



Phalanx

Ben Counter

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Phalanx, the great star fort of the Imperial Fists, is playing host to Space Marines from half a dozen Chapters, alongside Inquisitors, Sisters of Battle and agents of the Adeptus Mechanicus. They have come together to witness the end of a Space Marine Chapter, as the once-noble Soul Drinkers, now Chaos-tainted renegades and heretics, are put on trial for their crimes against the Imperium. But dark forces are stirring and even this gathering of might may not be enough to guard against the evil that is about to be unleashed...

About the book

The epic Soul Drinkers series concludes in this action-packed novel from the acclaimed author of Galaxy in Flames. Phalanx first appeared as a serialised novel in Hammer & Bolter issues 1 to 12.

Phalanx Details

Date : Published October 2011 by The Black Library

ISBN :

Author : Ben Counter

Format : ebook 412 pages

Genre : 40k, Science Fiction

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From Reader Review Phalanx for online ebook

Simon Cressey says

This was not bad but not the best 1/2 out of 10

Christopher Rolley says

A good end to the series, I would defiantly read it again :)

Jean-Luc says

5 stars is insufficient to convey how good this book is.

The Soul Drinkers are on trial for the crimes they committed in the first 5 books. They are disarmed and isolated on the Imperial Fists fortress monastery spaceship, the Phalanx, and their situation has never been more grim.

The book opens with some typos and some confusion... Wasn't Borganor of the Howling Griffons? Maybe I'm illiterate? The editor auto-replaced "chaos" with "Chaos" w/out differentiating insanity and the Ruinous Powers. Sloppy, sloppy, but this seems to be a problem with *all* ebooks.

Over and over I've praised Ben Counter's writing. But for the record, some of the battles in this book are so over the top, so (to correctly use an overworked hyperbole) *epic*, words do fail sometimes.

Gethsemar and Daviks charged into the heart of the library labyrinth at the same time, charging in from two directions to catch Sarpedon off-guard.

Sarpedon was never off-guard.

Seriously though, this book is amazing:

Luko slid a hand into one of his lightning claw gauntlets. Its weight felt tremendous, and not just because Luko hadn't yet donned the power armour that would help compensate for its size.

'I used to dream,' he said to Salk, 'of all this ending peacefully. At least, I told myself, an execution is not a battle. But there is one last battle now. You would have thought I'd have learned by now that there is always one last battle.'

‘Captain?’ said Salk.

‘I hate it,’ said Luko. ‘Fighting. Bloodshed. I have come to hate it. I have lied about this for a long time, Sergeant Salk, but there hardly seems much point now.’

‘I can barely believe you are saying these things, captain.’

‘I know. I disgust myself too, sometimes.’

‘No, captain,’ said Salk. ‘You don’t understand. You hate war, but you fight it because you know you must. There is nothing to disgust in that. Sometimes I take pride, or even pleasure, in it, and I take that and carry it with me to bring me through the worst of it. But without that, I do not know how I could fight. You are braver than I, Captain Luko.’

‘Well,’ said Luko, ‘that’s one way of looking at it.’

‘Let’s make our execution a little more interesting, brother,’ said Salk.

Luko clamped one of his greaves around his left leg. ‘Amen to that, brother.’

Did you ever think you’d read about a Space Marine who had tired of war? I didn’t.

‘Explain,’ said Varnica. ‘As you would to a layman.’

‘Think upon it, brother,’ said Gethsemar. ‘Here Space Marine fights Space Marine. There is nothing new about that. But will it be the final time?’

‘I think not,’ replied Varnica.

‘Then you begin to see our point. What is a Space Marine? He is a man, yes, but he is something far more. He is told that he is far more from the moment he is accepted into his Chapter, when he is little more than a child. His earlier memories may not even survive his training. He may conceive in his own mind of no time but one where he was superior to any human being. What might result from a mind so forged?’

‘He has no doubt and no fear,’ replied Varnica. ‘Such alteration of a man’s mind is necessary to create the warriors the Imperium needs. I see it as a sacrifice we make. We give up the men we might have become to instead serve as Adeptus Astartes. If you believe this is a mistake, commander, then I would be compelled to differ with you.’

‘Ah, but there it is! Do you see, Librarian Varnica? It is true that what we do to our minds to make us Space Marines is as necessary as teaching us to shoot. But what sin is locked into us through such treatment?’

‘Brutality?’ said Varnica. ‘Many times Space Marines have gone too far in punishing the Emperor’s enemies, and ordinary men and woman have suffered as a result.’

‘Brutality is a necessity,’ said Gethsemar. ‘A few thousand dead here and there mean nothing compared to the millions spared through the intimidation of our foes that our potential for

brutality allows. No, it is a far deeper sin of which I speak, something not so far removed from corruption.'

'Corruption is a strong word,' said Varnica, folding his arms and straightening up. The threat was clear. 'Then what is it?'

'It is pride,' replied Gethsemar. 'A Space Marine does not just think he is superior to the ordinary citizens of the Imperium. He thinks, whether his conscious mind accepts it or not, that he is superior to other Space Marines, too. We all have our way of doing things, do we not? Would we all resist any attempt to change us, though violence may be the only route doing so can take? So prideful we are that Space Marines will never stop killing Space Marines. For every Horus Heresy or Badab War, there are a thousand blood duels and trials of honour brought about by our inability to back down. That is the real enemy we face here. The Soul Drinkers were turned from the Imperium by pride. It is pride that motivates us in destroying them, for all we talk of justice. Pride is the enemy. Pride will kill us.'

Varnica thought about this. 'Throne knows we all have our moments,' he said. 'But the mind of a Space Marine is a complicated thing. Can such a simple thing as pride really be its key? And from the way you speak, commander, I would imagine you have a solution?'

'Oh, no,' protested Gethsemar. 'The Sons of Sanguinius all accept that we are doomed. A Space Marine's destructive pride is the only thing keeping us all fighting, and we are the only thing keeping the Imperium from the brink. No, it is our way to observe our in-fighting for the death throes they are, to understand what we truly are before the end comes.'

Varnica smiled grimly. 'For all your gilt and finery, Angel Sanguine, you are a pessimist. The Doom Eagles seek out the worst atrocities the galaxy commits because we want to put things right. It will not happen in any of our lifetimes, but it will happen, and it is the Space Marines who will do it whether we are too prideful for our own good or not. Why fight, if you believe all is lost no matter what you do?'

Gethsemar shook out his hand, and the dust drifted away on the thin wind. 'Because it is our duty,' he replied.

Did you ever think you'd read about Space Marine so self-aware that they could discuss their place in the universe? I didn't.

Graevus let the battle-lust in him take over. It was a rare that he permitted himself to completely let go, to abandon everything that made a Space Marine a disciplined weapon of war and allow the born warrior, the celebrant of carnage, to take control.

Graevus's mutated hand clamped around the Howling Griffon's head and dropped his axe among the burning debris. He twisted the Howling Griffon's head around until a seal gave on his helmet, and the helmet came away.

The Howling Griffon was the image of Graevus himself, a gnarled and relentless veteran, the kind of man that could be trusted to hold any line and execute any order when the fire came down.

These are our brothers, thought Graevus.

They are the same as us.

The thought broke through Graevus's battle-lust. He tried to force it down but it would not be quieted.

Graevus took a step back from the Howling Griffon. The Griffon, disarmed with his heavy bolter lying down in the wreckage, scabbled away from Graevus. Graevus picked up his axe, not taking his eyes from his opponent.

‘Fall back!’ shouted Graevus. ‘Fall back! To your lines! Fall back!’

Did you ever think you'd read about a Space Marine blinking on the verge of victory? I didn't.

‘Then who will go?’ said Tyrendian.

‘Sergeant Salk,’ said Sarpedon. ‘I ask that you select a squad and accompany me. I cannot do this alone. Captain Luko, you shall take command of the rest of the Chapter.’

‘You are our Chapter Master,’ replied Luko. ‘It is to your leadership that our battle-brothers look. Would you deny them that in their final battle? Let one of us go.’

‘No, captain,’ retorted Sarpedon. ‘I am faster than any Space Marine. Foul as they are, my mutations serve me well in that regard. Not to mention, I would send no man to face Iktinos or Daenyathos save myself. And I may be their leader by right, but ask any Soul Drinker what man he would prefer to fight alongside and those who are honest will name Captain Luko.’

Luko did not reply for a long moment. ‘If I was asked that question,’ said Luko levelly, ‘then I would say Chapter Master Sarpedon. Is it my fate that I will be denied that in these, our last moments?’

‘It is,’ said Sarpedon. ‘I promised you peace, captain. It will come soon. I did not promise I would be there when it arrived. Forgive me, but these are my orders.’

Luko said nothing, but saluted by way of reply.

I wept when I read that, because I understood there was only one way this could end. Just thinking about that scene makes me tear up.

This book is 1 of only 4 I re-read during 2012. (The others being Pariah, GEB, and Choices of One.) Such a rare joy to find an author who understands how to finish a story.

Kamal Sawyer says

A sad end. To Luko, Graevus & Sarpedon. Last of the Soul Drinkers :(

John McPeake says

This was a great way to end a great series. I love that the ending is both somber and a satisfying finale to the series.

My one gripe is that some of the copyediting is dreadful. I wasn't aware that 'butapedon' was a word?

Callum Shephard says

The Soul Drinkers saga is one of Black Library's long standing series, covering the trials of a space marine chapter who were loyal to the Emperor but fought the Imperium. Being nihilistic, grim even by the standards of Warhammer 40,000 and willing to mix up the status quo of the universe it has stood out amongst Black Library products as something unique.

For six novels the Soul Drinkers have fought and died in the name of their beliefs, and in Phalanx their tale finally comes to an end, in fire but not in darkness.

After the events of Hellforged and the betrayal of the Adeptus Mechanicus, chapter master Sarpedon and the remaining Soul Drinkers have been taken captive, stripped of armour and weapons. As a chapter of Rogal Dorn their captors, the Imperial Fists, jail them in the Phalanx to await stand trial for their actions rather than outright killing them due to chapter traditions.

It is not simply the Soul Drinkers' fate which hangs in the balance however. Thousands of years old machinations are coming to a close and the chapter is beginning to realise their "freedom" might have been a part of a detailed plan devised by another being.

Phalanx is definitely one of the best novels of the saga. Ben Counter has always excelled at two things in Warhammer, showing just how dark the universe can be and giving bittersweet endings which allow for the protagonists to gain some victory even in failure.

Counter fully uses both in this and gives the chapter a send off entirely fitting of the series. It makes it very clear from early on that the novel will feature the Soul Drinkers' final hours. They have lost everything, imprisoned on one of the best defended fortresses in the Imperium and are standing trial for their crimes. Crimes which are not simply against the Imperium but also against the God-Emperor, and Sarpedon is quickly beginning to realise they could all too easily be guilty of all charges.

The novel spends a lot of its first half focusing upon the Soul Drinkers' actions in the past and their current state. It's something used well as this is a finale but some readers might find the build up to be ponderously slow. It's a similar problem people have brought up with The Outcast Dead, there is a great deal of time spent talking but very little in the way of action until quite late on.

Thankfully the weight of the revelations being given helps keep a reader's attention, giving away information which changes much of what we knew about the Soul Drinkers. Very little of this can be talked about without giving away spoilers but what is revealed here makes the novel the most significant installment to the saga since the original novel Soul Drinker.

When the book does move from the trial to a battle what it gives us is one of the most desperate battles seen in the books, with astartes from a good dozen chapters focusing on combating a single enemy assaulting the Phalanx. The intensity of the fighting is detailed well into the pages and Counter helps to emphasize upon just

how cataclysmic the consequences will be if the space marines cannot halt the invading force. Being the saga's finale the body count is high, not just amongst the soldiers appearing in the book but amongst Soul Drinkers characters as well.

The novel's ending is neither happy nor triumphant, concluding on a very bittersweet note. While the Soul Drinkers do emerge victorious the cost is staggering and Sarpedon's final actions make it clear that this is the end of his tale.

If you've been reading the saga until now then it's strongly advised you buy this one both as closure and as a fairly good read. If you've not, then read a few extracts of the original, if you like what you see then try reading the first omnibus and go from there. This won't make anyone who has hated previous books enjoy the series though, so if you weren't fond of previous novels then don't bother buying this one.

Dylan Murphy says

Phalanx was an absolutely amazing conclusion to the Soul Drinkers series. From start to end I was at the edge of my seat with the varying plotlines all coming to an end. The action was fantastic as usual, and it was awesome getting to see Mr. Counters version of Chaos again(since we didn't get it in the since the 3rd book). The way he writes Chaos(not Chaos Space Marines, per say) is absolutely amazing. He captures the over the top horror in an astounding way, which many other BL authors do as well. However, he is the only author I have read, as of yet, that captures how truly..... weird, for lack of a better word (maybe quirky? Thanks for the word Abhinav!) Chaos is.

My fanaticism with Chaos aside, the story was amazing. The friction of the various parties on board the Phalanx during the Soul Drinkers trial was absolutely amazing, and I LOVED the flash-back bits that gave us a little more story of the Soul Drinkers and those involved in their trial. The Iron Knights siding with the Soul Drinkers was also an amazing extra that I did NOT see coming.

Couple that with how their imprisonment is effecting the Soul Drinkers, from Luko to Sarpedon was phenomenal to read.

After the whole trial ordeal came to a stunning, and unexpected conclusion the story became absolute gold for me(what really brought it from 4 to 5 stars). The Soul Drinkers valiant and defiant last stand was awesome to read about. Getting to see more of the Howling Griffons, Iron Knights, Angels Sanguine and the Imperial Fists was awesome, and when Daenyathos' treachery was truly revealed, oh man, it hit me like a train.

All of THAT going on the Phalanx? Unknown(for a second or two) to the Imperial Fists? Oh man.

The last half(or so) detailing Sarpedon's hunt for the traitors and the Imperial Fist's defense was amazing. I have never really been a Imperial Fists fan, as the always struck me as boring, yellow, non-codexy Smurfs(and I could not have been more wrong!) I really liked the bits from the Imperial Fists perspective.

Now, the ending was..... beautiful. I loved it. The intensity of the final battle aboard the Phalanx was amazingly written. The action was breathtaking and I really didn't feel the usual "They're Space Marines, of course they are going to win", which was awesome.

Both the Imperial Fists and Co. as well as Sarpedon's final battles were amazing. And I cannot express in words how much I loved the Ending. Especially the VERY end. The departure of the Soul Drinkers, and their inclusion in the memorial aboard the Phalanx was, again for lack of a better word, beautiful.

I am really going to miss reading about all of my Soul Drinkers friends, and I can only hope we get some

more in the series. Be it prequel or sequel, I will love every second.

Cold and Fast, Soul Drinkers!

P.S. READ THE NOVELLA DAENYATHOS, otherwise the book won't make too much sense.

Tom says

yeah, it was alright.

Tarl says

A fitting end to the Soul Drinker's legacy.

I didn't honestly know how this series would end. Counter has crafted something amazing with their series of books and shown how a 'modern' chapter of space marines can fall from grace.

I liked how it all came together in this book. Everything was revealed and the final strands were pulled together to show how everyone was manipulated. Final confrontations abounded, characters tested, and most pushed to the brink in the final chapters.

As I said, it's a fitting end.

Yet one thing Counter seemed to have issues with is the massed combats. Though they played a fairly short roll in the book, they didn't capture the sweep of the battle, nor the sheer scale of it. The atmosphere of the Phalanx seemed to grow and shrink in a scale that wasn't really well defined in my mind. At times it seemed almost a world, other times a mere ship, if a larger one.

In the end, it was a good end to the Soul Drinker series of books. It wasn't an amazing book within the series, but it was a fitting end.

Gavin Gates says

Hard to review as it needs as this is the last in a series about the legendary 'Soul Drinkers' Space Marine chapter, the first section of this novel is basically a trial which seems to take in a lot that must have been set in place in the 5 predecessors to 'Phalanx' after that there is just what seems to be a series of... loose ends I suppose. The author luckily has a very vivid style of writing but unfortunately, without the history needed in the rest of this series, it was sadly wasted on me.

Christian says

Wow. Just wow. A drumheads style introspection of elements of the 40K setting seldom deeply looked at: Heroism, horror and humanity. This book was tremendous in terms of characterization. Counter channels David Gemmell in how beloved characters meet their fate. I didn't want the book to end. I will miss those people I came to know over the course of the four novel series. Very, very bittersweet. Even in the grim darkness of the far future, can there be, dare I say it, HOPE?

Andrew Ziegler says

I got the feeling while I was reading False Gods that there was no happy ending in store for Loken and his allies. There was no way that he could win, no way he could break free of Horus and the Sons of Horus, no way that I would believe.

The Soul Drinkers series kind of has always had that feeling for me. There is no way to be a renegade chapter of marines in this universe and not automatically be painted traitor and killed on site. It always seemed like the end of the Soul Drinkers would have to be death, for all of them. Ben Counter, who is kind of hit or miss for me, for the BL in general does a good service for the Soul Drinker's legacy.

Although this is not a happy ending, there is no coming back from the decisions Sarpedon has made in the time since they were lead astray by the dark forces, at least they are not going to away as traitors and not the heroes they wanted to be.

Phalanx does two things really well. One, it was a great "best of" style send off series finale. You know, those TV shows that show clips, or reference their own history at the end of the series, well, that is what this was, a long lesson in all the high points of the preceding 5 novels of the series. Sadly left out, the actual SOUL DRINKING part of the chapter that I think only happened ONCE in all 6 books. The other thing that Phalanx does REALLY well is it delivers a much more compelling and interesting look at the Imperial Fists Space Marines than Sons of Dorn, which was a book dedicated to them. I think this was a good read, and a fitting end for the Drinkers. All the characters you have grown to know and love are killed off one by one throughout, I can only hope that Gaunt's Ghosts final novel does not do the same.

I recommend this and the rest of the series, the Soul Drinkers are a great Chapter and this was a good story as a whole, well done Mr. Counter.
