Angels of Death

FINAL DUTY

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WARHAMMER 40,000
Caleb dreamed, and his dreams were dark.

The night was lit by explosions, by the glare of both sides’ flares. Shells screamed from the sky. Artillery belched smoke and noise. Muck and shrapnel pattered across the wire-torn hell of no-man’s-land. Caleb tried to move, but his arms and legs were snared in razorwire. Grime masked the colour of his fatigues and, though he strained to make out the insignia on his shoulder, it blurred even as he stared at it. A thumping head announced a concussion and he groaned, calling out to the men that ran by. They were unhurried, kitted out in ghostly grey fatigues, and floated from corpse to corpse like harvesters of the dead men’s souls. It would be a rich harvest indeed when the trench line buckled. Perhaps it already had.

This was a dream, and Caleb knew that he dreamed.

The figures paid him no mind and for that he was grateful. There was something fearful about these men, the way they walked through the hail of grit with such detachment. The largest amongst them saw him stir, then paused in his ministrations and came for him. In pearl-white armour, he strode through the fog of the dream. Caleb tried to slither free of the wire tangle, but couldn’t move his legs. His hands ran through the muck in search of his lasgun, but it wasn’t there. Of course, he thought, heart pounding.

This was a dream, and Caleb’s dreams were always dark.

Too soon, the colossus of a man was standing over him, examining Caleb’s body with a ghoulish interest. He leant in, fingers as hard as bone unpeeling the grime that caked Caleb’s collar to exhume his dog tags.

‘Lieutenant Caleb, are you with me?’

The voice had a calm authority that Caleb yearned to surrender to. Perhaps it was just a hangover from the dream, but he could not lie still, not yet.

‘I can’t feel my legs,’ Caleb whispered, throat dry and speech painful.

‘Never mind them,’ the voice soothed.
Caleb blinked, eyes misty. He was lying down, and it sounded like it was raining. The air was dry though, the signature warmth of electrical heaters, and he could hear voices all around. The odour of powerful counterseptics overpowered even the stench of his fatigues.

‘My men,’ said Caleb, recovering a measure of urgency along with the fragments of his memory. He’d been leading a company across no-man’s-land, a last desperate push for the enemy trench across a minefield that hadn’t been on the briefing charts. ‘Holy Terra, my legs.’

‘Never mind them,’ the voice repeated. ‘Drink something.’

A plastek cup appeared at his lips, a force he could not resist tilting back his head until he was helpless but to drink. It smelled like recyc, but it tasted like springwater. He drank a little more before the cup was pulled away and strong, hard hands shaped him into a sitting position. Caleb swallowed a surge of giddiness and blinked to clear the fog that lingered around his eyes.

He was on a bed in what looked like an emergency shelter. Lumen strips dangled and swayed from the corrugated roofing. The prefab rockrete walls were pasted with hygiene edicts and lined with locked cabinets that rattled with distant explosions. Orderlies in blue-grey scrubs walked between the trolley-beds. Upon them lay men in the universal fatigues of blood and grime. They moaned, cried out, wept, and whispered to the figments of a narthecium sleep. Caleb recognized none of them, but theirs were the cries of the dying from his dream. And the patter of muck and shrapnel over no-man’s-land, the sound that he had just mistaken for rain, hardened into the downpour of small arms rounds upon an iron roof. Every thirty seconds or so, something more substantive detonated nearby, causing everything in the shelter to shake, the wheels of Caleb’s trolley-bed skitting from side to side.

The giant gripped the side rail of his bed, holding it effortlessly steady. For the first time, Caleb got a proper look. At once, his heart swelled as if to choke him and he tried to rise, but couldn’t. It wasn’t just his legs failing him this time. It was his arms, his neck, even his chest felt feeble. He couldn’t breathe. He should be standing to attention, or prostrate upon the ground, not lying upon his bed to be tended by one of the godly Adeptus Astartes.

‘Peace, lieutenant,’ said the Space Marine, his pale helm projecting a soothing timbre. ‘In death is the Emperor’s love equally shared.’

‘Do you… Do you mean… Am I…?’

‘You are in pain, brother. Please, drink some more.’ The Space Marine inserted the cup between Caleb’s lips. Helpless as an infant in a god-warrior’s arms,
Caleb complied and drank. When he had accepted what the Space Marine deemed sufficient, the warrior again stood back.

Across a widening gulf of confusion, Caleb tried to pin down anything familiar from the Space Marine’s wargear. His power armour was as smooth as ivory and bedecked with purity seals and devotional scrolls. The shoulder pad bore a heraldry that Caleb did not recognise. It was a red cross, but with each arm split down the middle, more like four arrowheads targeting the centre.

‘Where am I?’ Caleb managed. ‘There were Space Marines battling in my sector, but they were pulled out. I’ve not seen your Chapter before. I don’t—’ He clutched his temple as a stabbing pain shot through it. He felt sick. Almost immediately afterwards, his arm went slack and his head flopped back to the hard pillow. His thoughts were muddy. ‘I… I don’t recall.’

‘I am Raphel, of the Hospitallers. It is my sworn honour to tend the Emperor’s fallen.’

Caleb tried to mumble something, but couldn’t. His lips were numb and it was spreading. Deep in his mind there was a fear that demanded to be heard but it found no outlet in him. The sounds from outside had intensified. It sounded like hand-to-hand fighting, but Caleb was aware of it in the dim way of a drowsy child from beneath his bedclothes.

Calmy, the orderlies moved between the wounded. One by one, they powered down life support generators and withdrew IV lines. A low hum that Caleb hadn’t even registered faded back until all that was left was the muted rumble of war. The murmurs of the dying fell quiet. There were no more tears.

‘Defend the Emperor’s pilgrims to the last,’ intoned the Hospitaller as the orderlies set aside the trappings of the medicae for the tools of war. One man was handing out lasguns and another power packs. The men slammed the cells into their weapons, dialled the charge to maximum and flicked from full-auto to single-shot as they fanned out through the shelter. Each man took a bed.

Caleb’s shout forced a dribble of air between his slack lips. The orderlies took aim at the wounded men and fired, a burning head-shot between the eyes. Caleb gave a moan, experiencing a perversely anaesthetic dread as the Hospitaller drifted from his bedside, drew a bolt pistol, and deposited a plastek cup upon the tray table by his headrest. The remaining liquid had charred the clear sides a smoky grey.

‘Dream the Emperor’s dream, brother. No man of the Imperium need fall by the heretic’s hand. Not where there is a Hospitaller to honour his final duty.’
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Guymer is no stranger to the worlds of Warhammer, with exciting stories in *Gotrek and Felix: The Anthology* and *Hammer and Bolter*, and much more on the way. He is a freelance writer and occasional scientist based in the East Riding. When not writing, David can be found exorcising his disappointment at the gaming table and preparing for the ascension of the children of the Horned Rat.
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