

**“SMACK-DAB, IN THE MIDDLE OF  
NOWHERE”**

By Duncan P. Pacey

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[www.duncanppacey.com](http://www.duncanppacey.com)

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*This book is dedicated to:*

*Dedication pages*

*Without which this page would have been blank.*

# INTRODUCTION

## *A Bloody Wall Falls*

The bandit lord known as Ash knew his end was near.

He ducked instinctively as a hailstorm of bullets scoured the paint off his fort's walls, its defenders leaping wildly for cover nearby - lest they discover what their insides look like. He cursed loudly, the spray clattering behind where he now sat in an angry slump, gripping his old hunting rifle tight in blood-stained hands. The roar was utterly deafening; it drowned the cries of fallen bandit soldiers all along the metal wall, and more so the moans of his enemies dying slowly in the river at the foot of it.

Let them sob, he grunted to himself. They could cry until the river's acid dissolved them, for all Lord Ash cared. They didn't deserve a swift death for the menace they had caused.

His slender fingers tightened around the cracked wooden stock of his aged rifle. The mob of southerners who now laid siege to his precious fort had come out of ruddy nowhere. Yesterday Lord Ash was a glorious bandit king, lord of the Ash Fort, and ruler of Can't Be Buried - the great Waste plains upon which his mighty walls stood as a beacon of power.

Now? He was fairly certain he'd shat himself.

"Lord Ash!" a voice called, somewhere beneath him.

The bandit lord grunted, shifting his weight forwards so that he could peer down to the lower rampart. He placed a hand firmly on the floor, but slipped on a pool of fresh blood. His, presumably.

He had been shot, possibly twice, but his body had given up sending pain signals from specific areas and was now blaring vague alerts from just about everywhere. His best cape, a pleasant shade of blue, was

now a less-than-pleasant shade of red. His manicured, pointed beard was now ragged with filth, his patchwork metal armour even more so - not like it was much use, anyway. Couldn't even stop a bullet or two.

The Ash Fort's walls were towering bloody things, built from layer upon layer of iron, steel, and anything else vaguely solid that could be patched on in a hurry. The upper rampart, crammed with defenders, ran in a staggeringly large square the entire perimeter of the fort. It took Lord Ash an hour just to walk the length of one side - an impressive barrier keeping out the Waste's many perils, until today anyway.

The lower rampart, which Lord Ash was crawling over to investigate, was about halfway down and acted as a storage space for additional supplies, manpower, or, in one small section on the eastern wall, a pleasant little coffee stall. It hadn't sold actual coffee in years, but that never stopped anyone from drinking the tarry black mess.

Lord Ash glared over the side of the upper rampart, spying a skinny wretch of a soldier clutching a boxy radio to his breast. "Tell me some good news!" Ash called down.

The skinny soldier shuffled awkwardly from one foot to the other, staring up at his leader. "Erm," he stammered back.

"Well? Out with it, man! By jing by jove, I haven't got all day."

Then, another storm of bullets pounded the length of the wall, ripping up twisted metal and spewing it across the ramparts, deadly shards spilling onto the cowering bandit soldiers. Lord Ash rolled to his right and gritted his teeth, pointing towards the Waste side of the wall.

"Will one of you blow that bloody truck up?" he bellowed, sporadic rifle fire filling the void between hailstorms. "I just had this wall repainted!"

Not waiting for a response, he rolled back onto his stomach and gazed down at the soldier with the radio. "Good news, Gordon! Or you'll be scrubbing my toilet for a month!"

Gordon, knuckles white around his radio, stared at Lord Ash. "We jus' got word from Lady Gertrude's party in Behinds, sir."

Ash scowled. Behinds was a small, derelict Old World town about three hours walking south of the Ash Fort. "Well she jolly well better be lining up for a flanking assault, Gordon m'boy! I'm getting tired of bleeding all over my fort!"

Gordon seemed to visibly shrink. "I ... I'm sorry, sir. She called to say the southerners 'ave reinforcements on the way, and then I think she died, sir."

"You *think* she died, Gordon?" Lord Ash's face, already a poster of what stress does to a person, wrinkled further.

The lad nodded hurriedly. "Aye, sir. Not sure what else, 'Oh shit, oh shit, my insides, oh shit,' could mean, sir."

Lord Ash sighed deeply. Still lying stretched out on his stomach, a tripping hazard if there ever was one, he waved at the boy to go away, words failing him. Slowly he dragged himself back away from the edge and, wincing with pain, propped himself against the outer defences. His eyes, heavy and dark-rimmed from a day of non-stop madness, swept across the scene. And what a sad, sad affair it was.

The truck somewhere below, assuredly un-blown-up (despite his request), had reloaded and was letting loose on the wall once again. A smattering of small arms fire accompanied it from below, all to the percussive bass of angry southerners trying to cave in the south gate. Lord Ash's bandit army, proud defenders of the Ash Fort, were dying all along the southern wall. He watched a man crumple to his knees, clutching at his stomach before anything could fall out. Then a woman lost her face, tipping drunkenly forwards, over the wall, and into the icy, acidic river below.

By jing by jove indeed, Ash thought to himself, shaking his head in dismay. It truly was over.

Amidst another thundering storm of machine-gun fire, one of Ash's captains rushed over to his side, kneeling low to keep beneath the wall's metal plating. It was Sir Robert, his favourite captain, and a man who had repeatedly won the Ash Fort moustache competition. By goodness was his majestic lip companion a legend. And his abilities as a bandit captain weren't shabby, either.

"Lord Ash," the man spoke, visibly out of breath. His normally pristine face was drenched in sweat, spattered by blood stains. Behind him was his lieutenant, Doris, clutching a bloodied hunting knife in her small hands. They both looked worried.

"My Lord," the man spoke again, fear wavering at the edge of his voice. "We just came from the south gate. Good golly, but this southern horde has nearly broken through. We've got men stabbing through the cracks to keep them off, but they jolly well won't let up.

What are your orders? Is Gerty coming up from Behinds to give these ruffians the old what-for in their, well, their behinds?"

The bandit lord didn't speak for a few moments, his eyes shut. He breathed deeply, frowned, then stared up into the pleading face of Sir Robert. "I'm sorry, my old friend. But the day is lost. Those southerners have reinforcements coming, and ours are spent bloodying the ramparts."

Sir Robert and Doris frowned in unison, inching closer. It was Doris who spoke first. "But sir, if we can't hold 'em off, wassat mean for us?"

"Doris, my dear, it means we need to evacuate henceforth and immediately. Live to fight another day, what-ho and all that." Lord Ash knew it was the right thing to do, but the low, soft tone of his voice betrayed his inner lack of confidence.

And then the robot appeared.

Servos whirring noisily, its glimmering, smooth metal skull appeared first atop the Waste side of the wall, quickly panning left and right with a cyclopean, glowing red eye. Sir Robert and Doris both gasped, taking a step back, their hands instantly bringing forwards weapons.

"What the fu-?" Doris cried.

"Lord Ash," Sir Robert shouted, stepping between his lord and the skeletal figure now reaching with a clawed hand to pull itself over the defences. "Lord Ash, if we're fleeing, we need to flee, now!"

But Lord Ash didn't move. Even as Sir Robert and Doris moved to help him up, he pushed his wooden rifle into Sir Robert's hands. He shook his head, glancing briefly at the machine. It was flopping over the wall now, standing to its full, terrifying height. Two soldiers on the other side moved rapidly to intercept it, axes raised in their hands.

"DO NOT ATTEMPT VIOLENCE, FLESHY HUMANS," it roared, synthetic vocal chords sounding hollow, lifeless - a being with no desire to sound human. "ORGANIC BEINGS ARE DESIGNED ONLY TO DIE. I AM HERE TO SPEED UP YOUR PURPOSE."

Lord Ash pushed again with his rifle until Sir Robert finally grasped it. "My old friend, take this and fly. Fly with whoever you can find. Go north, leave the fort. Survive!"

"Sir, I can't just jolly well leave you here to die!" the captain protested, shouting over the noise of the battle, trying to push the rifle back.

Behind them, the robot's red eye cast an eerie, almost-prophetic glow on the face of a terrified, wriggling soldier it now held firmly in its claw. Blood oozed out from beneath the man's clothing, then the thing grasped him hard by the face with its other claw and tossed him over the side like a child bored with its new toy. The robot then stepped towards the second soldier, who was understandably reconsidering his decisions in life.

"Go you damned fool!" Lord Ash boomed. "Go, thrive, and then come back to seek revenge! By jing by jove, I will haunt you if you don't honour my memory!"

Doris gripped Sir Robert's arm and pulled urgently. Sir Robert growled loudly, teeth bared beneath his moustache, but he submitted. In tense hands he took the old rifle, stared hard into his lord's eyes for a long moment, and then allowed Doris to pull him hurriedly away.

Lord Ash listened sadly as his favourite captain's footsteps dissolved into the background ruckus of gunfire, screams and a robot's taunts. He took a deep breath, his chest hurting in places he never knew could hurt, his breath coming out in ragged rasps. With teeth grinding together, he pushed himself further against the wall, propping himself up higher. His fingers explored the bloodied metal floor until they came across a discarded axe, the hand of its previous user still gripping for dear life.

The robot, drenched in streaks of sticky blood and standing between two fresh halves of a human form, swivelled its soulless red eye to stare at Lord Ash.

"Alright, you bastard," he muttered. "I don't know why you're here, what those southern menaces did to buy your allegiance, or why you give two tosses about my fort."

It cocked its head at him.

"But by jing and bloody well by jove, you will not win this day without feeling the blade of my axe deep within your shiny metal skull."

Then the head of his axe fell off, clattering to the floor.

He stared at it.

He looked back at the robot.

Well ... it turns out the end was nearer than he thought.