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# OF GODS AND MEN

ANDY SMILLIE



AN ARMAGEDDON SHORT STORY



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*Power.*

It is a word that means many things to many men. It is the single thing that all men crave. It unifies worlds and divides brothers. It is the driving force in a man's life and the architect of his death. Yet few who ponder its meaning, or find themselves in its embrace, ever come to know its true nature.

But I do. I, Niall Cathalan, know of power.

*God.*

A word imbued with more meaning than any other. Man has worshipped gods since he has been able to look upon the stars. He has pondered their nature, striven to understand their divine intent. He has waged war in their names and died for their favour.

*Gods.* They are the refuge of the weak and the heretic. The gods of mortals do not walk this plane as the *Validus* does, and if they did, they would be in awe, humbled by its might. It is a Machine God. Where it walks, the earth trembles. There is nothing in creation that its steel hands cannot tear down, nothing birthed into the universe that can pierce its armoured shell.

We were one, the *Validus* and I...

I know what it is to feel taller than any mountain, to crush my foe beneath a single, indomitable step. To unleash such terrible devastation that even the mightiest of continents burn in my wake. I have stood unopposed in every arena of war and consigned my foe to oblivion with naught but a thought.

I am princeps of the *Validus*, Imperator Titan, greatest among the marvels of Mars, deadliest weapon of mankind. I am power personified...

...and I am dying.

I am small again. Without access to the *Validus*'s sensorium, my world is

confined to what my limited, human senses can perceive. I cannot see beyond the horror in front of me.

The bridge is ruined. Broken deck plates claw at my flesh as I move over them. Power cables, hanging limp from the shattered ceiling, harass my limbs as I push past them. The stench of burned meat fills my nostrils, twisting my stomach until bile fills my throat.

Engineer Luag, Moderati Taran and Salas, the tactical officer, are slumped beside their stations. Their skin is scorched black by plasma discharge. They are all dead.

*Man.*

I was a man, once. A frail being of limited scope, full of petty concerns and weakness. As a man, a cadet in the Adeptus Titanicus, I dreamed of being a god, of sharing a consciousness with a blessed Titan, of inhabiting its mighty form. From the first caress of connection with the *Validus*, the universe troubled me no more. Yet despite everything, here we are, gods at the mercy of the man I once was.

If we are to save our honour, I must remember how to be a man.

Inch by agonising inch, I pulled what remained of my mortal body across the chamber towards the moderati's station.

The *Validus* was weakened by its march across the Boiling Sea. Its ablative plates corroded by the tide of acid, its leg bastions laid bare. It had stood no chance against a pair of ork super-heavies.

The giant ork war machines opened fire with all of their wrath, overwhelming the void shields and blasting our legs off at the knees.

We fell.

Left to die, we lay helpless as war raged all around us.

Now, the orks were coming to finish us. They would rape the *Validus*, strip it bare of everything useful and use its blessed components to construct more of their infernal contraptions. I would not allow the *Validus* to be defiled.

Omnissiah, forgive me.

I broke out of the half-dead embrace of the *Validus*. I cried out against the cold sting of freedom. One by one, the data-cables had hissed and disengaged from my body, separating me body and soul from the *Validus*. Long dormant nerve endings awoke to sudden pain as my ruined body toppled to the floor.

I pulled myself over the remains of the shattered amniotic tank, wincing as the

shards of armourglass tore my vat-thinned skin. It hurt, but then it hurt to draw breath with atrophied lungs, to fight the cramps threatening to snap my bones.

The un-bonding had been too sharp, too sudden. The proper ministrations had not been tended to. Torn from the Titan's consciousness, I was thrust back inside myself. My mind howled in despair. I had only moments before it closed down, leaving me to die a catatonic cripple, trapped in the corpse of my totem.

I reached the medi-pod, drew a stimm injector from it and jammed it into my neck. The stimms sung in my veins, so different from the dreams of the machine, yet they kept me alive.

The dose of neuromoxin has sustained me until now. I have another seven minutes at best. I hope I will only need half that time.

'Ommissiah, armour me against the weakness of flesh.'

I whispered the prayer and pulled myself across the floor to Taran's station. Like the rest of the *Validus's* crew, the moderati is dead, his blackened corpse slumped beneath his console.

I reached up to the moderati's charred skull and pulled out the data-cables connecting him to the *Validus*.

The moderati's jacks were different from my own, the plugs not immediately compatible.

Still, they fit after a fashion.

That is how I came to stand here, once again joined to *Validus*, once again both man and god.

I join the *Validus's* mind in the data stream. It looms large, a dark cloud of binary pressing towards me. I am not bound with it like before. The moderati jacks cannot handle such an interface.

We stand apart, separate. Strangers bound only by purpose.

I try to speak, but my voice is lost in static. The *Validus* turns to stare down at me. Its face is hidden in shadow, its voice an indiscernible whisper at the back of my consciousness. I push my mind. I will not be denied. Fulgurant fire flashes through the code, burning away the fog of data. In the mortal realm, blood haemorrhages from my ears and mouth.

It is worth it. At last I glimpse the god I have known. It is magnificent, a beacon of perfection.

'Die. Die now.'

I command the *Validus* to lay down its life. It growls in response, a bestial snarl that rises like gusting wind as it whips over my mind.

‘Die.’

The *Validus* growls again, weaker this time. It is not angry. It is desperate, pleading. It has lived for thousands of years. It has no wish to die.

‘You must. There is no other way,’ I assure it, feeling its resistance ebb as its sensoria detect ork boarders in the lower torso. ‘Die. Die now.’

The data-cable sparks, burning away the flesh on the back of my skull as it shorts out. The link falls silent. The *Validus* has cast me out.

Like each of us, it will die alone.

*‘Terminal Detonation in ten seconds.’*

I listen to the machine voice as it rasps from the banks of vox-casters studded around the *Validus*’s body. It is not the Titan’s true voice. A god’s voice cannot be heard by the ears of men. A Titan speaks only to the soul of those bonded with its blessed machine spirit.

*‘Eight seconds.’*

The droning machine idiom sounds no more like the *Validus* than the klaxon wailing through the Titan’s corridors.

I can hear the rising thrum of the plasma reactor as it builds to critical.

These are my final moments. The explosives will soon detonate, condemning the *Validus* and every ork within ten kilometres to oblivion.

This recording I leave for the Legio cadets. For the princeps who come after me. There is a lesson in this, one you must learn or suffer as I have. As the *Validus* has.

Power... Power is fleeting, and even gods have their limits.

The cabal of tech-priests huddled around the vox-servitor. The lobotomised serf’s mouth had been replaced by an ornate brass grill, its naked feet blackened where they had been fused to the chamber floor. The servitor was the priests’ only link to that which existed outside the slate-steel walls of the receiving chamber. The priests were *Ausculitarie*, guardians of the code, the binary source that carried all information in and out of Mars.

Information would unlock knowledge. Knowledge was power. Therefore, information had to be guarded, controlled. It was the singular truth of their order, and their entire reason for being.

‘The *Validus* is dead?’ the First asked. All knowledge began with a question.

‘High probability.’ As was his function, the Second answered.

‘Despatch investigation team?’ The Third spoke last. Question, solution,

action. The Three had always operated in such a manner. The sequence was sacrament. Like the indomitable stream of binary that fed the serried banks of cogitators, which stood chattering around them, it would never be broken.

‘Will that suffice?’

The Second tilted his head as he sifted the data flow. ‘Estimated arrival at world designated Armageddon in fifty-seven years.’

‘Acceptable,’ the Third confirmed.

‘The machine is infallible. Princeps Niall is mistaken.’ The First spoke now of truth, of the certainty derived from the information.

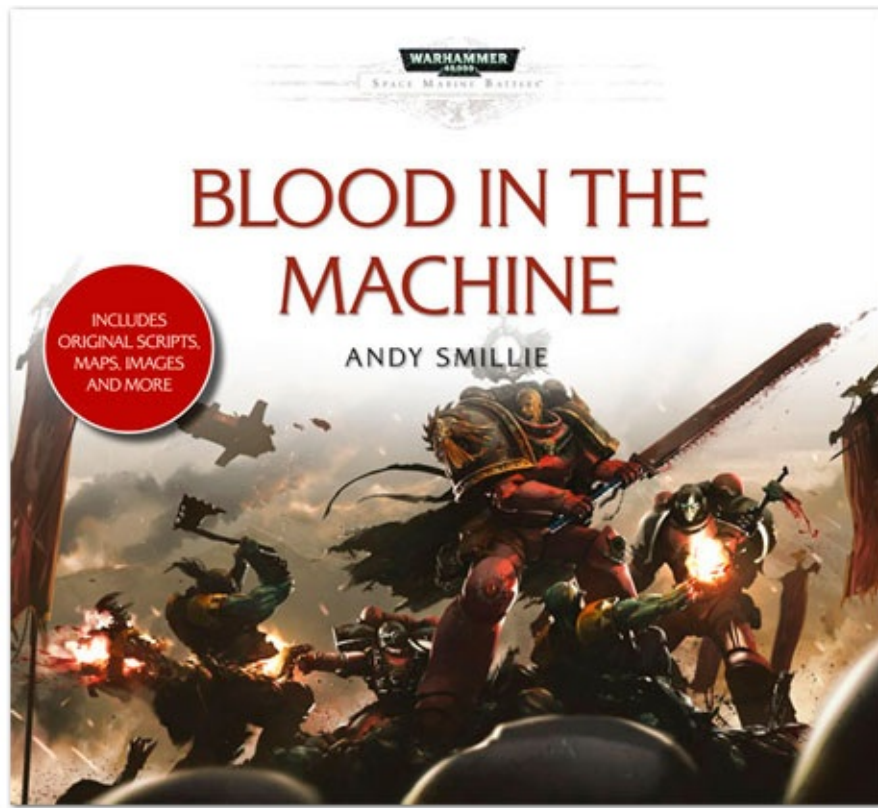
‘Suggest record deletion.’

‘Yes. Expunge Princeps Niall from history banks.’

‘Concur. He is only flesh.’ The Three spoke as one, muttering in singular affirmation. ‘The machine endures.’

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hailing from Glasgow, ANDY SMILLIE is best known for his visceral Flesh Tearers novellas, *Beneath the Flesh* and *Flesh of Cretacia*. He also has written a host of short stories starring this brutal Chapter of Space Marines and a number of audio dramas including *Deathwolf* and *From the Blood*.



A Flesh Tearers audio drama by Andy Smillie

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**A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

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

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