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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is a British author with his beginnings in the videogame and RPG industries. He's written several novels for the Black Library, including the Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach* and the *New York Times* bestselling *The First Heretic* for the Horus Heresy. He lives and works in Northern Ireland with his wife Katie, hiding from the world in the middle of nowhere. His hobbies generally revolve around reading anything within reach, and helping people spell his surname.

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A THOUSAND KILOMETRES above, I opened my eyes.

'Now,' I said to my brothers.

The chamber's lights fell to deep red as an engagement siren began to whine. Robed adepts worked clanking machines by the chamber's edges.

'Fifteen seconds,' one of the tech-priests called in a blurt of tinny vox-voice.

Each of my brothers was clad as I was. Each of us raised our weapons in unison.

+Are you ready?+ Galeo asked in our minds. The white mist began to rise, clouding the air between us.

'Ten seconds.'

Dumenidon replied for all of us, as he always did. 'For the Sigillite and the Emperor.'

'Five seconds,' called the tech-adept. 'The machine-spirits sing. Initiating telep--'

A BLUR OF pain and fire. A storm of noise and cancerous colour. Liquid nothingness, yet with a spiteful sentience in its tides. It manifested enough solidity to grip at your arms and legs as you fell through it.

Before I could focus my concentration enough to repel the sensation back, we--

--APPEARED IN PERFECT arrangement, all five of us ringing the regent's throne. Our weapons were still raised: five wrist-mounted storm bolters aiming ten barrels at the convulsing ruler of Cheth. His robes rippled at the tidal mercies of the fleshcrafting beneath.

The sonic boom of our arrival shattered almost all thirty of the great stained-glass windows, letting even more sunlight spill into the throne room. The white mist of teleportation, now poisoned to arterial crimson, lingered in coiling tendrils. Even as it dispersed, it stroked at our armour, dulling the polish.

The regent actually managed to gasp at our appearance. He was flushed and mutable in his spasms, bleeding pus from his tear ducts, but stupefaction and fear halted his change.

Galeo spoke without speaking. The weight of his psychic proclamation was enough to grind my teeth together.

+In the name of the Emperor of Mankind, we do judge thee *diabolus traitoris*. The sentence is death.+

We closed our hands into fists, and five storm bolters boomed in the harmony of absolute rhythmic unity.

The regent's physical form burst across the five of us, painting silver armour with vascular, stringy viscera. Bones shattered and crumbled, blasting apart, cracking off our helms and breastplates. A partially articulated ribcage crashed back onto the throne.

+Peace.+

On the justicar's order, we ceased delivering sentence, but did not lower our weapons. Smoke rose from ten barrels, adding a powdery chemical scent to the surgical reek tainting the raised dais.

Only the regent's shadow remained. It twisted in the centre of the circle we had formed, writhing and clawing at nothing, straining to build a physical form from the air.

+Dumenidon,+ pulsed the justicar.

The named warrior drew his blade in a sharp pull. Each of us added our emotions – our disgust, our revulsion, our hatred – to his own, layering our surface thoughts around his clear, clean rage. The touch of our minds spurred his anger deeper, blacker, into a wrath intense

enough to cause him physical pain.

But he was strong. He let his own body and brain become the focus for our psychic force, channelling it along the length of his blade. Psychic lightning danced down the sacred steel, raining fragile hoarfrost to the marble floor.

All of this, from our arrival to the focus of killing energy, happened in the span it took Annika's heart to beat five times. I know that because I heard it. It formed a strangely calming drumbeat to the execution.

Despite barely being able to see it, Dumenidon impaled the crippled shadow with a deep thrust. His blade instantly caught fire. This time, the burst of gore was ectoplasmic and ethereal in nature. Slime hissed against our warded aegis armour plating, failing to eat into the blessed ceramite. The creature's shriek rang in our ears, shattering the few windows our teleportation arrival hadn't.

Thus ended the reign of Regent Kezidha the Eleventh.

I turned to Inquisitor Jarlsdottyr, finding her in a canine crouch halfway down the steps leading up to the throne. A hundred silk-robed courtiers stared at us. Fifty armed palace guards did the same. None of them moved. Most of them didn't even blink. This was not quite the gala ballroom event they had been expecting.

'And them?' I asked her. My voice was a rasp-edged growl from my helm's vox-grille.

'Skitnah,' she said, her lips forming a Fenrisian snarl. Skitnah. I knew the word from her home world's tongue. Dirty. Foul. Tainted.

We raised our weapons again. That sent them running.

'I will cage the vermin,' said Malchadiel. He raised his arms as if pushing at the chamber's great double doors, even from this distance. The rest of us opened fire, scything down those fleeing slowest, or who dared raised arms against us. Insignificant las-fire scorched my armour, too sporadic and panicked to be worthy of concern. A crosshaired targeting reticule leapt from robe to robe, flickering white with screeds of biological data.

None of it mattered. These were vermin. I blanked my retinal display with a thought, preferring to fire free.

The nobles of Cheth hammered on the throne room doors, crushing each other in their attempts to escape. Fists beat against the solid bronze, forming a revolting cacophony in their fear. As they wept and screamed, they burst like bloated sacks of blood under explosive bolter shells.

I spared a glance for my brother Malchadiel. He stood rigid by the throne, facing the double doors, hands taloned by his efforts. Psy-frost rimed his splayed fingers, crackling into ice dust with each fractional movement. The doors held fast as the dying nobles surged against them, and I wondered if he was smiling behind his mask.

Less than a minute later, all guns fell silent and blades slid back into sheaths. Malchadiel lowered his hands at last. The immense bronze doors creaked as they settled back onto their hinges, at the mercy of gravity and architecture once more, rather than my brother's will.

Stinking, opened bodies lay in ruptured repose along the carpet, and a world's worth of aristocratic blood ran across the floor. Annika was toe-deep in a spreading lake of it, clutching her bolter in her hands. Red stains flecked her face in a careless impression of tribal tattoos.

'It's the smell I hate most,' she said.

They do say Fenris breeds cold souls.

Darford's uniform was drenched. There was no way of knowing where one stain ended and another began. His trimmed moustache was fairly trembling with irritation.

'They always do this when you summon them,' he said to Annika. 'Every bloody time.'

Vasilla was on her knees, pressing bloodied palms to her face as part of some pious ritual. She whispered voicelessly through lips that dripped with warm gore, praying to the distant Emperor.

Merrick was distractedly reloading his shotgun, with the percussive *snick, snick, snick* of shells sliding home. The cyber-mastiff stalked around at the other side of the chamber, dipping its bloody iron jaws into the dead.

'Get back here,' Merrick called to it. It obeyed, red eye lenses gleaming.

The Khatan poked a fat corpse with her spear, lifting a gold medallion from its throat. Her grin formed a marble crescent in her tan features. This was her favourite part: after justice came the looting.

+We are returning to orbit,+ Galeo sent to the inquisitor.

Annika inclined her head in gratitude. 'My thanks. We will handle the rest.'

But I turned away. I could hear a heart beating.

'Hyperion?' Annika called.

+Hyperion?+ Galeo echoed inside my mind.

I ignored them, scanning the bodies, letting my eyes follow my ears. The heartbeat was little more than a dull, wet pound, weak with arrhythmia.

There. One of the palace guards – his burst body spread across the carpet – no longer existing from the stomach down. Somehow, he still lived. Loyal to the last, his rifle was in his shaking hands, aimed at the source of all this destruction.

Darford saw the danger in the very same moment. He managed to say half of Annika's name before the guard fired. The lasrifle cracked as it discharged. I lifted my left hand towards the inquisitor as the weapon spat.

She had only half-turned when the energy beam whined aside at the last moment, deflecting to carve a groove in the gilded wall.

A second later, I released my anger as flame. The violet fire ignited him, body and soul. He shrieked as he burned, dissolving to powdery bones in a lake of his own boiling blood. The smell would have been something formidable, but my helm's olfaction filter negated much of its strength.

Annika cleared her throat when nothing but a blackened skeleton leered up at us. Her eyes were fixed upon the burn slash in the white wall.

'Which one of you should I thank for that?' she asked.

I lowered my hand, letting the shield of protective force fade from around her.

'I live to serve, inquisitor.'