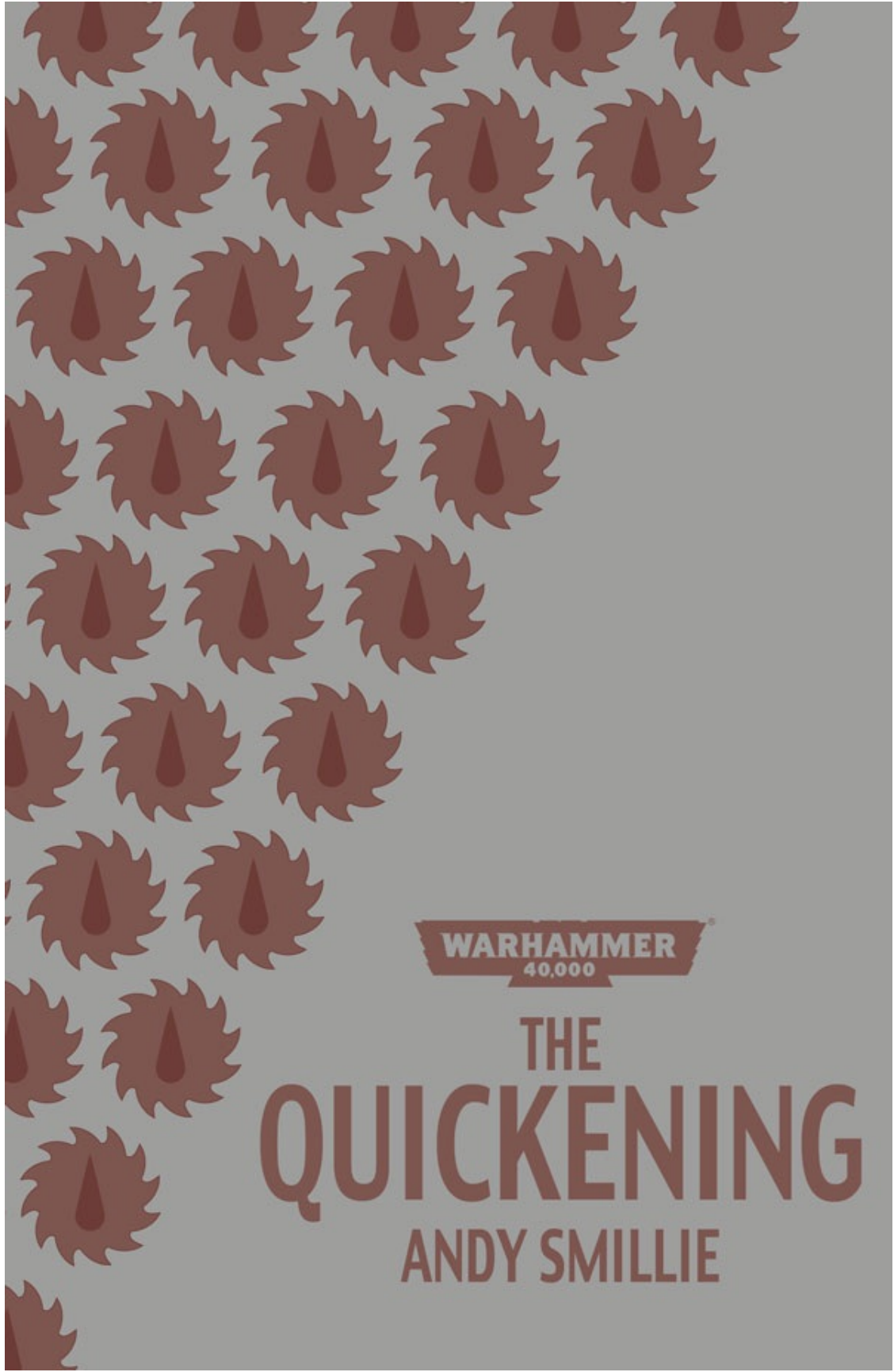


WARHAMMER
40,000

THE
QUICKENING
ANDY SMILLIE



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Andy Smillie

I am one, and they are many. But I will endure.

The bolt round looms large as it pushes towards my head, sluggish as though traveling through water. I turn to the side and feel the heat of the shell as it scrapes past the flesh of my cheek. A half-step and the blade formed from my rage slices through the firer's arm, shearing it off at the elbow. He is to blame for Spheris's treachery. His lying tongue is the architect of the anarchy enveloping the world. I growl. The myriad faces worked into his baroque battle-plate widen in anguish as my reverse stroke cleaves through his helm. I move past him as his corpse starts to topple.

Unarmoured, the human pawns of the archenemy thought me easy prey. Pride granted me access to their innermost sanctum, a feat a thousand warriors could not have accomplished. I am no lamb to be slaughtered on the altar of a dark god, however; I am a beast twice cursed. I am Balthiel, Librarian of the Flesh Tearers.

The others are in motion, faces twisting to snarls, weapons angling towards me. Were I held in time's embrace, they would kill me. Autogun shells would hammer into my body, blasting it apart as las-fire peeled away my flesh. I would be dead in moments. I am not bound by temporal law, however, my gifts setting me apart from the three dozen traitors crowding around me.

Thump... Thump...

I listen to the throb of their barely beating hearts, and to the sound of blood as it trickles through them. A sun gone nova, a pall of incandescent rage, I will their blood to burn hotter, to boil in their veins. I end them with a thought. The traitors explode in a hail of gore as arterial fluid bursts from their bodies. Their weapons spill to the floor, like leaves wilting from dying trees. A cloud of hissing droplets of blood drifts towards me, like a flurry of ghoulish snowflakes. I relish their

touch as I press forwards, opening my mouth to savour them.

For weeks, I have been desperate to kill. The pain of longing has been like a needle in my mind, an itching thirst that no water will sate. The crew of the *Wayward Lance*, the trader vessel that delivered me to Spheris, the populace I've moved through, the ranks of this treacherous coven: all forbidden morsels, an indulgence victory would not allow. I rejoice at this release, the warm coppery tang of freshly spilled blood driving me to rapture.

Morchan's corpse writhes as I pass it. The bastard psyker was the only one who could have divined my true nature, but his warning died on his lips as I summoned my gifts, pulling myself out of time. Without the strength to follow me into the future or root himself in the present, Morchan's mind was torn apart, his body turned inside out by the psychic-temporal shift.

Only Governor Kadi Aren remains. His weakness has cost the lives of millions. He is the reason I am here. Beads of sweat begin to form on his brow as shock turns to terror. I taste his panic. His weapon is charged for firing. A blue halo rims its mouth as he grasps for the trigger. I snarl. He is too far away. Time is catching up with me. I will not reach him. Thrusting my hand towards him, I channel my rage into bolts of crimson lightening. They arc from my splayed fingers, flaying away the ablative plates of his jewel-encrusted armour, lancing into his flesh. A scream stretches his mouth as the eldritch tendrils peel the flesh from his bones and burn out his soul. The embers of Aren's corpse flicker for a moment before vanishing. I gasp, salivating, my pulse building to a thundering crescendo as I drink the psychic backlash of his death.

Time pulls me close and I come to rest, panting. My enemies lie dead around me, but the battle is not yet over.

I have overused my gifts. I have drawn too long from the immaterium.

Dark smoke rises from my skin in waves. The din of distant battle is drowned out by the scraping sound of hungry claws.

'By his blood am I made.' I begin the catechism as the pain comes.

A thousand whispering voices threaten to engulf my mind. Creatures, daemons, nightmares made flesh, gnaw at the edges of my consciousness. Tongues of silk whisper idle promises and false truths. My flesh is ruined, flawed, yet it is all they ask in exchange for the end of all pain.

'By his blood am I armoured.'

Blood, this time my own, runs from my mouth and nose.

I tense against the darkness enveloping my mind, feeling my bones break as the effort sends my body into spasm.

'By his blood shall I triumph.'

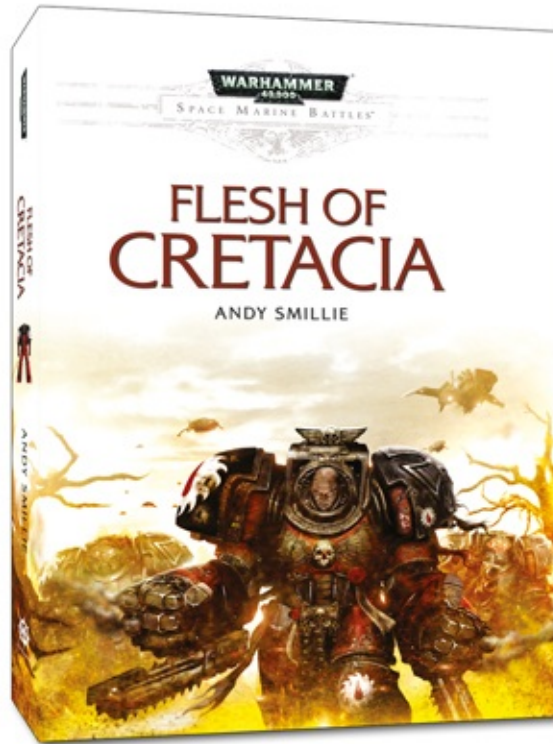
I feel the warp creatures roar in anguish as my *will* pushes them away, armouring my soul against their touch.

I stifle a scream as stabbing pain splits my skin, tearing it apart like a tremor spearing through the earth. I collapse onto the blood-soaked cobbles. My eyes close as I drift into a sus-anic coma, trusting to the grace of Sanguinius that my brothers will find me before the daemons return.

I am one, and they are many. But I will endure.

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*.



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