



WARHAMMER
40,000

BLOOD ANGELS

REFLECTION IN BLOOD

JAMES SWALLOW

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REFLECTION IN BLOOD

James Swallow

Epistolary Ceris sensed the arrival of the Knights before they became visible through the oxide mists. He said nothing, only turned his head and raised his gauntlet a degree or two, enough for Sergeant Rafen and the rest of the squad to know that the renegades were close at hand.

Also silent, Rafen gestured to Puluo and Ajir to lower their bolters. The two warriors obeyed, but reluctantly. The sergeant's own pistol and blade had not left holster or scabbard since the squad had put down on this nameless, barren moon, but the tension of potential battle was there in every move he made, if one knew where to look for it. And while the four of them now made a show of being at peace, in the haze behind them where their Thunderhawk sat, Brothers Turcio and Kayne were concealed with weapons at the ready.

Rafen stepped forward and absently fingered the haft of the standard planted in the moon's rusty regolith. A simple pennant hung from it, a field of bright crimson bearing the white device of a winged droplet to signify the presence of the IX Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes: the Blood Angels. A ritual thing, the standard was part of the agreement. Its symbology was the implicit covenant that this meeting, in this place, was to be under the banner of truce.

Those with whom he had been sent to parley came from the mist like wraiths of legend, five of them. While their armour marks were of comparable type to those of Rafen's squad, their wargear seemed somehow *older*. Not decrepit and failing, but careworn in a way that showed great devotion and constant use. Most of the armour had the cast of pewter to it,

but splashes of dark arterial red dominated their shoulder pauldrons, their chest plates and helms. He saw the sigil of their Chapter as it glittered in the directionless sunlight: a white shield over two crossed swords, a drop of crimson upon it.

The Knights of Blood. Once a successor born of Rafen's Chapter, they had been declared renegade nearly a millennium ago. Their brutality and zeal, dreaded throughout the Imperium, had been such that it was not only the enemies of man that suffered at their hands. The Knights refused to moderate their ways, and so an edict of excommunication had been passed. It was said they still prosecuted their crusade against all foes, the demands of the Inquisition be damned.

'They don't look like traitors,' muttered Puluo over the vox, as the leading Knight planted a standard of his own in the dirt. Another of the cadre stood at his side, subtle battle marks and honour-chains differentiating one from another.

'They don't all have tentacles and spit ichor,' offered Ajir. 'Be wary.'

Rafen ignored the comments and took another step forward, giving his name and rank. 'We are here,' he added. 'My master Dante granted this. You wish to speak?'

'Only two sharpshooters,' said the first Knight. 'Not enough.'

Rafen resisted the urge to look over his shoulder. '*More* than enough.'

The second Knight chuckled softly and removed his helmet to reveal a dark face crisscrossed by scars. 'I am Ser Koth. My brother here is Ser Rale. Greetings, Blood Angel.'

'What do you want?' Rafen asked, following suit while measuring the other warrior's aspect.

'To the point,' Koth's faint smile faded. 'Very well. We have something that belongs to you.' He waved a hand, and a piston-legged servitor ambled out of the mist carrying a casket in its brass grippers.

Warily, Ceris went to meet it, and the servitor halted obediently. The psyker seemed on edge, looking this way and that for enemies that were not there. After a moment, the Blood Angel cracked the seal of the casket and peered inside. Rafen caught sight of familiar shapes in red ceramite. Broken pieces of power armour.

'Regretfully, this is all that remains of one of your squads,' said Koth. 'But we believed you would wish it repatriated to you.'

Rafen's hand was on the hilt of his sword. 'How did they perish?'

Koth sighed. 'We did not end them, Sergeant Rafen. Whatever our reputation, the Knights of Blood would never prey upon our blood-kindred.'

'Orks,' growled the other Knight. 'Dead now.'

'Lord,' Ceris held up a glassy canister containing knots of fleshy matter suspended in life-fluids. 'They have recovered the progenoids.'

'Aye,' Koth went on. 'The gene-seed of your late brothers. It seemed wrong to allow it to be lost.'

'Why didn't you just *take* them?' The question spilled out of Ajir, laced with venom. 'Your kind respect naught. Why pretend otherwise?'

Rafen turned to censure the warrior, but Rale was already speaking. 'Told you, Ser,' he snapped at Koth. 'Just like the rest. A waste of time.'

'We cannot accept those,' Ajir insisted. 'They are tainted by proximity to these traitors!'

Rale moved to advance on Ajir, but Koth put out a hand to stop him. 'We are *renegades*,' he said coldly. 'Not *traitors*. An important difference.'

'You know nothing about us,' Rale growled.

'We know what we have been told,' Rafen replied. 'We know what is in the history books.'

'You know what the Inquisition wishes to be known,' Koth shot back. He pointed at Rafen. 'Do you know what *we* have been told about *you*, Sergeant Rafen? A failed aspirant who cheated his way into the Chapter, whose taint-hearted brother almost turned you against yourselves. Is that the full truth? Or is there more to it?' He glared at the Blood Angel. 'Who do we listen to? Outsiders? Or those whose veins carry the power of Sanguinius? Forever blessed be his light.'

'This is pointless.' Rale turned away, snatching up the standard. The gesture had only one meaning. The parley was over, and the two groups were now enemies again. All hands went to their weapons. 'We are *not* like them, Ser Koth,' concluded the Knight. 'They have already judged us.'

Rafen hesitated, struggling with the moment. There was more at hand here, he could sense it. But what? *Not a trap... Something else*. He strode to the casket and took the canister from Ceris, turning it over in his armoured fingers. 'The loss of even one progenoid lessens us all,' he noted. 'Few would risk death to bring them to safety.' He turned to study

Koth and Rale. 'For we *are* within our rights to kill you, renegade. The High Lords of Terra order it so.'

'You may make the attempt,' said Koth. 'And in the deed, prove Ser Rale is correct about you.'

And now Rafen felt he was grasping the edges of understanding. 'You did not need to come here in person, Knight. You could have left the casket on this world and sent us the location. We had no need to even breathe the same air.' There was that faint smile again on Koth's face. 'Why?'

'I admit to it,' said the other warrior.

Suddenly, Rafen felt a cold pressure on his thoughts and saw a glitter of witch-light in Koth's ebon gaze. At his side, Ceris stiffened and he knew at once: *the Knight was a psyker*. 'I wanted to look you in the eye, Blood Angel. That is why we made the demand of Dante, that he send you and your squad.'

Rafen said nothing, allowing the renegade Librarian to read his surface thoughts and know he was without guile. Chapter Master Dante had not seen fit to inform Rafen of the reasons he had been chosen for this mission, and now he understood. 'You have done so,' he said. 'What is your conclusion?'

A shadow passed over Koth's face and the psyker's calculating touch retreated. 'We are all sons of Sanguinius beneath the skin, no matter what the agents of the Inquisition may say. The Knights of Blood wished to know if their erstwhile kinsmen are still so. That question has been satisfied, and so we will turn our rage upon the forces of the Archenemy once more, knowing that Baal remains in safe hands.'

Rafen frowned, realising too late that the true purpose of this entire endeavour had been beyond him from the start. 'Why not come back with us and see for yourself?' As the question left his lips, Ajir shot him an aghast look.

Koth barked out a bitter laugh. 'We are not the Flesh Tearers. Our excesses are not sanctioned by Terra. No, Baal is forever denied to us now. Better that we simply part ways here and return to our battle-brothers with what we have been given.'

The Blood Angel weighed the glass canister in his hand. 'What have I given you, Ser Koth?'

'Truth,' said the Knight, turning away, donning his helmet once more.

‘You’re going to let them leave?’ Ajir questioned.

‘Yes,’ said Ceris, answering for Rafen. ‘Because if we fire a single shot, the dozen other Knights concealed out in the mists will cut us down in a heartbeat.’ The psyker glanced at the sergeant. ‘Forgive me, lord. Ser Koth’s mind is quite powerful. He hid not only his true nature from me, but the existence of his men as well.’

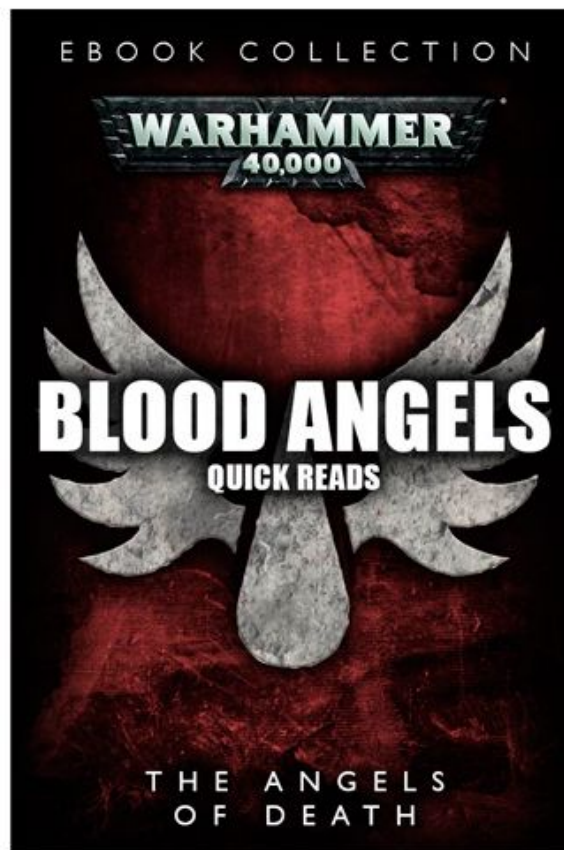
Rafen’s jaw stiffened. ‘I do not like to be played,’ he called, throwing the words after the departing Knights.

‘We are all pieces in the same game, Rafen.’ Koth’s voice echoed back to them as he vanished into the haze. ‘The trick is to ensure the rules are of your own making.’

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 four 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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