



WARHAMMER
40,000

A SON'S BURDEN

ANDY SMILLIE

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'I remember the day Seth left a world to die. I remember the voices of our brothers, of those he left behind to die with it. I remember the day Seth proclaimed our lives worth less than the planet of the Legion that shunned us. I remember that day. It was the first day I believed him to have the strength to save us.'

– Flesh Tearers Chaplain Appollus

Darkness. It rolls out beyond my position, a thick cloud that blends the sky with the ground. It is as much a blessing as it is a curse, concealing me even as it conceals my quarry. I glance to the west where the blackness is broken by the unceasing flare of artillery fire. Anger coils my gut as I watch the flames it has set among distant buildings. My brothers are in those buildings. My Chapter Master is in those buildings.

Blood. I reek of its wet warmth. It coats my armour and shaven scalp, running into my eyes like a scarlet sweat. None of it is mine. Regrettably, not all of it is the enemy's.

Death. I am surrounded by it. The dismembered corpses of the recent dead are strewn the length of the warehouse. Their limbs and entrails stain the corrugated iron of the building. Beside them, the long dead, whose bones had cracked underfoot as we'd fought, watch in silence.

'The building is secure, captain.' Brother-Sergeant Cophi's voice sounds from my left.

I re-sheathe my blade and turn to face him. His eyes are as dark as the ash he's used to obscure his face.

I ask after our fallen brothers first. 'How many?'

'Seven.' Cophi holds up his fist. In his grasp is a length of wire. Seven tongues dangle from the hooks threaded along its length. 'Their corpses will lie in silence.' He ties the ends of the wire and loops it over the thick trunk of his neck.

I nod. The removal of the tongue is an old Cretacian tradition to prevent a Scout's ghost from speaking to those following in his wake and betraying the rest of the war-party. Like the remaining twenty-three Scouts under my command, I was born and raised on Cretacia. Ghosts or no ghosts, I would honour the tradition. 'And the enemy?'

'Almost two hundred at rough count.'

'A good tally,' I say. Despite my best effort, the words sound as empty and hollow as I know them

to be. Two hundred is not a fraction of the enemy warriors infesting the city around us. I shift my gaze back to the west and the burning horizon. 'We are short on time. We move out in five minutes.' I turn back to Cophi. 'Our right flank will be exposed as we cross the street. Have our strength weighted to the left. We can't afford to get bogged down in a firefight. If we're engaged, one squad will break off and cover our advance.'

'I'll have Sergeant Viritiel and his men bring up the left. Their heavy bolter will buy us a few extra moments if we're spotted.' Cophi pauses. 'Temel, we have wounded.' He lowers his voice as he addresses me by name.

I don't ask him how many. It doesn't matter. Five or fifty, my order would be the same. Cophi knows this. There is no hope in his eyes. They are as hard as his bouldered shoulders. He has spoken only out of duty to his warriors. 'Leave them behind.'

Even certain in my command, the coldness in my voice surprises me. I did not think I would live to see the moment when I cast our brothers aside as easily as I would a spent power cell. I have spent too long in the shadows. My actions have long been hidden, judged only by the restless gaze of my conscience. I sigh. Even it has become a tired observer with little voice to champion my guilt.

'Duty and honour do not always walk the same path.' Sergeant Eschiros's voice is the firm whisper of a sniper rifle. 'Though they intersect often enough for those with the courage to stay on the road.'

'You've spent too much time with Chaplain Appollus.'

I turn to find Eschiros looking the worse for wear. The skin of his face is twisted and raw, scorched black around the jawline.

'What happened?'

Eschiros grins. The gesture twists the ugliness of his wounds, making his face appear cruel. 'The Chaplain would not let you avoid the issue so easily, captain.'

I smile. Eschiros's eyes hold nothing but righteous warmth. He is without question bound for the Chaplaincy. 'I will be sure to seek Appollus out when we return to the *Victus*.' I dismiss Eschiros with a curt nod and turn to Cophi. 'If we don't make it to the artillery line before day break, we will fail. Secure a locator beacon with the wounded and once the mission is done we'll send for them.'

'Andas and Sothis have asked to stay with the wounded.' Cophi is already turning from me. 'They would help them secure one of the smaller buildings.'

'No. We can't spare anyone. This will be hard enough.'

'I'll see you on the street.' Cophi's tone betrays none of his feelings on the matter.

I stare at his back, watching as he walks from me and disappears into the gloom of the building. Our next fight in the duelling cages will be revealing.

For the next five minutes, I stand alone.

The swift double-clack of weapons being reloaded and the harsh scrape of blades running across sharpening stones keep time around me. It is a familiar countdown to battle. One, that to my ears, is more accurate than any chrono-meter. I look out into the darkness of the street, and my hearts quicken in anticipation of the blood and death to come.

Nekkaris. The dark world. The sun that once lit its horizon is gone. Its moons are battered husks that hang lifeless in the black. Of the universe beyond, there is nothing save the faint shimmer of distant stars.

'Incoming!' A Nekkaris trooper, a sergeant judging by the bronze band framing his shoulder, yelled

from the forward parapet and threw himself down into the trench. The rest of his squad followed suit.

Chaplain Appollus didn't move. He remained pressed against the wall as the artillery strike detonated. Rock dust and metal shrapnel rained off his armour. 'Three days we've been under assault. Three days the enemy have hammered us with mortar and siege shell.' He turned to glare at the Nekkari. 'And for three days their rounds have travelled no further than this wall. When will these idiots simply learn to duck?'

Harahel grunted. The other Flesh Tearer stood to Appollus's left, his weight resting on his eviscerator, the weapon's blade standing taller than any Nekkari. 'Perhaps you could use this time to hold a sermon. Instil these "warriors of the Emperor" with some courage.'

Appollus snarled. 'Such fragile vessels cannot hold the fire of courage.'

'I'm surprised that fool's throat hasn't turned hoarse from all the shouting,' said Nisroc. The Apothecary was with them on the wall, his arms folded tight across his chest.

Behind them, Balthiel sighed. The Librarian had come to expect such overt disdain from Appollus, and Harahel's passive aggressiveness was preferable to the fits of rage he knew the Company champion was capable of. But Nisroc... Balthiel looked to the Apothecary, and the bionic that sat in place of his left eye. He reached out with his mind, letting it skim the edges of Nisroc's thoughts. The Apothecary had grown dark of late. He had not been the same since Armageddon. 'If you must mock them, do it in private. We will need the Nekkari in the days ahead,' Balthiel spoke over the comm.

'I doubt that, brother.' Appollus indicated the Nekkari troopers huddled against the trench wall.

Seth felt Balthiel's eyes on him but said nothing. He shared Appollus's frustration. The Flesh Tearers were ill-suited to defence. This static posting was eating away at their restraint. If they did not attack soon, the Nekkari would have more to fear than harsh words.

'How long must we wait?' Harahel aimed his question at the horizon.

'Until Temel completes his mission.' Seth looked out to the rolling explosions that made and unmade the city before them.

'If he is still alive,' said Appollus. 'We still have little idea how many enemy occupy the capital.'

'Captain Temel will not fail. It is not in his blood,' said Seth. 'The moment he has destroyed the artillery emplacement, we advance.' He turned to regard the convoy of Rhino transports in the courtyard. The ten armoured vehicles seemed to resent the inaction, their hulls trembling as their engines growled on idle.

'I could be half way across the city by then.' Brick-dust tumbled from between Appollus's fingers as he closed his fists around the rock of the wall.

'Not even you and your Death Company would survive that.' Nisroc motioned to the ground beyond the wall as another barrage of shells smashed into the earth, gouging another crater in the rubble strewn landscape.

'At this point I'd be willing to find out.'

'Master Seth.' The stern, assured tone that had defined Colonel Nim's thirty-year command was absent as he addressed the Chapter Master, his voice shaking as much as the ground underfoot.

'What is it?'

The man flinched as Seth turned to regard him. 'The astropaths, liege, they have received a communication for you.'

'From who?'

'Liege, it is from Lord Dante.'

I freeze. Ahead, a clenched fist shouts a warning to me in the darkness. *Enemy*. I drop to my belly and scramble forward. The broken rock and glass that litters the ground, shifts and cracks as I move. I advance with caution. The noise is minimal, lost against the howl of the wind and the distant bark of artillery, yet each scrape of stone stabs at my ears like the unexpected snap of weapons fire. I have trained for a hundred years to move in silence. But I have practised for the same amount of time to hear the slightest of sounds. It is the frustrating dichotomy of my life, to have spent my days listening for a silence that I will never hear.

I crawl to the doorway, drawing level with Cophi and his squad. The five Scouts are almost invisible, spectres sheathed in the rain and smoke that bathes the city in an eerie blanket. Cophi is pressed up against a ruined section of the wall, an area of missing brickwork allowing him to peer into the room beyond. He gestures for me to take a look. With care, I rise to one knee and ease my eyes up above the broken iron panel filling the doorway.

The adjoining room is vast. Towering data presses, cracked and broken by pitiless bombardment, litter the floor. Metal support beams and reinforcing rods stick out like twisted bone from beneath the rockcrete that skins the walls. My eyes follow columns of thick pipes up past a winding balcony and the misshapen outlines of upper floors. All of this I see in a heartbeat, all in the time it takes the smell of ash, of fire quickly extinguished, to drift on the air and draw my attention back to the ground. Near the middle of the room, wedged between a pair of presses, a group of civilians, their clothes torn and ragged, have been herded into a tight circle. Men, women and children, of every shape and age cling to one another in desperation, drenched by the rain as it hammers down through the broken roof. To their right, three-dozen traitors stand ready to fire. I make to signal the advance and stop. There is something else.

I blink to clear my eyes, and focus on the darkness just behind the traitors, a gap in the path of the rain. I see him then. The Archenemy. His battleplate is of the deepest black, an oil-slick mirror that reflects back the darkness around him.

Beside me, I see Sothis's finger tighten on the trigger of his sniper rifle.

I hold up my hand, fingers splayed. *Wait*.

Sothis eases his finger from the trigger. Ahead of us, another two of the Archenemy walk into view, boltguns held across their chests. Sothis nods his thanks. He lingers on me a moment, his eyes holding a question.

I turn away from him. The civilians are not our concern.

The cover around us is light. The crumbling brickwork little proof against a storm of bolt-rounds.

Faced with one of the Archenemy we might have been able to take the room and continue on with our mission. Faced with three, we would suffer losses, casualties we could not afford.

Is there a way around? I sign the question to Cophi.

Eschiros is looking.

Then we hold for now. I gesture in reply, my eyes fixed on the huddle of civilians. I see a man cradle a woman. A woman cradle a child. A child cradle another. I have witnessed such scenes before. Once I believed such acts to be valorous. I was mistaken. It is resignation, not courage, that compels such sentiment. The humans do not want to die alone. I hear the racking click of weapons being readied. At least the Emperor has granted them that.

The traitors fire.

The din of discharging autoguns fills the building, an oppressive echo like the nearing of a storm. I

see the distortion in the rain, twisting tunnels of spray as the bullets tear towards the humans. Bodies twitch and jerk as rounds strike them. Mouths hang open in screams that are lost beneath the traitor's cruel laughter. Eyes widen in pain and horror, blinking out as the life flickers from them. The noise ends. The movement ceases. For a heartbeat there is nothing but the rain and the steam rising from the barrels of the traitors' weapons.

There's a gap in the exterior wall. We can go through it. Cophi mouths the words.

Where?

The far left side. Eschiros will guide us out. Cophi indicates an area of balcony.

I look up and see Eschiros. The sergeant and four of his Scouts are secreted among the ruins of a staircase. *Understood.* I nod in acknowledgement, tapping the comm-bead wired to my throat three times. *Advance, single line.* I tap again, pause, and then twice more. *Stay low, flank left.*

Cophi and his squad slip into the room. I wait until the last of them has advanced to the first press before following with Sothis and Andas. Bileth's squad follow behind us, while Viritiel's hangs back in overwatch. We move slowly, with care, crossing between presses only when Eschiros signals the all clear.

At the third press, forty paces from the opening in the wall, we come as close to the dead civilians as our route will carry us. My nostrils flare at the smell of blood. I feel my hearts quicken, my muscles tense. It is not the blood of the dead that calls to me. Like carrion, the traitors have descended upon the civilians corpses. With knives and crude implements they are dismembering them, stealing limbs and organs for Emperor knows what end. I would be among the traitors, tearing them apart with tooth and blade. I would drive my fist into their coward guts and rip out their throats. I place a hand against the press and steady myself as a bead of sweat rolls from my brow. I close my eyes and tell myself that the killing to come will sate my thirst. It is a lie I must believe or we will fail in our task.

We cross to the fourth press one at a time, hugging the ground with our weapons held out in front of our heads. I grimace as the rubble grates against my skin. I am bleeding from a dozen cuts, each small stab of pain threatening to steal my last nerve. I tighten my jaw and force back the anger building in my chest. A wandering traitor forces me to pause halfway between the fourth and fifth press. I watch him from behind a fallen length of pipe. His footsteps are inaudible, lost beneath the drumming of my hearts. I lie there and watch as Cophi flashes from cover to snap the man's neck and carry him out of sight. For an instant, I hate Cophi. The release should have been mine.

I hold at the fifth press. Our line has become extended. The others need a moment to catch up. I place my back against the cold metal and let out a long breath, thankful for the brief respite. I haven't seen the Archenemy since we entered the room, but my every instinct tells me they have not left.

Beside me, Andas growls.

Emperor damn you. I will the curse through gritted teeth and turn on him. His eyes are wide with the glint of madness. I force him against the press.

'Control yourself, brother,' I whisper in his ear, hoping that he has the strength to heed my words. 'You will betray our position.' Andas bares his teeth and struggles against me. Sadness robs me of my anger. 'Sanguinius keep you.' I thrust my knife up into Andas's abdomen, clamping my hand over his mouth to strangle the sounds of his death. I hold his body firm against the press until I feel it go limp, and lower it to the ground.

Sothis's face twists in anger. I know from his posture that it is not directed at me. He was closer

than any to Andas. His brother's weakness has shamed him. 'Let me.' He draws his knife and stoops to remove Andas's tongue.

Cophi and his squad are seven paces from the gap in the wall when the storm comes. Lightning rips through the heavens and the darkness shrouding us.

There is no escape now. We must fight.

The human traitors are slow to react, dumbfounded by the line of Flesh Tearers they find in their midst. The Archenemy are not. Bolt-rounds flare in the gloom, stitching towards us before the first flash has faded.

To their credit, Cophi's squad do not throw themselves to the ground. Instead, they turn and fire, their bolt pistols barking in reply to the Archenemy's salvo. I see three of Cophi's Scouts go down, punched backwards by mass-reactive rounds.

Their sacrifice allows the rest of us the moments we need to gain momentum.

'Cover fire!' The words tear from my throat as I run towards the press of traitors. Autogun rounds spark as they collide with the machinery around me. The traitors adjust their aim. Rock shrapnel tears at my skin as they churn up the ground in front of me.

Behind me, Sergeant Viritiel's squad opens fire, the cacophonous chatter of their heavy bolters drowning out the traitors' frantic shouts. The traitors come apart in a red mist, pulped by the sustained fire.

The spray of blood and flesh splashes over me as I move through it. The three Archenemy stand before me, but I keep moving. Their bolters swivel in my direction and I grit my teeth against injuries that never come.

One of the Archenemy jerks and goes down, a hole shot clean through his neck. The other two drop to a crouch, sheltering behind a mess of steel.

'Displace,' I hear Eschiros bellow the order to his squad as the two remaining Archenemy turn their guns on the balcony and open fire. I offer a silent prayer that Eschiros and his men have found cover, and keep running.

The Archenemy guns rack empty. I watch expended magazines topple. I see hands reach for replacements. I hear the stiff clack of fresh rounds locking in place. I watch as barrels turn on me, and fingers tighten on triggers.

They fire.

I dive forward, throwing myself into a roll. Their rounds roar as they tear over my head, obliterating the air where I'd stood. I rise at the feet of the nearest. My blade flashes azure as its energy field ripples to life. His bolter clatters to the ground as I rob him of his hand. He cries out in a language that burns my ears. I snarl, reversing my grip and severing his head.

The last of the Archenemy swings the butt of his gun towards me. I don't have time to move. I form a wedge with my forearms and brace against the blow. The pain is immense. He hits me again. Something breaks. The third strike comes low, smashing into my ribs. I slash out with my blade as I stumble, cutting through his gun's barrel. The strike leaves me open. He capitalises and his left hand catches me on the chin. I roll with the blow and fight to stay conscious.

Laughter rumbles through the vox-grille of his helm as he advances on me. The sound drags blood from my ears.

'Embrace your death. It is the truest reflection of your life.' His voice is like the cracking of dried wood aged beyond mortal means. He draws a long, curved knife as black as his armour.

I tighten my grip on my blade.

A cluster of rounds strike his pauldron. He turns, raising an arm to protect his head as another strikes his gorget. 'Barbarian.' The word carries the weight of his hatred as he rounds on his attacker. Sothis. The Scout is running towards us, bolt pistol blazing.

The Archenemy grunts, and throws his blade. It spears into Sothis's chest, pitching him backwards. 'No!' I roar and lunge forward, driving my blade up into the Archenemy's chest. He grunts as though the wound were minor, and clamps a hand around my neck. I stare up into his helm and see only myself. The hatred in my own eyes glaring back at me from the polished dark of his armour. 'Die,' I rasp through gritted teeth and force the knife in further, feeling his blood run over my hand. His gauntlet tightens on my neck. I feel bones crack. He will kill me before my blade finds his heart.

A bullet rushes past my ear to strike the Archenemy's wrist. His hand comes away. He lifts the stump of his forearm towards his helm in disbelief.

'Embrace this death. It is the end of your life,' I snarl, plunging my blade into his primary heart.

Exhausted, I let his corpse topple from me and drop to one knee. '*Sanguinius bless your aim.*' I look to the balcony and mouth my thanks to Eschiros. He was the only one who could have made that shot. I drag myself up and rest my weight against a burnt-out barrel. 'How many?' I ask Cophi over the comm.

'Too many.'

I swallow a knot of rage, and glance around. The storm outside has receded and the room is dark again. The stench of death is choking. The ground is slick with blood. Sergeant Cophi is re-organising the squads. Weapons snap to readiness as they are reloaded.

I focus on the rainwater, listening as it bounces off the metal of the presses. I hope for a moment's calm. I do not find it. My mind warps the sound, feeding me images of weapons fire, the steady rhythm of flak guns and the quickening pace of autocannons. My hearts rumble in my chest, eager to fight again. Sighing, I get to my feet.

Nine Nekkari troopers took their own lives. A dozen more wept like infants, shaking as wracking fear bent them foetal. The rest looked on helpless, mouthing pleas to the Emperor as the Flesh Tearers prepared to leave.

'Get on board, Chaplain.' Seth's voice was like the growling of a chainblade.

'No,' said Appollus. 'We cannot just leave.'

'We can and we must.'

'Temel and the others, have you forgotten they are out there?'

'I am aware of our current deployment status.'

'And you would leave anyway?'

'I have told you. This emergent threat is dire, one the Blood Angels cannot stop alone.'

'Dante calls and you come running.'

Seth snarled and stepped forward, pressing his forehead against Appollus's. 'The years we have stood together, *brother*, the blood we have spilled together. Those things have bought you your life this day.' Seth bunched his fists. 'On Sanguinius's name, if you ever speak to me in such a manner again, I will kill you.'

Appollus held his ground in silence.

Harahel felt his finger drift to the activation stud on his eviscerator. He stood at the top of the

Thunderhawk's ramp, watching Seth and Appollus below. Seth was the greatest warrior the Flesh Tearers had known since Amit, but there was a darkness in Appollus, a brutal savagery that had seen him unbeaten in the duelling cages. Both of them were irreplaceable, heroes of the Chapter. Harahel hoped he would not be required to intervene.

Seth took a step back and regained his composure. 'Baal is at stake, Appollus. The tyrannids have consumed all before them. If we do not go now, Baal will fall.'

'And what of it? Let the Blood Angels worry about Baal. What of this world? Is it any less important?'

'Do not insult me with feigned ignorance. You *know* it is.'

'Baal is not our world,' said Appollus.

'It is Sanguinius's world. It is our father's home.'

'Our father is gone.' Appollus struggled to keep his voice level.

'Under the twinned red suns of death shall the reckoning of my sons begin. By the grace of a golden warrior will their fate be writ, and by their actions will he know their courage. Against an unknown foe will they fight, a beast that holds the doom of men within its jaws. This will be a war they cannot win, and failure here will herald the coming of the end.'

'I have read the Scrolls of Sanguinus,' said Appollus. 'But how many must die so that Dante can triumph? How many of our brothers' lives is Baal worth?'

'All of them.' Seth paced away, turning his back on the Chaplain. 'We need Baal, Appollus.'

'The memory of nobility does not change who we are.'

'No it does not.' Seth turned back to face Appollus, his shoulders heavy about his frame. 'But without it we are lost. How can we ever find our way back from the brink if we have nothing to turn back to?'

Appollus said nothing, standing a moment in silence before stepping past Seth and onto the Thunderhawk.

The scene before me is one of madness. Serried ranks of siege engines line the shattered street. Each piece of artillery is marked by its treachery, its iron and steel warped by the influence of the Nekkari's dark allies. Their barrels are broken and distended, stretched like misshapen mouths that snarl as they cough rounds into the air. Some buck against the piles of chains that hold them in place. Others flash with fire, their hulls glowing like filaments as they consume the bodies of their crew. All are covered in dark runes, inky sigils that shift and shiver under gaze.

The puddle I'm knee-deep in shudders as another barrage fires into the distance.

Hold. Cover. I sign the command to Cophi. The sergeant and his squad are in the building behind me. A ruined agricultural plant, it presents the only real cover on the south side of the enemy position. To the west, secreted in smashed nutrient vats, Eschiro and his Scouts await my order. The rest of the Company are already moving in from the north.

Clear. Move. Cophi signs back.

I crouch lower and edge forward, slipping between a pair of burned out pallet-lifters as I scramble down towards the nearest vehicle.

A single, soft chime sounds in my ear. *Hold.* I stop moving and throw a glance back towards Cophi.

Three targets. Ten paces. I only just make out his warning.

I ease down onto my belly, sheltering behind a pile of loose brick, and tease forward.

A shallow trench snakes around the artillery, and runs the length of the position. It is thick with the enemy. Traitors with autoguns held across their chests, walk up and down in slack patrol, distracted by the growling of their possessed charges and the screaming of unfortunate gun-crew.

I tap my throat once, then twice in quick succession. The three traitors nearest me jerk and fall to the ground, a single hole bore through each of their skulls. I sign my thanks to Eschiro and drop into the trench. The next patrol is already closing; a few more steps and they will uncover the bodies. I push on, trusting to the darkness and Eschiro's rifle.

Ten more strides and I am at the first artillery piece. The machine rumbles at my presence. Verdant fire hisses from its exhausts in an angry snarl. A thick vapour hangs in the air, a choking mix of sulphur, cordite and burned flesh. The smell is almost unbearable. I stumble as nausea threatens to beat me to the ground. I draw my knife and cut into my face, slicing the flesh between my top lip and nose. Blood runs from the wound. The smell fills my nostrils. The stink of the artillery fades behind the visceral clarity. With a grunt of effort, I plant a charge. The machine's hull vibrates, trembling under my touch.

'Die with courage,' I spit, and skirt around its hull towards the next war machine.

I plant another charge and drop into a tight roll, travelling under the vehicle's hull to avoid a patrol. Moving along the line, I shift from target to target, pushing forward as quickly as I dare, sprinting when the bark of the artillery rises to hide my footsteps. In the open, Eschiro and the others keep me covered, but between the tanks I am on my own.

'Beware,' a traitor grunts in warning as I round the hull of a quad-barrelled anti-air tank, to stand between it and another with a large mortar-cannon mounted in place of its turret. Beside him stand four more of his fell brotherhood.

I launch forward, grab the nearest gun and press it firm against his chest. Driving him backwards, I slash out with my knife to kill two of the others as we go. The fourth and fifth raise their weapons to fire. I throw my knife into the chest of the fourth. He topples. The fifth's finger tightens on the trigger. I wrench the gun from the hands of the first and swing it out like a club. The stock connects with the fifth's face. He drops, brains leaking from his skull. The first struggles to his feet. I ignore him for a moment, striding forward to retrieve my knife. I turn as he makes to run, driving my blade through his cheek, and pinning him to the tank. His mouth twitches, pleading. His eyes stare at me, wide with horror. I smile, a wolf's grin, and leave him there.

A handful more charges and I am done.

'Hold,' Cophi's voice whispers in my ear.

I freeze.

Cophi's voice comes again. 'The Archenemy.'

I press the comm-bead tight against my throat and whisper. 'How many?'

'Five. You'll be spotted as soon as you move.'

I check the mission time. The squads moving in from the north will detonate their charges in three minutes. 'We are out of time.'

I break cover and open fire, my bolt pistol kicking in my grasp as I unload on full-auto.

The Archenemy standfast as my rounds hammer their armour. They fire. Bolt-rounds dog my steps as I race towards the cover of the vehicles opposite. It is too far. I grimace, stumbling as a glancing shot rakes my thigh.

'Get down.'

I throw myself forward at Cophi's command. An instant later a missile roars past me to explode among the Archenemy. Another missile follows the first. Their weapons fall silent.

'Finish quickly, there are more targets than we have bullets.' This time it is Eschiros's voice in my ear.

He is right. Traitors are pouring into the trench from all directions. Around me, the darkness is in retreat, pushed back by the glare of small-arms fire.

I work quickly, tossing charges at the tracks of the remaining vehicles even as I gun down the crews that emerge to engage me.

'We're done,' I shout over the comm, making for Cophi's position.

'We might well be.' Cophi's tone is light, but he is not wrong.

The trenchline is full of traitors now. Cophi and his squad are pinned down, suppressed behind a series of low walls. Eschiros is faring little better. I'll never make it clear before they are overrun.

I find Cophi's eyes in the darkness. They do not need me to speak the words.

He detonates the charges.

The noise is so loud as to be inaudible, a deafening wave that stretches my mouth in anguish as I'm punched from my feet by the blast. Fire rolls over me. Shrapnel tears through me. I land hard.

Darkness steals the pain.

'Captain? Captain Temel?'

I open my eyes on Cophi. He gestures for me to be still. I follow his gaze to my abdomen. A length of ragged metal has me pinned to the ground. 'Is it done?' I feel blood spill from my mouth as I speak.

'Yes. The artillery's destroyed.' Cophi's brow is heavy with concern.

'I hate the re-juve sarcophagus,' I say grinning. 'Pass me the long-range comm.'

Cophi waves Eschiros forward. The other sergeant is limping, and his left arm is as a bloodied rag by his side.

'Captain,' Eschiros says, grimacing.

'It seems not even you made it through this one unscathed. The Emperor's blessing must have been elsewhere.'

His face lightens. 'It seems he had his hands full with you.' Eschiros places the comm-unit down next to me, and hands me the transmitter.

I depress the send key and the wash of static falls silent. 'Master Seth.'

A moment passes. Another. I listen to the crackle-hum of static, searching for a reply. 'Master Se—'

'Captain Temel.'

In person, Seth's voice is akin to the roar of a chainblade. Distorted over the comm, it sounds more like the thunder of a wrathful god. I smile, glad that I fight under and not against his banner.

'This is Temel. The mission is complete.'

The static shifts, and for a moment it sounds as though Seth makes to reply. I pause. Nothing.

'We have destroyed the enemy artillery position,' I continue. 'You are free to move up and engage the main enemy formation.'

'We are not coming.' Seth's words come as a hammer-blow. I feel them keener than the wound in my gut. 'Baal is in danger,' he continues. 'We are already ascending to orbit.'

'I understand.' I harden my voice with thoughts of duty and honour. If this is to be my last communication with the Chapter, then it shall be one of strength and purpose. 'The Blood go with you, Lord.'

‘Sanguinius keep you, Temel.’

‘Gabriel...’ I falter, struggling to separate how I feel from what must be said. ‘Our brotherhood is one forged in sacrifice. We carry the burden of our father’s death as a scar upon our souls. His sacrifice lies at the very core of who we are. Do not let your actions here weigh upon you. Do not let them define you.’

The link goes dead.

I pass the device to Cophi and take a moment, riding the surge of adrenaline that is part anger, part sorrow.

The sergeant’s fist tightens on the transmitter, his knuckles bone-white as I relay Seth’s message.

‘Just like that,’ Cophi snarls.

‘It is Seth, not us, who suffers here.’

Eschiros looks at me in question.

‘This burden is his to carry. We will be too dead to care.’ I pause, watching as the glaze of acceptance creeps into the corners of their eyes. ‘Or did you not come to kill and die in the name of the Emperor and Sanguinius?’

‘We should go. Enemy reinforcements will be here soon.’ Eschiros is already gesturing for the Company to pack up and prepare to move.

I nod. ‘Do what you can for this world.’

‘Captain...’ Cophi’s face twists in painful denial.

‘I am done. Go.’

Cophi makes to turn from me, but I grab his arm and gesture to his knife. He passes it to me without question.

I take the blade, and thrust into a pile of smouldering rubble until its length glows amber. Opening my mouth, I grip my tongue with one hand and bring the blade up towards the other.

‘The Blood grant you strength.’ Cophi does me the honour of not looking away, watching as without cry or grimace I cut out my tongue.

My lips wet with blood and I toss the lump of meat to Cophi. He scoops it from the air with a loose fist, and fastens it around his neck with the others.

‘Take this.’ Eschiros tucks a heavy bolter against me. ‘Kill until killed,’ he says, reciting one of Chaplain Appollus’s favoured axioms.

Eschiros smiles and moves off. Cophi lingers a moment, searching for words he will never find, before slipping away into the night.

I wait then, alone, a sentry in the darkness. I listen as the ruckus of men and the rumble of tracks draws near. The smell of blood fills my nostrils and quickens my hearts. My thoughts are consumed by death, the death that will soon claim me, and the death I am about to reap.

I am vengeance. I am fury. I am wrath. The words I have spoken a thousand times surface in my mind like a rising storm. My face twists to a snarl. I rack the slide of the heavy bolter and open fire.

The black Thunderhawk was almost invisible against the dark rockcrete of the foundry. Nestled between two of the structure’s towering chimneys, it had not moved nor powered its engines since first arriving on Nekkaris.

First Zealot Gylon approached the gunship with the cautious gait of a man who knew exactly what awaited him inside. He stopped a moment, letting his eyes scan the darkness. Despite what they told

him, he was not alone. He was not that naive. Gylon had spent his life in Nekkaris's eternal night. He had learned to be attentive to the hairs on his neck as they rose and twitched. Out in the black, the gods were watching him. He took a breath, calming his nerves, and walked up the ramp into the gloom of the Thunderhawk's hold.

Inside, the craft was as dark as it was outside. Gylon pulled a lumo-stick from his tunic and twisted it sharply. The chemicals inside sparked white before settling to a low-green glow. He held the stick out in front of his face and paced forwards. The Thunderhawk did not welcome him, its interior cast in ghoulish relief by the lumo-stick. Each strike of Gylon's boots on the deck was answered by a haunting echo that sent chills down his spine. The craft was more mausoleum than gunship. Ancient statues, carved from blackest rock, lined the walls of the main hold-space. Beneath each, held in a lightless stasis field, a weapon or scarred relic stood in defiance of time. Gylon had only been here twice before. The first of those times had been on the Day of Truth, when the gods had come and set him free from the lies of the false Emperor. The second had been when he had led his army to victory, cleansing Nekkaris's capital of the cowards unwilling to embrace the one true truth. Gylon made his way to the ladder that led to the upper deck and gripped the lumo-stick between his teeth. Reaching up, he grabbed the first rung. It was almost too thick for him to grasp. He climbed, finding it far harder than he had the last time, the effort exhausting his now old bones.

The upper deck was cast in shadow, as though lit by the twisting blades of firelight. Gylon swallowed the familiar dread that rose in his gut, and stuffed the lumo-stick into the pocket of his trousers. There was no sign of brazier or open flame, yet the *crackle-snap* of burning wood persisted as he walked the length of the deck and entered the antechamber beyond.

'Why have you come?' Da'ka Jumoke's voice shifted and changed as he spoke. It was an elusive rumble, a storm circling the horizon.

Gylon fell to his knees, prostrating himself before Da'ka. The black-armoured god sat on a throne of polished metal. Da'ka was alone in the room, though he carried more threat than a legion of Gylon's men. 'It is as you said, lord,' Gylon kept his eyes low as he spoke. 'The Space Marines, the Flesh Tearers, they are leaving.'

'Are you certain?' The sharpness of Da'ka's words cut at Gylon's ears.

'Yes, lord,' the zealot stammered, shaken by the feel of his blood as it ran from his ears to streak his neck. 'There is no doubt. We have—' Gylon flinched as the soft-crackle of an open comm-link sounded from Da'ka's throne.

'Recall the brotherhood. We are done here.' Ignorant of Gylon, Da'ka cut the comm-feed, and made for the chamber's exit.

'Lord...' Gylon's mouth hung open in question. He turned, tracking Da'ka as the Space Marine strode past him. 'With the Flesh Tearers gone we can overrun the capital. I had thought now to be our hour of victory. We should press our atta—'

With a speed that belied his bulk, Da'ka snatched Gylon from the floor, hoisting the zealot's face level with his helm.

'Lord... I meant no offence...' Gylon whimpered, babbling in terror, as he saw his own frail form reflected in the fathomless dark of Da'ka's helm.

'Shhh, quiet,' Da'ka lowered his voice. 'The universe has no wish to hear of your weakness.'

'Why, lord? Why would you abandon us?' Gylon's lips trembled, his cheeks wet with fear.

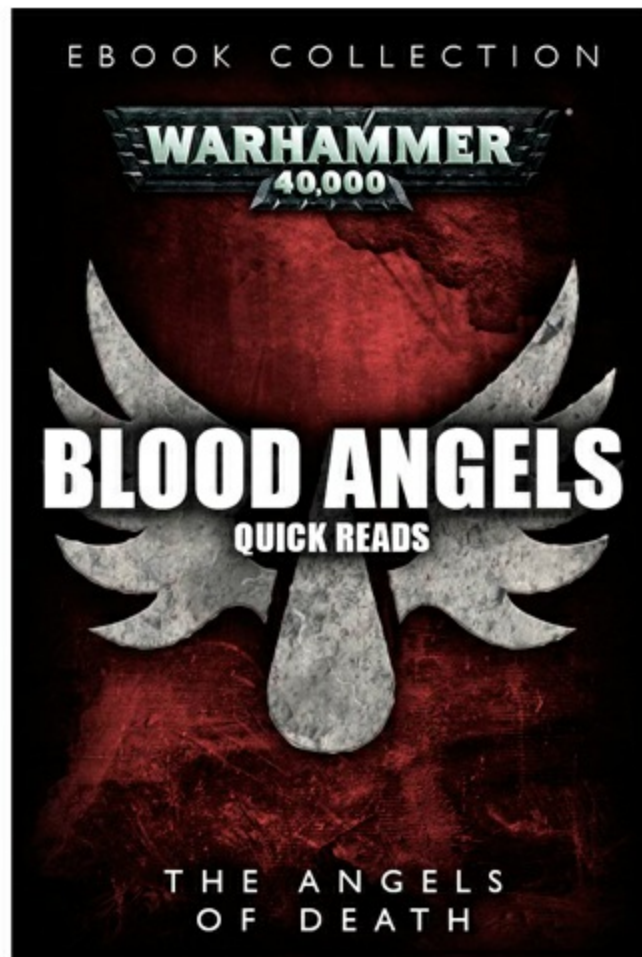
'I do not care about you or your world. My patron would see the Flesh Tearers fall. Seth has left his

own to die here. No soul can make such sacrifices without cost. It is with such small cuts that giants are slain.' Da'ka placed a hand on Gylon's face, relishing the crunch of bone as he tightened his grip. 'Lowly though you are, I will take your life. You are the final blade that will leave nothing of my soul left to cut.'

His jaw now broken, Gylon was unable to scream as tendrils of blue flame slithered from Da'ka's gauntlet to engulf him. His final moments were ones of terrible, impossible agony, as his bones burned and he heard again the crackle-snap of tinder.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Smillie is best known for his visceral Flesh Tearers novellas, *Sons of Wrath* and *Flesh of Cretacia*, and the novel *Trial by Blood*. He has also written a host of short stories starring this brutal Chapter of Space Marines and a number of audio dramas including *The Kauyon*, *Blood in the Machine*, *Deathwolf* and *From the Blood*.



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