

WARHAMMER
40,000



SCYTHES OF THE EMPEROR
**TERMINAL
VELOCITY**

L J GOULDING

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TERMINAL VELOCITY

L J Goulding

Wreckage. I am ensnared.

Kick free. Roll left.

Lateral spin. *Ground, sky, ground, sky, ground, sky.*

Arms spread. Steer with legs.

Ground, sky, ground, sky, sky, ground, ground, ground, ground.

Angle descent, adjusting trajectory. Altitude, fourteen thousand and seventy-two metres and falling.

Falling.

Falling.

My auto-senses dull the roar of the air to nothing more than faint white noise.

Problem. Visor display shows damage to left thruster. Fuel leaking like a comet tail behind me. Cannot fire my jump pack.

The Storm Eagle spirals downwards some fifteen hundred metres away. Its engines are burned out, its internal bays open to the atmosphere.

It's shedding bodies. Ragged xenos and a handful of limp, armoured forms.

Emperor speed you on your way, brothers.

Comms are inoperative. Altitude, twelve thousand eight hundred and sixteen metres and falling.

Falling.

Recall emergency procedures. Disengage safeties. One, two. Check armament. Lost my blade. Bolt pistol mag-locked to right thigh.

Confirm final disengage. Deactivate fail-safe.

Release.

The jump pack snaps free, the trailing harness-web tugging me into a new half-spin.

Arms spread. Head back. *Ground, sky, ground, ground.*

The pack tumbles past me, still leaking wispy fuel as it falls. It looks much smaller now, whirling towards the infinite horizon.

Combat assessment: my transport has been attacked. My squad is unaccounted for, presumed killed-in-action. I am in freefall, two-point-eight kilometres from the designated drop-point.

Local geography: urban sprawl, ninety-four metres above relative sea level. Enemy-held territory.

Adjust altitude reading accordingly.

A bright flash. A concussion wave, and a booming detonation as the stricken Storm Eagle's fuel tanks catch. The explosion sears the heavens, lighting up the cloud cover below and scattering the remains of her fuselage over a wide area.

One amongst many. Who knew that the tyrannids could gain air-superiority over the mighty Imperium so effortlessly?

Sudden impact to my left shoulder.

Spinning. Spinning. Corrected.

It is a piece of the drop-rail. Brother Tolliver still hangs lifelessly from his pack, locked in position and ready for the jump that never came. He has lost his helm, and his short, white hair whips in the howling gale.

Another pack is locked two spaces behind him. The bisected remains of Brother Kenai dangle half out of the harness like a mangled puppet.

No, not *remains*.

Kenai claws at the rail with bloody gauntlets. His body has not yet realised the extent of the damage that has been inflicted upon it.

I try to raise him on the vox, or even by battle-sign, but he is too far gone. He is being dragged down by Tolliver and the drop-rail, even though he will not likely survive all the way to the ground. Not with that level of blood loss.

In desperation, he fires his jump pack.

There is a bright flare and the rail begins to spin like a firework, driven by Kenai's frantic thrust. I dive to the right, angling and slowing my fall to avoid them.

They spin faster, and faster still. I pray that Kenai blacks out before the end.

His pack detonates, taking most of the rail and Tolliver with it. Someone's severed arm hits me solidly in the face.

Ground, sky, ground, sky.

Arms spread. Corrected.

Altitude, seven thousand, four hundred and eighty-one metres and falling.

In the moment, I struggle to recall my training. The correct procedures feel... counterintuitive. I draw my bolt pistol, and confirm the full magazine.

Be the blade, as well as the hand that wields it.

Everything blurs to white as I breach the cloud cover, moisture beading across my helmet's retinal lenses. The visor display appears to hang against a murky, blank page before my eyes.

Suddenly, inexplicably, my armour's systems manage to lock on to the local strategic network. My tactical readouts are updated.

The xenos are swarming into the Second Ward. They must have sniffed out our true intentions, and are converging upon all potential ground evacuation points.

They are millions-strong. Without air support, we will not prevail.

My vision clears. I see the cityscape below me, overlaid with the most recent mapping in friendly green and hostile red.

So much red.

Altitude, four thousand, one hundred and twenty-one metres and falling.

A murder-flock of winged beasts takes flight from the shattered upper levels of a ruined mega-hab to the south. They are the smaller, grotesque creatures, barking and shrieking their alien calls into the sky, though their sheer number casts a shadow upon the wide streets below.

Targeting. Lock. Fire.

Targeting. Lock. Fire.

I am upon them, and then *through* them. Leathery wings slap against me, startled yelps and the breaking of their wiry bodies piercing the white noise in my ears.

Turning with a twist of my armoured limbs, I loose two more shots back up into the brood before they even know what has hit them. They circle, confused and angry, before continuing on their way.

I roll over again. I can no longer see sky at the horizon.

The largest of the tyranid bio-constructs stalk the avenues and plazas of the city, surrounded by their smaller cousins. The perspective is confusing; for a moment, I feel like a model-maker surveying the miniature angles of a great tableau, with my perfect and imperfect creations arrayed for battle upon its surface.

Then the moment passes and the very real metropolis rises up to greet me.

Altitude, two thousand and eighty-nine metres and falling.

My visor locks onto the enemy at ground level. Not the larger constructs now, but those it classifies as 'infantry'. Still technically out of bolt pistol range, my ever-optimistic battleplate nonetheless urges me to engage them.

With a flick of my pauldrons, I aim for the widest open space I can see, and raise my weapon to the horde below.

No lock. Fire.

No lock. Fire.

No lock. Fire.

Each shot means death for something, some as yet unseen beast at ground level. I fire indiscriminately, until the shape of a worthier target resolves in my vision.

It is a living tank. A loathsome screamer-killer.

I fire again and again, knowing full well that my bolt shells cannot pierce its chitinous hide.

Then the ratchet lever locks back, the pistol's magazine spent.

No matter. My body is a weapon.

Be the blade.

Point-five-eight metric tonnes of genhanced flesh, smooth ceramite, cold plasteel and unyielding adamantium. I am like a living meteorite. My mass and velocity will be my final gifts to the Emperor.

Altitude, three hundred and forty-eight metres.

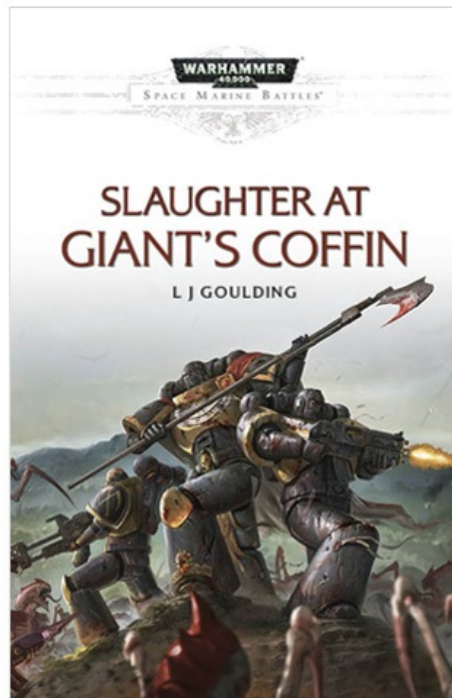
I make one last correction to my trajectory, and pull my arms in tight to my sides. My target is all that I can see.

Give me a smile, you unholy bast—

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L J Goulding is the author of the Horus Heresy audio drama *The Heart of the Pharos*, while for Space Marine Battles he has written the novel *Slaughter at Giant's Coffin* and the audio drama *Mortarion's Heart*. He has also written a number of Warhammer 40,000 short stories, including 'The Lords of Borsis', 'Kaldor Draigo: Knight of Titan' and 'Shield of Baal: The Word of the Silent King'. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

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