

The image is a cover for a Warhammer 40,000 story. It features a close-up, dramatic shot of a Terminator's armor, showing intricate details of the metal plates and joints. The Terminator is positioned in the foreground, with its right arm raised. In the background, a checkered floor is visible, suggesting a combat arena or a specific location. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a sense of intensity and scale. The overall color palette is dominated by metallic greys, blacks, and a warm, golden-yellow glow from the background.

WARHAMMER
40,000

L J GOULDING

HELOTH

A SCYTHES OF THE EMPEROR STORY

The cover art depicts a dramatic scene from the Warhammer 40,000 universe. In the center, a heavily armored Imperial Knight, likely a Terminator, is shown in a dynamic pose, holding a glowing golden staff or weapon. The knight's armor is dark and metallic, with intricate details and glowing red highlights. The background is a chaotic, war-torn landscape with a checkered pattern on the ground, suggesting a battlefield or a specific tactical maneuver. The overall color palette is dominated by dark greys, blacks, and a bright, golden-yellow light emanating from the central figure and the background. The top of the cover features the 'WARHAMMER 40,000' logo in a stylized, metallic font.

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HELOTH

L J Goulding

Hive ship. Bio-wreckage. Ruined mother of monsters, and the twitching birth-sac of insidious, alien horror.

#70443 *Heloth* was all of these things, and more besides.

The stench of her burning choked the jungle - flakes of sticky ash drifted in a nauseating rain, settling amidst the mud and gore slicks of the area around the crash site. Slain out in the void, she had come tumbling like a clutch of falling stars to smite Miral Prime with her immense, smouldering bulk, spread now across an area the size of a small city. Little of the original landscape remained beneath her, and the fire was still spreading.

Even in death, it seemed that the hive ships of the tyranids might visit destruction upon their prey-worlds.

Thus had Veteran-Brother Menele's thoughts been darkened as Second Company pulled back to their Rhino transports. With the horrendous losses they had suffered, it had not been an orderly withdrawal so much as a rout, though his admittedly wounded pride in the Chapter would never allow him to admit it. On the bouncing, shuddering floor of the Rhino's troop compartment, Captain Agaitas was dying. His armoured midriff had been torn open, the blood loss catastrophic. Attended by the Apothecary, he writhed and groaned in agony, cursing the xenos and rolling his blinded eyes in a face raw with fresh burns.

'They... have us...' he gurgled 'The Coffin... will... fall...'

Menele looked to the Apothecary, who shook his head grimly. He was not a member of Agaitas's command squad, and so Menele couldn't recall his name. It hardly seemed to matter, now.

Brother Vasilis crouched against the far wall, clutching the ragged company standard tightly in his gauntlets. The fabric still steamed where it had been

splattered with bio-acid from the attack that had killed Kostis and Gallagar, and Agaitas's last command had been for Vasilis to raise it up again from the mud.

'The noble horsemen of Sotha do not lie at the feet of abominations,' the captain had said, right before one such abomination ended him. It was Menele who had ordered the retreat.

Like all of his company-brethren, he knew every stitch of the banner as though it were his own flesh. Conabos, the dark horse, rampant upon a chequered mosaic field and overlaid with the golden scythe of Second Company. None of them would see it lost to the tyrannid onslaught, here on this unworthy and barbaric world. The Scythes of the Emperor had already lost too much.

The Rhino's internal comm-link chimed. *'Two more large hostiles, coming around to outflank us from the south-east. Moving to evade.'*

Menele glanced back through the transport's viewing aperture. Their driver was pushing the engine to its maximum load, the blazing trees and undergrowth rendered as a fiery blur surrounding the column as they sped from the crash site. Behind them, Third Squad's Rhino was aflame, the hull's gold and sable Chapter livery blistering away in the heat, and their driver was struggling to keep pace.

Further back still, the Scythes' pursuer was gaining.

It towered over the jungle, its great forelimbs thundering through the binning trees with each heavy step, toppling and shattering their trunks in cascades of bright embers. The titanic beast let out a roar loud enough to rattle the troop compartment around Menele even over the shriek of the protesting engines, before spraying another wild flurry of bio-plasma bolts into the Rhino convoy.

Each impact was a burst of green-white fire that flashed like summer lightning. Most tore harmlessly into the ground, showering scorched earth and sickly glowing fragments of wood, but he saw one strike another transport in the left frontal track housing. It was only a glancing hit, but something sheared off within the mechanism and sent the vehicle slewing madly to crash into a protruding spar of bio-debris from the fallen *Heloth*, some five metres thick. The Rhino's momentum lifted its rear end clear off the ground before hammering back down, the engine stalled out.

Menele cursed, and slammed the aperture slot closed before turning back to his brothers. 'That's Ninth Squad. They struck out hard.'

He looked down at Agaitas, whose delirious curses had given way to what looked like murmured prayers - his slack, bloody lips were moving, though barely any sound seemed to escape them.

Several of the battered warriors inside the Rhino regarded their captain with

grim acceptance, the masks of their faceplates appearing almost morose in the compartment's dull light. But Menele knew that, as disheartening as it might be, no purpose of morale or honour was served in allowing Agaitas to linger on in this moribund state, and he could not stand by and watch it go on any longer.

He gripped the young Apothecary's shoulder pad, and spoke firmly. 'Give him peace.'

The Apothecary lifted his gaze from his patient - Throne, the lad could not have been more than a decade out of the Scout company, Menele realised. Were the survivors from Sotha spread so thinly that this was the best they could offer as replacement for Brother Musides? Nonetheless, the old veteran kept his thoughts to himself.

'Give him peace,' he repeated. 'Our mission to secure *Heloth* has failed, and our brother-captain has already paid the ultimate price. Take from him the Chapter's due, and be done with it.'

No one else spoke. The Rhino bucked and slewed, the track suspension squealing as they sped on.

The Apothecary nodded slowly. He reached for His pistol-like carnifex - Menele gritted his teeth at the bitter, bitter irony of the name - and placed it against Agaitas's temple with reverent care. When activated, the pneumatic mechanism would deliver a euthanizing metal bolt into the brainpan of the patient, ending their suffering in a painless instant. There was no Chaplain to administer last rites, nor indeed any words that would make this grim duty any easier, nor soothe the passing of his noble battle brother.

The captain held out a trembling hand towards Brother Vasilis and the company standard. His fingers grasped for what his sightless eyes could not find. Then, with a loud *clack*, that made Menele start in spite of himself, the carnifex did its work, Agaitas's hand fell to the floor, and he dropped limply into the crook of the Apothecary's waiting arm.

But the respectful silence that should have followed was cut all too short.

A monumental impact close by hurled Menele and two others across the compartment, and the Rhino's engine note rose sharply as the tracks whirled in the empty air. Menele slammed face-first into the bulkhead, feeling gravity shift around them as the transport rolled; then he was skidding back across the ceiling panels, with Agaitas's dead weight across his legs.

Someone's boltgun went off in the crush. The Apothecary's pristine breastplate exploded in a shower of red.

'Pile ou—' Menele began, just as the rear hatch of the Rhino burst inwards in a

devastating flash of green fire.

Like *Heloth*, they too were burning now.

Consciousness returned to Menele slowly and fitfully. His limbs were heavy, but he felt armoured hands raising him up.

Three of them stumbled clear of the wreckage - three, from the seven that had boarded. Vasilis still bore the standard, walking the pole like an oversied crutch as he helped Menele back up the incline.

Beyond them lay another Rhino - Third Squad's? - its rear section completely obliterated by a direct hit, and pieces of armoured bodies littered the smouldering earth all around. Bolter fire rang out in the middle-distance, and Menele caught sight of battle-weary survivors from Ninth and Sixth Squad falling back by sections from what remained of the tree line. Some bore power falces, the blades slick with tyranid blood where their field generators had failed under the sheer weight of the enemy's number.

And after them, between the blackened trees, came the xenos.

In the shadow of the bladed giants that were stalking the Scythes, lesser tyranid warrior-forms leapt and howled and hunted, with their nightmarish, multifarious forms silhouetted against the flames. Another deafening roar from the nearest bio-Titan shook the burning jungle, only this time much closer and answered by hooting calls from the beast's approaching kin.

How could there be so many? The hive ship was dead...

His system already pushed to the limit by supra-hormones and combat stimms from his battleplate, Menele forced himself to stand unaided, and took stock of the situation.

Then he drew his chainsword, and opened a tactical vox-channel.

'Brothers, to me. We will stand as one.'

Affirmatives echoed back to him, all sense of squad-level command long abandoned - Menele counted fewer than thirty ident returns on his visor display. Brother Vasilis stood at his back, firm and resolute, planting the standard and letting the banner unfurl in the fiery breeze.

'Here they come,' the warrior muttered, drawing his own blade with his free hand.

The tyranids surged forwards, catching the slowest of the retreating Space Marines even as the rest formed up in an improvised defensive cordon. Menele snarled, and made a series of swiping gestures with his chainsword.

'Regroup! Two romphaean lines... Fire at will!'

The first xenos fell to the thunder of mass-reactive fire, their sinewy bodies tumbling into the ashen mud. Severed limbs and ropes of bright ichor flew through the air.

But still they came.

Striding forwards, Menele loosed carefully aimed shots from his bolt pistol, dropping three gaunt beasts before they could close with the first defensive line. 'Hold rank!' he bellowed, stooping to retrieve a fallen falx and tossing it over to one of his unarmed battle-brothers. 'Prepare to engage!'

With bolt shells whipping over their heads, the Scythes' first line redied themselves. Menele took his place in the line too, staring hard in hatred at their xenos attackers as they closed the gap between them. The tyranids swept over them like a living, bladed tide. Swinging axe, chainsword and falx alike with deadly, practised skill, nonetheless the warriors of Second Company might as well have been trying to reap the great oceans of Sotha with their blades. Menele hacked again and again, but felt the battle brother to his right tall beneath the xenos assault - then the warrior to his left. Menele spun and fired point-blank into the gaping, tanged maw of a tyranid beast, then came about to snatch a glance back to the second defensive line.

The moment of inattention almost cost him his head. Literally.

A barbed claw came down over his shoulder and struck into his plastron. He twisted with the blow, driving his chainsword hard into the braying tyranid warrior's upper shoulder, but the strength of the thing's attack sprawled him from his feet and sent the embedded forelimb raking up his visor. Ceramite and plasteel tore with the sheer brute force of it, and Menele's helmet twisted painfully about his face as it was wrenched half-free of the armour's neck seal.

He crashed down with the wounded beast on top of him, his vision crazed by the sudden loss of half his faceplate. He blinked hard with his exposed right eye, trying to shake away the disorienting overlay of his damaged auto-senses.

And he realised that he was gazing directly into the cold, predatory eyes of his foe.

Without thinking, he rammed the chainsword into its abdomen and gunned the motors, carving through chitinous exoskeleton and softer tissues with equal ease. The beast convulsed with the blade's action, gore spraying Menele's armour and staining the mud beneath them both, and it swatted at him with jerking, palsied limbs. Finally, he snatched up his pistol and blew out the top of the tyranid's crested skull.

The first line had dissolved into half a dozen smaller melees, but the second

held true. His brothers fired indiscriminately into the alien throng, or fought them blade-to-claw in the early dawn light. He dragged himself to his feet and hacked down some foul winged creature as it swooped for him, and for just one moment he dared to believe that the remnants of Second Company might hold out until Chapter Master Thorcyra could send—

A shadow fell over them all. The shadow of the bio-Titan. Its roar almost knocked Menele from his feet.

It opened fire into the Scythes' position with its great, fleshy weapon analogues. Bio-plasma burned through armoured Space Marines and tyranid warrior-forms alike, hurling them aside like so many insects. Menele saw Brother Vasilis obliterated where he stood one second he was there and the next he was gone, and the tattered, scorched company standard was hurled down once more.

Dazed and exhausted, Menele staggered through the carnage towards it. The horsemen of Sotha would never fall. Second Company would never fall.

Still trading fire and fury with the xenos, the other survivors moved to cover him. Another bio-Titan crested the trees behind them, bellowing at the first as though they might be two bull phantines vying for territory out on the plains.

Menele sank to his knees in the filth, grasping the banner pole and hefting it upright again. Another warrior, his armour scorched by plasma fire, came to aid him.

Then, the wider vox-link crackled. '*...report... status... Second Company...*'

Confused, Menele looked beyond the battle to the rising Miral sun. They had not received communications from the Giant's Coffin bastion since the first attack at *Heloth*. Even so, the voice came through again, more clearly this time.

'Approaching Chapter forces, report now. Tell us how to help you.'

He turned to his battle-brothers. 'It's the Coffin - they must have visual on us!' He pressed a finger to the link in the side of his ruined helm and spoke as clearly as he could. 'Coffin, we're surrounded. The Titans took out our air support, and chewed through the column in less than an hour. The jungle is already swarming with tyranid hatchlings from the *Heloth* wreck.'

'How many of you remain? Can you make it to the outer walls?'

Menele scanned the encroaching horde, and the faces of his brethren as they fought against it.

They were exhausted. Spent.

'Unlikely. We're down to—'

Above them, the two bio-Titans lunged at one another snapping with teeth as long as sword blades, their tread shaking the ground. Menele cried out to those

stragglers still engaging the smaller tyranids on the muddy slopes who might yet be crushed by these great monsters that appeared to have forgotten the original battle entirely.

'Pull back! Pull back, brothers!' He resumed his report as quickly as he could. 'We're down to less than two squads. They hit us hard. The captain is gone, although we're rallied to the company standard. I don't think we're going anywhere, Coffin.'

They all knew it - they had nothing left. Nothing that could wound a bio-Titan at close range. Not a Devastator, nor heavy support vehicle.

But the bastion at the Giant's Coffin had such weapons in abundance, and now they were within visual range. Menele hoped that he would not have to spell it out for whoever was on the other end of the vox-link.

There was a long pause. '*Second Company. Hold position.*'

'Understood. For Sotha, brother.'

'*Aye. For Sotha.*'

Menele cut the link, and raised his chainsword high.

'Second Company, stand fast! Let the xenos horrors come and bask in the glory of our noble standard!'

The Scythes of the Emperor knew what such an order meant. In short order they pulled back, spending the last of their ammunition as best they could. They raised their voices together in the old Sothan battle hymns, and in laments for their lost brethren. Many gauntleted hands gripped the haft of the banner pole, and as one they held it aloft even as the tyranids tore into them.

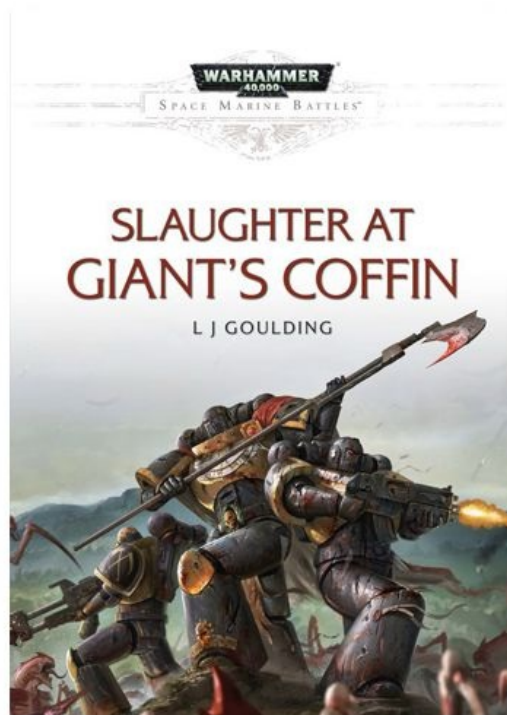
The shrieking thunder of incoming artillery strike drowned out their songs, and their death-screams. The standard of Second Company fluttered, ragged, in the backwash of each colossal detonation. Menele and his battle-brothers were united until the end in their defiance of the xenos, with what remained of their lives measured not even in seconds, but in fractured, half-glimpsed instants of indiscriminate annihilation.

And the dark horse Conabos stood, proud as ever, upon the banner's chequered field.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L J Goulding has written many stories for Black Library, including ‘The Lords of Borsis’, ‘Kaldor Draigo: Knight of Titan’, ‘Shield of Baal: The Word of the Silent King’ and the Space Marine Battles audio drama *Mortarion’s Heart* for Warhammer 40,000, and ‘The Oberwald Ripper’ and ‘The Great Maw’ for Warhammer. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

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