

WARHAMMER
40,000

**GALL OF
CHAOS**

DIVINE WILL

by **ANDY SMILLIE**

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Death is not instantaneous.

I pull the trigger. The target falls, dead.

For most, that is the truth of it. That is enough.

It is in man's nature to turn from death. It is his primal belief that to look too closely, to linger too long on another's final moment, would tempt oblivion to claim more than one life. For all he has conquered, man cannot stare down death and triumph for long.

I tighten my grip on my rifle.

To a Vindicare, a man reborn a weapon, the fleeting space between life and death is a vast gulf of action and reaction. It is a moment stretched to breaking.

I press my eye to the scope.

A golden-armoured figure fills the display. A series of translucent digits resolve as the range-finder adjusts. The man is half a mile away.

I adjust the magnification, drawing out to see the surround.

The man stands atop a marble podium, dwarfed by the grandeur of the structure behind him. The vast, many-columned building is the seat of power here on Drex. An honour guard of Tempestus Scions flank the man to the left and right. Each wears a scarlet dress uniform, their weapons holstered, their hands tucked in ceremony behind their backs.

I adjust again, widening the field of view.

A crowd of thousands vies for my attention. They have crammed themselves into the palace square beyond all reasonable capacity. Held in place by a ring of iron-framed barricades, their mass stops a few meters

short of the podium.

I feel my breath drift between my lips as I pan over the shifting crowd.

Rough-hewn, wooden signs and ragged banners with slanderous oaths reinforce the bitter faces of the men and women wielding them. These people have come to listen to the man in armour, but they have not come to follow him. Not yet.

I tighten focus.

The man's jaw is certain. By appearance, he is in his mid-thirties. Like the sense of self-determination the people of Drex feel, this is a lie. Rejuve-therapy and vital stimms have prolonged his life. The man is three hundred Terran standard.

It is a long time to have lived. A long time in which to rack up sins and amass enemies. And this man has not been idle.

I exhale and make a final, minute adjustment to the scope, narrowing on the Inquisitorial pendant affixed to the man's breastplate.

'They will try to kill you,' I had said. 'It would be safer to deploy in force. Sweep north from the capital and burn out what remains of the daemon's followers.'

'Too much has been wasted already. An army will not bring peace to Drex, Tarim. The only salvation for the planet lies in a single bullet.'

'It will take me two days to locate the cult leader.'

'No,' Inquisitor Gerhart shook his head, and tossed a shell casing into my lap. 'The people of Drex must believe as they once did. They must be made to understand, to know in their hearts that there is only one true Emperor and that He is the God of Mankind.' Gerhart paced the short length of my meditation cell. *'I will stand before them, and the Emperor Himself will reach down from the heavens and ward me from harm. Of His divinity there will be no doubt.'* He stopped moving, clenching his fists. *'Or I will turn their planet to ash.'*

I looked up then and met Gerhart's eyes. Despite the vigour of his oration, they were still, full of the cold calm of a man whose soul has been burnt away by the fire of his own deeds. 'There are perhaps only seven in my temple capable of such a shot,' I said. 'Even I have made a shot like it only once.'

'Do you believe in the Emperor's divine will?' asked Gerhart.

'Yes,' I nodded. 'But I do not believe that it will render you bulletproof.'
'Good,' said Gerhart, stepping from my cell. 'Then do not miss.'

I lift my eye from the scope and look down towards my south-west at the Oration Tower. The domed structure is the only other vantage point overlooking the inquisitor. Red warning sigils filter over my display as my visor picks up a heat signature behind one of the angular windows decorating the tower's peak.

The High Speaker, his aide and the five scions who were there to keep up the pretence of protection were undoubtedly now dead. A fair price to ensure the target's location.

I take off my visor and place it on the roof next to me, careful to angle it towards the tower. Teasing out the thread-thin data-cable from behind the visor's optical cogitator, I jack it into the scope's auxiliary port, linking their displays.

I settle back into a firing position.

Gerhart is in full flow now, his arms thrusting in emphasis. I resist the urge to read his lips. The coming minutes will require all my concentration.

I exhale slow, fixing on the Inquisitorial pendant. It is a beacon, drawing my crosshair to Gerhart's central mass.

He raises his arms, drawing them up from his sides as though crucifying himself before the crowd. He will never present as an easier target.

My visor feeds the scope a single rune.

I fire.

For a long a moment, I watch.

A bullet spins through the air towards Gerhart's chest. It was not fired from my rifle. Another chases the first. This time, my round. I watch the displacement in the air following the path of the two bullets as they bear down on the inquisitor.

My round hits first...

I exhale.

...striking the other before it can kill the inquisitor.

The bullets collide in a brief crack of noise. The Tempestus Scions break ranks, moving to surround Gerhart. He waves them away, looking to the heavens as he makes the sign of the aquila.

I am on my feet, pistol in my hand. I open up on full-auto at the tower. The range is too severe for my rounds to punch through the thick walls and kill. I keep firing. It is enough to cause panic. Stone shrapnel and the twisted remains of shells rip through the interior space of the tower, forcing the would-be assassin to displace. I empty a magazine, watching the single heat signature recede.

It is seventeen hours before I complete my mission.

Fear, like all disease, has to be allowed time to fester, to spread. The heretic from the Oration Tower told all who would listen of what the Emperor did to his bullet. Overnight, the populace of Drex had fallen silent. The angry protests seemed a distant memory as the manufactorums returned to capacity and the tithes of munitions began flowing once more. Drex had been humbled. It was fearful. Obedient.

I had followed word of a broken man whose eyes were the dark ink of death, and whose skin pulsed with a sickly vigour. The would-be assassin had no refuge; he was shunned by the now-loyal populace, and outcast by the rest of his heretical brotherhood. They had taken their own lives in the hope the Emperor would forgive their transgressions and protect their souls from the jaws of the daemons that awaited them in the beyond.

A rare smile stretches the corners of my mouth. The Emperor would offer no such redemption. Even as I walk the sheet-metal streets of the manufactorum district, their souls will be writhing in eternal agony.

A ramshackle wooden hut, strung together by leftover rigging, the Wyrms' Talon is typical of the many sump-holes bordering the munitions port. Short stools stand grouped around freestanding cask barrels. The makeshift tables echo the haggard faces of the eleven patrons whose eyes do their best to avoid me. I feel the rotten timbers of the floor strain as I step in out of the rain. A gaunt man in the crimson robes of the priesthood hurries past me. I make a mental note of the barcode stamped into the flesh of his neck. The squat man behind the bar disappears into a back room. The wood shavings carpeting the place mulch to my boots as I move to a table in the corner and sit down.

I take my pistol from beneath my jacket and place it on the table. Ten of the room's occupants make for the door, their exits neither discreet nor graceful. None of them will see the dawn. There was a time when I might

have pitied them. Their transgressions weren't wilful but to sin in ignorance is still to sin, and innocence proves nothing. Their laxity had allowed the Archenemy to sit among them unchallenged. The Emperor demanded more of his children. He demanded vigilance.

The man sitting opposite me doesn't even look up from his drink.

'Your name,' I say.

'I knew someone would come for me,' he says.

'Your name.'

'My name?' He looks up to hiss at me through wasted stumps of teeth.

'What is your name?'

'Rot and die.' He moves to stand.

I move quicker, catching his arm to keep him in place before driving my fingers into his throat. Gagging, he fights to steady himself on the stool.

'Tell me your name and I will grant you the Emperor's mercy. Do not—' I pause to pull a blade from the folds of my overcoat, and place it on the table next to my gun, 'and we will spend a long time together.'

'What does it matter? The Emperor himself tore my bullet from the sky. Between him and the darker gods I've failed, my soul will not escape judgement.'

I smile at him, a cold gesture laced with mocking pity. 'The Emperor has many hounds. He has little need to bark himself.'

'You... ' His mouth widens and goes slack.

I roll up the left sleeve of my jacket. His eyes shift to my exposed forearm. Dark lines of neat text hide most of my flesh. Each of the tattoos is the name of a life I've taken. Yet they are more than just a tapestry of my life as a murderer. They are wards, armour against death's gaze. A foolish notion, perhaps, that lines of ink could trick the fates, but camouflaged in the names of the dead I have, to today at least, avoided oblivion's pull.

'Name,' I say, my voice hard as I indicate an area where the white of my skin still shows.

'My name...' He tightens his jaw, trying in vain to stem his tears. 'St'phen. My name is St'phen Tylr.'

Before all of St'phen's blood has had a chance to escape his corpse, I am already back out in the rain. Those who allowed this to happen are still out there, and none can live who deny the Emperor's divine will.

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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