



THE SANGUINOR:
EXEMPLAR OF THE HOST

A short story by James Swallow



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So it was that we made our preparations to die the deaths of warriors.

After seven brutal years of battle on Skylos, in which we lost the great measure of our strike force to the tyranid horde, we marked out the days of attrition.

Reinforcements would not find us; Skylos had been shrouded by strange warp storms that rose up as we made planetfall. This act of capricious fate isolated the xenos enemy from its hive fleet just as it severed us from Imperial contact, but the monsters that crawled and burrowed across the world's ruined surface seemed to go mad because of it. They abandoned their consumption of the populace, of the flora and fauna of the planet itself, and turned upon us. We were a half-company of Blood Angels, sent to cover the escape of the survivors.

But the civilians we were sent to rescue perished, as did many of my battle-brothers. Two full brigades of Imperial soldiery, killed and consumed for their flesh-matter. A contingent from the Adeptus Titanicus, torn apart by xenos bio-titans. A great army, gutted.

We Adeptus Astartes were all that was left. Our Thunderhawks were grounded, engines clogged by acid-venomed suicide mites that ate out the cores. Our armoured vehicles were mired in mudslides, the crazed weather a side effect of the tyranid rendering of the planet's ecosphere. We were reduced to small units scattered across the great plain where the aliens had built their safehold nest; our mission became to soak up whatever punishment we could and kill as many of the xenos as possible.

Listening for the sounds of claws and talons out in the mist, I counted my bolt shells for the second time that morning. Too few for comfort, so I took to sharpening my war-sword as we waited for the thin, grey rain to ease, there in the bowl of a bomb crater. A dozen of us, for all we knew, were all that remained of our brotherhood on blighted Skylos.

Only the Scout, Endemor, spoke. He muttered a litany under his breath, as the rain ran down his hairless scalp and splattered on his chest plate. *‘Blessed be Sanguinius, Primogenitor and Lord of our Chapter. All Glory to him and the Emperor of Man, may his light guide and preserve us. Might of the Sanguinor, give us strength and fortitude, bind us—’*

‘What did you say?’ If one looked Brother-Sergeant Ganon in the eye, you might conclude that he was old beyond reckoning, with a face made of scars and bitterness. The veteran was the hardest soul I had ever known, with every trace of the kindness of lesser men expunged from him. He had courage in immeasurable volume, but a cold heart into the bargain. He glared at Endemor as if the youth were spiting him. ‘Is that prayer?’ he snorted.

‘I invoke the names of heroes,’ Endemor replied warily. He did not know Ganon as I did, and seemed to think the question was a kind of test. ‘The Sanguinor—’

Ganon cut him off again. ‘The Sanguinor is a *myth*, lad. A story told by priests to credulous neophytes. Not real, not as the Emperor is real or as our liege lord was.’

‘No,’ Endemor shook his head. ‘It is written.’

‘You think you know better than I?’ Ganon leaned closer. ‘I have lived five of your lifetimes, young Scout. Fought on countless worlds and crossed to the edge of extermination. In all that time, no phantom in gold has fallen from the sky to save me or my kindred.’ His lip curled. ‘Do you know what I have learned?’

Ganon did not wait for Endemor to answer. ‘The Emperor protects those who protect themselves. And Sanguinius, his strength is within us, not in some apparition that judges battle-worthiness on a capricious whim.’

‘Such thoughts might be considered heretical,’ ventured Brother Dekkel, our lone Apothecary.

Ganon did not grace Dekkel with a glance. ‘Go tell Lemartes, then. Tell Lord Dante himself, if you wish. I only believe in what I see.’ He made a show of looking around. ‘I see no Sanguinor.’

‘He will come,’ Endemor insisted. ‘If not today, if not for us, then for others. But he will come.’

‘Why do you believe?’ snapped Ganon.

‘Why do you *not*?’ I asked the question before I realised I had spoken.

The sergeant glared at me. ‘You share his delusion, Koris? You wish to sit and pray to a figure from a story rather than fight?’

Now I was committed to this. ‘The Sanguinor is a noble ideal. He is the best of

us. Some believe he is the ghost of our primarch freed from mortal fetters and set to battle... There are those in the Sanguinary Guard who say he is Azkaellon, first of their cadre, made timeless and eternal to avenge the black deed of the traitor Horus. Others say he is the soul of a wronged brother seeking redemption...'

Ganon gave a terse nod. 'And he comes to aid the Blood Angels in their darkest moments. Yes, *yes*, I have heard the fable. But I have battled in dark places, brother. I have witnessed such horrors, and never once witnessed this shining seraph.' He made a dismissive gesture at Endemor. 'So you will forgive me if I do not hold such stock in it as a callow youth yet to be blooded. Aye, the myth has power and serves well to rally the spirit of those who have need... But it is an archetype made to teach a lesson, not a hard fact. *I deny it.*' He turned away, and I heard sorrow in his tone. 'The sooner Endemor does the same, the sooner he will understand the cold brutality of this universe. No-one is coming to save Skylos. We will die here, and I wish to do it with a bolter in my hand, not hoping in vain for a redeemer.'

As the bitter words left his mouth, the sun came out. *But no, not the sun. Something else, something brighter than starlight. Power, shining and strong.*

We all felt it. Endemor was the first to fall to his knee and bow his head. Dekkel and the others followed, and finally it was only I and Ganon left to look upon the golden figure who was quite suddenly *there* at the lip of the crater.

Why do you not believe, Ganon? I heard the voice come from all around me, as if the air itself brought the words into being. **Have you lost so much that you can no longer know something greater than yourself?**

'I...'

The sergeant was rigid with shock, as was I. 'I believe in my Chapter. My primarch, my Emperor... My brothers.'

It was impossible. My mind screamed that it must be some kind of illusion, but there it was. *The Sanguinor. We spoke of him, and so he was summoned...*

The shimmering warrior looked to me. His helm was a flawless sculpture of Great Sanguinius, that beatific visage rendered in gold and adamantine. His armour and the great metal wings at his back were of similar magnitude, so wrought with such perfect skill that any master craftsman would weep to behold them. In one hand, he held a bejewelled icon of the Red Grail that glowed with an ethereal inner light; in the other, the burning blade of a Glaive Encarmine, singing its need for battle to the winds.

I felt an ephemeral touch upon me, like dawning sunlight, like a father's hand upon a son's shoulder. The bleak mood that had bedded onto me during the

unfolding of the Skylos catastrophe disintegrated. My heart swelled with pride and martial fervour. I could not understand where these feelings had come from; in the months past, I had felt my spirit erode under the futile truth of this world's war. Like Ganon, I had come to know – *and expect* – only death.

Believe, brothers, said the voice, and the Sanguinor raised his sword. I could feel the ground beneath my feet trembling, the precursor to an attack by the tyranid burrowers that had so harried us of late. But this tremor was far greater, the noise building as the earth cracked in great sheets and opened wide.

A gargantuan tyranid tyrant-beast clambered out of the thick, muddy slurry, claws and talons snapping at the wet air as a flood of lesser warrior-forms swarmed around its hooves. The aliens were making their great press to cull us and end all other life on Skylos. I knew it in my bones. This was the endgame.

Believe, said the Sanguinor, reaching forward to trace the sigil of the Chapter on the sergeant's chest, granting him a blessing. **Follow me towards glory.**

Ganon turned his face to the rest of us and I saw a new light in his eyes. A total absence of doubt, a blade-sharp knowledge. I saw *faith*, and I think it was mirrored in me to the same measure.

We exploded from the crater, red comets of ceramite and steel plunging into a mass of the xenos flood. I killed my way through a legion of lictors and raveners, time blurring as my boltgun ran dry and turned to new purpose as a blood-slick club. Sword in hand, I tore murder through the alien ranks and I recall feeling no pain. He made us avenging angels, one and all.

I saw the Sanguinor end the tyrant with a blow that took the command-creature's head from its thick neck. It was the cut that sent the monsters into disarray, and although we did not know it that day, it was the beginning of the end for the tyranid invasion of Skylos.

My last glimpse of him was his golden gauntlets crushing the grotesque, distended skull of a zoanthrope, the ichor of the dying alien splattering his armour but never marring it.

When a lull in the battle finally came, there were only the dozen of us and a plain wet with blood and corpse-meat.

A dozen, save one.

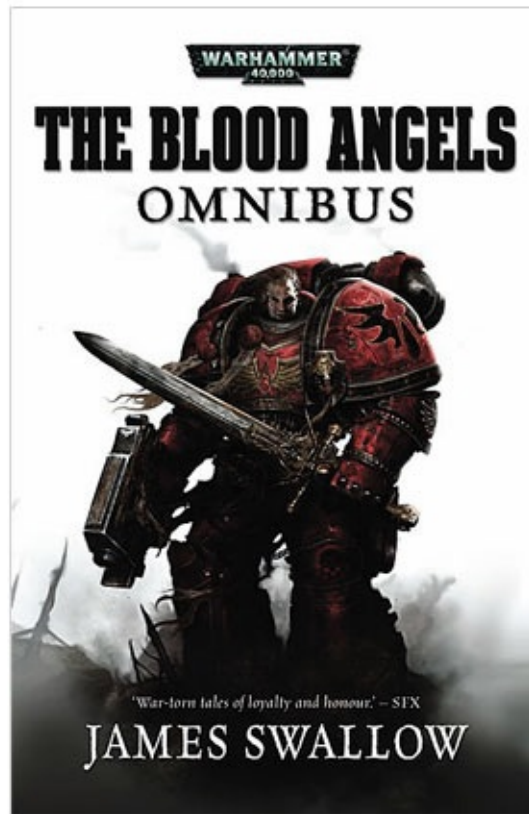
Ganon lay dead, his hands buried in the chest of a carnifex he had killed by ripping it open with a chainblade. He and the beast had ended one another, but while the fanged maw of the tyranid was foamed with spittle and swollen in animalistic agony, my sergeant seemed... *at peace*.

I did not see the golden angel again, nor have I since.

But I *believe*. And still, I follow him toward glory.

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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