

THE HORUS HERESY[®]

THE HERALD OF
SANGUINIUS

Andy Smillie

The dream of Imperium Secundus lives or
dies with its newly crowned Emperor

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THE HERALD OF SANGUINIUS

Andy Smillie

It takes two deaths to keep a secret.

This truth is as old as time itself, and far more cruel. It is a truth that will see me break the bonds of a Legion. And it is for this truth that I stand here, my blade poised at my brother's throat.

His name is Hakael, and this is the last time that I shall speak of it.

He is an honoured veteran of the Sanguinary Guard, a stalwart champion of Baal, yet this fate will steal away everything he has fought for. All of his deeds, his triumphs and glories will be forgotten. He will receive no burial, and his name will not be recorded in the Litany of Heroes. He will die here. He will die *completely* and, like the long-distant past, he will go unremembered and unmourned.

To his credit, he welcomes this fate. He stands before me, his chin lifted, throat exposed, hands loose at his sides. But his eyes are firm with conviction, his pupils the flat black of acceptance.

He senses my hesitation.

'Duty demands this, Azkaellon,' he urges me. 'Do not dishonour me with pity or regret.'

I nod. 'The Blood keep you.'

My blade removes his head in a single stroke. He is dead before he hits the floor.

I bite down the grief that swells in my throat, and turn to face the chamber's only other occupant – Aratron, another of my Sanguinary Guard. His jaw is

locked tight, his eyes fixed on the short length of kindling in his hand.

‘It seems ill-fitting that fate and nothing more decided who lived and who died here,’ he murmurs, hesitantly. ‘Had we determined this with a blade, it would be me lying there...’

I sheathe my sword. ‘Your deeds brought you to this room, as did his,’ I remind him. ‘But in the end, Aratron, our skill and zeal only carry us so far. We are all of us subject to the whims of fate.’

Aratron’s face creases, though he says nothing. It is rare for a warrior to admit that his life is not in his own hands, but we have both seen too many stray rounds steal away a life unintended. I give him no time to reflect on that possibility.

‘And make no mistake – from here, you are as dead as he. Your name will never again be spoken or heard, and your life as it was is over. Though my blade will not part your flesh, your fate has already been sealed by the rise and fall of an artificer’s hammer.’

I step to the brazier burning in the corner and reach into the fire for the helm within. Flame kisses my gauntlet as I lift it free – it smoulders faintly, as though angry at my touch. Its faceplate is an intricate mask, a perfect replica of the one worn by our father, Sanguinius. I regard it for a moment, awed by the craftsmanship. The primarch had fashioned it himself.

‘Are you ready?’ I ask, turning back to Aratron.

Aratron nods, and kneels before me. I grip the back of his head with my free hand and hold it firm.

‘The Blood grant you the strength to endure,’ I add solemnly, before pressing the mask onto his face.

The air is over-charged, feeling set to explode. A fight is imminent. Blood may be spilt, and this uneasy alliance of brothers will crumble. The walls of this fortress could be cast down. Imperium Secundus would fall and, with it, all that remains of the Emperor’s realm.

I move to intercept Sardon Karaashison as he tries to force his way past Neria and Vual. There is anger in his glowing eye lenses.

‘Get out of my way, *Angel*,’ he spits. ‘I will not ask you again.’

I step close to him, keeping my voice low. ‘You would allow yourself to become the catalyst for our undoing, kinsman?’

‘What? Speak your mind, Azkaellon.’

I gesture to the cordon of Sanguinary Guard spanning the breadth of the chamber. ‘Look around you, sir.’

The thin line of golden armour ripples and shifts as my warriors struggle to hold back the press of other legionaries clamouring for an audience with the Emperor Sanguinius.

‘We stand on a knife-edge. Uncertainty, frustration and mistrust are foes we are ill-equipped to defeat. What Lord Guilliman has built here is a fragile kingdom. A single brick knocked from its foundations by your anger is all it would take to topple it.’

The Iron Hand begins to see what I see – a new war in the making.

I place a hand upon his shoulder. ‘Would you really give Horus the satisfaction of *that*?’

He steps back, shame lowering his eyes. His outrage is all but forgotten. ‘We have stood here a day without audience. Lord Sanguinius cannot ignore the Tenth Legion.’

‘He will not,’ I assure him. ‘You will be heard. But not now.’

‘When?’

‘I will see to—’

A commanding voice rings through the din of the chamber, and my words are cut short. ‘Tell my brother Sanguinius that *I* would speak with him.’

I recognise the speaker at once. The soft menace in his tone is one that I am well acquainted with. I steel myself, and turn to face *the Lion*. The primarch of the Dark Angels is fully armoured – one hand cradles his helm, the other rests upon the pommel of his sword. Around him, ten of his veteran warriors are clad in hulking Terminator armour.

I speak with as much authority as seems appropriate when addressing the lord of another Legion. ‘Other matters demand the Emperor Sanguinius’ attention. When he is available I—’

‘*Now*, commander.’

The Lion towers head and shoulders over me. Like all primarchs, he is a warrior god by any definition. And still, I have to fight the urge to draw my blade. His rash display of force endangers us all.

In the end, it is duty and not fear that keeps my temper in check. ‘With the greatest respect, lord, you know the rules. One cohort may enter the throne room at a time except under direct instruction from Lord Sanguinius. I have received no such instruction.’

The primarch’s seething rage is an almost primal thing. ‘You will not defy me.’

For the first time in weeks, there is silence. I know without looking that all eyes are now upon us. I must choose my next move carefully – if I back down then all

semblance of order here will be lost.

If I defy the Lion, I risk fragmenting this alliance further.

‘I cannot disobey my father. Wait here, lord, and I will petition him to receive you.’

‘Do not dally...’ he sneers.

I turn from the Lion and make for the vaulted doors behind me, opening a vox-channel to the Sanguinary Guard as the first murmuring of the crowd builds once more. ‘Hold them here. No one passes the line. *No one.*’

I exit the receiving hall into an antechamber. It is only a few dozen strides across and tall, clear-glass windows run the length of the walls on either side of me. The centre of the space is dominated by a marble statue of the Emperor – the original Emperor. It is not the finest rendition of the Master of Mankind that I have seen, but then it is more than a mere ornament.

Fused within the marble, fine beads of explosive await detonation. I look again at the windows, imagining the panes of glass shattering as the statue explodes at some unseen trigger. I picture the lethal shards shooting through the air to sever limbs and end the lives of *any* intruders. I feel a shiver run down my spine.

‘The Blood keep us from such desperate measures...’ I whisper to the shadows.

This room, like all in the Fortress of Hera, is at its core like Guilliman. Cold. Calculating. Functional. Wreathed in just enough finery to lower the guard of its guests. I allow myself to be fooled for a moment, to enjoy brief solace before walking through the heavier doors ahead of me and into the throne room beyond.

I address my father as I enter, bowing as I cross the threshold.

‘Lord Sanguinius.’

This is the second of Hera’s great throne rooms. It is a long slit of a chamber, the ceiling held aloft by serried rows of granite columns, and cut down the centre by a length of crimson carpet. The principal throne room remains Guilliman’s, for he is Master of Ultramar. Even as the new Emperor, my father would not disrespect him by claiming it.

No, there is more to it than simple respect. This *position* sits uneasily with Sanguinius. Remaining here is his protest, a silent objection against a role he had little choice but to accept.

My father sits at the far end of the chamber, ensconced upon his throne. His wings are pulled tightly back behind him, tucked into a recess in the chair. ‘I have told you before Azkaellon – there is no need for you to bow here.’

I straighten. ‘I shall try to temper my disobedience, lord.’

Sanguinius rises and descends the marbled steps to meet me. His battleplate is gleaming gold, his wings spread out behind him like a cloak of virgin snow. I cast my eyes low, humbled by his majesty. Were hope a tangible thing, he would surely be the manifestation of it.

‘What trouble do you bring me this time?’ he asks. His face is unreadable, yet I know enough of him to sense the weariness in his tone.

‘The Legions gathered here grow restless,’ I report. ‘Sardon Karaashison of the Iron Hands demands an audience. As does Sergeant Raln of the Seventh Legion, and the sons of the Khan, as well as many more of Lord Guilliman’s own Ultramarines and officials. Yet I cannot in good conscience let any of them into your presence. Any one of them could be working to carry out some foul threat that we cannot yet perceive.’

He sighs. ‘But I cannot rule from behind a wall of mistrust.’

‘Then let us simply be cautious. Let the Sanguinary Guard shoulder the risk in your stead. Let us act as your heralds.’

Sanguinius considers this for a long moment.

‘Very well.’

I nod, and make to turn.

‘Wait,’ he calls out. ‘There is something else, Azkaellon. Speak your mind.’

I wish to Baal that I had worn my helm – that my face had not betrayed me. ‘The Lion...’

I pause, choosing my words with care.

‘Curze’s escape... It *claws* at him.’ I swallow hard and force the rest of the words from my mouth. ‘His fingers stray close to his blade...’

Sanguinius’ face darkens. ‘My brother’s loyalty is not in doubt. He is Master of the First Legion. He is beyond reproach.’

‘I do not doubt his intent, lord. But what of his judgement?’

‘Leave this alone, Azkaellon.’

Sanguinius leaps into the air, a single, powerful beat of his wings carrying him high up into the darkness of the chamber’s balcony. In his absence, I bring my fist to my breastplate and salute the throne.

It is only then that I notice the long blade, which had rested there when I entered, is missing.

‘This honour should be yours, Azkaellon. It is only fitting that you—’

‘No, Aratron,’ I say firmly, shaking my head. ‘I cannot be herald *and* safeguard our father. You ten are the greatest of the Sanguinary Guard. Exemplars of Baal’s

heritage, first among the Legion of Sanguinius. This honour falls to one of you.'

I let my eyes move across the ten Blood Angels standing in the chamber with me. I have fought beside each of them. We have shed blood and faced horrors unimaginable. They are my brothers and my friends, and I would send them into harm's way without a second thought.

Yet what I ask of them now weighs upon my soul like an armoured boot on my throat.

Hakael nods with a grim resignation. 'Then let us decide this.'

He is first to step forwards, an act typical of him. His eyes meet mine, but we say nothing as he pulls a length of bound parchment from the bunch held in my hand. Unrolling it, he holds it up for his brothers to see. It is stained with a single blood-drop.

One by one the others follow, until Aratron draws the other marked lot. He nods in silence and takes his place next to Hakael.

I take the lengths of parchment from them and move to the lectern. Upon it sits a small metal inkwell, a slender quill and a golden chalice. The quill is magnificent, a single feather of purest white, plucked from the wings of Sanguinius himself.

'By our father's body is the truth written,' I intone. 'By his blood will it be remembered.'

The well is warm, the blood within heated to prevent it from drying. I remove my gauntlet, take up the quill and dip it into the well. With long strokes, I write Aratron and Hakael's names onto the pieces of parchment.

'And by our blood will it be honoured.'

I place the pieces of parchment into the chalice, and draw a knife across my palm. Clenching my fist, I squeeze a thick drop of blood into the cup.

The eight Sanguinary Guard who will leave the chamber do the same, adding their blood to mine. I wait until they are done before dropping a small, lit taper into the chalice. It ignites with a blue flicker, burning the paper to ash. I use my fingers to scoop the ash-blood mix into my mouth, tightening my lips at the acrid taste. It is not wholly unpalatable.

The thought strengthens me.

It is well that I can bear the taste of sorrow.

I swallow hard, using my tongue to drag the mixture back towards my throat.

'It is done,' I say. 'May our Lord Sanguinius grant us the strength to endure.'

'Glory to Baal,' the rest of them call out in unison.

The eight Sanguinary Guard salute and exit the chamber, leaving me alone with

Aratron and Hakael.

I stand there a moment, unmoving, anchored by questions. How is it that I have come here to strike down two of my own? Are my actions born of necessity or paranoia? Will the blood that I am about to spill be justified? I look inside myself for answers, and find only the hollow stab of doubt.

Perhaps, I muse, when I am dead and gone, my blood and bones naught but dust in the wind, history will ask these questions again. Should that be the case, then I hope that there comes an answer.

I hold out my hand, proffering two lengths of kindling to Aratron and Hakael.

‘May the Blood guide you.’

The Lion rounds on me, his eyes narrow. ‘What is this deception?’ he demands, thrusting a finger at the golden-armoured figure sat upon the throne. ‘*That* is not Sanguinius.’

Beside him, his Deathwing honour guard tighten their grip on their weapons. I hold up my open palms in appeasement, speaking calmly and clearly.

‘You are correct. We have not sought to conceal ourselves with lies. His likeness to our father is born only out of respect.’

The Lion thumps his gauntleted palm in frustration. ‘Where... is... my... *brother*?’ he demands.

‘With respect, if the Emperor Sanguinius wanted you to know, he would have told you.’

‘*You* will tell me.’

His eyes are like blazing brands. I hold his gaze. ‘I will not.’

He steps close to me as his temper frays. ‘There is steel in your heart, Angel,’ His is an intimate anger, his threat personal. ‘But my blade will pierce it as surely as it has a thousand others.’

Nestled amongst the anger lines creasing his face, a slit of raw flesh draws my attention. The wound is slight, a hairline laceration. It is—

No. I feel my eyes widen as I realise that it is not simply a wound.

It is an *insult*, an indignity made with the very tip of a blade. No mere legionary could have marked the Lion in such a way.

I pause politely, taking a measured breath. ‘I do not fear death, lord – by your hand, or any other. Duty demands I do far worse than hurl myself at oblivion.’

He regards me coldly for what feels like the longest moment of my life. Then he nods, with what seems to be a grudging respect.

‘Were it only that my brother understood *duty* so clearly...’

He brushes past me, stepping to the foot of the throne.

‘And how should I greet this... *herald*?’

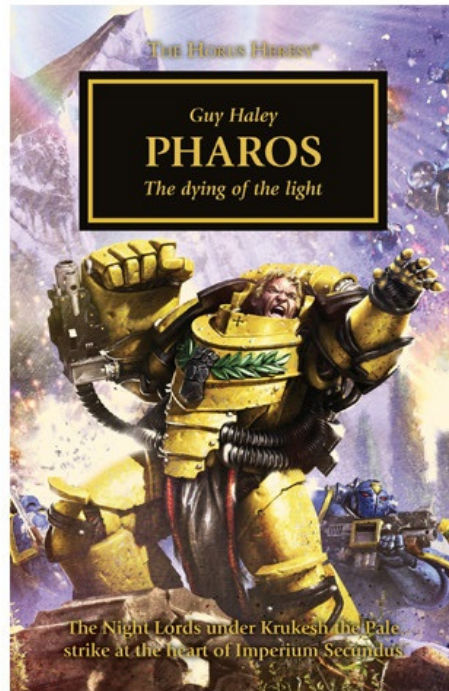
I hide a smile.

‘If it pleases you, my lord, you may address him as the Sanguinor.’

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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