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THE DEATH OF ANTAGONIS

David Annandale

The Black Dragons fall upon the world of Antagonis, summoned to combat the plague of undeath that has engulfed the planet. Allying themselves with Inquisitor Werner Lettinger and a force of Sisters of Battle, the Black Dragons endeavour to save the souls of the Imperial citizens who have succumbed to the contagion. But there is more than a mere infection at play – the dread forces of Chaos lie behind the outbreak, and the Black Dragons stand in the way of the Dark Gods' victory...



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of the digital short story *Eclipse of Hope* and the novellas *Yarrick: Chains of Golgotha* and *Mephiston: Lord of Death* for Black Library. By day, he dons an academic disguise and lectures at a Canadian university on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games. He lives with his wife and family and a daemon in the shape of a cat, and is working on several new projects set in the grim darkness of the far future.

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SQUAD PYTHIOS BROUGHT the survivors out of the bunker.

They mustered in the square of the palace compound, then joined the waiting ranks of the Mortisians. The convoy moved out from the palace walls, out onto Admiral Kiershing Square, with the Space Marines taking point.

And the dead attacked.

The change was instantaneous. The random wandering, despairing moans and acts of self-destruction turned into a furious charge. Five great avenues fed into the square, and from all of them came a storm surge of bodies. The dead ignored the Space Marines and slammed into the Guard. The Mortisians were fast. A wall of stubber and las-fire met the onrushing dead, but the momentum of tens of thousands of bodies wasn't going to be halted. Five collective battering rams struck, and the Imperial lines buckled. Toharan turned, and saw the impossible. Already, within the first second of the battle, as the Mortisians found themselves in full melee, men were changing, their eyes blanking into mindless hunger and rage as they fell on their comrades.

'Diamond,' Toharan voxed. 'Out then in.' Squad Pythios plunged into the fight. They scythed through the dead with chainblade and fist, decapitating and crushing. It was like wading through molasses. The dead were so focused on clawing past the Mortisians to the civilians that they barely reacted to the Dragons advance.

Toharan forced a reaction. He and his brothers became the moving rocks against which the death tide broke.

They split into two groups and worked their way around the defensive island of the Guard. They slashed across the flow of the dead, hundreds falling before them like threshed wheat. Halfway around the Mortisians' perimeter, the Dragons split again, with one half of the squad moving to the rear lines, and the other heading to the front, tearing apart another rank of the enemy. The momentum of the dead stalled. There was a pause while the flood of reinforcements continued to pour in from the avenues, and the charge built up its strength again.

The Mortisians had the measure of their opponents now, though Toharan already had his doubts about what difference that would make in the long run. The reality of twelve million damned souls was sinking in.

But for now, the massed power of the Imperial Guard unleashed a horizontal rain of projectile and las-fire. The barrage was continuous, and it pushed back the army of the dead before it could surge again.

Breathing space. Time to move.

'Go!' Toharan shouted over vox-link and speaker, and the caravan took its first,

lurching steps. The Dragons moved to the interior perimeter. Toharan disliked not being on the front lines, but he had his orders, and the mission dictated strategy. It was not the Dragons remit to take on an entire city. Their battle, in this moment, was to save as many civilians as possible. The people would be needed after the next stage of the war, after the Black Dragons and the other vectors of Imperial might had purged Antagonis of its taint. There had to be a population to reclaim the planet, to celebrate the victory and prove that it was not pyrrhic. So Squad Pythios moved to protect the unarmed. As big as the area was that the thousand civilians took up, it was one whose bounds the Dragons could keep patrolled. The refugees marched, and the Space Marines circled them at a constant run, bringing bolter and chainblade to bear wherever the Mortisian defences needed shoring up.

Toharan paused in his run to jump up on the lead vehicle, a Hellhound. Colonel Burston Kervold, heading the joint command of the Fourth and 25th companies, rode standing in the roof hatch, magnoculars around his neck. His chin was a steel prosthetic. It was scratched and pitted as if he really did lead with it. Kervold's cap perched on a head that was a phrenological map of his tours of duty. His eyes were narrowed flints, staring at the dead with a contempt so strong it should have blasted a path clear to the outskirts of the city. But when Kervold turned his head to face Toharan, the Space Marine thought he saw the tightness of fatalism in the officer's gaze. Kervold had seen and noted the same things, then. The behaviour of the dead was unusual, unlike any plague of undeath Toharan had fought before. Even more than the speed of the dead, it was their focus that was alarming. There wasn't just hunger in their frenzy.

There was anger. There was passion. And then there was the rapidity of the contagion.

The elements were all wrong. Vital information was missing. The mission had the earmarks of a disaster.

'If we stop,' Kervold yelled over the roar of the inferno cannon's spray of ignited promethium, 'we'll be finished.'

Ahead of them, the dead looked like a solid mass.

'Then we don't stop,' Toharan replied. 'Not for any reason. How is our route?'

'We'll stick to the big avenues for as long as we can. But once we're into the hab zones...'

Kervold's shrug was humorous in its understatement of despair.

Toharan nodded. 'Then we fight harder. And we still don't stop.' He dropped back to the ground and resumed destroying. Already the defences were being strained again. Already Guard lines were thinning.