

THE HORUS HERESY®

LOST SONS

James Swallow

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LOST SONS

JAMES SWALLOW

I commit these words to vox-thief.

Know that it is day one hundred and eleven of the fifth year of our vigil, and the third year since the reckoning of the betrayal. My temper grows no longer, my blade's edge ever wicked as I sharpen it and wait.

And I wait.

I am Arkad, Warden of the Blood Angels and for now, as I have been since the order was spoken by my Lord Sanguinius, I am custodian of Baal and all her environs.

We are twenty in number, my brothers and I. A handful of sons from our Legion's great sum, here upon the rusty sands of our homeworld. We march the halls of the fortress-monastery and we drill endlessly. We spar against one another and the combat-slaves. We meditate and supervise the army of human serfs who keep the hearth of the Legion burning, the glories of the Blood Angels polished and perfect and always ready.

But we wait.

Five years is not the blink of an eye in cosmic time, it is barely within the notice of a warrior of the Legiones Astartes. We live on scales that common men do not comprehend. Campaigns that span decades are the meat and drink of our lives.

Five years? I have slumbered longer in stasis-sleep. It means nothing!

It means...

Time is a strange, malleable thing. I have known an age to pass between the draw and exhale of my breath, but these years have moved as if every day grows longer than the last. I rise before the dawn of Baal's red sun each morning and it seems an eternity elapses before it drops back below the horizon.

Inaction chafes at me, and the others. We do nothing. We occupy ourselves with trivia and training and accomplish no advance! All this occurs while out in the galaxy a war unlike any other burns stars to ash. A civil war, a nightmare of Legion against Legion. A conflict that... *and I whisper it...* may have taken the greatest toll upon us.

I hope that this day will be the last. That today the order I swore to obey will

be lifted from my shoulders.

Imperial Memoranda # GHJRHVE/334/DXGJ/7316/Theta

+++DATUM BEGINS+++

Let it be known that by the order of Horus Lupercal, Warmaster, First Among Equals (other titles omitted) has commanded that The Angel Sanguinius, Primarch of the IX Legiones Astartes, Lord of Baal (other titles omitted) is to gather the Great Companies of the Three Hundred, the entirety of the Blood Angels Legion [refer to: addendum] and carry the battle standard of the Emperor of Mankind to the worlds of the Signus Cluster. Lord Sanguinius will bring the Imperium's displeasure and its illumination to the errant and the lost under the yoke of the alien race known as the nephilim [refer to: Melchior pacification, extermination pogroms of the White Scars], until the extermination of the xenos.

This will be done, in Terra's Name.

+ADDENDUM+

To maintain operational parity in the Baal system and the Legion structure, a token force will remain in situ. Minimum recommendation requires six capital ships and attendant supplement vessels, servile crew thereof, and no less than twenty Space Marines.

+++DATUM ENDS+++

I climb to the black basalt landing pad in the eastern donjon, and Brother Hezen is there waiting for me. He looks out over the roof of the Grand Annex, the towers and domes of the fortress-monastery.

Hezen doesn't turn, even though I know he hears my approach. There is little sound up here beyond the low keen of the razorwinds. It seems unnatural for our citadel to be so quiet. As I walked here along the arcades, I heard only my own footfalls. Hezen is the first Blood Angel I have seen today, the bright crimson of his wargear polished to a lustre that glimmers in the noonday light.

He still does not turn to me.

My armour, ebon black as the Warden's office decrees, is as fine and undamaged as his. Cleaned and polished each night, even though the need may not be present. At my hip hangs the bone-white winged skull device of my crozius arcanum, the signifier of my rank and status. I have to think for a moment to recall the last time I activated the weapon's destructive power-aura; for now it remains inert and forever ready, as do we.

‘Hezen.’ I call his name and at last my old friend graces me with a look. He has his helm tucked under one arm and the wiry silver threads of his hair are caught in the breeze. A line of service studs forms an accent over his right eye, giving him a permanently quizzical expression.

‘Brother Arkad.’ He bows slightly. ‘Word comes from the orbitals.’ He taps his vox-bead. ‘A small craft has left the target and broken atmosphere in the last few minutes. Landing permission was granted.’

‘What about the starship?’ The vessel, a *Dauntless*-class light cruiser, had first been met by picket patrols beyond the orbit of Ammonai, the most distant outpost of the system.

‘Under the guns of a dozen battlecraft,’ says Hezen. ‘If it so much as lights a plasma torch without permission, they’ll open fire.’

I consider that appropriate. Communication has been terse; the shipmaster spoke only to inform us that he was delivering a messenger bearing the authority of the Regent of Terra. The pennants and codes are all present and correct, so I am left with little choice but to agree.

But these are times when trust is no longer in abundance, and I have made certain that every tower within line of sight contains a warrior armed with a Stalker-pattern boltgun. We have all heard the stories of the treachery at Isstvan, Calth and elsewhere, when battle-brothers who supposedly came in good faith were shown to be disloyal, murdering those who welcomed them out of hand. *It will not happen here*. I have made that a vow.

I hear the distant noise of thrusters and I remove my own headgear with a snap of connectors. The skull-faced helm locks to my thigh plate and I turn my eyes to the clouded sky. Some say I have the aspect of an unfinished man; I am hairless, the after-effect of poisons that almost killed me on Vaddox Prime. I wear my disfigurement proudly, it must be said. If a man will not return my gaze at first meeting, I think I will never truly trust him.

Now a drop-ship, incoming. I see it to the west, moving fast. Grey like slate, and even my genhanced sight cannot pick out any identifying insignia. My hand drops to the hilt of my crozius.

Hezen sees it too. He rests his grip on the bolt pistol holstered on his belt. We are both ready to kill or be killed today. And I think it is true to say we both secretly wish for an excuse for battle.

It is a Storm Eagle. It makes one pass over the pad and lands in a skirl of thruster exhaust. The drop-ramp opens before the dust has settled, and a figure is silhouetted in the hatchway.

A Space Marine; he can be nothing else, the bulk of power armour filling the interior of the transport ship. But what colours does this so-called messenger wear? I do not know at first sight.

I remember another messenger, five years ago. The moment is clear and crisp in my thoughts, my eidetic memory bringing it to life as if it is happening now.

I was on the Heartcease, the battleship. The vessel is an old friend. I was aboard it when the Emperor came to Baal for the first time, and I was young, so very young. We became whole when Sanguinius rejoined us.

But in this memory, the Great Angel was not with us.

The bulk of the Legion's fleet had been deployed across the galaxy, much of it to the Kayvas Belt for the past year, but now that mission was over and the Blood Angels prepared for a new endeavour. We were to go to Signus Prime on the orders of the Warmaster, and punish the xenos who sought to impose their will upon it. In an unprecedented move, the astropathic signals told of the intent to take the whole Legion to those blighted stars.

I admit I was taken with the ideal. All of us, the grand army of the crimson, the Angels of Death turned to one singular purpose. Oh, I wanted so much to be a part of that campaign. Such glory would be found in it.

But it was not to be.

The orders came from the Primarch. He would not allow another to give them, for he knew full well how we would feel when we took up the duty. I heard the echo of his voice in the repetition of the astropath Ser Jesper, the Master of Speakers, as he relayed the command.

Stand down.

I actually flinched.

Jesper spoke twenty names, and I distinctly remember the flashes of regret on the faces of the men who were not chosen. Regret for us. As they left for the assemblage, they bade us farewell with rueful smiles. They felt sorry for us, but they were glad they were not us.

A great and singular mission was now ours in their stead; we were to stand sentinel over the Baal system and the home of our Legion, protect and nurture it while the remainder of our kinsmen fought the alien. We were to be guards, then. Caretakers entrusted with the security of our homeworld, but not warriors free to take to battle.

It was a bittersweet thing. On the one hand, a high honour that we twenty were trusted with the beating heart of the Blood Angels; on the other, a great tragedy

that we would not taste victory in the assemblage of our Legion at Signus.

I accepted it, with the humility and stoic mien that was expected of a Warden. But not all followed my example.

The messenger wears no Legion sigil, no rank insignia. His armour is featureless, except for a small icon etched high upon one shoulder. But none of that shocks me more than the fact that he openly wears a librarian's psychic hood, in direct contravention of the Decree of Nikaea! The Legiones Astartes are foresworn from the use of psionic powers, and yet this one shows the tools of the psyker without fear of censure.

Before he can set foot on Baal, I am at the base of the ramp, denying him egress. Hezen is behind me, his pistol drawn.

The psyker eyes me with something that might be grim amusement. I see him better now, a shorn scalp and a stubbled face, eyes that are watchful, a nose broken by countless blows. He knows the question I am going to ask before I speak it, not through use of his powers, but because he has heard it a hundred times before. 'I am Brother Tylos Rubio, agent of Malcador the Sigillite. I carry his authority and that of the Emperor.'

The rest is unspoken; the Sigillite's word is permission enough for anything, so it would seem.

After a moment, I step back and allow him to disembark. 'I would know your rank and Legion, brother.'

Rubio's expression is neutral. 'I have neither, as you would reckon it. I exist here as a tool for the will of the Regent.'

'And what does Lord Malcador want with us?' Hezen asks. 'I hear a civil war is going on out there.' My battle-brother makes no attempt to mask his bitterness.

'Aye,' Rubio nods. 'And now that war has come to Baal.'

'We see no traitor ships.' My hand is on the crozius. I am willing the opportunity to draw it. 'Horus Lupercal, may death blight him, has not yet seen fit to test our defences.'

'But you know of the tumult in the immaterium?' Rubio presses me with the question. 'The great swathe of warp-tempest that men are calling the *ruinstorm*?'

'I know.'

How can one not? Several of Ser Jesper's astropaths have perished in the wake of the massive metapsychic effect. We have heard the reports, sporadic and conflicting, of a huge maelstrom of nigh-impenetrable space storms cutting across the galaxy. Some say it is an engineered thing, made by the turncoat

Warmaster and his traitor allies, others that the Emperor caused it as a firebreak to blockade Terra. Whatever the cause, while it churns and boils through the void, the skies are cut in two.

I know the ruinstorm. It hangs like a bloody curtain between Baal and the far stars where our kindred have gone. It is the barrier we would need to penetrate to peer toward the Signus Cluster. It is what denies us word of our Legion and our primarch.

‘Then you know that the map of the galaxy has changed.’ Rubio reaches into a pack hanging from his belt. ‘Perhaps forever. That change has forced Lord Malcador to make hard choices for the good of the Imperium. For the future of mankind.’

He is holding a matt-black tube in his hand, the case for a message scroll of photic parchment. The black scroll is a document of such rare import that it is more legend than eventuality. I see it and at first I do not understand.

Twice before in living memory such messages were delivered to the homeworld of a Legiones Astartes. I reach out and take it, because I know I must. I am Arkad, Warden of the Blood Angels, guardian of Baal, and only I can do so.

The tube breaks open with a twist and the parchment unfurls in my hands. The ceramite digits of my gauntlets hide the tremor in my fingers.

‘I am sorry, brother.’ I hear Rubio talking, but the words are distant. My every iota of being is trapped by the writing on the scroll. Silver, on black.

‘The Blood Angels are no more.’ I speak, although the voice is disconnected from me. The words it utters are not what scream through my thoughts, the denials and the howling defiance. ‘Our Legion... has been declared null.’

Hezen rounds on the grey-armoured warrior, his gun rising as high as his fury. ‘What lies are these?’ he shouts, taking aim at Rubio. ‘You cannot say such a thing, you have no right to issue that diktat! This is madness!’

‘It is the Regent’s command,’ replies the psyker, and not without compassion. ‘I regret to say that if you disobey, you will be considered *excommunicatus traitoris*.’

I hold the scroll numbly in my hands, and I remember speaking those same words.

Only months had passed since the fleet was dispatched to Signus. But so much had changed.

The stinging buzz of the teleporarium effect briefly overwhelmed my senses,

and abruptly I was no longer in the transit chamber of the citadel, but there in the middle of the tacticarium aboard the Heartcease.

I drew my crozius but did not ignite its power field. I hoped that the sight of the weapon might be enough.

Nagal and the others turned to face me as I stalked across the compartment. Crewmen scattered out of my way. Nagal and five brethren, each of them clad in full battle regalia, bolters loaded and ready.

Ready to go to war.

'You should not have come, Warden!' Nagal fumed. He had his boltgun in his grip, but he did not quite point it at me.

'Stand down.' I gave the command, and it was only after the words left my mouth that I heard Sanguinius's echo in them.

Nagal gave a bitter laugh. 'Not this time. We are going, and you will not stop us.' He gestured around. The command crew of the Heartcease were at combat stations, prepared to take the ship out and into the warp. The fools; the storm would kill them if they attempted to cross it. I told him this, but Nagal was not swayed. 'We'll take that risk. It is better to perish in the attempt than remain here and allow our will to corrode.'

'Brother, heed me. Stop now. It is the primarch's will. If you disobey, you will be considered excommunicatus traitoris.'

That gave them all a moment of honest pause, but Nagal rode over it. 'I seek no violence, Arkad. Just turn your back and let us leave. It is for the best.'

'I will not.' A part of me wanted to go with him. 'I share your anguish, your frustration. We all do!' I scanned the faces of the other warriors, and the crewmen. Yes, we all felt it. 'But we have our orders. We must remain here and protect Baal until we are relieved.'

'Protect it from what?' The question exploded from Nagal in a snarl. 'We cannot delay!'

He stabbed a finger at the viewport and the stars beyond, taking in the blackness, and I knew what he meant. Out there, hidden in the marrow of warp space, a hellish fault was growing like a cancer. The spacers were calling it the ruinstorm. It thickened with each passing day, and with its arrival we had lost contact with the Legion fleet and the Angel. A dark pall fell over all of us. I feared the worst.

I said the name. 'Horus. We must stand ready to oppose him—'

Nagal wouldn't let me finish. He spat on the deck. 'Lies and idiocy! I refuse to accept these stories denigrating our lord's beloved brother! Horus would never

turn his face from Terra! This is all a plan to divide us, engineered by some unseen enemy! That is why we must go to the Angel's side, to learn the truth.' He stopped, losing his momentum, the terrible possibility of it weighing him down. I knew that feeling, oh yes. *'And if... if by some horror it is true... then all the more reason to find Sanguinius.'*

'If Horus is a traitor,' said one of the other warriors, 'we'll find him and kill him.'

My battle-brother rounded on me, his eyes alight with dread. 'What purpose is there to hide here if our father is lost, if he is...' Nagal could not bring himself to say the words.

If Sanguinius has been killed?

I took my crozius and returned it to its scabbard. I approached Nagal and met his gaze. 'Do you think the Angel is dead?' I asked it of all of them, and none could reply. 'Answer me, kinsmen. If you truly believe that Sanguinius is lost to us, then I will let you take this ship and go.'

The silence that followed seemed to endure forever.

'No,' said Nagal, at long last. 'I do not believe he is dead. We would know.' He tapped his chest plate, over his primary heart. 'Here.'

Nagal glares at me, and he hates me. He hates me for making him stand down, and he hates me for the news I have brought before the twenty of us. I am the focus of all his rage and frustration. I cannot blame him.

The black scroll is in his hand, and he crushes it in his grip before angrily dashing it to the floor of the Grand Annex. The massive domed chamber, built to house conclaves of Blood Angels a hundred times the size of our gathering, resonates with the sound of our voices. *'This is unacceptable!'*

The others are in agreement. They have listened to me repeat Brother Rubio's words and they rebel against them. The psyker stands outside the great hall, waiting for our word, but I have no doubt his preternatural gifts let him hear everything that transpires within.

'What proof does the Sigillite have?' asks another legionary. Like all of us, he does not want to accept the possibility that we two-score are now all that remains of the Sons of Sanguinius. *'The word of fools and humans?'*

And yet, I have seen the datum Rubio brought with him. Observations from Imperial warships, reinforcement vessels sent from Terra at the outbreak of the rebellion. A handful of wrecks have clawed their way back through the madness of the ruinstorm, a handful out of hundreds.

The crews of these ships turned their sensors towards the Signus Cluster as they crossed the light years towards it, their scry-scopes probing for any contact from the Blood Angels flotilla, their astropaths calling out for the like aboard the flagship *Red Tear* and its sister vessels.

I have seen, and now I show the others, what those crews saw. Blackness and the absence of light. A new void at the galactic coordinates where the stars and worlds of Signus once shone.

The Signus Cluster no longer exists. A monumental dark mass has taken its place, swallowing up whoever did not fear to tread on those blighted worlds. Some say that those within have been taken to hell, if such a thing exists. I would weep for my Great Angel if only I could.

The tragedy of it thunders in my mind, almost too big to comprehend. The Legion, erased from existence. All my brothers, my comrades in arms, my angelic father, *gone*.

Do I truly believe Sanguinius is lost to us? It shames me to say it, but in this moment, I do. I believe that *all* is lost.

Hezen is nodding. ‘The Regent cannot simply expect us to go quietly into oblivion! He must know that we would not accept dissolution without argument!’

Dissolution. Such a weak word for so great an act, so final a judgement. The systematic decommissioning of a Space Marine Legion; the repossession and redistribution of every last item of materiel, from bolt-shell to battleship. It is the closure of the book of hours on a legacy that has endured since the days of Old Night, the promise of the final end of the Blood Angels.

Not in glorious battle, fighting an intractable enemy until the very last of us perish – but a death by pen and ink, the work of administrators, politicians and strategists. It sickens and enrages me in equal measure. This is not the way of the Imperium I am oath-sworn to fight for!

‘We are not dead!’ shouts Nagal, and a handful of others take up the cry. ‘Even... even if this is true,’ he says, glaring at the black scroll, ‘there are still twenty living sons of Sanguinius! Twenty souls are enough to rebuild this Legion.’

‘*One* would be enough,’ growls Hezen. ‘No matter if it takes a thousand years, we can restore our strength.’

‘If you had millennia, that would be so.’ I turn, and I see Rubio standing behind me. How he entered and approached without my knowledge is disturbing. ‘But these are difficult times, Blood Angel. The hardest times our

Imperium has ever faced.’

‘You have no right to be here!’ says Nagal. ‘The Annex is for the scions of our Legion and no other.’

Rubio ignores him, looking to me instead. I feel the psyker reading me, knowing the dread in my hearts. He nods grimly. ‘The war with Horus threatens to rip the galaxy in two. Priorities change. As a surgeon must sacrifice a limb to save a life, so the Sigillite makes the difficult decisions. I regret that your Legion has fallen on the scales of such a choice.’

‘Speak plainly.’ I find my voice again. ‘If you are to be our executioner, Rubio, then grant us that!’

He bows slightly, and takes in the scope of the fortress-monastery with the motion of his hand. ‘The war machine that powers a Legion, the gene-engines and the weapons stocks, the whole of it... The strategic value of such hardware is incalculable, and it cannot be allowed to fall into the hands of the traitors. It must be protected, nurtured, so that reinforcements can be brought to the battle in due course.’

‘The rebellion will not last that long,’ says Hezen.

‘Can you be sure?’ Rubio replies. ‘The Sigillite foresees all possibilities. Even now, on distant Titan, he makes ready a new weapon, a new breed of warriors. *Malcador prepares.*’ He indicates his armour. ‘I, and others like me, have been called to assist in his deeds.’

‘You would gut our fortress for this?’ Nagal’s tone is flat and cold. ‘When we are at our lowest ebb, the Regent would come to Baal like a carrion eater and strip it bare? Is that why you are here?’ He advances on Rubio, fists clenching. ‘To pick us to the bones?’

‘Yes,’ replies the psyker. ‘Cargo leviathans are coming, crewed by recovery battalions from the loyal factions of the Mechanicum. They will remove what is needed.’

‘Get out,’ Nagal snarls.

‘I have more to say—’

‘*Get out!*’ bellows the warrior. I watch Rubio pause, then bow again. When he is gone, Nagal’s ire returns to me. ‘You should have let us go, Arkad. Damn your blood, you should have let us go!’

I face him. ‘If I had, then there would be nothing left of us.’

‘Look around,’ Nagal demands. ‘Soon that will be so.’

His words remind me of the dream.

We never speak of the dream, although we all shared some iteration of it.

Those in true slumber – if a Space Marine can ever truly sleep – saw it most strongly, but even those of us who were awake, standing our posts or at practice, experienced a measure of the...

I hesitate to call it a vision.

What did I see? A jumble of images, flickering through my thoughts like a half-recalled memory. A world of blood-red sands, but not Baal. Fire in the sky. A great creature, more beast than man, but blurred so that I could not define its characteristics.

An axe in the creature's hands. A mighty blow and hundreds of my kinsmen dead.

Among it all, Sanguinius, his wings spread wide. I saw him falling, even as I knew that the Angel never falls.

Then it was gone, but in the wake a terrible, brief fury awoke in me. It was a strange kind of anger, far removed and hard to grasp. I felt somehow... tainted by the passing of its touch.

In the times before the Emperor's illumination, this dream would have been called an omen.

But after that day, no warrior among the twenty spoke of it again, as if to give voice to what the dream suggested would make it a certainty.

The summons brings me to the landing pad, where Rubio's Storm Eagle remains, poised like a patient raptor ready to throw itself into the sky.

I confess I have already made my decision, as I walked through the Silent Cloister and along the upper galleries. Nothing the psyker can say will change my mind.

'Speak,' I insist, as he emerges from the interior of the lander.

'I have an offer for you and your brothers, Arkad. An opportunity.' His tone seems genuine. I wonder for a moment, did Rubio once stand where I do now, a loss so great it cannot be measured weighing upon him? The warrior removes the power sword on his belt, scabbard and all, and shows it to me. 'Before, you asked me my rank and Legion. I was once a warrior of the XIII, the Ultramarines.' Rubio turns the weapon so I may see the shape of the revered Ultima upon the hilt. 'I am lost to my Legion as certainly as if the sons of Macragge were dead and gone.' There is no exaggeration to these words; I hear the pain in his voice and I believe him.

'And now you are Malcador's agent?'

He nods. ‘One of many. Some of us legionaries, from brotherhoods on both sides of the insurrection. Others mortal and... otherwise. I have a new purpose now.’

He speaks of the Sigillite’s works in the Sol system, the deeds done in the Emperor’s name, but not with true openness. All across the stars, he tells me, measures are being taken. Ships and men silently diverted to where they will be most needed in the battles to come. Military equipment, gene-tech and the building blocks of a Legion’s infrastructure. All to Lord Malcador’s design, all to combat not Horus Lupercal’s treachery, but the dark forces the Warmaster has awakened.

I find it hard to follow, until he makes the offer. Then I see.

Rubio holds out his hand. ‘Join me, Arkad. You and your brothers. The black scroll may mark the ending of your Legion, but it need not be the end of your duty to Terra.’

‘You would have us give up our colours for those?’ I study his ghost-grey wargear, and tap the winged blood-drop across the chest of my night-black armour. ‘I will die before I surrender that. If Sanguinius has been taken from us, we lost sons... then to shrug off our identity like some discarded cloak would be the greatest insult to his memory!’

‘You don’t understand.’

‘I understand.’ Rubio stands his ground as I advance towards him. ‘I speak for all my brothers. Your offer is refused.’

To his credit, he does not waste breath trying to convince me otherwise. ‘Very well. I have one last demand of you, then.’ The psyker returns his sheathed blade to his belt and offers me a vox-module. ‘Your ships in orbit, the guardian flotilla... I have given them Malcador’s orders to disperse and strike their colours—’

A smile comes to my lips, a swell of pride to my hearts. ‘But they do not obey?’ In that moment, the humans, the crew-serfs and the mortal officers, they remind me that one need not be a legionary to be of the Legion.

‘The shipmasters refuse to accept the Sigillite’s commands unless you authorise them. Arkad, you must release the fleet from their oath to the Blood Angels.’

‘I will not.’ I hear footfalls. Ceramite boots upon the stone, the sound of armoured warriors rising to fill the ranks behind me. I turn to see their faces, but each one of my kinsmen has hidden his visage behind his helmet.

And their armour...

They no longer wear the blood-crimson of our legion. Dark layers of inkstone stain have blackened their wargear to a shade similar to mine. The only marks of incarnadine that remain are brazen red saltires that cross over their chests, their shoulders. The stark lines of scarlet are like bloody wounds.

It is Nagal who leads them. 'If we are truly in the company of death,' he intones, 'then it is fitting that all who look upon us shall know it.'

My pride grows ever stronger, and I see the questions in Rubio's gaze as I turn back to him. 'Where is Horus Lupercal, brother? Under what blighted rock does the turncoat hide?'

Rubio reads our collective intent immediately. 'You seek to face the Warmaster. The twenty of you against the might of his armies, his traitor legions? You will die.'

'By the Sigillite's word, we are already dead,' snarls Hezen. 'We will find Horus and kill him. Or die in the attempt.'

'What other end can we aspire to?' I ask, and I see Rubio's manner hardening. 'Anyone who has given their fealty to the Great Angel may follow us, if that is their wish.'

The pskyer draws his Ultramarine gladius, slowly and deliberately. The sword's blade glows, and in concert with it, the crystals of his psychic hood come alive. 'I cannot allow that. Master your own fates if you will, for you are of the Legiones Astartes and that is your right. But those ships belong to the Imperium, and Terra.' The tip of the blade points at my head. He still holds out the vox-module. 'Tell them to stand down, Brother Arkad.'

'No.' The crozius arcanum is suddenly in my hand. The aura crackles into being, glowing blue-white.

In this moment, I am fully ready to commit the most unthinkable of acts. I am ready to kill another Space Marine for what I believe to be right, and I know that the battle-brothers standing behind me will not stay my hand. They will see it good and raise no reproach. I am ready to end the life of Tylos Rubio if that is what it will take.

In a way, the feeling is... *liberating*. Is this what Horus's traitors so desired? And once it is done, will it be easier to kill again, and again? For that is the threshold we now stand upon, and the path beyond will be marked with the blood of warriors we might once have called brother, might once have fought alongside.

And then a cry comes from human lips before our weapons can meet. 'Wait! Wait! Hold your blows, in the Angel's name!'

Nagal, Hezen and the others part like a dark curtain, to allow a man's approach. A spindly thing he is, clad in velvet robes. He stumbles as if he is dizzy. Ser Jesper, the Master of Speakers, tries his best to run to us. Behind him trail cords of rope-wound wires and ritual bonds. He has come at a mad pace from the fortress-monastery's astropathic seclusium, and done so with such urgency that he is in great disarray. It concerns me to see Jesper in this state, for whatever news he brings must be of the greatest import. The poor telepath is not properly decompressed from his psi-sendings. Weak, watery blood runs from the corners of his eyes.

The astropath collapses, but Hezen is there to catch him. He brings him to us, bearing the weakened, fallen man like a child.

'Heed me,' croaks Jesper. He is barely awake, but something in the waif-like form keeps him conscious long enough to speak. His tone becomes the sing-song of mimic repetition as he gives the meme-codes that prove his message to be authentic. He is relaying a communication from the stars. 'Raldoron speaks across the wild and screaming distances,' he whispers.

'The First Captain?' Nagal stiffens at the mention of the name. Our brother Raldoron was called to be at the Angel's side at Signus. Suddenly, Jesper's near-panic is understood.

'He speaks...' The astropath is dying. He has killed himself to rip this message from the tumult of the ruinstorm, sacrificed his life because he knew it would save us. I am humbled by his act. '*Sanguinius lives. The legion endures.*'

It is the last communiqué Ser Jesper grants us; I hear the final beat of his heart.

Rubio cannot deny what he has heard, even as his vox-bead crackles with confirmation from his own astropaths aboard the cruiser. His sword sinks towards the ground.

I raise my crozius, Baal's red sunlight casting it like spilled blood. 'Go back, Rubio. Take your ship and your orders, and go to Malcador with empty hands and empty holds.' My hearts sing as I say the words.

'He counted you lost too soon,' says the psyker.

'We were never lost.' I shake my head. 'We are Blood Angels.'

And that is answer enough.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

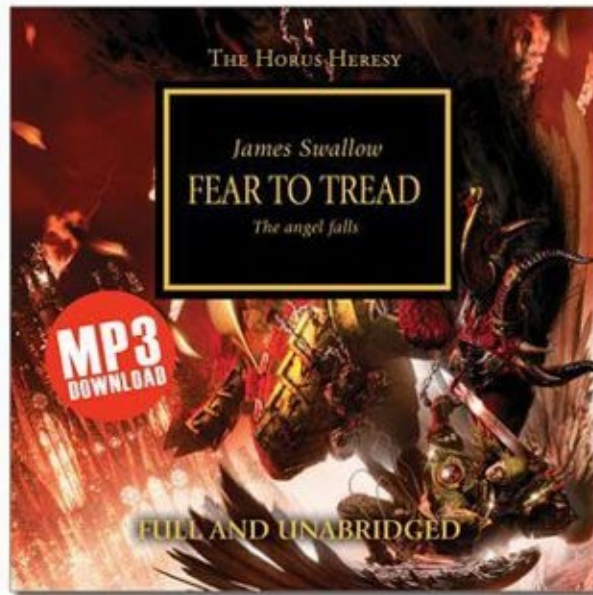
James Swallow is a New York Times bestselling author whose stories include the Horus Heresy novels *Nemesis*, *Fear to Tread* and *The Flight of the Eisenstein*, along with *Faith & Fire*, the Blood Angels books *Deus Encarmine*, *Deus Sanguinius*, *Red Fury* and *Black Tide*. His short fiction has appeared in *Legends of the Space Marines* and *Tales of Heresy*, along with the audio dramas *Heart of Rage*, *Oath of Moment* and *Legion of One*.



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