 5. You acknowledge that all copyright, trademark and other intellectual property rights in the e-book are, shall remain, the sole property of Black Library.

\* 6. On termination of this license, howsoever effected, you shall immediately and permanently delete all copies of the e-book from your computers and storage media, and shall destroy all hard copies of the e-book which you have derived from the e-book.

\* 7. Black Library shall be entitled to amend these terms and conditions from time to time by written notice to you.

\* 8. These terms and conditions shall be governed by English law, and shall be subject only to the jurisdiction of the Courts in England and Wales.

\* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

\* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.