

CADIAN BLOOD

An Imperial Guard novel

By Aaron Dembski-Bowden

When the Imperial shrine world of Kathur is blighted by Chaos, the brave Guardsmen of Cadia are sent to reclaim it. The plague of Nurgle has set in deeply on the planet, forcing the Cadians into battle with an innumerable legion of the infected. In the midst of battle, Captain Parmenion Thade is thrust into an unlikely commanding role. Yet, he cannot imagine what lies ahead on Kathur, and just how important it will be to ensure victory there...



About the Author

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is a British writer with his beginnings in the videogame and RPG industries. He worked extensively on the Werewolf: the Forsaken, RuneQuest and World of Darkness game lines, and was the Senior Writer on the million-selling MMO Age of Conan: Hyborean Adventures. He lives and works in York, UK.

•IMPERIAL GUARD•

IMPERIAL GUARD OMNIBUS ONE
Steve Parker, Steve Lyons and Mitchel Scanlon

DESERT RAIDERS
Lucien Soulban

ICE GUARD
Steve Lyons

GUNHEADS
Steve Parker

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The autocannon roared.

‘Fall back!’ Vertain cried, wrenching his control sticks.

His walker reversed, the backwards-jointed legs protesting with a hiss of angry pistons. Solid rounds pinged and clanged from the pod’s sloped armour, while the Sentinel’s underslung cannon replied in a percussive burst of thunderclap after thunderclap.

The plaza had erupted in gunfire a few minutes before.

An expanse of concrete inlaid with a mosaic of the saint formed a courtyard between several towering temples.

The squadron had been scouting here when the first sniper shots rang out. Within a minute, plague-slain were shambling from the temples, led by cultists wearing ragged remains of Kathurite PDF uniforms. They came in a tide, immediately broken in places as the Sentinels

opened up with their autocannons, drowning out the grunts and wails of the dead.

‘We are not dying here,’ Vertain spoke into his vox-link. ‘Break formation and fall back.’ He never heard an acknowledgement from the others. He could barely hear his own voice over the carnage unfolding around his walker.

The squadron wasn’t going to win a straight-up fight, and they all knew it. They were scouts, and the Sentinels were armed for taking shots at armoured infantry and light tanks. The high-calibre rounds from the walkers’ autocannons were tearing holes in the crowds of plague-slain, but they were next to useless against such a horde. Greer’s walker staggered, almost thrown from balance as its stabilisers strained to deal with striding over piles of moving corpses. In a move worthy of a medal, Vertain saw the other pilot condense his leg pistons, lowering his cockpit pod for a moment, then spring upwards to clear the mound of writhing dead he’d been standing atop. Greer landed with a thudding clank that shook the ground, turning as he walked backwards and opening fire

on the plague-slain again. A swarm of corpses dressed as monks flew apart in a grey-red cloud as three autocannon rounds hit home.

‘That was beautiful,’ said Vertain through clenched teeth as he kept laying down fire.

‘I look forward to my promotion,’ crackled Greer. Vertain joined his fire arc to Greer’s, and felt his Sentinel’s gait start to drag. He was limping now, limping badly.

‘You’ve got three of them on your right leg, sir,’ Greer crackled. ‘Kick them free.’

Vertain tried. His Sentinel replied by lurching violently to the right with a screech of protesting stabilisers. Alarms flashed across his console as his leg pistons vented air pressure.

‘They’ve ruined my stabilisers. I’m not kicking anything for a while.’ As he spoke, Vertain’s cockpit tilted again. His helmeted head smacked against the side of his pod, the pain painting his vision in a palette of greys.

The dead were climbing his walker now. He heard their fists beating on the armour plating on his cockpit. They

might even drag him down if enough of them could scramble up.

His vox sparked live with a burst of static. ‘Vertain, this is the captain.’ Emperor’s blood, Thade’s voice was clear. He sounded close. ‘Acknowledge.’

With sick on his breath and half-blind through a concussion, Vertain reported the situation, ending with the four words Captain Thade had been praying not to hear.

‘Dead Man’s Hand: Broken.’

‘Thirty seconds, Vertain. That’s all.’

It turned out to be just under twenty seconds.

The Chimeras tore into the plaza, a rolling thunderhead that slammed into the horde of wailing dead. Black as a panther, the command Chimera pounded into the first group, grinding them into bloody gobbets. It swerved to a halt, cutting down the plague-slain nearby with angry beams of light from its multilaser turret. The irritated whine of high-energy las-fire shrilled above the moans and crunches of combat.

The other Chimeras, their hulls a gun-metal grey, followed in the wake of destruction. Dozer blades bolted to the front of the troop transports – specifically banned from ungentle use in clearing roads of corpses – now hammered the plague-slain to the ground to be crushed under heavy treads.

The drivers spread out to form a protective ring around the embattled walkers, turret fire slicing through the bodies of anyone approaching the tanks. In a chorus of clangs, thirty rear ramps slammed down onto the mosaic ground, and the 88th spilled from their transports: guns up and firing red flashes. Thade was first out of his Chimera, chainsword raised and howling.

‘Secure the walkers! For the Emperor!’

The captain’s first foe wasn’t dead. A PDF traitor ran at him, slowed by the disease ravaging his body. In his fist was a broken bayonet. Thade’s chainsword sang in a savage backhand swing, and the traitor’s head left his shoulders.

‘First blood to Cadia!’ someone shouted to his left.

The fight lasted less than two minutes. Lasguns cracked out head-shots in orderly volleys, scything down the enemy in waves. The Cadians stayed shoulder to shoulder in their squads, taking no casualties in the brief battle. When the last of the plague-slain was dragged from the leg of Vertain's walker and shot in the back of the head, Thade holstered his pistol. The sergeants from all fifteen squads ringed him, every man standing ankle-deep in the dead. The stench rising around was enough for several men to don their rebreather masks.

'88th: status.'

'Unbroken,' fifteen squad leaders chorused.

'Unbroken,' Vertain sat in his cockpit, the door opened so he could speak freely. He made the sign of the aquila.

'Close call, though.'

Thade nodded. 'We move to retake the Shrine of the Emperor's Unending Majesty. We're hearing nothing from the Janus 6th in there, and if they have any survivors left, they're almost certainly retreating deeper into the monastery.' Every eye turned to the building a kilometre away through the winding streets. Half of it

still burned. ‘We’re going in – securing it where the Janusians failed – and waiting to be reinforced. If the resistance is beyond our capabilities, then we get comfortable and ask Reclamation command what they want us to do. Questions?’

‘Primary threats?’ asked one of the sergeants.

‘Potentially. Nothing solid yet. If we find them, we take them down. If there are too many, we consolidate and await reinforcement. Vertain, report.’

The Sentinel pilot cleared his throat. ‘We pulled back to this plaza when the fighting in the temple grounds abated. We were looking for a staging ground, sir. The last we saw at the monastery, the enemy’s rearguard was following the forward elements in. The main doors were breached. Six, maybe seven hundred Remnant,’ he said, referring to Kathurite PDF traitors. ‘Double the number of plague-slain.’

‘Seven hundred secondary-class threats, and fifteen hundred third-class,’ the captain confirmed. ‘Nothing changes. We split into three forces, each with specific objectives. I’ll take one hundred men to the central

chambers. Lieutenant Horlarn, you take a hundred to the undercroft and make sure there's no way into the shrine from underground. Lieutenant Darrick, you've got the bell towers. Questions?'

No one spoke.

'The Emperor protects,' said Thade. 'Now move.'

Resistance was nowhere to be seen. Gaining access to the monastery proved to be uncomfortably easy.

The towering gates were broken, torn from their hinges, and there was little sign of enemy forces outside of a few shambling loners wandering around the expansive courtyard. These ended their pathetic existences under precision las-fire, as the Guardsmen filed from their Chimeras and moved in squads up the wide marble stairway to the front entrance. The air reeked of the dead and the burning sections of the monastery itself, a potent musk that again inspired a lot of rebreather use.

Minutes became hours. Deep within the labyrinthine monastery, the Shrine of the Emperor's Unending Majesty, almost three hundred soldiers of the Cadian

88th were on the hunt. Bodies of plague victims littered the stone floor, just as they did in each passage and chamber the Cadians had passed through in the last few hours. The Janusians hadn't just been besieged; they'd been infiltrated and annihilated. Bodies of the regiment, blood soaking their urban camouflage gear, were strewn everywhere in the monastery alongside the enemy dead. Their last stand had been inglorious and, to Cadian eyes, rather unimpressive. The Janus 6th was scattered in a poor defensive spread across the monastery's series of awe-inspiring sermon chambers, their final resting places showing to the trained glances of the 88th just which soldiers had died fighting, and which ones had broken ranks to seek an escape.

No sign of primary threats so far. In fact, Thade and his officers had just about abandoned the notion of seeing any first-class targets. They had real problems now – enough tertiary threats to last a lifetime. The plague-slain were everywhere inside the monastery, and in far greater numbers than those seen by Dead Man's Hand outside.

Room by room, the Guardsmen cleansed the holy site, cutting down the shrieking dead as they staggered in feral mindlessness, nothing but shells of unfocused malice.

Poisonous blood showered Captain Thade as he impaled a howling woman with a thrust of his chainsword. A hundred whirring teeth sawed through fleshy resistance, and the woman cried blasphemies as she was disembowelled.

It was hard to tell the dead ones from those that still lived. Neither would lie down and die when you wanted them to, and they all made the same noises.

Thade yanked hard, freeing the blade from her torso in a light spray of near-black blood and fragments of flesh that smelled beyond foul. The rot taking hold of the enemy made such work all the easier. Decay softened the flesh, making it weak under Imperial las-fire and vulnerable to the howling bite of chainswords.

The corpse began to rise again, ponderously clambering to its feet despite being gutted and missing an arm.

Thade's blade silenced as he killed the power. He'd been fighting with the weapon for almost half an hour, and his muscles burned with effort. Exhausted to his core, he pulled his bolt pistol and pressed the muzzle against the woman's broken skull. The air within the monastery was cold, but he blinked stinging sweat from his eyes.

'In the name of the Emperor, just die.'

The bolt shell hammered into the corpse's head and exploded within the brain, wetting the Imperial Guard captain with more chunks of decaying matter. A flying shard of skull hit his breastplate with enough force to leave a scratch.

The sharp cracks of a las-fire chorus died down around him, and Thade's command squad dispersed around the barely-decorated contemplation chamber. Each of the nine fighters scattered, but stayed in eye contact with at least one other member of the squad. Every man wore dark grey fatigues and black chest armour made filthy from the day's fighting.

'I need vox,' Thade called out across the cavernous sermon chamber. Janden moved over to him, jogging

around the dip in the floor where a mosaic of the Emperor had been defiled some weeks ago. The room reeked of urine and the vast amounts of animal blood used to deface the image.

Janden handed Thade the speech horn connected to the bulky vox-scanner on his back.

‘You’re live, captain.’

‘Squad Venator to Alliance. Acknowledge signal and give me a situation report.’

The pause of several seconds put Thade’s nerves on edge. There were a million ways this mission could go wrong. Even with the greatest trust in his men, he hated his squads scattered in this hive of the dead.

‘Alliance here, captain. Situation: Unbroken. We’re close to the chorus chambers atop the north-eastern bell tower. We need ten, fifteen more minutes to get in place.’

‘Acknowledged,’ Thade replied, and nodded to Janden.

‘Squad Venator to Fortitude and Adamant. Report.’

The pause this time lasted longer. Janden shook his head at the captain’s glance; it wasn’t interference. For once.

‘Adamant here, captain. Situation: Unbroken. We’re entering the undercroft now.’

‘This is Fortitude, Unbroken. Moving with Adamant to support. Heavy resistance in the cellars delayed us. We found where the Remnant were regrouping, and they’re not regrouping anymore, sir. Forty minutes to mission objective.’

‘Understood. Be careful,’ Thade said.

And so it went. Squad Phalanx next, then Endurance and Defiance, on and on down the line. The captain listened to the brief situation reports from each of his fifteen squads. Casualties were light, despite the fighting being fierce.

Thade led his one hundred men in a loose scattering of squads, moving to take control of the primary altar chambers at the heart of the monastery. Another hundred followed First Lieutenant Horlarn to secure the undercroft and purge the subterranean tombs of the enemy. Second Lieutenant Darrick led the last hundred, securing the four bell towers thrusting up from the monastery’s central domes. The holy building was the

size of a small town – the 88th had spent the best part of three hours cutting right to the core of it.

One last vox-report to make. The most important one.

‘This is Captain Thade. 88th reports progress as expected. Resistance medium-to-heavy. No sign of primary targets, repeat: zero sightings on primary threat. Resistance so far, secondary threats twenty per cent, tertiary threats eighty per cent.’

This simple message was all that was required. He doubted it even reached the lord general’s base, but it still had to be done.

Janden took the speech horn when Thade handed it back.

‘Only twenty per cent on the secondary threat? Felt like more.’

Thade smiled at the vox-officer with the bandaged arm.

‘I’ll bet it did.’

At his order, the squad moved out, heading deeper into the monastery. The chambers grew larger, expanding into halls, each one majestic in size and increasingly grand in ostentation, built by faithful hands many thousands of years ago. Arched walls and ceilings were

supported by great spines of stone, thickly jutting from the skeletal architecture. Stylised pillars rose to the roof, each one bathed in the weak dusk light coming through the shattered stained glass windows.

The ten soldiers in Thade's squad fanned out, stalking through the near-darkness in a familiar ritual of stops and starts. Run to a pillar. Crouch, rifle up to scan ahead.

Run to the next pillar...

Something cried out ahead. It was either inhuman, or hadn't been alive in weeks. Thade looked around the pillar he was kneeling behind, one hand on the faded red carpet for balance. He saw nothing, but heard the moan again.

A few dozen metres ahead of him, the sight blocked by the pillars, a lasgun fired with a single, sharp crack.

'Contact!' someone called out. 'Tertiary threat confirmed.'

The Cadians advanced, rifles up and no need to hide. A small group of plague victims, no more than twenty, spilled sluggishly from an arch behind a torn red curtain.

Thade squeezed off a shot with his pistol, detonating the head of the lead curse victim.

‘Kill them!’ he shouted, and nine lasguns lit the chamber with flickering red flashes of pinpoint laser fire. Not a single shot missed, but the disease-wracked corpses still took several direct hits to put down for good.

The soldiers stood around the bodies after the killing was done. It was Kathur Reclamation protocol to speak short prayers for each of the fallen when time allowed.

Captain Thade ordered his men on without a word. Time was not on their side.

The squad moved through a series of smaller chambers, each one a mosaic-rich tribute to Saint Kathur’s deeds, paid for by hundreds of generations of pilgrims. Progress was fast until the squad’s eleventh man, wheezing as he leaned upon an aquila-topped black staff, rasped the captain’s name.

Thade halted. ‘Make this good, Seth.’

‘I hear someone calling. Crying out, as if from a great distance.’ The sanctioned psyker wiped a fleck of foamy spittle from his lips with a trembling hand. His powers

were erratic at the best of times, waxing and waning without his control. This campaign was a nightmare – Kathur was wreathed thick in warp disruption, and the psychic toll on the Imperial Guard’s telepaths was immense. Five had died of embolisms in the weeks since planetfall, one of heart rupture, and a further two had fallen under possession by nameless horrors born of the warp.

‘Calling out to us?’ Thade asked.

‘I... I cannot tell. There is something ahead.’ Here Seth paused to suck air through his teeth. ‘Something powerful. Something old.’

‘Primary threat?’ asked Janden. This was greeted by a short wave of chuckles from the gathered soldiers and Thade shaking his head. ‘Not likely,’ he said.

The captain resisted the urge to sneer at the wheezing, thin-limbed psyker. Their eyes met and the gaze held for several moments. The captain’s eyes were the typical pale violet of the Cadian-born, while Seth’s were a deep blue, bloodshot under the band of metal across his brow that sank cables into his brain to amplify his unreliable

talents. ‘Anything more specific?’ Thade tried to keep the dislike out of his voice and his expression. He was almost successful.

‘An agent of the Archenemy.’

‘In the next chamber?’

‘In one of the chambers ahead. I cannot be sure. The warp clouds everything.’

Thade nodded, inclining his head and leading the squad on. ‘Janden, what chambers are ahead?’

The vox-officer consulted his data-slate, tapping a few buttons. ‘A series of purification halls. Pilgrims used them to bathe before being allowed entrance to the inner temple.’

‘A bath house? In a cathedral?’ Zailen, the squad’s weapons specialist, walked alongside Janden. The hum of his live plasma gun set the troopers’ teeth on edge. Thade felt his scalp prickling, but fought down the sensation as he spoke.

It was Thade who answered. ‘Saint Kathur, Emperor rest his bones, was famed for his purity. It makes sense those

who came to see his remains would be required to ritually cleanse themselves.’

Zailen shrugged and looked away – a habit of his when he didn’t have the words to answer.

Ahead of them, the great double doors leading into the purification chambers stood closed. Defiled engravings of female angels, carved of marble now stained with blood and body matter, stared down at the eleven men.

Thade cleared his throat.

‘Trooper Zailen?’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Open the doors.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Zailen raised his plasma gun and squeezed the first trigger. The baseline hum of the arcane weapon intensified in an angry whine of massing energy. He breathed a quiet ‘Knock, knock...’ and pressed the second trigger.

The plasma gun roared.

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