

THE HORUS HERESY®

EXOCYTOSIS

James Swallow



The Death Guard under First Captain Typhon face
the suspicion of their new ally, Luther

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Dawn came to Zaramund in slow ranges of colour, yellowed streaks the shade of bruised flesh rising up across the vault of the sky and bringing with them gradual changes that crept across the dense, forested landscape.

Calas Typhon stood upon the ridge above the encampment and watched it come, his helmet dangling at the end of his arm and the low, cold breeze plucking at the matted hair of his unkempt beard. He imagined himself a fixed point in space and time, around which the cycle of Zaramund moved endlessly, his presence changeless and constant.

Dawn and dusk, night and day, these things were trivial and distant concepts to a legionary, trimmed from Typhon's existence along with hundreds of other small human things that his kind lost when they were transformed. He had no need to sleep or to fuel his body in human ways, and it had been so long since he had known need of these things that they had become alien in concept. In his deep past, the man who was now First Captain of the Death Guard Legion had progressed through a state-change that irrevocably rewrote his physical nature.

A dawning of my better self, he considered, with a brief, bleak smile.

The moment of amusement guttered out like a snuffed candle as his usual dour mien replaced it. Typhon's brow furrowed as he tried to grasp the ephemeral edges of the thought that had been tormenting him ever since they had arrived on Zaramund – even before that, if he were honest with himself. He could almost form the idea, but every time he reached for it, it retreated. It was like running his fingers through the flow of a river, seeking one single ebb of current. The

truth was infuriatingly beyond his reach, a phantom retreating into the warp, and even after the hours Typhon had spent up here in isolation and self-reflection, it still escaped him.

He let the moment of reverie crumble and his gaze tracked a heavy shuttle as it lifted off from one of the temporary landing pads on the south side of the encampment. The brick-shaped craft rose into the lightening sky on crackling thruster bells, carrying aboard it new components and equipment for the repairs to the *Terminus Est* and the other vessels in his flotilla. Typhon watched the shuttle shrink to a dot, and high above he picked out the constellation of bright morning stars that were his battle barge and its sister-ships, drifting up there in a low geostationary orbit.

The warship had suffered greatly, and there had been a moment when Typhon feared that Zaramund might become her grave marker. But the fates had a way of confounding a warrior's expectations. Instead of battle, the *Terminus Est* had found a safe harbour and an unusual welcome from a quarter that Typhon had never expected: Luther and his renegade Dark Angels, planting their standard next to that of the Warmaster Horus Lupercal...

As much as this turn of events was welcome to the Death Guard, Typhon could not help but be suspicious of it. But then, was that not the nature of the sons of Barbarus? To distrust all that could not be seen and touched and broken?

Typhon shook off the thought with a flick of his head, removing a gauntlet and raising a hand to run it over his close-cropped temple. Luther's generosity was, like it or not, sorely needed by the First Captain and his Grave Wardens. Expedience overruled distrust.

For the moment.

The thought faded as Typhon's fingers found a new lesion on his scalp, hidden in the greasy layers of his hair. He tried not to dwell upon it, but his hand slipped to the back of his neck where the mottling of his skin had begun several weeks earlier. There was a cluster of livid boils there, a triad of them that were strangely cold to the touch. Other marks elsewhere on his body, similar in kind but better hidden in the crevices of his musculature, were slowly growing more numerous.

And yet, they caused him no pain. If anything, Typhon felt physically stronger than he ever had, as if he were improving with each passing day. *Am I unwell?* The question echoed in his mind, and it seemed ridiculous. *Inconceivable! I am a Death Guard, the obdurate and unrelenting. There is no known toxin or sickness that can lay us low.*

He wanted to laugh off the thought, but it nagged at him. Typhon became aware of a few tiny, black flies circling his head, little things barely larger than motes of dust, and he swatted lazily at them as he spied a figure approaching up the incline of the ridge.

The other Death Guard removed his helmet as he approached and halted a few metres away, giving a shallow bow. Hadrabulus Vioss was a captain of Typhon's Grave Wardens, and his master's right hand. 'My lord,' he began, 'you have been vox-silent for some time. Your communications circuit registers as deactivated.'

Typhon glanced down at his helm, then away. 'I required some time to think, nothing more. What is it that you want, kinsman?'

'Not I, First Captain.' The Grave Warden's shorn scalp bobbed. 'The Dark Angel, Luther. He wishes to speak with you.'

'Reasons?'

Vioss' lips thinned. 'Are you asking me to guess?'

Typhon made a gesture for him to continue, and his second-in-command took a breath.

'I think he wants us to stand with him. To speak well of him, to the Warmaster.'

'Luther is gauging the price he will ask in return for aiding us.'

Vioss nodded. 'Aye.'

Typhon pushed away the thoughts that had been clouding his mind and took a step forward. The synthetic musculature beneath the heavy ceramite planes of his Terminator armour hissed gently, and he turned his helmet in his hands as he reactivated its systems.

'He is a warrior of Caliban, after all,' he added, after a long moment. 'They all have a hunter's eye for the calculations of warfare.'

'We *will* owe him a debt,' noted Vioss.

'Indeed,' Typhon allowed, and started down the ridge towards the camp. 'But there are other scales that need to be balanced before his.'

'There is much to be done,' muttered Luther, his hooded gaze searching the hololithic chart table before him. Dull light from the display underlit his face and the low ceiling of the command chamber. Above the glassy surface of the table, renderings of nearby worlds turned along their orbital plots, and clusters of dark green arrowheads – indicators suggesting starship deployments – swam in the void zones between them. 'If he's out there... we need to be ready to meet him with force when the time comes.'

‘Corswain,’ said the Lord Cypher, considering the name. ‘If what the Death Guard told us was true, then allowing Typhon’s warriors to rest here may draw him to us.’

Luther shot him a warning look. ‘Is that censure in your words, brother?’ Before Cypher could reply, he went on. ‘Use your gifts. If the Lion’s lapdog has our scent, we will build a snare for him when he comes.’

‘I have sensed nothing,’ admitted the psyker. He paused, then lowered his voice. ‘Perhaps you will enlighten me, lord. Perhaps you will tell me what it is we gain from aiding Mortarion’s men.’

The answer, shaded with derision, slipped from the mouth of another Dark Angel who stood close by, his gaze lost in the hololithic display. ‘Such allies...’ The captain realised that he had spoken out of turn and bowed slightly. ‘Forgive me, Lord Luther. I did not mean to—’

Luther cut him off with a blade-like motion of his hand. ‘Speak your mind, Vastobal.’

Captain Vastobal took a breath, and then launched in. ‘The path you have chosen for us. It will be harder to walk it alone.’

‘But?’ Luther’s piercing gaze held him in place.

‘I question if these Death Guard are not what we *need*... but merely what we *have*.’

‘You think we would be better to abandon this world and seek out the Sons of Horus ourselves, is that it?’ Luther frowned. ‘Annexing Zaramund was just the first step. Typhon’s arrival was merely a fortunate confluence of events.’

Vastobal hesitated, and Cypher spoke for him, anticipating the captain’s words. ‘He does not trust them. He believes the Death Guard have nothing with which to repay our generosity.’

‘Gratitude is not in their lexicon,’ added Vastobal.

Luther was about to add something, but then an icon flickered into life on the chart table and a mech-voice announced an incoming vox-signal, a message sent from the repair camp that the Dark Angels had granted to Typhon’s men several weeks ago.

‘Speak of the beast...’ muttered Cypher.

‘Answer,’ Luther told the table’s machine-spirit, and the lines and shapes of the display reoriented themselves to form a three-dimensional avatar of the Death Guard First Captain, sketching him in from the waist upwards as if he were a spectre rising out of the horizontal screen.

‘*Well met, Lord Luther,*’ rasped Typhon, his face hidden behind the tarnished

brass of his visor. Each of them silently noted the Death Guard's mild insult by not facing the Dark Angels Grand Master bare-headed. *'You wished to converse with me?'*

The question that dallied in all their minds was clearest on Vastobal's face. *What have they got to hide?*

'First Captain Typhon,' said Luther, maintaining a neutral tone. 'How go the repairs to your ships? My technologians inform me that the work proceeds apace.'

Typhon's mask bobbed. *'We will be whole again very soon.'*

'We have several experienced Techmarines in our ranks,' offered Cypher. 'If it would expedite the situation, we can deploy a squad to you—'

'No need.' Typhon cut him off. *'These are our craft. We know them best.'*

Luther leaned on the edge of the chart table, eye to eye with the hololith. 'Cousin,' he began. 'You have been on Zaramund for over a month now. In all that time, you have turned down my every invitation for respite with us, my offers of serfs and brethren to aid you. You take only materiel and never venture beyond the walls of the encampment.' He showed a wan smile. 'I am beginning to think I have offended you in some manner.'

'Not so,' replied Typhon. *'Your generosity is greatly appreciated, my lord. But the Death Guard do not easily accept charity. It is a flaw in our character.'* He paused, addressing them all. *'And I would not wish for any incidence of disagreement to emerge between our two Legions.'*

'I do not follow,' said the Cypher.

Typhon's masked face turned towards Zahariel. *'After being hounded for so long by your brother Corswain, some of my warriors bear enmity towards the sons of Caliban. It would be unfortunate if a... misunderstanding were to occur.'*

The implication beneath the words was clear.

'Corswain is no brother of ours,' said Vastobal firmly. 'Not any more.'

'Of course,' allowed Typhon. *'I will merely say, it is better that the repair work is done by my men alone. I ask you to respect that request.'*

'As you wish,' said Luther. 'But I will expect to share a drink with you when all is done.'

'There will be repayment, yes. Until then, Lord Luther. And once again, my gratitude to you.' Typhon inclined his head and the hololith winked out.

'He's afraid his men will pick a fight with ours?' Cypher fairly sneered the words.

'A poor excuse,' said Vastobal. 'My lord, he is not being truthful with us. The

Death Guard do not deserve the goodwill you are showing them.'

'Oh?' Luther gave him a cool glance. 'Then by all means, captain, correct me.'

Vastobal paused, realising once again that he had overstepped the mark. It was a trait he had never been able to expunge, and one that all too often led him into trouble. He pressed on, committed. 'Allow me to surveil Typhon and his men. So that we may be certain of what they are doing inside the walls of that camp.' He glanced at the Lord Cypher. 'We have all heard the stories of what those behind the Warmaster's banner are doing on other worlds...' He drifted off, as if he were unwilling to say more.

Luther and Zahariel exchanged a loaded look.

'I would expect my centurions to act in the best interests of the Legion at all times,' Luther said, 'with care and discretion.'

'No less,' Vastobal agreed, accepting the unspoken order. He saluted Luther with a mailed fist to his breastplate, and stalked away across the command chamber.

Hours passed. Typhon wandered through the camp, directionless and lost in his thoughts. He saw the work around him but did not really register it. His mind kept straying to distant questions.

The ship-helots from the XIV Legion crews brought down from the fleet toiled tirelessly at their assignments, assembling and preparing replacement parts here on the surface before the shuttles took them up to the battleships. They worked in a sullen, careful rhythm, and those of them that did not have lobotomiac implants – the ones who still possessed something of a persona – passed the time with old plainsong remembered from the days of farming the harsh chem-fields of Barbarus. Their low voices drew distant memories from Typhon, back out of the poison mists of his past and into the present, but he dismissed them. It irritated him for reasons he could not articulate, like rough cloth rubbing over chafed skin.

In his right hand he gripped the long haft of *Manreaper*, the power scythe that was the First Captain's signature weapon, absently kneading the grip and letting its weight drag on his arm. The scythe acted like an anchor, pulling Typhon into the moment, keeping him grounded when his thoughts threatened to carry him away.

It was hard for him to maintain his focus. More and more often, Typhon was finding himself drifting, a dark miasma buzzing coldly at the edges of his thoughts whenever his mind was supposed to be at rest. The subtle magnetic pull

of it seemed strongest when he was aboard the *Terminus Est*, and then even stronger when the ship sailed the warp, as if out there in the churn of the empyrean a clarion was calling that sang only to him.

A voice echoing from that *other* place.

Typhon had come down to Zaramund partly to watch over the helots but also to put some distance between himself and the void. It had not worked. Day by day he felt less like the warrior he had been and more like a traveller inside his own skin.

He thought about the sunrise he had witnessed, and the creeping motion of light and shadow that followed. A shift of similar magnitude was moving through him, he could sense it. A state-change that would bloom in fullness if only he would let go and allow it.

And what then? Typhon had led his breakaway splinter fleet out from under his primarch's shadow because he believed that he had a destiny of his own to fulfil. *I always did, even when we were youths. Even at the beginning, before Mortarion's father came for him.* But now that path was coming into sharper focus, and Typhon was uncertain of where it would lead him.

He took a deep breath and found it tasted odd – not from the air, but from the spittle in his mouth. He swallowed, halting his mind before it could wander again to thoughts of lesions blossoming on reddened skin and cold scales over oily flesh.

The First Captain's attention snagged on a pair of legionaries who crossed his sight at a jog, each of them carrying their bolters at the ready as they scrambled up an incline to sight over the walls of the camp and into the treeline beyond. Their boots thudded against the Mortalis-pattern structures of the prefabricated walls, kicking up puffs of displaced rust.

Typhon went after them as another Death Guard – a veteran sergeant with a bulbous augmetic eye – followed the warriors to their post. 'You,' he commanded. 'What is wrong here?' No alarm had been sounded, but the actions of his men spoke to a warning.

The sergeant halted, covering a moment of surprise at seeing the First Captain before him. He gave a brisk salute and jerked his head towards the walls. 'Lord Typhon. A minor incident, at the perimeter.' He paused, gathering himself. 'Civilians. We sighted a group of them on the scry-sensors approaching down the valley.' The sergeant pointed into the distance. 'The vox-tower contacted them, warned them off. They came anyway.'

Typhon sensed the dark glitter at the edge of his vision once again, as if it were

light flickering off the wings of resting insects. He walked with the sergeant, following him up the ramp. ‘What do they want here?’

‘Unclear.’ The sergeant pointed again as they reached the level of the ramparts. ‘Look there, lord.’

Typhon planted *Manreaper*’s shaft on the platform at his feet and peered out at the gathering of people visible through the edges of the tree line. They were settling in by the side of the dirt road that led back towards civilisation.

Some of them caught sight of him and they froze like prey animals caught in the savage gaze of a predator. On the wind, Typhon picked out their hushed murmurs and saw others coming together, whispering intently. One of them spoke into a hand-held communicator.

At his side, the sergeant’s manner shifted and he let his bolter drop slightly.

‘Lord... a message from the vox-tower. The civilians have responded to our warning. They say they won’t leave.’ He gave his commander an odd look. ‘Not until they are allowed to speak to... to someone called *Typhus*.’

The trees rendered Vastobal an emerald ghost.

As dense as the forests on Caliban, the tall and slender trunks gathered in on one another in thick stands broken only by game trails and the occasional clearing. The gathering light of the day did not penetrate far through the canopy, and Vastobal was able to slip from one pool of shadow to another, barely disturbing the undergrowth despite the bulk of his power armour and the enveloping folds of his deep-green war-cloak.

Alone and vox-silent, it had been easy for him to melt into the woods and make them his ally in concealment. Once he passed the line of perimeter sensors the Death Guard had seeded in the forest, he felt a warning pulse through his veins. They were acting as if Zaramund were enemy territory, a place annexed by the XIV Legion from an unwilling populace, rather than the gift of sanctuary it truly was.

Behind the breather grille of his helmet, Vastobal’s lip curled. With each step he took, his misgivings grew firmer.

He had spotted the civilian caravan a few hours in. Hidden from their sight, he watched them pick their way down the track leading to the Death Guard encampment. He listened to them talking and singing. He studied their manner. They were *happy*, and he could not fathom why. This strange group of Zaramundi natives, a mixture of all kinds from all strata of the planet’s feudal society, acted like they were on a celebratory outing to some great festival. They

were buoyant, but strangely earnest with it. He searched his thoughts for the right word to encapsulate the mood he saw.

A pilgrimage?

Partly out of curiosity and partly because they served as a good distraction to any watchers, Vastobal shadowed the civilian band for the rest of their journey, paralleling their path until it ultimately deposited them at a distance from the gates of the repair camp.

He found a hide inside the hollowed-out core of a fallen tree trunk and used the rangefinders in his helmet's optics to scan the iron walls, looking for points of weakness. Vastobal planned to wait until nightfall and enter the camp in stealth, to penetrate as deeply as he could and observe the activities of the Death Guard unaware. If they thought no eyes were upon them, he reasoned, their true character would soon reveal itself.

But the Dark Angel had barely settled himself before the armoured gates of the camp hissed open on pneumatic rods, parting wide enough to allow a figure in Terminator wargear to stride through. The livery was the same as that which Vastobal had seen in the hololith, and the massive scythe in the warrior's hand erased any doubt as to the identity of the Death Guard who wore it.

First Captain Typhon. Vastobal tensed, his hand falling to the hilt of his sheathed longsword. *Could he know that I am here?*

The Dark Angel had heard the stories of Typhon's battle prowess, and murkier suggestions that he was some kind of psyker – although that seemed uncertain, given the XIV Legion primarch Mortarion's antipathy towards mind-witches. He drew on his training to slow his heartbeat and will himself to fade into the forest, lest some fraction of whatever preternatural sense Typhon might possess were to brush over him.

It appeared to be enough. Typhon halted before the civilians, these *pilgrims*, looming over them, his full focus on the mortals who bowed at his feet.

Vastobal tuned his auto-senses to maximum and strained to listen to the words passing between them.

Calas Typhon knew well the faces of common men who looked upon him and his kind. Without fail, the emotion etched upon their countenances was always *fear*. The shade of it might change with the circumstance, but they were always afraid of him, terrified of the paragon of war in plate and steel before them.

Not here, though. Not these men. They looked up at him with something approaching adoration, as if he had come to bring them deliverance. Typhon

gave in to an odd compulsion to remove his battle-helm and look them in the eyes, but the act seemed only to cement their manner.

They whispered among themselves, nodding and smiling.

As if they know me.

Irritation pulled at his mouth. 'Who are you, and what do you want?'

'We have come to see you,' said one of them, a steely old woman with the manner of a lifelong matriarch. She beamed at him. 'Ah, it was worth the trip, yes?' She threw that question to the others and they nodded in agreement. 'Here you are. Just like we were promised.'

'I do not know you,' Typhon retorted, annoyed by her manner and by a creeping sense of something amiss that refused to abate. 'This is a military installation. You cannot be here. Return to your homes.'

'We have abandoned them,' she explained. 'It was time. Your arrival made that clear.'

He shook his head. 'If you do not depart on your own, you will be removed by force.' Typhon glared at her. 'We won't be gentle.'

She smiled at up at him as if he were some wayward son, and gestured at the air around her. 'We've all heard the whisper of the wings.' The old woman's choice of words shocked him into silence. 'The glittering black-silver. Like you. We've all been given gifts.' She rolled up her sleeve, revealing a bird-thin arm and tanned, wrinkled skin like careworn leather. 'I was supposed to die of a canker. Instead, I blossomed.'

Typhon blinked as a tiny insect buzzed between the two of them. From the corner of his eye, he realised that there were more, dancing in shafts of sunlight falling through the treeline. Black motes, coiling around like wilful smoke.

She showed him the inside of her forearm and the lesions there, all mirrors of the ones on his scalp. Others in the group presented themselves in similar fashion, some unbuttoning their shirts so Typhon might look upon their breast or throat. He saw cold and yellowing marks in tri-part clusters. The same. The very same.

'It was the Grandfather who brought me back from the canker,' the old woman was saying. 'He spoke to us about you, the Great Lord Typhus. Our champion.'

'My name is *Typhon*,' insisted the First Captain. 'Calas Typhon.'

'Oh, for the moment,' she said, dismissing the comment. 'Things grow and change. There is death, and rebirth.'

The old woman placed a hand upon his vambrace, the spidery, stick-thin fingers tracing over the metal, and he looked down. She was drawing shapes there, a

pattern of three interlocking circles.

His thoughts raced. Ever since he had been a youth, Typhon had sensed the motion of greater things out beyond the edges of his perception, like the wakes of giant unseen leviathans passing below the surface of the ocean. Once, he had been marshalled in his use of those abilities, harnessing them in service to his Legion – only to be forbidden all such practices by his primarch.

That those forces had impressed themselves upon his life was not in question, but he had rarely encountered those who had felt that touch themselves. Not even Erebus, with his marks and his words, seemed so close to him as these strangers before him now. The air was filled with a strange, potent scent – sweet and acrid all at once, like flowers blossoming from within corpse-flesh.

‘You see,’ she said, and her rheumy eyes were shiny with tears. ‘Yes, indeed. You do see it, don’t you? We have been waiting here for so long, my lord. Unhallowed and rescued from our maladies over and over, all for this. For now.’ She nodded, and as he looked closer, Typhon saw the broken blood vessels across her neck and face, the remnants of harsh infection. ‘It is time.’

His gaze swept across the others and he saw the same. Hollowed faces of men that should have been long dead, drawn back from their end into a kind of null-decay. It was like a veil briefly dropping from his eyes. He saw these people as they really were: the living who fate decreed dead, held in abeyance by the very malaises that should have ended them.

‘How are you alive?’ he whispered.

‘You know,’ smiled the old woman. ‘By the grace of the Grandfather. And with your passage, herald, we can move on.’ She spread her hands. ‘We may finally impart our gifts and marks to everyone on Zaramund... and beyond.’

Typhon looked down and saw the leathery skin of the woman’s arms rippling as tiny shapes moved beneath the surface of her flesh. Motile black specks began to extrude themselves through her pores and swarm across her hands, forming a shiny, dark mass.

A terrible and potent reaction rose up in Vastobal, a wellspring of repulsion that spilled out of the core of his being.

He could not tear his gaze away from the pilgrims. All of them were spreading their hands in religionist poses and oily, glistening matter was seeping from their mouths and nostrils, weeping from their eyes and ears.

Even at this distance, the stink of the noisome fluid was like a physical blow. Vastobal recoiled, feeling his gut clench and stiffen. The gene-forged of the Dark

Angels were capable of ingesting matter without effect that would have killed a normal human instantly, but this bilious reek was so utterly foul that it threatened even the iron constitution of a Space Marine. Blinking away chemical tears, Vastobal activated the atmospheric seals on his power armour and set it to a mode more suitable to an ultra-toxic death world or deep void vacuum than the placid woodlands of Zaramund. He lurched out of his hiding place, fighting down the wave of nausea that had come over him, and gathered himself. The captain's cloak rippled over his shoulders as he grasped the hilt of his longsword and slid a short length of it out of the scabbard, preparing for a full draw.

The pilgrims turned to him, and he beheld horrors.

Gawping, slack-mouthed corpses that were animated by jerky, marionette motions. Agglomerations of dead flesh that mimicked the shape and form of humans. Repellent things that belonged in a midden or a grave.

The Death Guard Typhon did not seem to care about the sudden transformation at hand amongst the civilians, instead turning with obvious threat towards Vastobal as he made himself visible. Typhon pointed his power weapon in the Dark Angel's direction and called out a command to halt, but Vastobal was only half-aware of it.

His attention was taken by the *things* around him.

All the mad rumours and insane half-truths he had heard about the Warmaster's dalliance with the eldritch and unknown now came snapping into hard focus. The possibility he had always secretly hoped was untrue now revealed itself to him. Vastobal was a son of Caliban, and sons of Caliban knew the truth about monsters lurking in the dark. *The rumours of the unclean are real*, he told himself, *and worse than I could have believed*.

Distantly, Vastobal's duty made itself known to him. Luther had to be warned about what he had allowed to set foot on Zaramund, warned about whatever foul sorcery the Death Guard had brought with them from their alliance with Horus Lupercal.

The creatures had other plans. The men-things reached for him, spilling black ichor across the undergrowth at his feet as clawed fingers scratched at his armour. Choking in a breath through the lingering stink in the confines of his helmet, Vastobal's hand jerked and the rest of his sword came free.

His unsheathing swing was wide and it took the head from one of the unhallowed pilgrims. Instead of a jet of crimson, a flood of black foulness issued into the air, and Vastobal recoiled once again. The others mobbed him and he reacted with swift, deadly force. Another, then two more of the pilgrims were cut

down by his blade.

Everywhere he opened them, blackness exploded outwards, moving like oily smoke.

Belatedly, Vastobal realised that the repellent fluid was a colossally dense mass of tiny insects, flies that the corpses vomited out in great, buzzing swarms.

Reason threatened to slip from him as the full extent of the horror became clear. The Dark Angel's warrior mind slipped into pure combatant mode, some rote-trained element of his thoughts taking over as a base instinct overrode all other concerns.

Destroy this foulness. Wipe them all out. Expunge them.

Vastobal moved quickly, leading with the sword and cutting down everything that crossed his line of sight. In the melee, the need to destroy the pilgrims became all-consuming, as if the Dark Angel were suddenly an antibody compelled to eradicate an infection marring the body of Zaramund.

A dark, sizzling slick of insects and black blood coated his armour as he advanced towards the old woman he had seen begin it all, the one who had been speaking with the Death Guard. She was the heart of it – yes, that was clear now. Bellowing a war cry, Vastobal went at her with his sword falling from on high, intent on opening up her stick-thin frame with one cut from jowl to bowel.

The curved head of a scythe blade came out of nowhere and blocked the falling strike before it could connect.

Typhon decided that the Dark Angel had gone mad.

One moment, the Death Guard was seeing... *something*... and the next his gaze was ripped away from the old woman by a cloaked form crashing out from the tree line, shouting incoherent warnings about corruption and filth.

Typhon was about to interpose himself between the civilians and the other legionary, to demand an explanation as to why one of Luther's men had seen fit to approach their camp's perimeter unseen – but events overtook any such calm response.

The Dark Angel began killing. He did it with such ferocity that Typhon was momentarily taken aback. He had seen such blind fury in the Word Bearers or the World Eaters, but never from the more measured warrior kin of the First Legion.

The civilians actually fought back. They moved with a purpose that common men seldom exhibited before the shock and awe of a legionary in full flow, but it counted for nothing. The Dark Angel put them down with swift, flashing strikes

from his weapon, blood splashing where it struck. Typhon was aware of the insects again, as if coming out of nowhere, doubtless attracted by the scent of spilled blood.

The moment stretched and he let a surge of cold anger push him forward. Typhon turned to meet the Dark Angel's blade as he came hurtling towards the old woman, her tear-streaked face a picture of shock as this avatar of death itself thundered across the clearing.

Their weapons clashed with a shriek of powered, crystalline steel, for a brief instant seemingly frozen in time.

'Stay your hand!' Typhon snarled.

'What obscenity have you brought here, Death Guard?' The Dark Angel shouted the words back at him, shaking with rage. 'This profane horror will not stand!'

Locked in their violent embrace, Typhon could see the warrior's name etched in golden scrollwork over his breast, surrounded by laurels that designated the rank of captain.

'Vastobal,' he grunted, hoping that by addressing the Dark Angel directly he would get some sense from him. 'Stand down!'

'Never in the face of such pestilence!' The other warrior broke out of the lock and attacked again in a flurry of slashes and jabs from his longsword.

Typhon planted his feet in a defensive posture, fighting with both hands on *Manreaper*, using the shaft to parry and block every hit that Vastobal tried to land. The Dark Angel's cloak whipped around him as he looked for an opening; he was good, Typhon had to admit, and had Vastobal's discipline been in place instead of his rage, the clash could have followed a different path.

His jaw set. He had no time for this. When Vastobal attacked once more, Typhon spun his power scythe in a flashing arc and used the heavy heel to knock the Dark Angel off balance.

Hit hard, Vastobal went down on one knee and Typhon pointed the scythe's curved blade at his head. 'Enough!' he snapped.

'No, not enough!' Vastobal bellowed. The Dark Angel's sword flew at Typhon in an upward arc that was so fast, it almost caught him unawares.

Typhon shifted in his stance, but not quick enough to avoid the very tip of the blade screeching as it scored a line up his chest plate, and cut into his face through the mat of his unkempt beard.

His hand went to the wound. There was blood.

Dark it was, so dark as to be almost *black*. In the few moments before the Space

Marine's accelerated metabolism clotted the wound, fat droplets fell from the cut and splashed against the ground underfoot.

And something altered inside Calas Typhon, something dark and deeply buried. Released, it uncoiled and was reborn.

The change was blink-fast, an element of his spirit reforming into another shape. His soul twisted at the sting from the wound – but it wasn't the small nick in his flesh that angered him. It was the flood of emotion, of sudden rage and hatred at the Dark Angel's insolence and idiocy.

How dare Vastobal do this? How dare he?

Does the fool not understand who I am? What arrogance compels him to strike me and those like me?

Typhon let the cold, simmering fury break its banks and he struck back with his scythe, putting all the power of his Terminator armour's superior musculature into the blow. The blade struck the centre of Vastobal's longsword and cleaved it in two – half the length whipped away with the spent kinetic force of the impact, and the other vibrated in the Dark Angel's hand. The First Legion captain was staggered by the break, and in another time and place that might have signalled the end of this ill-fated clash.

It was not to be. Forces larger than Typhon were at his back, a buzzing, droning vibration that ran through the meat and bone of him. They propelled him forwards into a stomping, steady advance. The Death Guard captain felt a crawling, electric sensation coursing through his bloodstream, like insects in his veins. His hearts hammered at the inside of his reinforced ribcage.

The buzzing was in his head, the black-silver glitter ghosting at the edges of his sight.

Typhon recalled all the times he had taken the Ritual of the Cups, a post-battle rite in which Death Guard commanders would share a draught of pure poison with their most valiant warriors. The drinking of the venoms, a challenge to the gene-forged hyper-metabolism of the Space Marines, was intoxicating in its own way and Typhon savoured the rush of it. The threat of true death made a legionary's adrenaline surge high.

But this was better.

He felt potent and powerful. *Unstoppable.*

Light flashed from the steel as *Manreaper* fell towards Vastobal's chest. The Dark Angel rolled aside and barely escaped the weapon's kiss as the scythe bit into the ground. Typhon slashed downwards again, and once more Vastobal almost paid with his life. From the corner of his shadowed gaze, Typhon thought

he saw the earth where the blade had landed liquefying into muddy, toxic slurry.

His fractional moment of distraction allowed Vastobal to stab him. With all of his enhanced might, the Dark Angel came forward and jammed the blunt edge of his broken sword into the tiny gap between the plates of the plackart that protected Typhon's lower torso. Levering it outwards, the broken blade slashed power cables and artificial muscle bundles and finally tore through the wargear's undermesh, the last barrier before the Death Guard's flesh.

Typhon roared and stiffened, standing in place as Vastobal lost his grip on the sword and fell back once again. It was a deadly wound, one that even a warrior of the Legiones Astartes would be hard pressed to shrug off.

But instead of the torrent of pain he expected, Typhon experienced a boiling, churning corpse-cold at the site of the stabbing. He looked down and saw a dark red shimmer creeping along the fraction of the broken longsword's blade that was still visible to him.

At first he thought it to be blood, but Typhon did not bleed that colour.

It was *rust*. In the blink of an eye, corrosion spread over the weapon – across the blade, hilt, pommel and all – and Vastobal's sword turned to gritty powder, the metal exhibiting a thousand years of age in an instant.

Vastobal's face remained hidden behind the black of his battle-helm's visor, but his reaction was clear through the motion of his body, his hands rising in an unconscious gesture of warding.

'What have you brought here, Death Guard?' he whispered.

Typhon opened his mouth to reply, but the only sound that escaped his lips was the echo of the droning buzz inside him.

He gave in to the act he was longing to complete. *Manreaper* glittered once more against the sun, and when its wide and lightning-fast arc was at an end, Captain Vastobal's helm – his head still contained within – rolled a metre from the Dark Angel's twitching corpse.

The old woman knelt before the Death Guard, and every one of the pilgrims did the same, pressing their scabrous foreheads to the mud amidst the opened bodies of their kindred. Together, they uttered a single word in a breathy rush – '*Typhus*' – and then fell silent.

Typhon trembled with unchained energy, and it took a physical effort to reel himself back in. His hand went to his torso, where the ragged rent in his armour was still gaping. The edges of it were damp with clear mucus, but there was no pain. Only a cold, clammy sensation, the same as he had felt around the clusters of lesions elsewhere on his body.

The change, he realised. This is no malaise. It is improving me.

The old woman looked up at him, as if she caught the echo of his thoughts. Her smile was all black, rotted teeth and the bloom of new undeath.

‘First Captain!’

Typhon spun around as the veteran sergeant he had left on the battlements came striding towards him, a trio of Grave Wardens in close formation behind.

‘My lord, are you injured?’

Typhon slowly shook his head. ‘Sergeant, what did you see?’

The Death Guard pointed his bolter at the beheaded Dark Angel. ‘He came from nowhere! We saw him attack you without provocation and kill the civilians...’

‘Is that *all* you saw?’ Typhon’s gaze bored into him, the air turning metallic as his hidden preternatural senses reached out.

‘My lord?’ The sergeant seemed confused by the question.

Typhon waved him away. ‘Never mind.’ His hands flexed around the hilt of his power scythe and he took a step towards Vastobal’s body. The buzzing pressure at his back had returned – or had it ever really left? – and he let it gently push at him. Black flies darted around in the sudden stillness, dipping down to gorge themselves on the spill of rich legionary blood soaking into the earth at his feet.

‘What are we to do with the body?’ said one of the other warriors.

Typhon glanced at the old woman, who gave him a demure, conspiratorial nod.

‘It will be dealt with,’ he replied.

Luther’s gaze tracked back and forth across the chart table as data scrolled from one side of the glassy surface to the other, the arrival of each new pane of text signalled by a quiet bell chime. It was a march of interminable information, bulletin after bulletin pertaining to the logistics and minutiae of maintaining a fighting force upon a newly conquered planet. While the Grand Master had adjutants to whom he could turn this task, there was a part of him that was always drawn back to peer over their shoulders. Some seed of disquiet that something vital might be missed if he did not personally cast an eye over all aspects of his new fleet and his centurions.

Behind him, the command centre’s hatch dilated and Cypher stepped through, a mordant cast to his face. He had been about his own tasks for the past few days, since before Luther had granted Captain Vastobal leave to covertly observe the Death Guard, and he suspected that Cypher had also been using his own subtle

methods to spy on Typhon and his Grave Wardens.

‘What is it?’ Luther demanded, sensing the onset of a new problem in the other warrior’s manner.

Cypher offered Luther a data-slate by way of an answer. Displayed upon it was a god’s-eye pict-capture from one of the constellation of scrying satellites orbiting above Zaramund. It showed a dozen false-colour blurs caught in motion over the curve of the planet below. Starships, he guessed, captured in the act of breaking orbit at combat velocity.

‘The Death Guard are gone,’ explained the Lord Cypher. ‘All of them. No word to our stations. No *thanks*.’ He spat the word bitterly. ‘They simply boarded their vessels in the hours of darkness and then broke for the system’s Mandeville point at full burn.’

Luther raised an eyebrow. ‘And the repair camp?’

‘Empty.’ The other warrior leaned in. ‘We should have listened to Vastobal.’

‘And where is the good captain?’ Luther glanced around the echoing command chamber, his eyes never finding the centurion he sought. ‘Seek him out for me. I would know why he did not report their preparations for departure.’

‘He may have tried,’ said Cypher darkly.

Luther met his gaze, and an unwelcome chill prickled at the base of his spine. A low chime sounded from the screen-table before him and, by reflex, the Grand Master glanced down at the display.

The newly-arrived datum was a minor alert; a civilian medicae in one of the outlying colonial settlements was requesting assistance from an Apothecary of the Legion, to deal with an unidentified infection that had arisen in the community.

Luther dismissed the data pane with a flick of his hand and looked back at Cypher, brooding on what as-yet-unseen effects his generosity towards Typhon’s warriors would leave behind.

Typhon did not need to look up at the great portal across the compartment to know that the *Terminus Est* and his fleet had just entered the warp.

He smiled to himself as he walked to the ornate cabinet in the corner of the meeting chamber, the pistons in his heavy armour gasping quietly with each movement. He could feel the empyrean realm out there, the thud and heartbeat pulsing of it washing against the Geller fields of his ship. Typhon imagined it as an endless, protean ocean of blood in which the vessel was now submerged. Alive and restless, calling out to him.

He wondered what would happen if he ordered the protecting energy sheath to be shut off.

What would I allow in? What would emerge out of myself in order to meet it?

The smile grew as he arranged a series of pressure-sealed flasks in a row. Typhon was experiencing something that had always seemed impossible to hold on to. *Clarity*. That was the only word for it. He almost chuckled. It was some cosmic joke, a great irony. All his life, from his tormented youth on Barbarus to his redemption in Mortarion's ranks and beyond, to this day, Calas Typhon had been reaching for understanding. Now he saw that it had been a part of him from the very beginning.

Those who had hated the pallid, hollow-eyed boy that he had been, the ones who shunned him and named him half-breed and witchkin, perhaps they were the ones with the most insight. In their dull way, they had seen a fraction of Typhon's true potential.

What was the word that old hag used? She called me the herald...

He liked the cadence of that title. It had import to it, the weight and moment of greater things at hand.

Herald.

It spoke of one bearing the undeniable truth, one who carried the harshest reality for all to hear.

And Typhon found himself knowing that truth, fully and completely. He was Death Guard, and had always been so. Alive but forever dead. Moving and never halting. Held in abeyance between the pulse of life and the cold embrace of the grave. Others would see this as contradictory, but not he, not now.

They are the same, he told himself. *Until Zaramund, I lacked the perspective to see it*. Now he was beyond the moment, it seemed odd to think of any other state of mind.

It was as if he had always known.

Typhon removed seven baroque steel bowls from a compartment in the cabinet and counted them out. As he did so, his free hand drifted to the place where Vastobal's broken longsword had penetrated his armour. He paused, glancing down. The ceramite there was soft, like new flesh, but the rent in the plate was gone. Healing, like an extension of the body beneath.

A single black fly crawled across the surface of his wargear, but he paid it no mind. There was a brief flicker of concern that died out almost as quickly. *When was the last time I took off my armour?* He dismissed the question. It was unimportant.

From the flasks, he poured measures of poisons and toxins that swirled around the bowls to become powerful, lethal brews. Vapours that would kill on contact coiled in the air, and the First Captain drew them in like they were fine perfume.

Lord Typhus.

He heard the voice behind him and turned. Vioss stood in the hatchway that opened on to the anteroom beyond. ‘What did you say?’ Typhon asked him.

‘Lord Typhon,’ Vioss repeated, his helmet cradled in the crook of his arm. ‘I have assembled the senior officers as requested. Your Grave Wardens await you.’

He beckoned with one armoured gauntlet. ‘Bring them in. I would speak with my kindred.’

Vioss gave a shallow bow, and presently he returned with a cohort of five more legionaries, each one a battle-tested veteran of countless wars throughout the Great Crusade.

Typhon knew them all, knew the colour of their hearts and the secrets of their souls. He wanted to show them the truth that he knew, and in time he would. But for now, for today, he would help them take the first step.

‘I have considered much in our time on Zaramund,’ he began, ‘and I believe we have reached the end of this chapter.’ Typhon bade them take up the stance of the Seven, each warrior falling into rote positions from the old Dusk Raiders battle formation. They left a place for him in the middle of the group, waiting patiently and silently for the First Captain to continue. ‘Brothers, today we end this journey as a splinter fleet of the Fourteenth. I know now we must reunite with our Legion and our primarch.’

He saw some of the Grave Wardens exchange wary glances, but none of them dared speak out at his words.

‘We are stronger in union,’ Typhon went on. ‘Unbreakable.’ He looked away, turning his back on them to make the last preparations for the Cups. ‘There is much we can give to our kinsmen. I know that now. I needed distance from our gene-father to see that. So we will reunite. This will be my order.’

Unseen by the others, Typhon reached up to the mark that Vastobal had given him upon his chin. He reopened the wound and it slowly wept fluid into the matt of his thick beard. The First Captain allowed the cut to leak into the palm of his gauntlet. Black, oily liquid gathered there.

‘We are to return to the main body of the Legion, then?’ Vioss ventured the question. ‘We will stand beneath Lord Mortarion’s standard?’

‘Aye. I wish it.’ Typhon let his gauntlet pass over each metal bowl, allowing a

single drop of his dark and tainted blood to fall into the infusion. 'Join me now, brothers. Take the Cups with me, and seal our intent.'

He stepped aside, and each warrior came forward to take his offering before returning to his assigned place. Vioss was last, and he hesitated before picking up the vessel. Typhon took the last one and saluted him with it.

Something uncertain flickered in the Grave Warden's eyes, but then it was gone. Vioss walked back to his position, and Typhon stepped into the space that had been left for him.

'Drink with me,' he said. 'Join me.' Typhon raised the cup to his mouth and drained the contents in one single draught.

At his sides, his men did the same, opening themselves to change and to truth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Swallow is best known for being the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Fear to Tread* and *Nemesis*, which both reached the *New York Times* bestseller lists, *The Flight of the Eisenstein* and a series of audio dramas featuring the character Nathaniel Garro. For Warhammer 40,000, he is best known for his four Blood Angels novels, the audio drama *Heart of Rage*, and his two Sisters of Battle novels. His short fiction has appeared in *Legends of the Space Marines* and *Tales of Heresy*.



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