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LORD OF THE HOST

A short story by James Swallow



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Thunder blared inside the great crystal globe as a dozen teleport flares blossomed into being high up among its vaulted arches, and from each fell a figure clad in golden armour, fire blazing from their backs.

They crashed through floating clusters of snarled, ichor-smeared chains that drifted like flotsam, up in the null-gee ranges above the silver disc that was the orb's only solid ground. With bolters and plasma guns they annihilated the freakish guardian beasts the sorcerer kept as his defenders. Winged fiends that resembled monstrous fusions of deep sea life and avians came at them, vomiting flames and belching toxic smoke. In the open air of the great glassy sphere, the final assault began.

The crystal globe – ornate and insanely complex down to the nanometre – was the work of a hundred thousand psychotic watchmakers, crazed architects and blasphemous priests. Scy-scans of the object came back confused; it appeared to have no motive drives, no life-support mechanisms, nothing anywhere near the structure of a conventional starship or space platform. It was a perfect sphere eight thousand metres in diameter, made out of stained glassaic, beaten silver and brass. It had no right to exist, and yet it had emerged from the warp and taken up a geosynchronous orbit over the colony world of Skylos, and some foul magick conjured within had cast a shroud over the planet, rendering it impossible to land there.

It was to see this abhorrent wonder and to end it that Lord Commander Dante of the Blood Angels had come. Dante's flagship caught the edges of the last distress call sent by his battle brothers trapped below and he could not pass them by.

The revenant ships that defended the orb were being torn apart by cannonades all around as Dante dived toward the silver deck on wings of white flame. He saw death-grey ships marred with unholy texts and the sign of the Eightfold Star

breaking apart from within, consumed in nuclear fires. Behind the unchanging visage of his helmet, a death mask of the face of primarch Sanguinius, Dante smiled. It was the way of the Archenemy to divide and conquer, to isolate and attack when they thought the odds to be in their favour; this day, the Blood Angels would remind the servants of the Ruinous Powers that their belief was gravely mistaken.

He landed with a crashing impact on the far side of the silver disc and broke into a run. More of the sorcerer's guard-things came skidding across the slippery surface toward him; they resembled ursine animals, but mutated with growths of antlers and talons that emerged from their thick limbs. Some of them carried swords that had lambent flames instead of blades, others had barbed whips that moved with an animate serpentine life of their own.

Dante's infernus pistol came up to meet their approach and he released the punishing energies within it. A collimated rod of blazing force opened the closest of the beasts in a wet blast of entrails and flesh-matter. Successive discharges turned the guardians into slurry, or, in the case of those not fortunate enough to perish immediately, into shrieking torches that stumbled blindly about as their fur combusted.

The Lord Commander did not pause until he was through the ring of defenders, until he had unsheathed his great power weapon and whet it on the skull of a bovine-like behemoth that lowed and spat as he raced toward the master of this madness. Dante's signature blade, the mighty Axe Mortalis, smoked in the cold air as the blood of dead horrors boiled off the energised cutting edge.

He beheld the sorcerer.

Perhaps once a man, now clotted meat and bones shrouded in ribbons and robes, pieced of forms that might once upon a time have been a head or a torso, visible through a floating haze of arcane symbols. It started to speak, but Dante shot at it.

'I care not for your name or your declarations,' said the Chapter Master, even as the infernus pistol's death-blast was absorbed and reflected harmlessly away. 'Only that you die here. Go to your foul gods knowing that, traitor weakling.'

'Dante,' it sang, revealing two still-human arms from within its robes. One ended in a gauntleted hand that glowed brightly, an eldritch gem upon it shimmering with the baleful light of raw Chaos. 'Proud angel. It is *you* who dies today. Your life has led to this moment, warrior-king.'

The sorcerer had no eyes, only a band of flesh scored by cult-marks of

Tzeench and the Octed, yet he saw through other means, scowling at the figure in gold. 'None can escape time, not you, not your primarch nor your corpse-god Emperor.' He pointed toward the planet below. 'Skylos lies within a shroud of chromomagicks, and each tick of the clock is endless days to them. They will live a lifetime down there and die alone and desperate. You will not survive to see their ashen bones.'

'Do your worst,' Dante snarled and attacked with his fury, his axe rising.

The chromancer formed a kind of shield by slowing the passage of atomic time in a thin layer before his body, but Dante's axe had been cut in technoforges lost past the Age of the Heresy, and it defied this barrier. The blade gouged the sorcerer's chest with a glancing swipe and a flood of black blood jetted out. The creature screamed and thrust out the gauntlet.

'Time...' it howled, '... is against you!'

A web of weaponised seconds, minutes and hours turned into daggers and swords that rained down on Dante. *Now* breaking open around him, shattering like porcelain, *Then* coming up from a dead far past. Impossible energy ripped through him, penetrating armour and flesh as wind would rush through the dune sands he had known as a child—

—and in that memory, he was there. Not recalling it, but living it. The boy Dante had been only a few summers old. A face before him, a father or a brother? In the agony of near-death, poisoned by shellsnake venom. Telling him a truth, imparting something that is undeniable and unstoppable—

'Everything ends, Dante. I die here, and you will die one day. Do not fear it.'

He recoiled as chains of future-past and never-when entwined his golden armour, dragging him into an abyss of no-time where his life became shards from a broken mirror. Walls of black metal grew around him—

—and he was fighting to survive in the endless corridors of the leviathan wreck, the nameless space hulk that had become a black hole consuming every brother his chapter sent against it. Soul after soul had died in that iron hell, the Blood Angels lost almost to a man. Master Sangallo perishing before his eyes and the final, damning retreat from the disaster at Secoris. He remembered Kadeus joining him among the fifty who escaped—

'Death comes in due time, Brother-Captain Dante. Not for us today, but one day.'

'No,' he shouted, because that was not what happened. He was certain of it. Kadeus had never said those words, brave Kadeus who had stepped into Sangallo's stead and guided the Blood Angels back from the brink of extinction.

His mentor and his friend—

—and the one who lay dying centuries later, there on the stone of the Grand Annex. His hand reaching up, calling for Dante with his last breath. You are Chapter Master now, the old warrior had told him, and the final act is to press the shaft of the Axe Mortalis into Dante's empty hands. The weapon is eternal, as the Blood Angels must strive to be against all odds, against the bane of the Rage and the Thirst—

‘But you will die with this blade at your side, Dante. When it comes, don't resist. Accept it.’

‘No!’ This was not the last declaration of his mentor, and Dante rejected the moment with all his might. This was the corrupting act of foul witchery, the chronomancy turning the moments of his own life against him, sapping his will as it flensed years from his flesh.

In desperation, the sorcerer broke the barriers between past and present, allowing pieces of Dante's life to collide and merge. His whole personal history struck back in a tidal wave of sensation and presence. He remembered every great victory and elation and withered under the weight of every brother he had seen perish; for one so venerable as Dante, those moments were legion.

All that was real was the axe in his armoured fingers. The weapon before his eyes, the name etched upon its handle in script laid down ten of his lifetimes ago.

Mortalis.

Mortal. One who may die.

‘But not today.’ He felt the action more than he thought it. Dante let the weapon lead him into the attack, breaking the time-bonds and falling inexorably into the chronomancer's flesh.

He took off the arm that ended in the gauntlet with a heavy blow, and the sorcerer's scream split the crystal windows of the orb with crackling fractures.

‘I took your life,’ bellowed the enemy, collapsing into a pool of his own oily blood. ‘I stole your years! Decades robbed from you in heartbeats, you should die, die, die—’

Dante raised a hand and removed the death mask, showing his face outside of the fortress-monastery of Baal for the first time in living memory. He gave a cold smile, letting his foe see his unblemished aspect. ‘A decade? All but a passing instant to one who has lived a millennia and more, quisling fool. You seek to use my age against me, yes?’ The Chapter Master's voice fell to a whisper. ‘You think you could pervert the past so I would buckle beneath the load of times

gone by? Regret and loss and old, sorrowed memory?’ He raised the blade for what would be the death blow. ‘I live with those burdens each moment I draw breath. Your magick is a dim candle by their lights.’

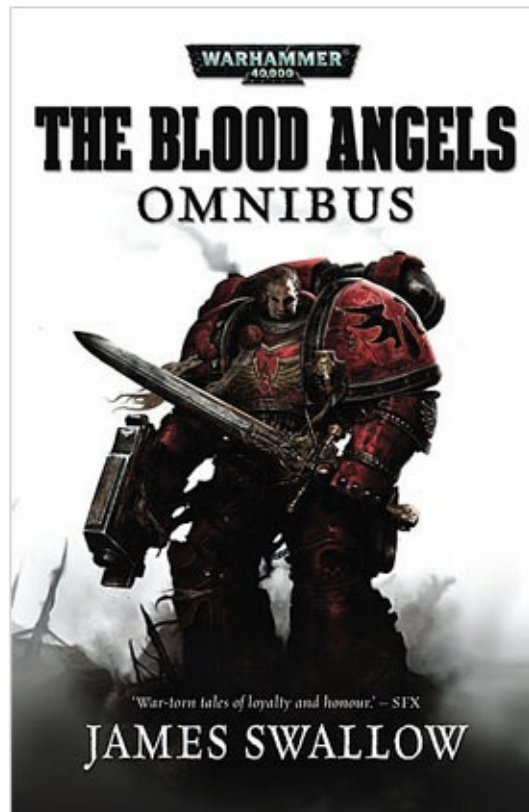
The Axe Mortalis fell, and with it ended the shrouding of Skylos.

As the Chapter Master cleaned foetid vitae from his blade, one of Dante’s Sanguinary Guard approached, cocking his head as he listened to a vox signal. ‘Lord, the remainder of the enemy ships are breaking for the void. Shall we pursue, or proceed to the surface?’

‘Hunt down and kill everything that bears the Mark of Chaos,’ Dante replied. ‘We have the time.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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



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