

WARHAMMER
40,000

REDEEMED

A BLOOD ANGELS SHORT STORY



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REDEEMED

James Swallow

A fall of night, red as rust and blood, followed the transporter.

It ranged up high over the scoured, mirror-bright line of the main rail, casting a wall of shadow out beyond the prow of the train as the line of five carriages snaked across the desert. A tokamak reactor in the heart of the engine car at the rear of the coaches propelled them at breakneck speeds, surging down the straightaways, wheels skirling and gushing sparks on the curves as it raced to stay ahead of the storm front.

The razorwinds had come in fast, gathering up sharp dust and stones as large as a man's fist from the plains of the Oxide Desert. Turbulent and deadly, the sandstorms could flense the flesh from an unprotected body in moments, turning dust into blades and flecks of gravel into bullets. They were a fact of life on the planet Baal, drawn into existence by the complex tidal pulls of its two large moons and their intertwined orbits. Even now,

Baal Secundus lurked low in the late day sky, reflecting the ruddy light of the far sun, watching the train run like the eye of a patient hunter.

The rails spread like web threads across Baal's surface, radiating out from the starport at Arch Rock, connecting to the great Fortress Monastery of the Blood Angels at Mount Seraph, the relic donjons at Sangre, and elsewhere to all the satellite compounds and facilities the Chapter maintained on their homeworld. It was a system borne out of necessity; the cruel weather patterns of the desert planet often grounded atmospheric craft and the sands slowed ground vehicles, while the trains could forge their way through all but the harshest of hurricanes. Still, it did not do to tempt fate, and the Chapter serf driving the engine opened the throttle a little more as the leading edge of the winds buffeted the trailing coach.

Inside the sun-seared bare metal of the carriages, there was little but freight, rows of storage pods and supply modules bound for the terminal at the end of the line. There were just three passengers on this run, and they had been granted an entire car to themselves. For them, and their singular cargo.

They were Adeptus Astartes, all three brothers of the Blood Angels Chapter. The elder two were Sternguard veterans, men of taciturn character who took their duties seriously. Neither had shown their faces since they boarded the train at the Fortress, their crowskull helmets perpetually scanning the interior of the carriage and the item they were watching over.

The third passenger wondered if they had been communicating on a private vox channel that he had not been invited to join. He went unhooded, his helm maglocked to the thigh plate of his armour, just below his bolt pistol's battered holster. His attempts to engage them in conversation had been met with terse, single-word utterances, and finally he had given up. They had continued on for hours with only the rattle and grind of the wheels beneath them as accompaniment.

Brother Rafen let his attention drift to the scratched glassaic port and the view of the deep desert flashing past beyond it, and he wondered: *what did they think of me?*

The hard and damning truth about what had transpired on the planet Sabien, the confrontation that almost became a civil war among the Blood Angels, the deaths from Space Marine fighting Space Marine: these things were still ghostly and yet to be fully revealed to the rank and file of the Chapter. And yet, some element of the truth found its way out in barrack-

room word and suspicion. Many had seen the *Europae* return wounded from the engagement against the traitorous Word Bearers, and battle-brothers in similar condition. Men talked – it was inevitable. Rafen had been told that Chapter Master Dante would issue a formal statement within a few days, but in the meantime men talked, and they wondered.

If they knew the truth, would they speak to me then? He asked himself. *Or would they distrust me even more than they do now?* Rafen pushed the questions away. It served nothing to dwell on such thoughts. He was here because there was one final duty he needed to perform. A ritual, of sorts, although not one that would be found in any books of catechism or battle rites.

His gaze was drawn back, inexorably, to the load that shared the carriage. A steel-grey titanium tube some three metres in length, hinged along its long axis and lined with warding runes, the container was suspended in the air by flexing cables strung from the walls, ceiling and floor of the rail car. It swayed gently with the motion of the train, the lines chiming as they alternately pulled taut and relaxed.

There were three personal seals next to the bloodlock that held the container closed, parchment tapes dangling from them. He could see the golden mark of Dante's signet next to that of the High Librarian, Mephiston, and Brother Corbulo of the priesthood. There should have been a fourth, the mark of Sepharan of the Sanguinary Guard, but the praetorians had not been present on Baal when Rafen had come home with this prize. He heard tell that Sepharan and his men had been deployed into the Eye of Terror on a mission of great and secret import, but it was only a rumour.

More rumour, he mused. *The enemy of fact*. Rafen felt the sudden need to be sure of something, and he rose quickly, drawing the sharp attention of the veterans. Without pause, he advanced to the container.

The other warriors exchanged a silent glance, and their hands went to their bolters. They did not raise them; it was not yet a challenge. But when he reached for the burnished steel surface, from the corner of his eye he saw a gun muzzle shift slightly.

'Step away, brother,' said a grim voice.

'You do not give me orders,' Rafen replied, without looking up. On the forearm of his power armour he bore a recently applied chevron of yellow, designating the rank of brother-sergeant that had been newly awarded to

him on the voyage back from Sabien. Despite the seniority of the Sternguard and their laurels, by technicality he outranked them both. He pulled off his gauntlet and laid his bare hand on the container.

Nothing. He wasn't sure what he had expected to feel – some answering pulse of warmth, perhaps? Some echo of the magnificent power he had briefly experienced on the battlefield? Rafen wanted to open the container, but the veterans would never permit that, even if he could defeat the bloodlock.

Rafen felt conflicted. He was here on Master Dante's sufferance, and likely then only because Lord Mephiston had spoken in support of his request. That last fact troubled him in a way he found it hard to articulate. The Lord of Death saw things with his witchsight that no man or transhuman could know, and it made Rafen uneasy to think that the Librarian had seen something in *him*.

But this... this strange, almost funereal obligation that Rafen had imposed upon himself, was the last line of connection between him and his sibling, Arkio.

Poor Arkio, dead upon the steps of a ruined shrine-world cathedral. Poor Arkio, unknowingly corrupted by the forces of Chaos. Rafen's brother in blood, not just in battle-name, dead at his hand for the price of his Chapter's deliverance. The promise to their long-perished father to protect his kindred had been broken, while his oath to the Emperor of Mankind remained whole.

Rafen drew back his hand and looked at the scarred, calloused skin of his fingers. For a moment, the red sunlight reflecting off the desert through the window made it appear as if his hand had been dipped in blood. Then the instant passed as he sensed the train making a wide turn, its forward velocity slowing.

'We are approaching the Regio,' said the other veteran.

'Aye,' Rafen relented, and turned away.

Baal was a world of extremes, from its frozen polar regions, heavy with dense metallic snows, to the searing radioactive belt of the equator, and much of its surface could barely be considered habitable by human standards. It was a landscape of sparse, desolate places, the legacy of a long-ago atomic war only remembered by the stubs of obliterated cities,

lying like broken memorial stones in the places where the rust-sands had not engulfed them.

Thousands of years ago, in the deep erg where not even the hardest of native tribal nomads would dare to venture, the first Techmarines of the Blood Angels had built the complex known as Regio Quinquaginta-Unus. Its High Gothic name drawn from an ancient Terran legend, the Regio was their holdfast outside the great Fortress Monastery. From orbit, it could be seen at the heart of a skein of lines cut into the desert, which traced the twenty-kilometre long design of a droplet of blood. The facility's uppermost level was a ferrocrete disc dotted with landing bays and portals, ringed with stark battlements and bristling with guns. This was only the face it showed the world, however. The bones of the Regio extended far down and out into the crust of Baal, sprawling into a network beneath the burning wilderness like the taproots of cacti. There were hundreds of sublevels and countless kilometres of tunnels, cavernous chambers and blocks of habitat and research units. Many of the deepest tiers had not felt the tread of human feet for hundreds of years.

Here, the Blood Angels of the Armoury, under the command of Brother Incarael, the Master of the Blade, kept their machine-works where the weapons and vehicles of the Chapter were maintained and sanctified for their eternal service in the Emperor's name. An army of Techmarines, Chapter serfs and indentured artificers preserved the legacy of the Chapter's precious wargear. It was the minds of the Regio's genii who had crafted weapons such as the Angelus boltgun. They sustained the slumber of the Chapter's Dreadnoughts between wars and preserved the treasured Standard Template Construct device that allowed the Blood Angels to build the unique mark of Baal-pattern Predator tanks. More than once, the rare STC had been the target of avarice from within and without the Imperium, and the Techmarines of the Regio guarded it aggressively.

The complex performed one other function. It was also a trophy house for weapons and technology deemed too important, or too dangerous, to be displayed openly in the reliquaries of the Fortress Monastery; it was said that between fighting alongside their battle brothers and engaging in their sacred duties, the Techmarines of the Armoury conducted works into the study of enemy armaments and archeotech so as to sharpen the combat edge of their kinsmen.

Rafen watched the crenels and watchtowers of the Regio rise from the sands as the transporter drew closer, following the silver rail toward the yawning mouth of an entrance tunnel. Watery shimmers of heat rose off the desert all around, giving the complex a ghostly cast despite the oncoming glower of the razorwind.

A flicker of movement caught his eye. Up on a raised landing disc, a workgang of helots were drawing a segmented dome over a winged vessel parked there, as protection from the approaching storm. It wasn't a standard craft like the Thunderhawks or Stormravens in use by the Chapter, more like the guncutters favoured by fringer crews and privateers. Rafen was struck by the livery of the ship as it vanished from his sight. The hull had been painted a red so dark it was almost black.

Then the train passed out of the waning day and into the unlit depths of the entrance tunnel. He felt the oculobe implants in his eyes tense as they immediately adjusted for the sharp drop in ambient light. The carriages rattled and growled as speed bled away to nothing. With a final hissing of brakes, the transporter rolled to a halt and great hatches in the walls of the rail cars fell open like ramps to allow servitors to begin the unloading cycle.

The Space Marine took a step toward the platform, looking around, taking it in. Rafen had never visited the Regio before, and it seemed a stark contrast to the ornate interiors of the Fortress Monastery. The complex had a heavy, brutalist ethic to its design, every surface sharply-cut from dense stone, blocky in form and function. There was no lack of regalia, but it was more martial, more practical than the elaborate ornaments of Chapter and honour in the Grand Annex, the great audience hall and the Silent Cloister. The first thing he saw were the twinned insignia of the Blood Angels and the Adeptus Mechanicus; the winged blood droplet of the Chapter was several scales bigger than the cyborg skull-and-cogwheel, and stood placed above it in symbolic recognition of who held superiority over this world.

'Like battle-forged steel, our loyalty endures,' said a voice, gruff with the effect of a vox-coder implant.

Rafen turned to see the approach of an Adeptus Astartes in red armour; not the vitae incarnadine of the Blood Angels, but something harsher, like the warning crimson of an alert sigil. Only one part of his wargear, his left shoulder pauldron, was the correct colour. It sported the Chapter's

insignia, but trimmed with a cog-tooth edging that repeated in other places over the other warrior's armour.

The Techmarine made no move to doff his helmet, but he gave a small bow to the sergeant. The motion seemed strangely elaborate. The other Blood Angel's power armour was equipped with a heavy, complex array of servo-arms emerging from his backpack, and they moved slightly as he did. Two of them ended in large manipulator claws, while a third sported the thick drum of a tool module. He carried no visible weapons.

'I am Brother Krixos, warsmith of the Chapter arsenal,' he intoned. 'Welcome to the Regio, Sergeant Rafen. The Master of the Blade sends his regards, but I regret that issues of duty compel him to be elsewhere. I will be standing in his stead for the completion of this... this obligation.'

Rafen frowned at that but said nothing. The intentions of the Techmarine cadre were sometimes difficult to fathom. It was not a question of distrust – these warriors were Adeptus Astartes and Blood Angels to their marrow – but more one of dissimilarity. Every battle brother who set foot on the road to the rank of warsmith was first sent to the dominions of Mars, where he was trained by the priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus in the arcane lore of machine-spirits and technologia. They were as much servants of the Emperor upon the Golden Throne as they were adherents to the Cult of the Machine God; the Mechanicus cog-and-skull device on Krixos's armour signified as such, showing the Techmarine's dual fealty to his birth Chapter and his teachers. It was true to say that the kindred who called the Regio home stood aside from other Blood Angels because of who they were.

The emerald lenses of Krixos's helmet stared impassively back at Rafen. His headgear was an unusually modified piece, thick with armour plates and additional sensor pits, lacking the fierce breath grille of Rafen's Mark VII Aquila-pattern helm. Krixos turned slightly to beckon a heavy-set servitor with lifter blades instead of arms, and the helot ambled past Rafen, up into the carriage where it set to work taking on the weight of the container. The two Sternguard stood warily aside, maintaining their silence. *Their job is done*, Rafen reflected.

Krixos seemed to sense his line of thought. 'I take stewardship of the weapon,' he announced, in a formal, final tone. 'You may return to the Fortress and rest assured that—'

‘I will see this to its ending,’ Rafen spoke over him. A jag of sudden, sharp emotion lanced through him. A reluctance. *Fear*, even?

The Techmarine hesitated before finally giving a careful nod. ‘As you wish.’ The hissing, plodding servitor emerged from the open rail carriage with the container suspended between its lifters, and walked away on its pre-programmed course. Krixos fell into step behind it and Rafen followed.

They made the descent into the lower levels of the facility aboard a wide inclinator platform the size of a duelling arena. The slab of steel decking creaked with the resonance of massive wheels turning beneath their feet, falling slowly down the angled shaft on heavy rollers in guide channels cut from the stone.

Standing in the middle of the inclinator, the blank-eyed servitor had the mesomorphic build of one from a heavy-gravity world, densely muscled and stocky with it. The slave stared unseeing into nothing, a punch-card command unit implanted in his chest ticking with clockwork. Rafen watched it for a moment. It seemed wrong that this servile, this commonplace mind-wiped thing, was carrying the weapon to its repose – there should have been ritual and ceremony, great circumstance and chronicles being written of the moment. This was a homecoming, after all.

Instead, the duty was being undertaken almost without note, in the shadows, and that sat poorly with Rafen. So many men had died to bring them to this point, not to celebrate their sacrifice with parades and hymnals seemed like a cheapening of their honour.

But that choice was not his to make. The Council of Angels, Commander Dante’s personal assemblage of advisors and confidantes drawn from the ranks of the Chapter at large, had ordered it so. The Blood Angels had been gravely wounded; this was not the first time such a thing had happened, nor even the worst occurrence, but the circumstances of it were troubling. The shadow of civil war had loomed briefly over the Chapter, a horror not seen since the terrible days of the Horus Heresy ten thousand years earlier. Although the threat to unity had ultimately been exorcised, the shock of the *possibility* of such an event still resonated, and many of the senior officers among Rafen’s battle brothers wanted all mention of this incident burned away and cast from their history, cut out like a cancer.

Imprudent to deny it, he thought. The battle may have been won but the echoes of the aftermath are yet to fade.

‘Brother-Sergeant?’ He became aware of Krixos at his side. ‘As you are here, there is a question that occupies me.’

Rafen’s lips thinned. ‘I will answer if I can.’

‘What happened out there? At Sabien? We have been told very little. Many of my brother Techmarines did not return with you.’

He immediately thought of Brother Lucion, the eager and dedicated Techmarine he had counted as a kinsman. Dead now, dead because of an allegiance Lucion chose to a falsehood, never knowing it to be so. He banished the man’s face from his mind. ‘We were tested,’ replied the sergeant, ‘and we have endured.’

‘Indeed?’ He could tell that his answer was not enough for Krixos, not nearly enough – but the warsmith did not press him any further.

The platform descended for another kilometre before it ground to a juddering halt, and thick steel doors drew back to give them passage through the twenty-seventh sub-level of the Regio. The servitor ambled on, and Rafen felt his pulse quicken as he took in the sights around him.

They had emerged in one of the great arsenal chambers, where the armourers, swordmakers and gunforgers of the Chapter maintained the weapons of the Blood Angels. Below, though a gridded walkway, he could see workstations where robed figures bent over boltguns and missile launchers, tending to them with the care of a parent nursing a child. On the upper level, displays of venerable armaments lined the passage, many of them sealed away behind panes of bullet-proof ironglass or the shimmer of protective energy fields.

In this age of heretics and mutants, witchkin and aliens, every Adeptus Astartes was, in his own way, a living expression of the Emperor’s wrath. They were Angels of Death, one and all, figures that strode like legends across every battleground to oppose all who would threaten the safety of the Imperium. And where they walked, they were venerated. Rafen remembered worlds where the populace went to their knees to worship them as the Blood Angels passed by. He and his kind were avatars of the God-Emperor of Mankind, and their aspect, their armour, the very guns in their hands, these things were all sacred and holy icons.

He saw weaponry that gave the truth to that ideal. A bolter from the Alchonis conflict, heavily detailed with brass filigree and platinum scrollwork, gold-wired blood drops carved out of red jade dangling on votive chains from the pistol grip and the muzzle. A chainsword with a handle wrapped in tanned orkskin leather, each individual tooth on the blade laser-etched with a single word from the Litany Vermillion. And there, so close that it caught his breath in his throat to be near to them, twinned combat daggers that had been owned by great Raldoron himself, and the thunder hammer that had been in the hands of the battle-martyr Zorael at the moment of his death. He looked about him and saw the tools heroes had used to forge their legends over ten millennia of ceaseless war.

These were not just devices for killing, but works of devotional artistry. In their own way, they were just as virtuous as the bones of a dead saint or a sanctified book of prayer. Everything around him was a museum piece, the least ancient of them dating back to the time of the Scouring, some so old that they might have been from before the Age of Unification. And yet, there were no *relics* here, not in the true sense of the word. These were not fragile things suspended in time, to be gawked at from a distance and mused upon by the unworthy. Every single martial device here was battle ready, should the need be there to call it to duty. Each gun was loaded and primed to fire, each sword's edge keen. This was an armoury, a gallery of lethal art – and there could be no more fitting place for the burden he had brought with him.

‘Here,’ said Krixos, halting before an empty alcove. This section of the corridor was deeper in shadow, lit only by a line of lumen strips in the ceiling. Something about the depth and the shade of the gloom troubled Rafen. It was so stygian that even his oculobe implants could not peer all the way into it. Krixos seemed not to notice and Rafen dismissed the thought, listening as the Techmarine transmitted a brief pulse of binaric linguacode in the clear. In response to the sound, a hidden seam in the alcove wall creaked and gave way, shedding drifts of accumulated dust. Beyond was a small, crypt-like space, dressed with a low altar that sported a series of stays clearly designed to fit the titanium container.

‘Brother-Sergeant Rafen,’ said Krixos, beginning the final formal declaration. ‘Your stewardship of this weapon is at an end. In the name of the Regio and by the authority of the Master of the Blade, I stand ready to

accept it. Will you yield it to me, in perpetuity for the Emperor's eternal reign, in honour of Sanguinius?'

'I...' Now at last it came time to say the words, Rafen felt the same knot of hard emotion in his chest. Once he had turned his back on the weapon, the last thread of connection between Rafen and Arkio would be cut. It was almost as if to give it up would be to give up his blood-brother's memory. He frowned; he would never allow that to happen. *Let it go*, Rafen told himself. *You have done your duty*. 'I will yield,' said the Blood Angel at last, and his hands came up to his chest to form the salute of the aquila.

'So declared,' said Krixos, without comment on his momentary pause. He gestured to the servitor, and the helot advanced toward the crypt-chamber.

'It comes home,' Rafen gave voice to his thoughts. 'After so long.'

'Yes.' The voice came out of the darkness behind them like an unsheathed blade. 'The weapon is brought home by the last to draw blood with it.'

Rafen and Krixos both reacted with shock, the sergeant's hand snapping at his holstered bolt pistol, the Techmarine's servo-harness turning a lasgun muzzle to point at the source of the sound.

'Fitting,' continued the voice, as its owner grew out of the shadows, approaching them with a steady, measured pace, ignoring their unease. Rafen's eyes met a sullen gaze framed by an ashen face. Black hair fell to the warrior's broad shoulders and the hint of something – an air of forbidding threat – played around his lips.

'My lord...' Krixos's tone shifted, and Rafen could almost imagine the expression of confusion on the Techmarine's face.

'I came to bear witness,' came the reply to the unasked question. The new arrival halted before Rafen, and the Blood Angel refused to turn away as the other Space Marine's unflinching gaze bored into his. He found himself looking into the eyes of a legend; or as some of his brethren would have it, *a nightmare*.

The gene-curse of the Blood Angels, the fatal flaw that was the legacy of their long-dead primarch, manifested in them as the Red Thirst and the Black Rage. Two sides of the same sorrowful coin, both combined to push sane battle brothers into a berserker madness from which no-one could return should their iron self control ever slip. Rafen had touched the edges

of the great fury himself back on Sabien, and the recollection of that moment still froze his heart when he returned to it. He had looked into that abyss, deep in his soul, and pulled back from the brink before it was too late – but many were not so lucky. The curse lay in the hearts of every Son of Sanguinius, Blood Angel and successor alike... and some fell far into that madness. Too far even for a last chance at redemption in the Death Company. When that horror claimed the mind and the soul of a battle brother, only the blade of the Executioner's Axe was enough.

That blade lay at rest upon the shoulder of the warrior standing before Rafen, upon the one they called the Redeemer of the Lost, the High Chaplain.

'I am Astorath,' he intoned, and this time he showed his teeth. 'Your name is known to me, Brother Rafen.'

Astorath the Grim. The name was a death-knell tolling in Rafen's thoughts. Like the reaper-wraith myth from Old Night, Astorath was the Chooser of the Slain, forever voyaging the galaxy in search of those Sanguinius's bloodline who had become lost to the Rage. He wore a suit of master-crafted artificer armour in blood-crimson, copper and gold. The plates resembled bunches of muscle, flayed of skin and shorn bare – Rafen had seen a similar design upon the armour of the psyker-lord Mephiston, but there the similarity between the two great Blood Angels ended. Where the Librarian was lit from within by an invisible sense of force, an ethereal aura that spoke of preternatural power, Astorath was bleak and shadowed. It was hard to quantify it, almost impossible to put into words... but it seemed as if there was a darkness clouding the air wherever the High Chaplain stood, a bitter and solemn ambience that stirred sinister memories in Rafen.

Strangely, a bolt of sudden anger raced through him and it took a near-physical effort for the sergeant not to snarl a question at Astorath. *How many of my kinsmen have died by your hand?*

The High Chaplain gave an almost imperceptible nod, as if something had been confirmed for him, and he turned to Krixos. 'You wonder why I am here?' He gestured in the air. 'My wings. They were badly damaged during a clash on Kascol Trinus. I came to Baal to have Icarael's Techmarines restore them to full working order.'

Rafen realized that the guncutter he had seen on his arrival could only have been *The Fate*, Astorath's personal vessel. Yet it seemed so mundane

to believe that the High Chaplain had arrived on the planet for something as minor as repairs to the black-winged flight pack he usually wore. Still, even without the dark arcs hanging over his shoulders, he still cut a formidable and daunting figure. The Blood Angel considered him. In many ways, Astorath was a harsh mirror-image of the ideal of their primarch, the antithesis of the exultant winged glory of Sanguinius. A balance of dark against the light, a living manifestation of the rage he was doomed forever to follow.

‘This matter is not of your concern, High Chaplain,’ the Techmarine was saying.

‘I want something,’ Astorath told them, ignoring Krixos’s words. ‘Before this rite is concluded.’ He nodded toward the container. ‘I want to see it.’

‘The weapon was sealed on the order of Lord Dante himself,’ Rafen insisted. ‘Your authority does not exceed his!’

‘Here and now it does, brother. And who are you to stop me?’ Before either of them could halt him, the High Chaplain pushed Krixos aside and stopped the servitor. Removing his gauntlet, Astorath tore off the seals and submitted himself to the bloodlock. To Rafen’s surprise, the container did not deny him, and slowly it arched open.

Wan, honeyed light spilled from the interior, banishing the shadows and the gloom. Every muscle in Rafen’s body tensed as the warm radiance touched him, gentle like sunlight on his face. The dark memories of Sabien stirred in him as Krixos remained rooted to the spot, still as a statue.

Inside the container was the weapon.

A spear made of golden metal, the haft was sculpted into a winged figure in a sanguinary high priest’s vestments, embossed with an ornate purity seal marked with the Emperor’s personal lightning-bolt sigil. It grew into a hollow-cored blade, shaped like a teardrop, and the metal seemed to emit a steady glow.

Lost in the chaos that followed the sundering of the Imperium during the Horus Heresy, passed into myth and legend for millennia until an expedition set off to recover it once and for all, the spear had finally completed its great journey across light-years, time and war. This was the weapon of a primarch, a weapon that, in defiance of all possibility, Rafen had wielded against the forces of the Ruinous Powers and used to dispatch

a daemonic creature. This was the spear that had killed his sibling, a blade that long ago the Emperor himself had forged as a gift to his angelic son.

‘The *Hasta Fatalis*,’ whispered Astorath, a note of awe in his voice. ‘The Spear of Telesto. By the Throne, what a thing of beauty...’ He reached a hand into the container.

‘No—’ The word escaped from Rafen’s lips before he could stop it. ‘You cannot.’

‘You do not give me orders,’ Astorath replied, echoing Rafen’s earlier words back to him. The High Chaplain gently placed his palm on the haft of the weapon and Rafen saw him tremble slightly at the instant of contact. Astorath did not possess the preternatural insight of a psyker, but some said he had a peculiar gift of his own, an instinct that drew him to places where the curse of the rage and the thirst ran strong. Rafen wondered what Astorath experienced in that brief moment, coming so close to an artefact that had been made for the hands of their primarch and gene-father. Did he feel the same connection that Rafen had? The sound of blood roaring in his ears, like calling out to like? His memory of those feelings was transcendent and terrible, and not something he would dare to repeat.

Astorath’s hand moved to the teardrop blade and found something there, a faint patch of discolouration deposited on the golden metal. *But how could that be possible? Rafen wondered. The blade burned off all stain of spilled blood, I saw it happen...*

The High Chaplain brushed his fingers over the tiny specks of dried vitae and brought them to his nostrils. He tested the scent, licked at the dry powder; then he turned his gaze on Rafen again, measuring him. *Somehow, he knows.*

After a long moment, Astorath spoke again. ‘I have what I came for.’ He bowed reverently to the spear and made the sign of the aquila. His hand snapped up and slammed the container closed, the noise echoing like a gunshot. ‘Proceed,’ he said, turning his back on them to retreat into the long shadows.

Rafen watched him go, more uncertain than ever as to where his fate was leading him.

‘The High Chaplain’s presence here bodes ill,’ said Krixos quietly.

‘His curiosity seems to have been sated,’ Rafen offered, but without conviction.

‘Wherever he walks, the Black Rage is close at hand.’

Rafen eyed the Techmarine. 'It is his duty to seek it out.'

'His presence brings it to the surface,' Krixos countered. 'Astorath causes good warriors to question their own truth wherever he goes. He brings doubt and mistrust in his wake.' The Techmarine paused, cocking his head; Rafen knew he was listening to a vox channel relayed through his helmet. 'Even now, word spreads of his arrival here. Every brother in the Regio cannot help but wonder who the executioner has come for.'

'He said he was here for your skills, not for your heads.'

Krixos made a noise in his throat, a grunt of dry amusement. 'He need not have come home to Baal for those repairs to be done. Any forge world of sufficient expertise would have sufficed. It is a pretext.'

'For what?'

'I dread to consider.' Krixos looked away.

The servitor placed the container on the rack and backed out of the alcove. Automatically, the thick stone walls ground together. Rafen watched it happen, schooling his aspect to remain impassive. 'It is done,' he said aloud. 'And so am I.' The sergeant nodded to the Techmarine. 'Warsmith, my thanks. I will return to the railhead and—'

Krixos held up a hand. 'I have been informed that the razorwinds have struck the complex with deadly force. All transports have been locked down for the duration of the storm.'

'How long will that be?'

'Several hours at the least. A day at most.' Krixos paused. 'The Regio can offer you some sustenance while you wait...'

Rafen gave the sealed alcove one last look. 'A dormitory room, then. Somewhere I can have some peace to rest and meditate.'

'This way,' said the Techmarine, leading him back to the inclinators.

The chamber they gave him was a sparsely-furnished cell on one of the habitat levels, little more than a stone box with a lumen globe in the ceiling, a bed and an icon of the Golden Throne impact-welded to the wall. Like everything else inside the Regio, the air within was dry in a way that seemed to deaden all ambient sound.

Rafen placed his helmet, weapon-belt and holster on the pallet, and took to one knee on the floor. There was a chapel a few levels above, as Krixos has informed him, and the offer had been made for him to remain there in prayer if he so wished it. Rafen did wish to pray to his Emperor

and his primarch, but not in the sight of others. He wanted some privacy in which to consider the questions that plagued him.

There was nothing in the cell to mark the passage of time, only the Blood Angel's internal reckoning, and he did not glance at the chronometer embedded in his helmet display. Instead, Rafen let himself come adrift from the moment. Minutes or hours passed as he tried to find a point of tranquillity from which to observe himself and weigh his own concerns. He had limited success.

His thoughts continued to return to Sabien, and before that the war-grave world of Cybele and the Forge at Shenlong. The blood that had been shed by him on those three planets seemed distant, the idea of it like a story that had been told to Rafen by someone else, by some other Space Marine who was him, who had experienced these things.

He reached for the memories, drilling down into his own recollection, but he was reticent. Did he really want to relive those moments, now that the threat to his Chapter was ended? Would it not simply be better to just... move on?

'No.' The word was raspy, and it sounded as if he had not spoken in days. 'No,' he repeated, with force, saying it aloud again for any ethereal beings who might be turning their eyes toward him. 'I will not forget.' Rafen would make sure that the brethren who would rather ignore the hard lessons he had bled through would not be given the chance.

It is not over. The shadow of blighted Chaos that dared to try and corrupt the Chapter had been purged by the light of righteous souls, but the wounds left behind had yet to heal. Many battle brothers had perished in the insanity of it all, lives snuffed out and glorious futures cut short – but the Chapter would ever endure, just as Rafen had told Krixos. In thousands of years of war and history, there had never come a time when the Blood Angels had been cut so deeply that they had faltered. Not at Signus Prime, when the treachery of the primarch's errant brother Horus Lupercal had thrown the entire Legion into a meat grinder; not at Holy Terra during the final siege of the Heresy when Sanguinius himself had died and left his sons without their father; not in the wars at Al-Khadir and the Kursa Ranges, or even in the aftermath of the Secoris Tragedy centuries past, when the Chapter had been reduced in number to less than a hundred warriors after a catastrophic space hulk intervention.

The Blood Angels would never be allowed to die, and while Rafen's existence and that of his brothers in arms would come and go across the march of time, the essence of the Sons of Sanguinius would endure until the day the final victory came. He nodded to himself, holding on to the insight, taking comfort from it.

'Blood endures,' he told the dry, silent air.

As he bowed his head, the sirens began to wail. Rafen reacted instantly, shaking off the drag of his inaction and springing to his feet. The weapon belt was first, secured and then checked, his bolt pistol cocked and loaded. He grabbed his helmet and wrenched open the cell's steel hatch.

Out in the narrow corridor, chaser lights strobed red and white, extending away in to the distance. He saw figures moving along a junction to the right, Chapter serfs by the look of them, sprinting away.

'You!' he called. 'Heed me!'

None of them stopped, and he wondered if they had heard him over the sirens. Frowning, Rafen donned his helmet and activated the power armour's internal vox unit. The monitor glyphs returned a steady *No Signal* display, and the Blood Angel felt the first real inkling of genuine concern. The heavy rock and ferrocrete of the Regio was what made it virtually impregnable, but it also had the effect of making vox communications difficult. Still, even with the attenuation caused by the strata all around, Rafen should have been able to pick up another Adeptus Astartes nearby. He gave up the attempt and went to the closest intercom unit. Wired into the Regio's grid, it should have been able to connect him immediately to the command centre. Nothing but dead static answered him.

He drew the bolt pistol and thumbed off the safety catch, and for the second time that day he heard the voice from the shadows.

'Rafen.' From ahead, a broad-shouldered figure was framed against the glow of the alert lights. Astorath advanced with urgency, and he had the Executioner's Axe in his hand.

'My lord.' The Blood Angel's hand tightened on the pistol grip. If the High Chaplain had come to take his head, Rafen would not go easily.

Astorath did not seem to notice the gun. 'My vox is nulled. Yours?'

'The same.'

He nodded gravely. 'They must have done something. Blanketed the zone with a jamming field.' He looked back the way he had come. 'I did

not think there were any of us on this level. Follow me.'

But Rafen did not take a step. '*They?*' he repeated.

'You have been here all along.' Astorath sounded it out. 'Of course. Word did not reach you.'

'I do not understand.'

The High Chaplain's cold eyes studied him. 'We are under attack, brother. I suspect that they came in under the cover of the razorwind storm.' He looked away. 'Raptors, brother-sergeant, by the hundredfold. Sent by the traitor Sons of Lorgar.'

'The Word Bearers?' It seemed like blasphemy to say the name of the Chaos warband aloud. 'Here, on Baal? They would not dare to strike at our homeworld!'

And yet, even as he said it, Rafen knew that such a deed was not beyond them. He had fought the Word Bearers and seen the fury and insanity that drove their freakish, corrupted zealotry. But such an attack would be suicidal, and any gains they made would be wiped out once the shock of the surprise assault was dispelled.

'I have heard no gunfire... and how could they reach our soil? Our battle barges are in orbit, our defence platforms fully manned...'

'There is more than one way to thread the labyrinth,' said the High Chaplain darkly. 'Extreme-range teleportation from a stealth vessel in far orbit, a warp gate conjuring... an entire planet can never be completely secure.'

Rafen thought it through. Attacking the Regio from without was madness. The Raptors would dash themselves against the battlements and perish under hails of gunfire from the weapons at the walls...

Unless...

Astorath nodded again, pre-empting his train of thought. 'They may already be inside. The doors may have been opened by treachery.'

A cold rush spread through Rafen's blood. 'Then the Word Bearers have come to loot this place, not to hold it. They must want—'

'The spear, aye. No doubt to assuage the hurt that was done to them.'

Rafen's heart was hammering in his chest. *That could not be allowed to happen.* 'We have to protect the weapon. We have to get to the reliquary.'

Astorath beckoned him. 'The inclinators are this way.'

The platform was in place in the throat of the shaft, and Rafen cast around as they crossed to it, looking for signs of life. Despite glimpsing the Chapter serfs moments earlier, there seemed now to be no sign of them. Perhaps they had gone to ground in one of the other chambers. He wanted to be sure, but the High Chaplain urged him on.

Astorath moved swiftly to the control podium on the far side of the platform, and Rafen looked up. The inclinor shaft stretched away above, rings of warning lights growing progressively smaller as they receded. He set his helmet's audial sensors to maximum perceptive range, trying to filter out the sirens. Rafen listened for the sounds of combat, for gunfire or detonations, but he detected nothing.

'We should try to find Brother Krixos,' he said, turning back to the other Blood Angel. 'If he-'

The rest of his words were lost in the flat report of an explosion, as a blast of smoke, fire and noise erupted out of the inclinor's controls. Astorath caught the discharge at point-blank range and it blew him back across the wide elevator deck, ceramite screeching on metal as the High Chaplain skidded and tumbled.

Rafen ran toward him, just as the platform gave off a howl of tortured metal. One of the roller guides stuttered and slipped, and suddenly the deck was canted at a steep angle. Untethered cargo modules spilled across the inclinor, and Rafen threw himself aside, narrowly avoiding a collision with a hulking steel crate the size of a Dreadnought. Grabbing at a guide rail for purchase, Rafen moved as quickly as could toward Astorath's prone form. He saw the High Chaplain move, heard him groan. The chestplate of his armour was smoking but the damage seemed minimal.

Then all at once, the guide rollers holding the platform in place slipped their moorings, and the inclinor shuddered and fell. Rafen lost his grip and rolled out across the decking, slamming into a quad of heavy storage tanks. The decking vibrated like a drum skin and Rafen could not regain his balance or his footing. He experienced the giddy, vertiginous rush of the headlong fall, strings of warning lights flashing past, racing away as they plummeted into the deeps of the Regio. He saw the tier counter rotating wildly, wooden ticker slats turning inside a brass cage, moving so fast he couldn't read them.

The autonomic brakes finally snapped on, but it seemed to do little to slow them. Instead, great fountains of yellow sparks gushed from the smouldering rollers and the hot stink of burning metal filled Rafen's nostrils. The platform crashed through ancient barrier plates erected to seal off lower levels, obliterating them in its headlong plunge. Some part of the Blood Angel's mind was marvelling – how deep could this complex go? The indicator lights ceased, the last ring of them pulling away, and the inclinor dropped into a black chasm.

Then the impact. Rafen was thrown into the air, spinning through the darkness in the midst of the crash of splintering metal. His head smacked against the inside of his helmet and, mercifully, he fell again, this time into a different kind of void.

He dreamed of rain on his face.

Rafen dreamed of a ruined cathedral on a mausoleum planet, under weeping skies slashed by stark lances of lightning. He dreamed of falling without motion, of shadows and pain.

The scent of blood brought him slowly back to wakefulness. His cheek was wet, and he could feel fluid pooling. Rafen blinked, scanning the visible glyphs across the line of his field of vision. His helmet had been damaged, along with some of the actuators in his legs, but the cowl of ceramite and steel that surrounded him had taken the brunt of the crash.

He took stock of himself, feeling for injuries. Some minor breaks in his bones, contusions and the like, things that would have been deadly to a common human but little more than an irritant to a Space Marine. Rafen sat up and cast around. The preysight setting of his helm was non-functional, so with an exasperated grunt he removed it and secured it at his waist. The wetness on his face was blood from a wound across his temple that even now was staunching itself as the gene-engineered cells from his Larraman implant scabbed over the injury. He wiped the excess fluid away and peered into the gloom, shifting spars of twisted metal that had fallen across him. 'Chaplain?' he called into the shadows.

'Here,' said a voice close by.

Rafen rose to find Astorath standing behind him, his pale face corpselike in the dimness. 'How long...?' He winced at a jolt of pain from his scalp.

‘You can walk,’ said the High Chaplain. ‘So we walk.’ Astorath removed a chemical lumen stick from a pouch on his belt and waved it before them. ‘Look, there.’ He indicated a tunnel mouth not far from the wreckage of the inclinator platform.

Rafen took a step and then halted, looking up. Wreaths of smoke and wedges of debris made it hard to see far up the ascent shaft, but he estimated that they must have fallen several kilometres before colliding with the end of the passage. ‘What happened to the controls? The explosion?’

‘My armour protected me,’ said Astorath. ‘It was a small charge, less powerful than a frag grenade. Concealed inside the podium.’

‘Sabotage?’ Rafen scowled at the word.

‘It would seem so.’ The High Chaplain pushed past him. ‘Come. This way.’

The command came with such force of authority behind it that Rafen almost obeyed immediately and without question, years of ingrained training leading him to default to the orders of a senior officer. *Almost*.

He halted. ‘We should hold here. This is where our brothers will search for us.’

Astorath did not turn back to look at him. ‘This is where the Word Bearers will come looking when they learn their trap was sprung.’

The mention of the traitors made Rafen reach for his bolt pistol. By the Emperor’s grace, the gun was there and still intact. ‘Where are we?’ he wondered.

‘The deeps,’ Astorath replied. ‘The lowest levels of the Regio, isolated and left derelict.’

‘How do we get back?’ He looked up again.

‘As I told you,’ said the other warrior. ‘This way.’

Reluctantly, Rafen fell in step behind the High Chaplain, following him into the tunnel as his unease grew.

The warrens were cut from the living rock of Baal itself, reinforced by pillars of ancient ferrocrete that had become cracked and shot through with rust over countless centuries. The air was full of agitated dust particles, kicked up by the concussive arrival of the inclinator, and they filled Rafen’s mouth with a taste like bonemeal, sapping the moisture from his lips. Astorath deigned to give him one of his lumen sticks, and together

the two of them navigated the aged corridors by the weak greenish light of the chemical lamps.

The walls were thick with oily lichen that seeped out of every crack, and in the midst of the fungal masses he saw tiny grubs writhing. There were shapes that fled before the edges of the lumen-glow, into boltholes and broken pipeways, and here and there thick curtains of web dangling from the ceiling, woven by fat, pale arachnids. An entire food chain of scavengers existed down here, living in the gloom.

The tunnel emptied out on to a rusted metal gantry and Astorath halted, sniffing at the air like a hunter canine.

Rafen eyed him. 'You know where you are going. How is that so?'

The High Chaplain spared him a glance. 'The accessways are all linked, Rafen. There are exhaust shafts sunk into the desert that reach down this far. All we need do is find the closest one and ascend... If we do not tarry, we could make the surface by daylight.' He moved to walk on.

'You are well informed, my lord,' Rafen added.

Astorath made a noise in his throat that might have been a growl of irritation. 'I was not always Astorath the Grim, brother-sergeant. There was a time, before my calling took me to other duties, that I served the Chapter as a line warrior in a tactical squad.' He gestured at the walls, the lumen stick in his hand casting warped shadows. 'I stood upon the battlements of the Regio as a sentry many times. I learned of its lore and history from men like Krixos.' He gave Rafen a hard look. 'By all means, if you wish to question everything I say, continue to do so. But you may find my answers become sparse as I direct my attention towards our egress.' He strode away and did not wait for Rafen to go after him.

The Blood Angel grimaced and fell in step again. The shock of the alarms, the fall, all that was fading away now, and in its place remained Rafen's growing disquiet. He could not shake a sense of wrongness about everything that was happening around him.

They navigated fallen sections of the rusting gantry, collapsed by the weight of time and neglect. In places where the path was broken, Rafen was forced to leap into the dark, praying to his Emperor for the certainty of a platform on the other side. Astorath navigated the hazards in silence, with only grunts of effort as he helped Rafen shoulder aside rubble or slice away debris with a swing of his axehead.

But for all his indifference, the High Chaplain was not ignoring Rafen. In fact, the reverse was true. Rafen slowly realized that the other warrior was scrutinising him at every turn, but taking great pains not to be seen to do so.

When a moment of pause came, as they stood at the bottom of a catchshaft damp with brackish moisture, Rafen's patience reached its limit. 'What do you wish to say to me?' he demanded, squaring off before the High Chaplain. 'I grow tired of your pretence.'

'Do you?' The reply was hard and brittle. 'Perhaps I should ask if that blow you took to the head knocked the respect out of you, *sergeant*. Remember who it is you address.'

'I know who you are,' Rafen shot back. 'There is no Blood Angel, no Son of Sanguinius that draws breath who does not know the face of the executioner!'

Astorath's eyes narrowed. 'That is my burden. And if you dare to think you could judge me for it, I will bleed you for your audacity.' He pushed past and kept moving, stepping up on to a walkway that circled the inside of the vertical shaft like the thread of a screw.

Rafen's temper flared. 'Answer me! It was not fate that brought us together in this! Why else would you have been down on the habitat levels? Were you there for me? Or for some other reason?'

'Do not ask questions you do not wish to have answered.'

The catchshaft joined an angled tunnel that rose up at a steep slant, and they began to ascend. Rafen advanced after the High Chaplain. 'This is about the weapon. The spear.'

It was a long moment before Astorath replied. 'It is so much more than that.'

'I have nothing to hide,' said Rafen.

When the High Chaplain spoke again, there was a challenge in it, his words severe. 'You took the Spear of Telesto. You, a common Adeptus Astartes. You took up a weapon forged for a primarch's hands and made it live. Such a thing should not have happened.'

'It did,' Rafen admitted. 'I do not know how.'

'A lie,' snapped Astorath. 'Who held the weapon before you, Rafen? What was his *name*?'

'Arkio.' He let out a sigh. 'My blood-sibling.'

Astorath snorted, throwing a look over his shoulder. ‘Arkio the traitor. Arkio the corrupted. A puppet of the Ruinous Powers, created to cause a fatal schism in our Chapter!’

Rafen’s hands contracted into fists and his anger smouldered, but the High Chaplain was right. Arkio *had* betrayed his Chapter, he *had* been tainted by Chaos. ‘True enough. But I forgave him.’

This time Astorath gave a mocking laugh. It was an ugly, chilling sound. ‘You did? How generous of you. Was that before or after you ended his life?’

‘He knew of it,’ Rafen bit out the words. ‘I sent him to the Emperor with that.’

‘If there is justice in this universe, then He Upon The Throne sent your errant kindred’s soul into the hells.’

Rafen’s jaw stiffened but he refused to rise to the bait. They walked in silence for a few moments before Astorath spoke again.

‘Very well. Here is what I wish to say to you. It is a question, and if you do not answer, what I suspect will be proven true.’

‘I am not afraid of your words, executioner!’ Rafen snarled.

The High Chaplain looked back at him. In the lumen-glow, he resembled a monstrous apparition from some ancient fable, come to claim the Blood Angel’s immortal soul. ‘What happened when you wielded the spear, Rafen? What did you feel?’

Powerful, heady memories flashed in his thoughts. He felt the divine radiance of the spear on his face again, the light shining off the blade. ‘I...’

‘I know,’ Astorath growled. ‘The spear can only speak to the Black Rage and the Red Thirst. You touched that darkness within, didn’t you? That primal force Sanguinius left behind in all of us. You cannot deny it was so! It was the only way to activate the weapon!’

Rafen lost himself in the moment and he saw—

—the scarlet path unfurling about him in a storm of seething crimson, a fog of bloodlust madness descending upon him. The raw energy of his primarch a flash-fire in his veins, the traces of Sanguinius’s genetic code engorging with preternatural power—

Astorath nodded coldly. ‘I have seen hundreds of my battle brothers hollow of eye and fallen within. Are you any different from them?’

Rafen's hands curled as if the Spear of Telesto lay across them, and he saw—

—golden fire, shards of lightning dazzling like fragments of suns, ripped from the air, collecting at the hollow heart of the teardrop blade—

He closed his eyes, and in the depths of his soul, he felt the mark of his eternal liege lord, indelible and bright as a star. 'My life and my soul for the God-Emperor, for Sanguinius,' he whispered. 'For the Blood Angels.'

'Your life and your soul,' repeated the High Chaplain. 'Are you ready to pay that price, Brother-Sergeant Rafen?' Astorath rounded on him, and prodded him in the chest with an armour-clad finger. 'Tell me, does the echo of that fury still resonate in you, even now? The gene-flaw overwhelmed you when you fought Arkio on Sabien, for how else could you have defeated him? My duty is clear, if any brother should fall to the Rage, then I—'

Rafen's shout thundered down the tunnel. 'I did not fall to the Rage!' He shook his head. 'You do not understand! The spear... it protected me.'

Astorath's expression made it clear he thought little of that explanation, and he turned away, continuing along the tunnel. 'How convenient.'

'There have been those who looked into that abyss and did not end their days in madness,' Rafen insisted. 'Lemartes, who you yourself gave authority to live on and fight for the Chapter! And Mephiston, the Lord of Death!'

'You compare yourself to them?' grated High Chaplain. 'Such arrogance. You are a pale shadow of the Guardian of the Lost, *boy*. And as for the Librarian... Mephiston may have spoken for you at Master Dante's side, but I am not swayed by the words of a witchkin, even one as great as he!'

Rafen's expression soured. 'I speak only the truth.'

'As you see it,' Astorath shot back. 'I know what you think of me. You see this—' he brandished his axe and spun it in his grip '—and nothing else! I do not want the blood of my brothers on my hands, but I accept it.' For a moment, there was sorrow in the other warrior's voice; then it was gone. 'I know my duty and I will never shrink from it. I have my curse and I keep it.' He pointed at Rafen once again. 'You have spoken of responsibility, of obligations. What if yours is to die?'

Rafen's blood ran cold. 'Only in death does duty end, and my duty has not yet ended. I am certain of that.'

'Indeed?' growled Astorath, cutting through a heap of fallen masonry with his blade. 'And who are you to make that choice? Other Sons of Sanguinius, veterans all and learned warriors with centuries of experience upon their shoulders, see things differently. There are those voices on the Council of Angels that would see the duty of Brother Rafen to come to an end. Your blood kinship with the corrupted one is reason enough.'

'I...' The words came hard to him, but Rafen persisted. 'I will not walk the same path as my sibling. Arkio was flawed, he was led astray. If I had been there before it happened...' He trailed off and took a breath. The air was different here. He tasted changes in pressure and temperature that indicated they were nearing the desert surface. 'I am *not* him,' Rafen said firmly.

'Your word is not sufficient,' Astorath told him. 'And now the Chapter finds itself rising from the aftermath of what your sibling wrought upon it. We are wounded, and hard choices must be made if we are to go forward. Secrets kept... and truths expunged for the good of the Blood Angels.'

'The Sons of Sanguinius have endured far worse,' Rafen persisted. 'This... this *trial* will not break us.'

'We have endured, aye,' Astorath admitted. 'But how? Through insight and pragmatism, by strength of our blood and the willingness to do what we must. The primarch taught us that when he left us.'

Rafen shook his head. 'And so, what is to be done? Shall we excise my sibling's insurrection from our chronicles as if it never took place, wipe the minds of the men who witnessed it? You would have the Blood Angels strike this incident from history?' His lips twisted in disgust. 'We do not hold our honour so cheap!'

'Our numbers are depleted, our forces scattered to maintain the illusion of strength. Worlds have been burned in the wake of this. Tell me, Brother Rafen. What would you have us do?'

'I would not embrace silence instead of truth!' he spat. 'That is not what the Great Angel would wish! He knew the truth better than any living being!'

'What truth?' demanded Astorath.

'That we are imperfect!' Rafen dared the High Chaplain to deny him. 'We are not like the whelps of Fulgrim, professing that we are faultless

and infallible! To pretend we are incapable of error is a weakling's way, it is foolhardy and arrogant.' He nodded fiercely, his temper rising. 'The insurrection must not be forgotten, the lesson of it must live with us forever so that it will never come to pass again. We are our history, the best and the worst of it. *That* is what Sanguinius knew!'

Astorath paused and gave him a long look. The High Chaplain's dark axe glittered in the gloom, the wicked edge of the weapon still sharp despite the many rocks it had cut aside during their ascent. 'You are exactly what I thought you were, Rafen,' said the High Chaplain, at length. He turned away. 'Now, come. We are close to the surface.'

Until that moment, there had been doubt in Rafen's mind. The possibilities existed in a kind of half-state, a chance that his future would unfold in one way or another, the path of his life crossing here with that of Astorath the Grim. Until that moment, he had not been certain.

But no doubts shrouded the understanding now. The look in those fathomless, bleak eyes, the iron in the words. Whatever he may have said or done, Rafen knew in his blood and bones that the Redeemer of the Lost had come back to Baal and to the Regio for him.

Astorath was here to judge him.

It took both of the Blood Angels to shoulder the hexagonal grille up from the stays that held it in place. Rafen spent a bolt shell on the lock, the mechanism coughing out sparks. With a skirl of rusted, elderly hinges, the hatch came open and they finally emerged in the desert.

The High Chaplain's estimate had been correct. The cold night sky was changing colour toward the distant Chalice Mountains, shading away from deep black toward purple hues. Eventually it would push toward orange-red as the Baalite sun made its slow advance, but that was hours away yet. Baal's night was long and slow.

Seamless drifts of rusty sand ranged off in every direction, settled in dunes and wavelike patterns by the passage of the razorwinds. Like the night, the storm had passed and only the faint breath of its trailing edge could be felt. Rafen turned in place and found a smudge of grey on the opposite horizon. The storm cell was advancing toward the westerly canyons, where its lethal energy would be expended in the endless, echoing arroyos.

Still turning, he got his bearings and found the distant lights of the Regio. They had emerged several kilometres from the outer keep walls, at the very edge of the perimeter zone. He squinted, cursing the damage to his helmet's optics. He wanted a closer look.

The sight seemed wrong – or more accurately, the sight seemed *right*, as if nothing were amiss at the Regio. Even at this distance, he expected to have seen plumes of smoke, weapon flashes. Rafen strained into the wind to listen, trying to pluck out the sounds of combat from the susurrus of desert noises.

He heard nothing, and went tense with concern. Had the enemy assault been so lethal, so swift that it had passed like the razorwind and left no survivors? Rafen took a step toward the distant complex. 'The attack... The Word Bearers...'

'Even they are not overconfident enough to attempt so gaudy a suicide,' rumbled Astorath. 'The Sons of Lorgar, spite curse them, are not here. They never were.'

Rafen rounded on him, all his suspicions ringing in his mind like a clarion. 'You.' He pointed at the High Chaplain. 'You lied. There was no assault on the Regio.'

'A ruse on my part,' admitted the other warrior, watching him steadily. 'A small piece of theatre so that I might have what I needed.'

'The explosive, the inclinor... you did that yourself. The charge was enough to damage the platform but not enough to penetrate your armour...' He shook his head. 'Why would you do such a thing, executioner? You could have killed us both in the fall!'

Astorath's dead eyes locked with his. 'That was not your time to die, Rafen. I did what I did to isolate you. I wanted to learn your character... and it is easier to divine the nature of a warrior's soul if his attention is elsewhere.'

Rafen's expression soured, annoyance rising in him. 'Is your little game concluded, then? Have you got what you wanted from me?'

'I have made my decision,' said Astorath, as his axe dropped into his waiting hands.

In the next second he was charging, a feral snarl splitting his lips.

Combat reflexes took over and Rafen drew his bolt pistol in a fraction of a second, his other hand snatching at the hilt of the battle knife resting in a

sheath along the line of his spine. He fired a single shot at the High Chaplain, aiming low, aiming to wound, to slow him down.

But he might well have called out his intentions in a shout. Astorath swept his blade aside and intercepted the bolt mid-flight with a crack of sound, the round blasting harmlessly into the dirt. Rafen dodged to one side as the weapon's fast, fluid arc bisected the space where he had been standing, and he rolled, tumbling over red dirt and half-buried rocks.

The High Chaplain lost no momentum at all, pushing off a broken boulder into a shallow leap, leading with the Executioner's Axe. Rafen knew he couldn't deflect the blow, and fainted away, desperately trying to extend his distance. Astorath's axe split the rock where he had been standing in two – and still the other warrior came, without missing a beat.

Rafen managed to cross the axis of his opponent's blade with the battle knife and there was a grating screech of metal on metal as their fractal-edges met violently. The impact was so great it resonated up the bones of the Blood Angel's arms and lit lines of pain through every joint.

He had the bolt pistol, and he had a shot to take. At close range, if he was clever and if he was lucky, Rafen might have been able to put a kill-shot into Astorath's face – but he could not bring himself to do so.

'Cease this!' he spat.

The other warrior grunted and shoved the axe forward. The sickle-blade head smacked Rafen across the jaw and staggered him. He felt blood froth in his mouth and fragments of teeth in his throat.

Astorath finally paused, shifting his grip in an almost leisurely fashion. Preparing to strike the death-blow. 'In a moment,' he replied.

'You have no right to do this,' said Rafen, spitting out gobs of bloody spittle into the dust.

'I have the right,' Astorath replied coldly.

'I will not die for the sake of those who doubt me!' Rafen roared his defiance. 'You may not share the weakness that tainted your sibling,' said the High Chaplain, 'but the rage lurks in you, as much as you deny it. I see it. I can smell it on you.' He swung at the air, the axe humming. 'Do not fear. I will make it swift. You will end with honour.'

'You're wrong.' Rafen shook his head. 'I am the master of my own will! The rage and the thirst do not command me!'

Astorath attacked again, cutting at him, a tornado of axe blows falling across him. Once again, Rafen could only react to the assault and try to

stay alive for a few more seconds. His anger built inside him like a floodhead.

‘I see it,’ Astorath growled. ‘You cannot hide it from me, brother. Stop pretending you are in control and submit to the fury!’

And for a moment, that was all he wanted to do. It would have been so simple to release, to open the gates to the anger. To let the fire build and build until it consumed him. He wanted to fall into the fight.

But I have looked into that abyss and my future does not lie there.

Rafen raised his head and, very deliberately, he tossed the bolt pistol away. Then, with a flick of the wrist, he threw his combat blade into the sand, where it buried itself up to the pommel.

‘You want my anger, my rage?’ Rafen shook his head. ‘I will not give it to you, Astorath. I will not let you comfort yourself with the lie that you ended my life to save me from the gene-curse. If you want to end me, you will do it in cold blood.’ He dropped to one knee and adopted the position of a penitent at prayer, head bowed, hands crossed in the sign of the aquila. Rafen looked at the ground, losing himself in the myriad grains of red sand. *Sanguinius, I put my trust in you as ever I have. My fate is yours to choose.*

At first, silence, then the rush of the air as the axe fell towards the bare flesh of the back of his neck. Rafen did not close his eyes. He wanted to see, right to the very end.

The axe blade fell slowly, and by the prickling of his skin, Rafen felt the impossibly sharp edge touch his flesh, resting there. A line of icy cold as nerves were severed, then the hot pain of spilling blood – all this from just the merest touch of the Executioner’s Axe upon him.

A shadow moved across the red sand, and after a long moment Rafen dared to look up.

He was alone.

It took an hour or so for Rafen to walk the distance back to the walls of the Regio, and not once along that path did he see another soul. The wound on the back of his neck began to heal as the Larraman cells did their work, but the sting of it told him that from this day forward he would forever have a scar there, a perfect line of damaged flesh below his skull.

Dawn had come as the sentries saw him emerge from the desert, and it was Brother Krixos who met him at the Wanderer’s Gate.

‘Rafen!’ The expressionless eyes of the Techmarine’s helm studied him. ‘We feared you had perished in the accident in the inclinor shaft!’

‘The accident,’ Rafen repeated. ‘Yes.’

‘How did you survive?’

‘The old tunnel network, the catchshafts...’ He paused, thinking through what he would say next. ‘I was guided.’

‘Praise the God-Emperor and Sanguinius,’ said Krixos.

‘The primarch watches over me.’ He paused, glancing around. ‘The High Chaplain’s ship, the guncutter... Is it still here?’

‘*The Fate?*’ Krixos gave a nod. ‘The hangar dome was being opened as I left to come to the gate.’ He looked up. ‘It was about to lift—’

Rafen was already running for the iron spiral stairs that would take him up to the landing platforms.

He sprinted on to the elevated disc as the guncutter’s thrusters gave off a low thrum of power. Exhaust vents along the ventral fuselage chugged fire and a hot wash of spent promethium stink washed over him. *The Fate* rocked as the engine note shifted, rising as the motors gained power with each passing second.

Rafen raised a hand to shield his eyes, searching the portals along the sides of the ship, the cockpit canopy for signs of life but, like the dark-toned hull, all the windows of the guncutter were tinted black-red.

‘Astorath!’ he said, but his cry was snatched away by the noise.

Then the wound on the back of his neck prickled, and he spun around. The Redeemer of the Lost stood before Rafen, night-black wings rising up from behind him. His blade was still lined with crimson. ‘There are few who have felt the kiss of this weapon and lived to speak of it.’ The High Chaplain regarded him gravely, raising his voice so he might be heard. ‘But I have never once come to regret the moments when I pulled my terminal blow.’

‘I know the Black Rage and the Red Thirst lie within me.’ The words spilled out of Rafen’s mouth. ‘They are part of all of us. When and if that fury will return to me, I cannot know.’

‘It will,’ Astorath told him, and once again there was a moment of regret in his voice. ‘It always does.’

‘But I will not yield to it. This I swear, on our primarch’s name.’

The High Chaplain walked silently past him toward the guncutter, and from beneath the ship a ramp dropped down to accept him. Astorath paused at the foot of the gangway, and he pointed his axehead at Rafen. 'You are not what I expected, brother. And so you live. *For now.*' He sheathed the weapon. 'But know this. After what happened on Sabien, you are being watched. And if you should give me cause, when we meet again I will not stay my hand.'

The Fate's engines howled, and Rafen backed away as the guncutter's hatch sealed shut. With a roar, the winged craft powered away into Baal's sky, leaving the Blood Angel to watch it recede to a dark, distant speck.

He sensed Krixos approaching. 'If you are ready, I have been informed that the rail transporter is cleared to depart the Regio for the return journey.' The Techmarine looked up, studying the sky. 'Now that the storm has passed.'

'Has it?' asked Rafen, staring into the distance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Swallow is an award-winning New York Times bestselling author, who lives in London. His fiction from the dark future of Warhammer 40,000 includes the Horus Heresy novels *Nemesis* and *The Flight of the Eisenstein*; *Faith & Fire*, *Deus Encarmine* and *Deus Sanguinius* (collected as *The Blood Angels Omnibus*); *Black Tide*, *Red Fury*, the audio books *Red & Black*, *Heart of Rage*, *Oath of Moment* and *Legion of One*; and short stories for *Inferno!*, *What Price Victory*, *Tales of Heresy*, *Legends of the Space Marines*, *The Book of Blood*, *Age of Darkness* and *Victories of the Space Marines*.

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In the darkness of a derelict space hulk, the faith and fury of the Blood Angels are tested to the limit.

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