

# Burden of Brotherhood

By Duncan Waugh

Corian wrenched his gauntleted hand free from the other man's torso. The jagged, cruel-looking blades of the power fist's lightning claw still sparked as the remaining viscera evaporated from the weapon's ugly, curved surfaces. He watched with a heavy heart as the once indomitable power armoured warrior before him collapsed to the ground, the man's body now limp and lifeless. Try as he might, he found himself unable to look away from the blood that pooled around his feet, leaking slowly from the few uncauterised wounds left in the torso of his fellow Space Marine.

Bending down, Corian laid his palm upon the pauldron of his former brother. The Chapter Master's movements were slow and laboured, in spite of his immense physical strength. He looked down at the fallen warrior, burning the image of the other man's face into his memory. Time dragged on, the Chapter Master unable or unwilling to break the solemn reverie that he found himself in, as if by delaying he could somehow keep the spirit of the warrior before him from being lost.

Rising to his feet, Corian looked between the faces of the other members of the small cadre of captains and lieutenants that had been present for the ceremony. They were his inner circle, his advisors, and the few that he trusted to be privy to what had just taken place. Their expressions mirrored his own – ashen and grave – uncomfortable with what had happened but resigned to it nonetheless. It was not the first time they had been forced to take such extreme action, and he doubted if any of them expected it to be the last, so rampant had the blight that ate away at their Chapter become.

As he stepped away from the motionless corpse, Corian struggled to maintain his composure. To die on the battlefield was one thing – that was expected of a Space Marine – but this, on one's knees in a darkened hold far from battle... it was not right. He stared down at the man he had once called brother, a man he had killed with his own hand, and felt a dark malaise creep over him. Every time he found himself in this place, that sensation rooted itself further and further into his soul, and it became that much harder for him to come out of the other side of it.

Powerful emotions roiled deep within the Chapter Master, threatening to boil up to the surface at the mildest provocation, and he struggled to get them back under control. Cathal, one of the number

of captains that were present, moved forward, seemingly about to speak. Yet upon making eye contact with Corian, the man held silent, retiring back to the edge of the circle.

Standing in the centre of the group, their dead brother lying at his feet, Corian knew that he should say something. That he should deliver some words of substance, something that would refocus and solidify the bond they all shared with one another. But in that moment, such a natural, simple task proved utterly beyond him.

What would be the point? They all knew these ceremonies had to continue. Nothing he could say would change that simple fact, and nothing he did would ever wash the stain of his brothers' blood from his hands.

The warrior stormed out of the room, his temper flaring at the futility of it all, his mood dark. Pacing rapidly down the hallway, his frustrations built. No, what these men needed right now Corian could not provide, only the enemy would be able to do that.

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Rounds hammered into the earth around them as Cathal and his squad of Space Marines charged head first into the oncoming barrage. Cresting the rise, they cleared the open ground and were finally in amongst the heretics' lines. A chaotic melee ensued, with combat descending into a primal and disorganised crush, the enemy's sheer numbers making any kind of cohesion impossible for the Space Marines as they hacked and slashed their way through the fanatical humans.

Out of the corner of his eye, Cathal saw one of his fellow warriors, Kier, approaching an intersection in the trench works, only to be slammed backwards from the impact of a long section of steel rebar that knocked the combat blade from his hand. The large, hulking form of an Ogryn soon stomped into view, swinging its makeshift club indiscriminately and hitting friend and foe alike as it went.

'Captain!' Kier called out in surprise, drawing the full attention of the other Space Marine.

The stench of the rag-covered creature filled the air as it rained blow after blow down upon the unarmed warrior, its vast mass belying the speed and ferocity

with which it moved. Cathal struggled to make his way through the press of bodies to aid his fellow Space Marine, but for every one of the zealots he cut down, another two appeared to take their place. His chainsword had long since stopped working, the mechanism choked with chunks of bone and body matter, and the captain had resorted to using the weapon as a blunt instrument against his enemies.

At last, having freed himself from the mass of foes that sought to pull him down, Cathal quickly closed the distance to Kier. The beset warrior had been knocked backwards and was pinned against the sidewall of the trench. The berserker Ogryn raised its weapon, ready to bring the huge slab of ferrocrete down on the Space Marine's head for a final time.

Fearing that he was too late, Cathal immediately reached for his bolt pistol. 'Brother, get down!'

But before he could bring his weapon up, Kier reached out an arm towards his attacker and a giant explosion of light seared from the Space Marine's hand. The foul mutant was immediately wreathed in a pillar of ethereal flame, screaming desperately as it tried to escape the burning agony.

Rushing to Kier's side, Cathal hauled the Astartes back to his feet, the man's face a rictus of despair.

'It is in me.' Kier's voice sounded hollow as he spoke. 'Captain, the taint has touched me.'

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Corian stood amongst the flora of the strike cruiser's arboretum, clad simply in robes of course weave. He gazed up through the tall glass panes at the dark expanse that lay beyond. Taking in the great swathe of stars that lay before him, he wondered at how many lives were being spent at that very moment in defence of the hulking behemoth that was the Imperium.

The warrior remained silent as Cathal entered the quiet sanctum and joined his Chapter Master at the observation point. Several minutes passed before the captain spoke, his voice low and heavy in the muted atmosphere of their surroundings.

'Kier is undergoing the rites of acceptance as we speak, it will not be long before it is time for the purification ritual.'

Corian grimaced and Cathal turned to regard his commander, concern written across his features. 'This is not a burden you have to bear alone, my lord. I have been speaking with the others and they concur. We should all take our share of the—'

'No!' The Chapter Master's voice reverberated loudly in the enclosed space as he locked eyes with the other Space Marine. 'It is bad enough that I have to dishonour myself with such acts, I will not allow it to contaminate the others.'

He looked back out at the vast blackness spread before them, finally continuing more softly. 'It is my responsibility, and mine alone. There is nothing to be gained from sharing in this sin.'

'Corian.' Cathal continued to push. 'If you think we do not see how this wears upon your soul, you are mistaken. Why should you alone be forced to suffer through it?'

Cold laughter rang out from the Chapter Master, the atmosphere growing noticeably tense. 'Why should I suffer? Me? Let me ask you, Cathal, when I still the beating hearts of our brothers, who do you think it is that truly feels pain?'

The captain did not have time to answer before his commander continued.

'How many of our own people's lives have we been forced to cut short? How many of them have we led down to some dark, forsaken corner of this ship before bleeding them dry? And for what? Because they dared to manifest the psychic gifts that the Emperor himself imparted to us? Is that why we must end their existence and expunge their glories from our Chapter's history?' Corian threw his arms wide with incredulity. 'Why must we hide what we are?'

'You know how the High Lords will view such rampant manifestation of latent psychic abilities, my Lord.' Cathal answered him. 'And you know exactly what their response will be.'

The Chapter Master's eyes grew wide with intense fervour. 'And how does spilling the blood of our own help the Imperium? Where is the gain in that?'

Corian gestured out at the vista beyond the ship's exterior. 'Look at it, an entire galaxy filled with

the weak and the simpering, the corrupt and the decadent, and all the while we fight and die. Then we have to hide what we are from them, as if we are somehow the unclean and unworthy ones?’

He turned on his captain accusingly. ‘Kier was one of yours, you cannot tell me that you think this is right.’

Cathal took a step towards his Chapter Master, his voice rising to match the level of the other Space Marine. ‘You know I do not! But think for a moment about what you are saying. If we allowed knowledge of this corruption to get out, it could damn us all. Every one of our brothers would be put to the sword if we were discovered, and you know that!’

Corian’s anger was blunted at the pain evident in the other man’s eyes, and he raised a hand in apology. Searching his old friend’s face for a reaction, the Chapter Master asked him carefully. ‘But what if there was another way?’

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The rest of Corian’s inner circle were ready and waiting when the Chapter Master stalked into the dark cargo hold. In the centre of the room, dressed in full battle armour, stood Kier, his helmet under one arm and his head held high.

The Chapter Master strode purposefully through the group, coming to a stop before his fellow warrior, his true emotions suppressed beneath a stoic mask of detachment.

The air in the room was solemn and heavy, many of the assembled observers having fought alongside Kier numerous times over the years, some of them owing their lives to the Space Marine.

Corian took a deep breath, steeling himself for what was about to come. Every time he had to execute one of his own he could feel a piece of himself break deep within. No fighter should ever have to be the one to end the life of one of his brothers.

These men were everything to him. The brotherhood that was forged between a group of warriors who fought alongside one another – let alone ones who bore the same shared genetic lineage as the members of the Adeptus Astartes – ran to the very core of who they were. These were people he would risk his life for without a moment’s hesitation, and every part of him rebelled at the mere thought of what he was about to do.

With a sharp cracking sound, the Chapter Master activated the power feeds that ran through his

gauntlet and into the blades of the lightning claw. The room was immediately lit with the bright blue glare given off by the weapon, casting stark shadows across the features of the various individuals stationed around the room.

Kier did not flinch at the sudden noise, the man’s posture sober and resolute, despite the knowledge of what was about to befall him.

The Chapter Master looked down into the other man’s eyes. In those black recesses, all he could see were the faces of each and every one of his comrades whose lives he had been forced to cut short. Corian’s fingers twitched involuntarily, causing Kier to look down, unsure of what was happening as the subtle movements sent light cascading around the enclosed space.

Corian had had few interactions with the warrior before him, but he could see he bore the same strength of will and resolute spirit that were the defining characteristics of their Chapter, and it left him with little doubt that the man’s loss would be felt deeply amongst his fellow warriors.

Corian had made a point of learning the names of every Astartes he had executed as a result of this so-called blight making its way through their Chapter. He had made sure to memorise them all, lest their sacrifices be forgotten, and the thought of adding yet another name to that ever growing list finally broke something deep within him.

The continuous crackling of the lightning claw fell silent as the Chapter Master deactivated the massive weapon, plunging the hold into near darkness once more. The faces of his assembled confidantes looked up, questioningly.

Corian’s voice was unsteady and ragged as he tried to force the words out. ‘No...’

The room remained silent.

‘Not again.’ The Chapter Master shook as he spoke, the servos of his armour grinding with sympathetic movements. ‘Do we not bleed enough for them already, that now we must kill our own as well?’

Some members of the group looked to one another with concern. Corian’s voice grew louder as he straightened his posture, catching the eyes of each man in turn.

‘I know that many of you also feel it, this thing buried deep within us. This...’ The Chapter Master struggled to find the right words. ‘...awakening. It

will take each of us in turn eventually, I have no doubt now.'

There was nodding amongst the others as the Chapter Master placed a placating arm on Kier's shoulder, before returning to address the group as a whole.

'Are we to lie down and die like dogs for no other reason than the way we were made?'

He continued, his voice becoming increasingly fervent. 'We are warriors of the Adeptus Astartes! How much have we suffered and endured for the Emperor and his precious Imperium, only for us to stand here, fearing sanction? And as what? Heretics? Witches?'

Murmurs of assent echoed around the room.

The Chapter Master pointed to each man in turn. 'I bleed for you, and you, and you, my brothers, but not for this.' He pointed to the Aquila emblazoned across his chest armour. 'Not anymore.'

Corian gestured dramatically to include every person in the room. 'Between us we have conquered entire sub-sectors, single-handedly destroying whole legions of xenos and human alike. What do we truly have to fear?'

The faces of the Space Marines that surrounded him mirrored Corian's own conviction.

'We are warriors, not cattle. We are the predators, not the prey. It is time we acted as such.'

It was Cathal who stepped forward, earnestness written plainly across his face. 'What would you have us do, lord?'

Corian grasped him with both hands, a cold smile forming as he answered. 'We take back our destiny, my brother. For you, me, and every one of our comrades that have died protecting this hollow, corrupt ideology of Mankind.' The Chapter Master turned to take in the rest of the room, speaking with surety. 'We fight for us now.'

'Some will resist, brother.' Cathal warned quietly. 'What do we do then?'

Corian's face took on an almost fanatical zeal. 'Then we must enlighten them.'

