



GABRIEL SETH:
THE FLESH TEARER

A short story by Andy Smillie



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*For David Stevens.
Thanks for keeping me in the fight.*

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Andy Smillie

Gabriel Seth sat alone, hunched in the gloom of the gunship's hold. A thick, black shroud covered his armour, its wide hood hiding his face and the unfathomable rage that burned in his eyes. Head bowed, he lost himself in the vibrations running through the craft's floor as it broke into Baal's atmosphere.

'Entry achieved. Proceeding to dock. Arrival in three minutes.'

The pilot-servitor's voice washed over Seth. He had no need of the status report. This was not his first time on Baal. He had stood beneath its war-scorched sky a thousand times. He could derive his location from the subtle shift in the craft's pitch, and knew, to the moment, how long it would take him to touch down: two seconds less than the servitor's estimate. For this same reason, he had disabled the external pict-feeds and the tactical hololith. He had no need to look upon his surroundings, to see the red-rust deserts and the toxic wastelands that skinned the globe. Seth knew well the hell that birthed angels.

'One minute.'

Seth sat back and rolled his shoulders, cracking his neck as he coiled and uncoiled his fingers. On his feet as the craft touched down, he depressed the hatch release. He stood a moment, listening to the rising growl of the blood in his veins as the gunship's thrusters idled down to a whispered whine.

'Imum-attero.' He snarled the destruct command as the assault-ramp touched down and stepped out onto the concourse.

Behind him, the pilot-servitor juddered, stuttering incoherent machine code as its neural cortex burned out and its memory banks dissolved. Outside of the Blood Angels, only the Chapter Masters of Sanguinius's disparate sons knew the location of where Seth now stood, and so it had to remain.

Neither the ashen walkway he now trod nor the vaulted reclusiam it led to existed. He walked amongst secrets, passing below structures formed by shame and dire loathing. Above him, thrust towards the heavens by fire-blasted plinths,

towered noble statues of Baal's ancient heroes. Each of them held a pair of weapons, one angled towards the sky and the other to the ground. They stood as immortal protectors, defending against the enemy within and the enemy without.

Seth took a step forward and stopped, his eyes drawn to movement on the nearest statue. Perched between the rivets of its pauldron were a choir of Erelim. The five Blood Angels Chaplains crouched in shadow, stalking him as he closed on the reclusiam. Stripped of all insignia and adornment save the Chapter symbol emblazoned on their shoulders, they were as dark mirrors to the Sanguinary Guard that stood in the light with Dante. Even their skull helmets had been daubed death-black and their jump packs had been framed by halos of darkest feather. Nothing but the glower of their crimson optics betrayed them in the half-light.

Seth shot them a murderous glare in warning, and with the slow care of a man drawing a blade from his own chest, shook his head. He would not be kept from the reclusiam. If the Erelim interfered, he would kill them.

The door to the immense chapel was a baroque slab of plasteel and iron. Masked cherubs wielding slender scythes framed a passage engraved in ancient Baalite sanskrit.

What man could not do, the Emperor sent his sons to accomplish. They were an antidote to the weakness of flesh and the sin of mind that kept man from greatness. His sons he sent to bear the cost of life and death so that man may prosper. Such a heavy burden was as poison to the blood of his sons, and so the Emperor sent his Executioner to set the afflicted free.

Seth growled as he read the passage aloud. Words and poetic sentiment did not change the truth of a thing. A kill was a kill, a life a life, and an executioner a murderer by any other name. He looked up at the spires of gilded metal that disappeared into the sky. The reclusiam had not been erected in the name of the Emperor's greatness, nor did it stand to guide his flock. It had one purpose – to legitimise the killing of one brother by another.

Pulling off his gauntlet, Seth slammed his hand onto the bio-reader set into the door. The smooth panel hummed, blinking amber. A moment later the vaulted doors eased open, drawn back by the firing of hidden pistons that hissed with the release of pressure. As soon as they were ajar enough to accommodate his wide shoulders, Seth entered.

Inside, darkness greeted him, a still gloom that only the augmented eyes of a Space Marine could pierce unaided. His footsteps gave rise to a hollow, clicking echo as he paced forward. He didn't look down; the sound of bone was a

familiar one. He knew that skulls and not cobbles paved his way. The air was crisp-cold and fogged as he drew breath.

He continued to the centre of the chamber where a narrow, suspended staircase doubled back on itself thrice before terminating in a wide platform. A figure knelt at the platform's edge, head bowed underneath a black marble sculpture of Sanguinius suspended by chains from an unseen ceiling.

'Stand up,' Seth barked as he started up the stairs.

The figure waited a moment before replying.

'I had wondered when you would come.' His voice was thick with age, and he spoke with the slow tempo of a man gripped by sorrow.

Seth cast off his cowl. His battleplate was scarred, pitted and rent from recent conflict. He growled, quickening his pace. His heartbeats rose in his chest, a primal call to violence that flushed his muscles with blood and begged for a release.

'I would have thought it prudent for you to finish one conflict before coming here to seek another,' the figure said, standing. He was barely visible, the gloom clinging to him like a second skin.

'Do not make this worse with your feigned concern for my brothers.' Seth's voice was like the snarl of an arena beast as he paced up the last few steps.

'This is my house, Flesh Tearer. I have told you before to mind your tone.'

'And I have told you before, Astorath,' Seth drew level with the figure, 'that I will deal with my brothers in a manner of my choosing.' His voice was a growled whisper, like the scraping of sand on flesh. 'You will not kill another Flesh Tearer while I draw breath.'

Astorath's face was as cold-calm as the grave. 'The fate of the damned is not yours to decide.' He took a step towards Seth, his dark, fathomless eyes glaring down at the smaller Space Marine. 'And never forget that you draw breath only by the grace of the Emperor.'

Seth ground his teeth, quashing the urge to tear Astorath's eyes from their sockets. 'You think yourself apart from us. For all of this darkness...' Seth gestured around them. 'For all of the theatre you use to hide your true nature, you are still a Blood Angel. And we are all lost, cousin. None amongst the bloodline are above the madness. Not even you.'

Astorath bared his fangs. 'I have walked with the damned—'

'No!' Seth roared, closing to within a blade's thickness of Astorath. 'You have not walked with them. You have stood above them, sneering down at them in arrogant indifference.'

Astorath's composure slipped as a ripple of rage ran across his features. 'I am untouched by the Blood's madness.'

'You think so, Blood Angel?' Seth grinned. 'You think it is sane to kill those of your own blood?'

'I do what must be done to protect the bloodline,' said Astorath, his voice the cutting sharpness of honed steel. 'We cannot all simply indulge our weakness.' Astorath bared his incisors in a cruel smile.

Seth smashed his elbow into Astorath's chest, driving his weight forward to rock him back onto his heels. He used the momentum, grabbing onto Astorath's pauldron with his left hand and using his right to deliver a series of hammer blows to his face. The first strike hit clean, the second broke something, the third—

Astorath fired his jump-pack, shooting forward to clasp Seth's head with both hands. He fired another burst from his pack, lifting Seth up before slamming him head-first down into the ground. 'For all your strength, Flesh Tearer, for all of your anger and all your will to fight, you cannot best me. I am the chosen reaper of the lost.' Astorath snarled and stepped away.

Seth struggled to remain conscious. Astorath was right. He felt like he'd been hit by a thunder hammer. He pushed up to his knees. 'I do not need to beat you.' Blood and teeth spilled from Seth's mouth as he spoke. 'Only to stand against you.' He got to his feet, wiping a hand across his lips. 'Every minute you spend here is one in which you are not butchering our brothers.'

Astorath roared and charged him.

Seth met the Blood Angel head on, locking his arms around him as Astorath drove them to the ground. He suffered three blows for every one he landed. Still he held on. His armour began to buckle and crack and he was forced to shelter his head against Astorath's breastplate. Still he struggled, digging punches into Astorath's back until he was rewarded with the crackle of a broken jump pack. With a grunt of effort, Seth arched his back, driving Astorath's weight up, and rolled them off the platform.

The two angels fell.

They hit the ground like stones dropped from the heavens. The bones paving the floor broke and shattered, sending sharp fragments rising up into the air like grenade shrapnel.

'If... ' Seth struggled to his knees as a raft of injury and trauma data scrolled over his retinal display. 'If you harm another of my brothers, cousin, I will return, and I will not come alone.' He rose unsteadily to his feet and began

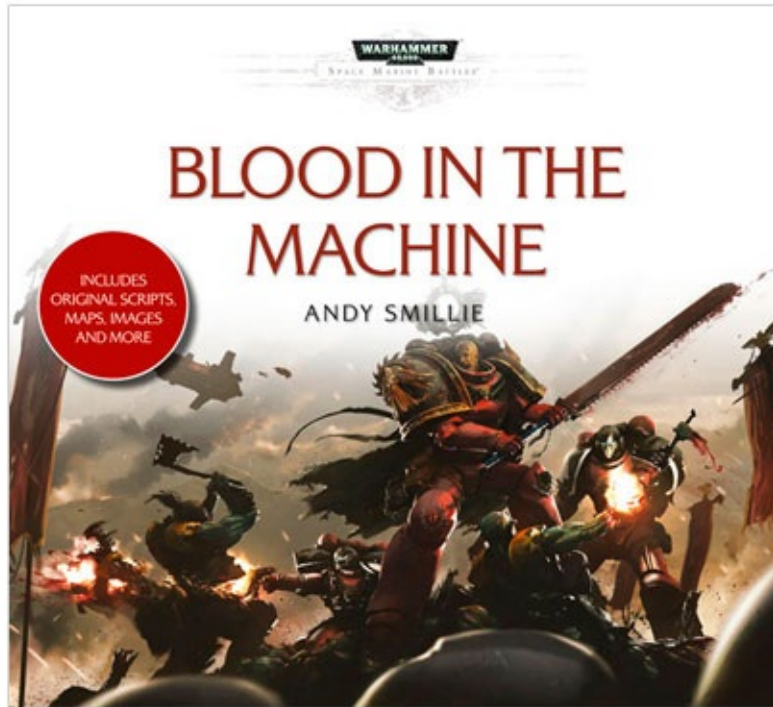
limping towards the exit.

‘You threaten Baal?’ Astorath roared, hammering his fists into the ground and pushing up onto his feet. Blood streamed from his nose, and pooled around his eyes. ‘The Blood Angels themselves? Have you gone mad?’ He forced the words though teeth welded together by rage.

‘I will do what must be done.’ Seth continued to walk into the darkness.

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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