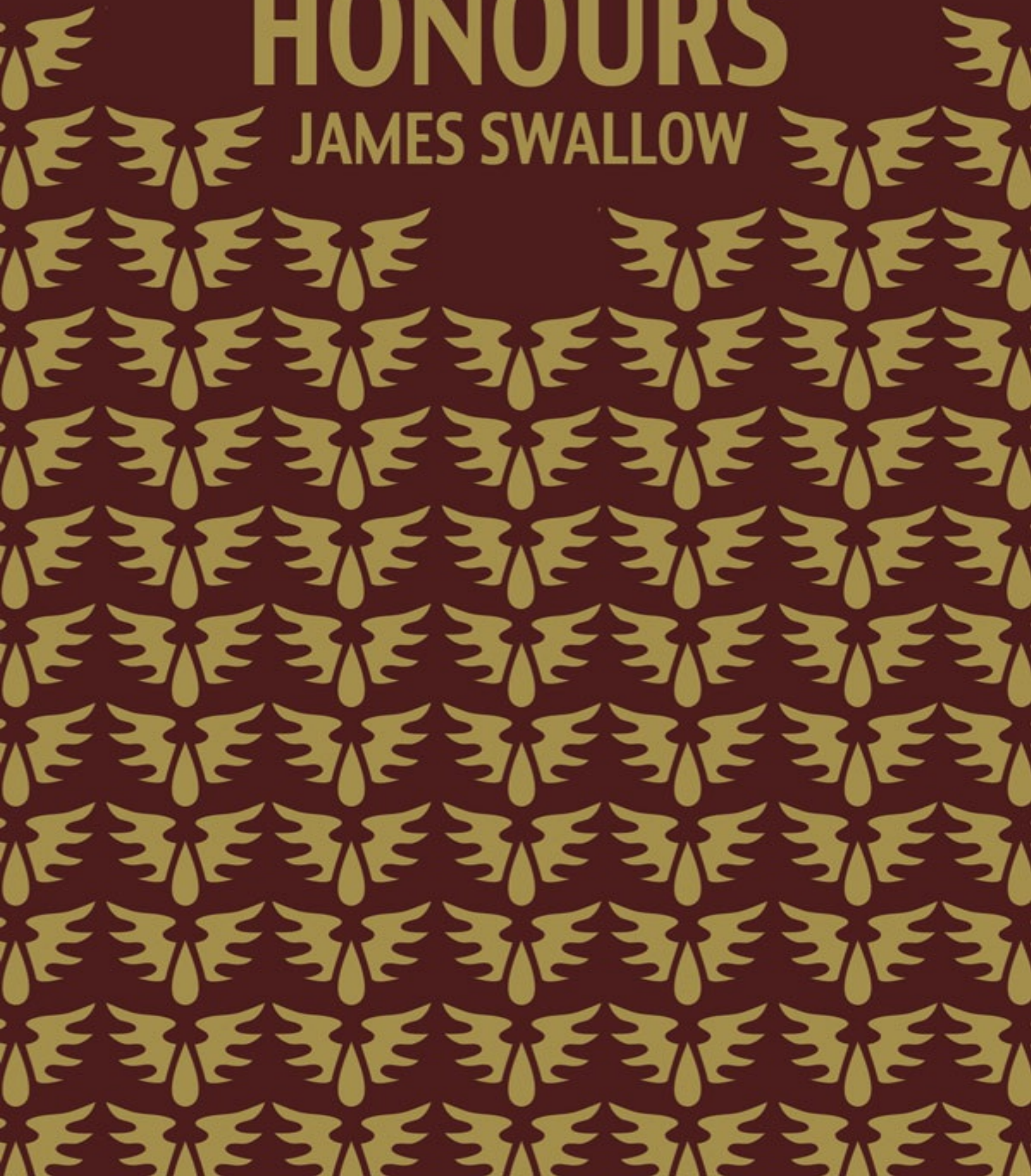


WARHAMMER
40,000

HONOURS

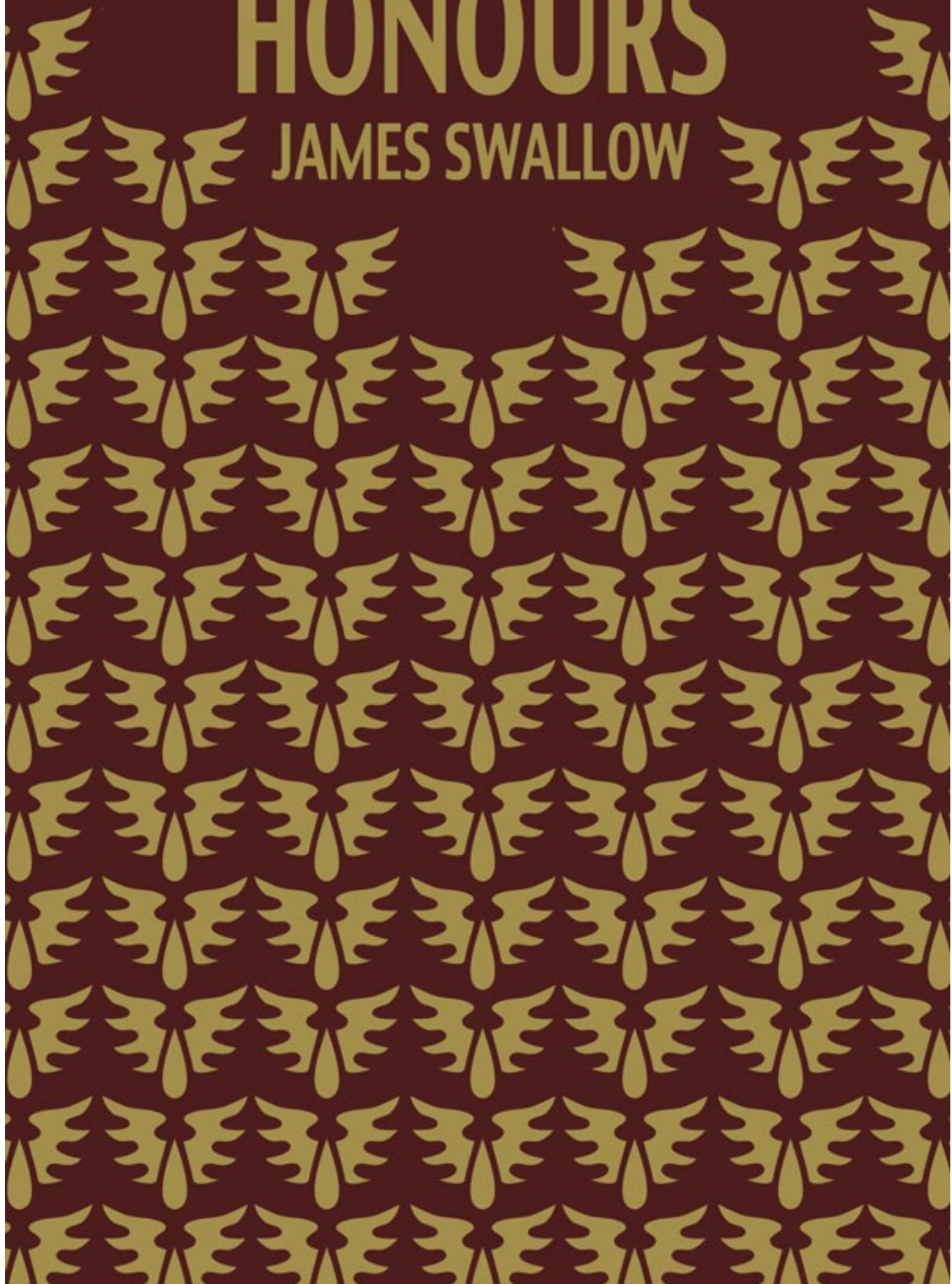
JAMES SWALLOW



WARHAMMER
40,000

HONOURS

JAMES SWALLOW



HONOURS

James Swallow

For a warrior like him, there were always those who had *questions*.

It was part of the burden of who he was. Veteran. Captain. Immortal, even, although they rarely voiced that last appellation in front of him. He didn't like the term. It hung around his neck like a bad omen. It dared the fates, and he only ever did that on his own terms.

The questions.

From the young and the newly raised battle-brothers most often, but sometimes spoken by war-worn sergeants and laurelled sons from the other companies, even other Chapters. He listened with patience each time. It was part of the duty for one with his exalted status. Every commander was a mentor and teacher, after all. He would lead as his primarch Sanguinius had: by example.

The daring ones, who looked upon the pennants of his great company and perhaps coveted his glories, would ask him: *How did you lose the eye, captain?*

Ah, the old wound. Who took the eye from him? 'I did,' he would say. 'As surely as if I had unsheathed my combat blade and gouged it out myself.'

He lost the eye through arrogance. On the shores of the Perpetua Sea, when his squad had confronted a heretic psyker leading a pack of cybrid war-dogs. He'd been young then, barely out of his Scout armour and with the black carapace still new beneath the skin of his torso. Oh yes, he had been so young, and foolish with it. Imprudent enough to believe that the little man throwing light from his fingertips could not possibly be a match for a Blood Angel, one of the Emperor's Angels of Death.

He took on the witch alone, breaking rank when an opportunity to attack made itself apparent. Even now, centuries later, he still smarted a little to recall the moment when the telekine had slammed him into the azure sands with a ghostly fist of mental force. Pinned there, staked out as one would leave a corpse to cool, he was held in place by a claw of gravity. The psyker came in close. Floating over him, with that terrible cackling laughter in the air, the witch sheathed a single finger in coruscating psi-light and used it to burn through the orb of his left eye. Slowly. Deliberately.

He killed it in the end. The creature's focus slipped as it relished his agonies, just enough for him to stab it in the gut with his knife. When the witch was dead, he threw the body out into the ocean shallows and found an Apothecary to staunch the bitter wound.

The scars and the bionic had stayed with him all these years, a reminder of the lesson. Arrogance kills; humility endures.

The sword, sir. Is it true what they say about the sword?

'Is it true?' That the blade killed a daemon lord, that it cut so sharp it sliced the hate from a curse and rendered it powerless? 'Yes... and no.'

The sword was a champion's blade, gifted to him by Lord Kadeus toward the end of his time as Chapter Master. He wore it with dignity and made it a point of honour that the weapon – which Kadeus had christened *Challenger* – would only leave its scabbard in the moment of most dire need. It became a talisman of sorts.

His warriors made a grim joke of it. In the thick of war, as blood and fire rained down around them, they would look to him and say, 'This battle is not so harsh, this enemy not so formidable. See? The captain does not deem it fit to draw his sword!'

But they did not jest with gallows humour when the beast Sethselameth emerged from the angles of warp space to attack them aboard the battle-barge *Bloodcaller*. The prince of Tzeentch had cursed the ship by clever means, secreting an unholy relic in the vessel's hull through the corruption of a crew serf, and it was the captain who had uncovered the ruse that let Sethselameth penetrate the ship. The duel of blades they fought in the high enginarium core would later be commemorated in a mural that covered the ceiling of the drive bay. The art is there to this day, raising the spirits of those who toil beneath the warp engines.

Some battle-brothers would study the bolter in his hand, the ready shape of the great weapon emblazoned with the wing and half-sigil of Sanguinius, yet the yellow shade of pallid sands and not the blood-crimson or deathly black of the other guns that hung in the grips of his men. They would look and they would say: *Why does your sidearm bear the colours of another Chapter?*

That story he liked to tell. Of the debt he earned on Mathus Station, when the heretic sect called the Hounds of the Ruined Sky fell upon a pocket of souls from a cousin Chapter ill-prepared for such madness and ferocity. A full thousand prayer-ships powered by the sick energy of the warp, pin-cushioning the deep space platform with their prows. A siege two hundred years long,

frozen in amber as the Adeptus Astartes trapped in Mathus's core decks held the line against cultists who devoted their entire existence to eradicating them. The Hounds built a little civilisation there, engineered around the enemy. They bred generations of themselves to throw at their foes. Each Space Marine they killed, even if it took decades, was a victory of the highest order. There were but four Imperial Fists left alive out of twenty-two when he answered their calls for aid, when the Blood Angels came to rescue the sons of Dorn. Together, they burned out the Hounds and put every last one of them to death. The Fists gave him the gun as a token of their gratitude, and each bolt it fired was homage to the warriors who had died on Mathus Station. He carried it with pride.

But the Tear was really what they wanted to ask about. The Cyanine Tear, as blue as the perfect skies of Baal before the War of Burning had seared them to umber shades. A colour beyond the living memory of all Blood Angels.

How did you come to be blessed with such a relic?

He had not asked for the honour, nor had he sought it. That was not the way of the Chapter and its sons. The Tear, carved of the rarest azure jade from Baal Secundus, set in wings of beaten gold spread across his chestplate. The captain took the relic as his commander's sigil when the First Company became his authority, humbled by the tribute and affirmed to be worthy of it. He carried it through a hundred campaigns, against orks and eldar, mutants and heretics. Smearing with the vitae of traitor kin, the captain wore it as he led the burning of the Night Lords warship *Fadesun* and the black-clad murder band that had harried the Perseus Null for six hundred years. He wore it as he executed the governors of Sable for their heinous crimes of chronomancy, and it saved his life by turning a deathblow from a Zode machine-giant in the Calixis Sector.

How was he worthy of this relic, this honour? There was no secret to it. He earned the Cyanine Tear by doing his sworn duty, just as every true Blood Angel did for his Chapter and kindred.

But the final question was the one he would never be able to give answer to, and in many ways that was the tragedy of it, for it was the puzzle they most wanted to be solved.

How did you die, in that place, at that time? Which greenskin was the one that ended your life?

On the plains of the hive world Levion Gamma, in the shadow of the Five Towers, the First Company led the charge against an alliance of orkish clans both massive and unprecedented. The green tide rolled over the planet, shredding everything that lay before them, until the orks closed the noose around

the silver citadels and the defence forces of the Imperium. They say the firestorm that broke on that day, the shrieking of plasma weapons, bolters and lasguns, tormented the skies so greatly that Levion Gamma never recovered from the battle brought to it by the Blood Angels.

The captain did not live to see those days, for perhaps the fates were dared one time too many. He fought and he died as he had lived, infused with courage by the right of his bloodline, honoured by his kinsmen. Upon a hill of xenos dead he met his last, the granted gun firing until the barrel was red hot, the sanctified blade of *Challenger* leaving its scabbard, his keen eye never faltering.

And the Tear; the Tear always shining, a beacon to his warriors.

Each item alone was only a tool, a device, a thing imbued with meaning but meaningless without a soul to attest to it. It was in the collation of all these elements, in the gathering of them to a warrior's side, that they became of value.

In this way, they were honours; and they remain still, for the war does not end and neither does duty.

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*.



Sent on a fool's errand by his trusted brother Horus, the primarch Sanguinius and his Blood Angels must face all the warp-spawned armies of Chaos upon the plains of Signus Prime.

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**Published in 2012 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd.,
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ISBN 978-0-85787-899-1

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