



WARHAMMER
40,000

BLOOD ANGELS

ETERNAL

DAN ABNETT

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ETERNAL

Dan Abnett

Froer watched as the retrieval detail brought out the bodies on bearer boards. A dismal return for a day's effort.

The sun was painfully bright. His mouth was dry. He took a tin beaker from his musette bag and scooped some water from the pool. The water was so clear he could see the pebbled bottom gleaming like a mat of glass beads. Tiny silver fish flitted around his Militarum-issue boots.

‘Sir!’

The men at the picket were signalling to him. He splashed back through the long pools under the trees.

A figure approached across the mossy sweep of the lagoon edge.

Froer took a breath. It was a rare and remarkable sight.

Adeptus Astartes.

The warrior's massive plate armour shone red in the hard sunlight. A Blood Angel. Two yellow teardrops on the shoulder plate denoted Sixth Company.

The warrior's helm was off, slung at his belt. His hair was cropped gold, his face that of a noble statue in a silent chapel. A man of—

No, not a man. Not a man at all.

Froer went to meet him. He bowed his head and made the sign of the aquila.

‘Captain Froer, Sixteenth Betal, Astra Militarum,’ he began. ‘May the Throne be—’

‘Gammarael,’ said the Angel.

‘We appreciate the assist,’ said Froer. ‘Been trying to clear the Plunge for—’

‘Show me.’

Froer fell in beside the not-man. He had to scamper every third or fourth step to keep pace. They walked along the flowered bank and began to wade into the crystal pools. Froer glanced back. His boots had crushed the delicate flowers growing along the bank, but there was no sign of the Angel’s passing. It was as though the giant’s vast heels had not trampled anything, or had caused the stalks and bright blooms to spring up again, renewed, after his passing.

‘Can I fetch you food, sir? Drink?’

‘No.’

‘The water here is quite fresh,’ Froer added, dipping his fingers into the pool. ‘Clean. We do not thirst here. There are also edible berries and fruit.’

The not-man said nothing.

‘Odd place for a war,’ said Froer.

‘Odd?’

Froer made a gesture at the glade around them, the stretches of sparkling water, the silver-trunked trees with their graceful khaki leaves, the flowers, the pure sunlight, the emerald velvet of moss on boulders.

‘A paradise, I mean. After the mud-holes we’ve seen, sir, the slime-pits, the toxic trenches, arguing over the last drops of filthy water in the canteens. Here, the Emperor has provided us with food and water, with no need for urgent resupply, and—’

‘You talk a great deal,’ remarked the Angel.

‘I—I’m sorry.’

‘Is the enemy here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then it is not an odd place for a war.’

Froer didn’t know what to say.

‘Assessment,’ said the Angel.

‘Oh, well... main dispositions are infantry to the west of the lagoon basin. My unit was ordered to circle east of the lagoons to flank and—’

‘This has not been achieved?’

‘No, sir,’ said Froer. ‘There is a deep plunge ahead, a grotto. Something is in there. It is denying my progress and killing my men.’

‘Type?’

‘Some kind of beast,’ said Froer. ‘It snorts like a hog. No formal identifi—’

‘Have your men form a cordon behind me. If it comes past me, they shoot. Full auto.’

‘Understood.’

Froer fanned his men out. They waded through the pools, thigh-deep, their rifles ready. The Angel moved ahead, with Froer following his ripples. Sunlight dappled the water.

The plunge was gloomy, a steep, gurgling basin choked with weed and briars. It smelled of rot and mould, and the sun seemed to shun it. It was like a blemish in the landscape, a darkness lurking within perfection.

‘Do we—’ Froer began.

The Angel raised his hand for silence and drew his blade, a glaive with a fine edge and a gilded grip.

He took another step, ripples expanding around his knees. As he pulled back an overhang of discoloured leaves there was a snort of phlegm.

Then the beast came out to meet them.

Froer gasped. It moved so fast, he could barely fix on it. It was twice the size of the Angel, obese, with black bristles blotching its pallid hide. Froer saw claws like broken femurs, a drooling smile full of yellow teeth, a muddle of wet eyes like frogspawn.

Talons squeaked on plate. The Angel grunted, meeting the charging weight, and slashed sideways. Blood as black and sticky as tar spurted into the air. The beast let out a pig-squeal.

The Angel cut again, a two handed back-slice. More tar-blood bloomed in the clear water like oil. The beast used its thrashing bulk, churned up the water in a furious surge, and struck the Angel sideways. Froer saw gouges in the red plate.

But the Angel had drawn it out.

‘Fire!’ Froer yelled, a tremor of fear in his voice.

The beast knocked the Angel over. Water sheeted up. It came on, thrashing. Froer fired at it as it went past. His wading men started shooting, ripping las-bolts across the surface of the pool. There was a stink of scorched meat.

It didn't stop, but embraced Corporal Engg and bit off his jaw. It shredded Trooper Layune's torso.

The Angel surfaced in an explosion of spray. He drove his glaive down into the thing's spine with both fists, wrenching back to split ribs and open the wound.

The water turned black. The beast squealed, vomited bile, and collapsed sideways.

The Angel withdrew his blade and then took off the beast's head with an overarm stroke.

The squealing stopped.

'You may advance,' the Angel said.

The not-man looked at the dead thing, and then at the floating bodes of the men it had slain. The pool was stained black around the beast's corpse, and bright red around the Guardsmen. The Angel's gaze seemed to linger on the red. Froer took his expression for regret.

'You may advance,' the Angel repeated.

'My thanks to you,' Froer said. 'My thanks indeed. I—'

'I am thirsty,' said the Angel.

'Sir, there is water all around us,' said Froer. 'This pool is tainted, but the others... fresh water and—'

The Angel glanced at him. It was a strange look.

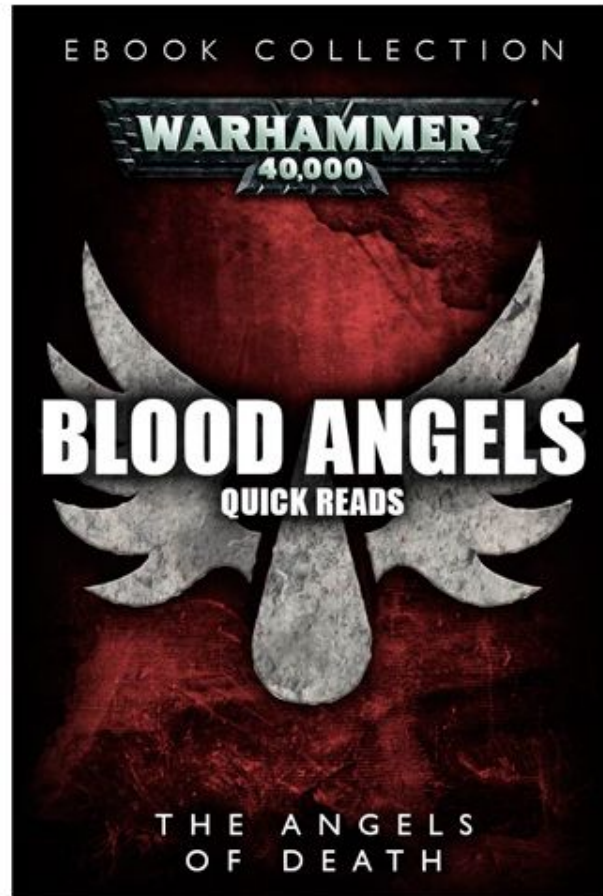
'There's not enough water,' he replied. 'Not even here in paradise.'

The not-man turned, moved into the darkness of the Plunge, and disappeared into the shadows where the sun could not see him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Abnett is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Unremembered Empire*, *Know No Fear* and *Prospero Burns*, the last two of which were both *New York Times* bestsellers. He has written almost fifty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies. He scripted *Macragge's Honour*, the first Horus Heresy graphic novel, as well as numerous audio dramas and short stories set in the Warhammer 40,000 and Warhammer universes. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

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