

THE BLOOD ANGELS OMNIBUS

A Warhammer 40,000 omnibus

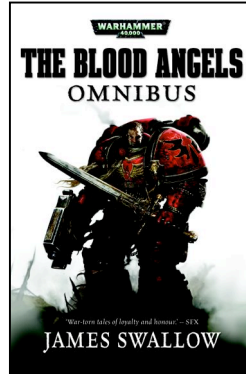
By James Swallow

Contains the novels *Deus Encarmine* and *Deus Sanguinius*.

On the remote planet of Cybele, the superhuman warriors of the Blood Angels Chapter fight a losing battle against their most bitter enemies, the forces of Chaos. After Battle-Brother Arkio leads a glorious counter-attack that has the enemy reeling, there is talk that this is a holy sign. Is Arkio blessed?

When Brother Arkio claims to be a reincarnation of Sanguinius, the Blood Angels' spiritual father, the message is clear: follow me or die. Rafen kneels before Arkio and swears an oath of devotion – but the words are ashes in his mouth, and in his heart, he knows that he and his brother will have a reckoning that only one of them will survive...

The scene is set for what could be the destruction and damnation of the entire Blood Angels Chapter.



About the Author

James Swallow's stories from the dark worlds of Warhammer 40,000 include the Horus Heresy novel *The Flight of the Eisenstein and Faith & Fire*, featuring the Sisters of Battle, as well as short fiction for *Inferno!* and *What Price Victory*. Among his other works are *Jade Dragon*, *The Butterfly Effect*, and fiction from the worlds of Star Trek, Doctor Who, 2000AD and Stargate. Swallow's other credits include writing for Star Trek Voyager, scripts for videogames and audio dramas. He lives in London.

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Horus Heresy

THE FLIGHT OF THE EISENSTEIN

The following is an excerpt from *THE BLOOD ANGELS OMNIBUS* by James Swallow.

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AMID THE GRAVES, it was difficult for Rafen to tell exactly where the sky ended and the land began. He became still for a moment, halting in the shadow of a large tombstone in the shape of a chalice, the muzzle of his bolter calm and silent at his side. The wind never ceased on Cybele; on it came over the low hills and shallow mountains that characterised the planet, moaning mournfully through the thin stands of trees, rippling the grey-blue grass into waves. The gently rolling landscape flowed away from him toward an endless, unreachable vanishing point, an invisible horizon where grey land met grey sky. The distance was lost in the low clouds of stone dust that hovered overhead, stained like a great shroud of oil-soaked wool. The haze was made up of tiny particles of rock, churned into the sky by the torrent of artillery fire that had etched itself across the planet hours earlier.

Cybele wailed quietly around Rafen. The wind sang through the uncountable numbers of headstones that ranged away in every direction as far as his visor's optics could see. He stood atop the graves of a billion-fold war dead and listened to the breeze as it wept for them, the familiar hot battle-urge of caged frenzy boiling away beneath the veneer of his iron self-control.

Steady and unmoving, an observer might have mistaken Rafen for a tomb marker. Indeed there were places on Cybele where stone-carved likenesses of Space Marines topped great towers of granite. In those hallowed grounds, men bred from Brother Rafen's own

bloodline were buried as a measure of respect for the planet and the great memorial that it represented to the Imperium. The moon of a vast gas giant, Cybele was a war-grave world, one of hundreds of planets declared Mausoleum Valorum throughout the Ultima Segmentum. Rafen kept his statue-like aspect as a flicker of movement danced on the edge of his auspex's sensors.

Presently, a figure emerged from behind an oval sepulchre carved in pink vestan stone, and it nodded toward Rafen before making a series of sign-gestures with a gauntleted hand. The two of them were almost identical: their man-shapes broad and hulking in red ceramite sheaths, the colour glistening from the soft, reverent rain.

Rafen returned the nod and emerged from his cover, low to the ground and swift. He did not pause to check if Brother Alactus was following him; there was no need. As Alactus followed Rafen, so Brother Turcio followed Alactus, and Brother Bennek followed him. The team of Space Marines had drilled and fought alongside each other for so many decades that they functioned as pieces of the same machine, each a finely-tooled cog linked to the other, operating in perfect unison. To move now in silence, without a single spoken word between them, was child's play for soldiers who had trained to fight under the most testing conditions. He could sense their eagerness to meet the foe; it was like a palpable scent in the air, thick and coppery on his tongue.

Rafen slipped around a smashed obelisk that rose like a broken bone from the cemetery grass, an accusing finger pointing upward and decrying the foul clouds. He dropped down into a shallow valley. A day earlier, this sheltered place had been a devotional garden dedicated to naval pilots lost in the war for Rocene, but now it was a ruined bowl of broken earth. A stray round from the enemy's opening sub-orbital bombardment had landed here and carved out a hemisphere of ground, fusing the dirt into patches of glassy fulgurites. Brown puddles gathered where ornate caskets were torn open and their contents scattered around Rafen's metal-shod feet: bones and decayed, aged medals crunched into the dirt where he walked. The Space Marine picked his way through the

skeletons and traversed the opposite lip of the crater, pausing to check his bearings.

He glanced up to see the shape of an angelic statue curving away above him, arms and wings spread as if about to take flight. The statue's face was unblemished and perfect; its eyes were raised to stare at some exquisite heaven that was an infinity away from the crude reality of this earthly realm. For one serene moment, Rafen was convinced that the stone seraph was about to turn its countenance to him, to display the face of Lord Sanguinius, the hallowed founder and primogenitor of his Chapter. But the instant fled, and Rafen was alone with the dead once more, stone angel and Blood Angel alike both wreathed in the mist and rain. He looked away and allowed himself to listen to the wind once more.

Rafen felt a churn of revulsion in the pit of his gut. A fresh sound was being carried to his helmet's auto-sense array, buoyed along with the ceaseless moans of the breeze: screaming, thin and horrific. It was a noise torn from the very darkest places in a man's heart, an utterance that could only have issued from the lips of one truly damned. The Space Marine surmised the Traitors were preparing to make an augury from the entrails of one of their slaves before they began another sortie.

Rafen considered this for a moment. If the archenemy were getting ready for another attack, then it made his mission all the more urgent. He moved off, a frown forming behind the formidable mask of his breather grille. A troop of lightly armoured, fast-moving scouts would have been able to accomplish the same task in half the time. But every single one of the pathfinder squad in Rafen's detachment had been killed in the first assault, when a fusillade of krak shells had torn through their ranks. He had been standing in the lee of a Rhino's hull when the shriek of superheated air signalled the incoming salvo, and in his mind's eye Rafen recalled the moment when a scout bike had spun up and over his head, as if it were nothing but a plaything discarded by a bored, petulant child. All that remained of the young Space Marines were some torn rags and flecks of burnt ceramite.

He buried the dark ember of his anger deep and pressed on, shuttering away his recriminations. It mattered little now what they had been told before arriving on Cybele, that the posting here was purely a ceremonial one, that it was a matter of honour rather than a battle to be fought. Perhaps he and his battle-brothers had been lax to believe that the corrupted would have no interest in a cemetery world; now they would repay that mistake with the blood of their foes.

Rafen slowed to a steady walk as they closed in on the grove the enemy had chosen for their staging area. The pristine, manicured lawns of the graveyards elsewhere were no longer evident here – around the perimeter of the Traitor camp, great dark tendrils of decay were trailing out through the grasses, emerging through an expanding ring of soiled plants and toxic slurry. In some places, the ground had broken open like an old wound and disgorged the dead from beneath it. Grave markers lay slumped and disfigured next to black twists of bone vomited from the newly putrid earth. Rafen's finger twitched near the trigger of his bolter, his knuckles whitening inside his gauntlet. The rush of righteous fury was tingling at bay within him, the longing for combat singing in his veins. He gestured for the other Blood Angels to stand back and hold their positions. He found a vantage point at the corner of a ruined vault and for the first time that day Rafen laid eyes on the enemy. It was all he could do to resist the urge to riddle them with gunfire.

Word Bearers. Once they had been an Adeptus Astartes Chapter of the most pious nature, but those days had long since turned to dust. Rafen's lips drew back from his teeth in a sneer of disgust as he watched the Traitor Marines move to and fro, marching arrogantly between tents of flayed ork-hide and the still steaming orbs of grounded dreadclaw landers. He closed his ears to the pestilent shouts of the enemy demagogues as they wandered about the edges of the encampment, spitting their vile prayers and chants over the cries of the slave-servitors, and the incessant cracks of neuro-whips against the backs of the helots.

The Word Bearers were a dark mirror of Rafen and his brethren. Their battle gear was doused in a livid scar-red the shade of fresh

gore, their armour dominated by a single sigil – the face of a screaming horned demon against an eight-pointed star. Many of the Chaos Space Marines sported horned helmets with filigree and fine workings cored from children's bones, or pages of blasphemous text drawn on skin-parchment and fastened into the ceramite with obsidian screws. Others went about bareheaded, and these ones displayed faces rippled with ritual wheals, tusks or hooks of warped cartilage.

It was one such Traitor Marine who was carefully ministering to the torture of the slave whose screams had carried so far on the wind. One of his arms ended in a writhing cluster of metallic tentacles that flicked and whipped at the air as if they had a mind of their own. In his other hand, the torturer held a vibra-stave that he used like a sculptor, lopping off slips of flesh with infinite care. The victim's cries wavered up and down the octaves and Rafen abruptly realised that the enemy soldier was playing the man like an instrument, amusing himself by composing a symphony of pain. Rafen looked away, concentrating on the mission at hand. His squad leader, Brother-Sergeant Koris, had made the orders quite clear – Rafen and his team were to merely locate the enemy camp and determine the strength and disposition of the foe. They were not to engage.

Training his auspex on the assembled force, he picked out assault units and the massive bulks of Terminators, but only a handful of vehicles. He considered the options: this might be a testing force, perhaps, maybe a blunt brigade of heavily armed troops sent in to probe the defences of the planet before a larger attack could begin. For a moment, Rafen wondered about the fate of the ship his company had left in orbit; it was a forgone conclusion that if so large a Traitor force had made planetfall, the skies already belonged to the enemy. He did not dwell on the prospects of what that would mean for them. With a full half of their force dead or crippled in the initial surprise bombardment, the Space Marines were reeling and on the defensive; the momentum of battle was on the side of the foe.

But in the next instant, Rafen's grim train of thought was abruptly stalled. From out of the open hatch of a deformed Razorback transport strode a figure that came a full two heads higher than every other man in the Traitor camp. His armour was chased around its edges with sullen gold plating and trceries of infernal runes that smudged and merged as Rafen's auspex struggled to read them. Wrappings of steel chain ending in flaming, skull-shaped braziers dangled from his arms and waist, while his shoulder plates mounted a fan of necrotic spines that appeared to be venting thin streams of venom into the air. Rafen had seen the champions of the archenemy before and so he was in no doubt that the being he looked upon was the master of the war force at Cybele.

A fragment of memory drifted to the front of Rafen's mind as he watched the tall Word Bearer approach and converse with the torturer. He recalled a snatch of description from the indoctrination lectures of his training, the words of old Koris back when the grizzled veteran was serving as a mentor. The Word Bearers, who forever bore the aberrant mark of Chaos Undivided, practised their foul religions under the stewardship of the highest ranked Traitors among their number – and Rafen was sure that the tall one was just such a being. A Dark Apostle, and here, in his sights! The hand around the bolter twitched again and he allowed himself to entertain the idea of killing this bestial adversary, despite the sergeant's orders ringing in his head. Bloodlust rumbled distantly in his ears, the familiar tension of pre-battle humming in his very marrow. With a single shot, he might be able to send the enemy into instant disarray; but were he to fail, their survey would be compromised and his brethren back at the Necropolita would be lost. Reluctantly, he relaxed his grip a little.

In that moment of choice, Rafen's life was almost forfeit. A fierce rune blinked into being on the Space Marine's visor, warning him too late of movement to his flank. With speed that belied the huge weight of his battle armour, Rafen spun on his heel, reversing his grip on the bolter as he did. He came face to face with a Word Bearer, the Chaos Space Marine's hideous countenance a series of ruined holes and jagged teeth.

‘Blood Angel!’ it spat, declaring the name like a venomous malediction.

Rafen answered by slamming the butt of his bolter into the Word Bearer’s face with savage ferocity, forcing the enemy warrior to stagger back on his heels and into the cover of the vault. He dare not fire the weapon, for the report of a bolt shell would surely bring every Traitor in the camp running, and he knew that none of his other battle-brothers could come to his aid lest they expose themselves. It was of little import, however, Rafen had killed enough warp-spawned filth to be sure that he could murder this heretic with tooth and nail alone if need be. Caught by surprise, he had only heartbeats in which to press his advantage and terminate this abomination – this thing that had polluted the universe since before he was born.

The Word Bearer’s hand snapped toward the gun on its waist. Fingers with far too many joints skittered across the scarlet armour. Rafen brought the bolter down again and smashed the hand flat like a pinned spider. The Traitor recovered and swung a mailed, spike-laden fist at Rafen’s head; the blow connected with a hollow ring and Rafen heard his ceramite helm crack as fractures appeared on his visor. Letting the gun drop into the oily mud at his feet, the Blood Angel surged forward and locked his gloved hands around the Word Bearer’s throat. Had his enemy been helmeted too, Rafen would never have been able to strike back at him this way, but the corrupted fool had thought this place secure enough to show his face to the air. Rafen pressed his fingers into the tough, leathery hide of the Word Bearer’s neck, intent on showing him the cost of his folly. Gouts of thick, greasy fluid began to stream from the Traitor’s wounds, and it tried in vain to suck air through its windpipe, desperate to scream for help from its brethren.

The spiked glove returned, crashing into his head again and again. Warm blood filled Rafen’s mouth as his teeth rattled in his jaw. The Traitor butted him, but the Blood Angel stood firm, the joyous lust of his hate-rage flattening the pain. Rafen’s vision fogged with the sweet anticipatory surge of a hand-to-hand kill, as the Traitor’s black snake-tongue twitched madly, lapping at breaths

it could not draw in. He was dimly aware of the Word Bearer punching and striking at his torso, flailing to inflict some sort of damage on him before he ended its repellent life.

Rafen registered a flashing bone dagger at the edges of his vision, then the sudden bloom of pain on his left thigh; he ignored it and squeezed tighter, compacting the Word Bearer's throat into a ruined tube of bloody meat and broken cartilage. Voiceless and empty, the Traitor Marine died and slipped from his ichor-stained fingers to the ground. Rafen staggered back a step, the thunder of adrenaline making him giddy. As his foot came down, fresh streams of agony surged out of his leg and he saw where the Traitor's tusk blade had cleanly pierced his armour. Shock gel and coagulants bubbled up around the wound, and turned dark as they struggled to combat the after-effects of the cut. Rafen grimaced; the daemon knives of the adversary always carried venom and he did not wish to be cut down by the dying blow of such an unworthy foe.

The Blood Angel gripped the haft of the Chaos blade and he felt it writhe and flex in his grip, quivering like a creature seeking escape. He could feel the movement of bladders inside it, fleshy organs pulsing as they sucked in his blood like a parasite. With a snarl, Rafen tore the serrated weapon from his thigh and held it up before his eyes. The blade was a living thing, each ridge of its saw-tooth edge a yellowed chevron of enamel crested by a tiny black eye spot. It hissed and chattered at Rafen with impotent hate, contorting in on itself. Before the Space Marine could react, the blade puffed up its air sacs and spat out a cloud of his siphoned blood, scattering it in a fine pink vapour.

Rafen broken the thing in two but it was too late: in the enemy encampment, the Word Bearers had stopped what they were doing and were glancing upward, nostrils and tongues taking in the thin stream of scent-taste.

He swore a blistering curse and tossed the dead creature aside, breaking vox silence for the first time in hours. 'Fall back!'

The four Blood Angels erupted from cover, moving as fast as their augmented limbs and power armour would let them; ten times that number of Word Bearers crested the lip of the grove and gave

chase, bolters crashing wildly and voices raised in debased exaltation.

IN THE ENCAMPMENT below, Tancred hesitated, the vibra-stave wavering in his hand as he shifted forward to join the pursuit; but then he realised that his master had not moved an inch, and with careful deliberation he relaxed and cocked his head.

Iskavan the Hated, Dark Apostle of the Ninth Host of Garand, let his bloodless lips split in a smile wider than any human orifice was capable of. One of his tube-tongues flickered in and out, sampling the damp air. 'A mewling whelp,' he pronounced at last, rolling the faint flavour of Rafen's spilt blood around his mouth. 'A little over a hundred years, by the taste of him.' He eyed Tancred. 'Perhaps I should be insulted that these mongrels saw fit to send children to spy on us.'

The torturer glanced back at the twisted ruin of flesh that was his handiwork. 'A handful of scouts are hardly worth the effort, magnificence.'

Tancred saw Iskavan nod in agreement from the corner of his eye, and he suppressed a smile. The Word Bearer had risen to the rank of second to the Dark Apostle through a mixture of guile and outright ruthlessness, but much of his skill stemmed from his ability to predict Iskavan's moods and to know exactly what his commander wanted to hear. In four and a half centuries of service, Tancred had only earned his master's displeasure on three occasions, and the most severe of those was marked forever on him where his organic arm had been severed by Iskavan's dagger-toothed bite. The torturer gave his tentacle replacement an absent flex.

'Let the hungry ones hound them back to their verminous hiding place,' said Iskavan, as much to Tancred as it was to the rest of the Word Bearer camp. 'We will join them momentarily.' The Dark Apostle turned the full force of his baleful gaze on the torturer and toyed casually with a barbed horn on his chin. 'I shall not be interrupted before I have completed my sacrament.'

Tancred took this as a cue to continue and beckoned a pair of machine-bound helots forward. Each of the once-men picked up an end of the rack on which Tancred's victim lay. The homunculae moved into the centre of the camp on legs of burping gas pistons, their arms raw iron girders ending in rusty blocks and tackle, rather than flesh and bone. Their burden was moaning weakly but still clinging to the ragged edge of life, thanks to the consummate skill of Tancred's art.

The Word Bearer bent close to the dying slave's head and whispered to him. 'Give,' he husked. 'Give up your love.'

'I do,' the helot managed, between blood-laden gurgles, 'I give my heart and flesh and soul to you, great one.' His teeth appeared in a broken grin, the beatific glaze in his eyes locked on the heavy, dolorous clouds overhead. 'Please, I crave the agony of the boon. Please!' The slave began to weep, and Tancred ran his clawed hand over the man's scarred forehead. The poor wretch was afraid that he would be allowed to die without the exquisite pain of Iskavan's blessing.

'Do not fear,' Tancred cooed. 'You will know torment such as that which Lorgar himself endured.'

'Thank you! Oh, thank you!' The helot coughed and a fat globule of heavy, arterial crimson rolled from his mouth. Tancred resisted the urge to lick at it and turned to bow before his master.

'With your permission, lord Apostle?'

Iskavan wet his lips. 'Bring me my crozius.'

THE BLOOD ANGELS had reinforced the edifice of the Necropolita even as the dust was still settling from the bombardment, toppling stone needles and broad obelisks to serve as makeshift cover. The building had been an ornate combination of Imperial chapel and outpost facility, but now it was in ruins. Its sole occupants, the priest-governor of the planet and his small cohort of caretakers, were among the first to perish when the building's central minaret had been struck. Now for good or ill Cybele was under the complete command of Brother-Captain Simeon, the ranking Space Marine officer. Crouching atop the corner of the Necropolita that still stood,

Simeon was the first to see the enemy approach through the tombstones, and he drew his chainsword with a flourish.

‘Sons of Sanguinius!’ His voice cut the air like the peal of a cloister bell. ‘To arms!’

Below him, where the marble plaza ended and the graveyards began, Brother-Sergeant Koris dug one armoured hand into the fallen stone pillar and pushed himself up to sight toward the foe. He saw Rafen’s unit charging and firing, sending controlled bursts of bolter-fire over their shoulders as they closed; behind them was a seething wall of Chaos Space Marines, a cackling, screaming horde that moved like a swarm of red locusts.

‘Brothers on the field! Pick your targets!’ he ordered, and to illustrate his point, the seasoned soldier shot the head from a Word Bearer just hand-spans away from Turcio’s back.

Bennek was less fortunate, and Koris growled in anger as the Space Marine lost his leg from the near miss of a plasma gun. Bennek’s armoured form tumbled and dropped, and the Word Bearers rolled over him without stopping.

With a yell of effort, the crimson flash of a Space Marine leapt over Koris’s head and twisted in mid-air, landing perfectly behind the stone barricade. The sergeant turned as Rafen, panting hard, brought up his bolter and laced the air above him with shot; a Traitor who had been snapping at his heels made it halfway over the obelisk before Rafen’s shells sent him screaming backward. The air sang with energy and explosion around them as the two sides clashed.

‘Damn them, these fiends are on us like desert ticks!’

Koris gave Rafen a brief, sharp grin. ‘You brought some company back with you then, eh lad?’

Rafen hesitated. ‘I...’ Salvos of Traitor gunfire chopped at the dirt near their feet.

‘Brother Rafen!’ Simeon loped over the pockmarked ground toward them, weaving around the flashes of new impact craters and the keening of lethal ricochets. ‘When I told you we needed to study the enemy closely, I did not expect you to take me so literally.’ The captain let off a ripping discharge from his bolt pistol, right into the enemy line. ‘No matter.’

Koris drew back from the skirmish and let Turcio take his place. ‘Speak, lad. What do these warp-spawn have for us out there?’ His voice was urgent, carrying over the constant fire.

Rafen gestured to the south. ‘An assault group, most likely a reconnaissance in force,’ he replied, calmly relaying his report with the same dispassion he would have showed in a training exercise. ‘A squad of Terminators and armour, at least three Razorbacks.’

Simeon grimaced. His few Space Marines with little or no heavy weapons would be hard pressed to hold the line against such a detachment. ‘There’s more,’ he added – a statement, not a question.

Rafen ignored the low hum of a bolt that lanced past his head. ‘Indeed. Terra protect me, but I looked upon one of their foul ceremonies, a sacrificial augury. There was a Dark Apostle in the camp to observe it.’

‘You’re sure?’ Koris pressed, the crack of rounds flicking off the tiles around them.

‘As the God-Emperor is my witness,’ Rafen replied.

Simeon and Koris exchanged glances; this made matters more complicated. ‘If one of those arch-traitors has befouled the graves here, then his plans for Cybele are clear.’ Simeon loaded a fresh clip into his gun, eyeing the torrid battle line as blood-red and gore-red armour clashed and fought. ‘He will seek to erect one of their own blasphemous monuments here and salt the earth with their profane benedictions.’

‘It shall not be,’ Rafen grated. A heat of fury flooded into him.

‘No, it shall not,’ Simeon agreed, bearing his fangs. With a roar, he dived into the fray, his chainsword braying as it cored a Word Bearer sending it skittering over the marble. Rafen and Koris waded through the fight with him, weapons flaring.

‘Hear me, Blood Angels!’ Simeon’s voice called. ‘In the name of the red grail, turn back this tide—’

The captain’s words were cut short as a tiny supernova engulfed him, and wreaths of hot plasma turned the stone to slag around his feet. Rafen had a single, momentary vision of brilliant white, then Simeon’s ammunition packs detonated all at once and threw him aside in the shock wave.

ISKAVAN GATHERED UP his most impious symbol of office and cradled it as a parent would a beloved child. The crozius in his hand gave off an actinic glow that surged as his fingers wrapped around it. The weapon sighed, pleased that its master was near, excited by the prospect of what was to come next. Murmuring a litany of un-blessing beneath his breath, the Dark Apostle dipped the disk of blades at the staff's head into the catch-bucket beneath Tancred's torture rack. He stirred the thick, fresh blood. The liquid flashed into steam, boiling around the accursed weapon.

'From the fires of betrayal,' Iskavan droned. 'Unto the blood of revenge.'

Tancred raised the vibra-stave over the helot's body, so he could see that death was upon him. 'By the bearer of the word, the favoured son of Chaos.' The torturer plunged the stave into the slave's stomach and tore it open, savouring the screams.

The Word Bearers standing watch around them spoke as one voice. 'All praise be given unto him.'

Iskavan held up his soaked crozius to the grey sky, the ritual of desecration repeated once again as it had been on countless worlds, before countless victories. He glanced at Tancred, who hunched over the spilt innards of the sacrifice. 'What do you see?'

It took the most supreme effort of Tancred's life to lie to his master. 'Death comes. Lorgar's sight is upon us.' The words were almost choking him. 'We shall feed the hunger of the gods.'

His black heart shrinking in his chest, Tancred stared at the entrails before him in fear and dismay. The loops of fallen intestine, the spatters of blood, the placing of the organs – the configuration was terrible and ominous. There, he saw the signs of something impossibly powerful rising into life, a coming force so strong that it dwarfed Tancred and his master. The play of light and shadow was confused, and so the torturer could not be sure from where this energy would emerge, but he could see clearly that it would bring ruin and destruction in its wake. At last, he managed to tear himself away from the sight, his final reading bringing a disturbing

prediction to bear. Both he and Iskavan would not live to see the end of the events they would set in motion on this day.

The Dark Apostle met his gaze and something like suspicion danced there. 'Is that all you see, Tancred?'

The words pushed at the torturer's decaying lips, fighting to be heard, but he knew with blind certainty that such a fatalist divination would enrage Iskavan, to the degree that Tancred would be first to taste the freshly-blooded crozius's power. He looked down in what he hoped would seem like reverence, praying to the gods that he be spared his master's displeasure. 'I see death, lord.'

'Good.' Iskavan chained his twitching, eager weapon to his wrist. 'Let us take the word to our adversary, and see them heed it... Or perish.'

The Chaos Space Marines whooped and yelled black hymnals and mantras as the battle force rolled forward and amid them all, Tancred picked at his newborn fears like a scabbed wound.

SIMEON'S VIOLENT END tolled around the perimeter like a death knell; it was felt almost as a physical shock by the Blood Angels ranged about the Necropolita's edge. The hero of Virgon VII, victor at the Thaxted Insurrection and decorated warrior of the Alchonis Campaign, was gone, swept away. The brother-captain was honoured and respected by every Space Marine in the Chapter, and in the centuries they had fought alongside him, each one of them could trace a debt of life to the bold officer. Rafen himself had almost been killed on Ixion by a mole-mine that Simeon had spotted a moment before it emerged. And now, as the Blood Angel considered the patch of scorched ground that marked the spot where the captain had died, he found the memory of that moment slipping away from him, as if it too had been lost in the plasma burst.

Koris was the ranking officer now, and the craggy old warhound seemed determined to cut a blood cost for the captain's death from each and every Word Bearer. But Rafen knew the veteran better than most of the Space Marines there, and he saw the signs of distress on his former teacher that others did not.

For all of Koris's encouragement and rousing, Simeon's sudden killing had dealt their morale a fatal blow, and the will of the remaining men lay wounded, bleeding out into the grass.

Rafen saw the surge in the enemy line as the rest of the Word Bearers' force joined the fight, and in that moment, he was certain they would die here. Unhallowed lighting flashed in the distance from a blazing force weapon, and the Traitors roared with approval. They drew back, a ruby tide retreating from the land's edge before returning as a flood. And then on they came, killing and ripping Rafen's comrades into fleshy shreds. His gun clattered, the barrel spitting hot as rounds big as fists tore into the foe – but then a sound, a heart-stopping shriek of Sundered air, fell across the battlefield.

Rafen instinctively looked up, and felt ice in the pit of his stomachs. Swooping in through the low cloud by the dozen were bright red Thunderhawk drop-ships, each one bristling with missile and cannon, each one heavy with more Space Marines to feed the fray. Half-glimpsed in the contrails and gunsmoke, the flyers looped over the enemy and turned.

'We are lost,' said Turcio, as if the words were his dying breath. 'With such reinforcements, we will be drowned in a sea of corrupted ones.'

'Then we'll litter this place with their dead before we do...'
Rafen's voice tailed off as the Thunderhawks opened fire as one, and bright spears of light lanced from their lascannon. But the shots never reached them. The beams fell short of the Space Marines and struck the middle of the Word Bearers' force with devastating effect, killing a unit of Chaos Terminators in one blaze of fire. Now the other flyers released packs of hellstreak warheads, which tore into the Traitors with furious abandon.

Rafen's eyes widened as the leading drop-ship cut the sky above him, and in a blink of crimson he saw the sigils painted on the aircraft: a pair of silver angel's wings, adorned with a shimmering teardrop of blood. As the Emperor willed it, so the Blood Angels had been delivered from the jaws of oblivion by their battle-brothers.

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