

THE HORUS HERESY

James Swallow

FEAR TO TREAD

The angel falls

*From the New York Times bestselling
author of Nemesis*



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FEAR TO TREAD

James Swallow

Since the earliest days of the Great Crusade, Sanguinius – angelic primarch of the IXth Legion – was ever among the closest and most loyal of Horus’s brothers. But the Blood Angels have long kept their true nature hidden from the rest of the Imperium, and when the Warmaster hints that the key to their salvation may finally be within their grasp, the sons of Sanguinius race to claim it. Now, as the revelation of their betrayal dawns and the traitors’ hand is revealed, the Blood Angels must face all the warp-spawned armies of Chaos, as well as their own personal daemons, upon the blasted plains of Signus Prime...



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Swallow is a New York Times bestselling author whose stories include the Horus Heresy novels *Nemesis* 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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THERE WAS NO place for Sanguinius on the bridge of his flagship. He had made it so; his command throne remained in his private sanctum in the upper reaches of the *Red Tear's* dorsal tower, but for all intents and purposes there was no formal seat of power here for him. It was a small humility that had been enforced across the Blood Angels warfleet from the very beginning of his reign. The primarch refused to take the captain's chair of any craft in his fleet, lest it be seen as a diminishment of the authority of that vessel's commanding officer. He stood with one hand upon the high back of Admiral DuCade's station as the shipmistress governed her crew. He remained statue-still and silent; as did the members of his honour guard, who waited in recesses draped with crimson curtains to the port and starboard sides of the bridge deck.

The *Red Tear's* command-and-control nexus resembled a small combat arena or a theatre in the round. At its lowest level, there were the primary operations consoles manned by DuCade and her prime cadre of naval officers. Then, raised up in three tiers like the stands for an audience, there were semi-circles of secondary and tertiary workstations for the rest of the command crew, the gunnery and engineering officers, the sensor specialists and more. Rather than raise the captain of the ship high above all things to look down on her men in the manner of some haughty queen at court, the admiral was at the centre of everything, the fulcrum of the starship and the fleet it led.

Only one being was allowed the honour of being placed above all. In the ceiling over their heads, a shallow bowl of silver metal worked with constellations and star-device etchings showed the lowermost surface of a habitat sphere, where the *Red Tear's* Navigators lived in zero gravity. Locked away behind thick walls of sense-deadening baffles, with the ship in normal space the psykers were at rest, in a kind of dormant coma-state.

Their distaff cousins, the astropaths, were not so lucky. Their hab-module was deeper inside the warship's hull, protected by layers of heavy armour and energy barriers. Arcane technologies connected them to mechanisms for psychic thought-projection, infinitely byzantine systems that fascinated the primarch with their intricate complexity.

The word from the astropathic sanctum was not promising. Sanguinius had bid them to reach into the Signus Cluster with their minds and listen for the whisper of communiqués from others of their kind. The vox-dead static picked up by the fleet's machine-call transceivers troubled him more than he had revealed, and he had hoped that the telepaths might find some trace deeper into the star system – something to indicate that the Blood Angels had not arrived too late to save these worlds.

When he asked them what they heard, the psykers wept and spoke in synesthetic riddles, becoming so agitated that he became concerned they might harm themselves. In the end, without answers, Sanguinius left them under guard and returned to the bridge. Whatever tricks his enemy had used to silence Signus seemed to extend into the ethereal as much as the real.

'I do not know what to make of this, my lord.' DuCade's voice brought him back from his moment of reverie. The admiral was offering him the pict-slate he had given to her a few minutes earlier. On its glassy surface, captures from the gun cameras of a Raven scrolled slowly past, showing frozen images of a field of wreckage and plasma spills against the void. 'The damage patterns resemble the effect of an explosive detonation deep inside the ship-frame.' She craned her neck to look up at him, the tiny woman surrounded by the broad metal cradle of her chair.

He nodded, threads of his blond hair falling over his face. 'My thoughts too,' agreed the Angel. 'But the scans show no signs of thermal damage, no traces common to a chemical or nuclear detonation.'

She nodded, frowning. 'No exotic particles either, which means it couldn't be an esoteric weapon, like a graviton shear or a conversion beamer.' DuCade looked away, silently giving an order to a junior officer with the tip of her head, without breaking the conversation. 'Those wrecks look like they were torn apart from the inside.'

'Like cages ripped open by a vicious animal.' Azkaellon hove closer, catching the edges of the conversation. He bowed slightly to his liege lord. 'I cannot understand how or why these craft were even in this zone of space. Most of them had no warp motors and were incapable of speeds beyond one-half light velocity, and yet they appeared to be making for interstellar space. It would have taken them centuries to reach the nearest star system, a millennium more to the closest Imperial world.'

'To answer that question, Guard Commander,' said DuCade, 'requires something the Legiones Astartes do not possess.'

'And that is?'

'Fear.' Sanguinius detected the shift in her pulse rate through a microscopic colour change in her pale cheeks and the motion of her thin hands. She went on. 'Consider this. The people on those ships were so afraid that they willingly sought out the embrace of the deep black. A prospect for slow starvation as their food supplies dwindled, suffocation or freezing at the failure of life-support.'

'Perhaps they held on to the hope of finding a rescuer out here,' said the primarch, for a moment trying to place himself in that mindset. 'But there was no one to aid them. No one to forestall the fate that ultimately claimed them.'

'They feared this death less than the terror that chased them from their homes,' offered Azkaellon, with a grimace. 'That notion is as alien to me as any xenos.'

'Admiral?' DuCade's augmented aide approached the commander. 'Bow observers report we are coming into visual range of the planet Phorus. Fleet speed is reducing as per your posted orders. We will cross the outer perimeter of the Signus system in approximately two minutes.'

'Sound battle stations throughout the flotilla,' she responded. 'Show me the planet.'

The officer saluted and turned to face the front of the command deck. 'Lens the eye!' At his order, the open bow of the semi-circular amphitheatre widened and the wide armourglass portals looking out into the dark shifted. The molecules of the clear material were stroked by electromagnetic charges that shifted the density and structure of the largest portal, a flawless disc set in an elliptical framework that resembled a human eye. The view outside sharpened, bringing the bow of the *Red Tear* into hard detail along with her escorts. The battleships *Ignis* and *Covenant of Baal* moved off the great barge's beam, and past them the light of Signus Alpha bent around the sphere of Phorus. Red-lit, it was a hazy shadow becoming more defined with each passing moment.

It was the primarch who first sensed that something was amiss. 'Azkaellon,' he said, beckoning the Guard Commander. 'Do you see? The colour?'

The Sanguinary Guard shot a look at a nearby systems console, where one of the sub-light navigational crewmen was working. On the woman's gas-lens screen there was a cogitator-generated image dredged up from the depths of the *Red Tear's* commodious data mines; a picture assembled from probe readings and the logs of the Imperial colonial census office, the standard planetary catalogue entry for Signus VII, local designation Phorus.

The image showed an unremarkable ball of rock and ice, scarred by asteroid impact craters. It resembled a sphere made of porcelain webbed with jagged lines, as if dropped from a great

height and then reassembled.

'The reflectivity of it is wrong,' Sanguinius told him.

Phorus's dirty white colouration should have made it stand out starkly against the bloody light of the star, but instead the planet was drinking in all the illumination it was given, absorbing it.

'All ships within lead element,' called DuCade. 'Target Phorus with sensing gear and report.'

Immediately, information began to stream into the *Red Tear's* data buffers. Azkaellon saw dozens of support screens light up along the upper tiers as cogitators laboured to interpret the new readings.

'Phorus was home to ninety thousand colonists,' the primarch offered, his eyes on the forward portal. 'But I fear no longer. Look at the surface.'

The Guard Commander's perception caught up with what he was seeing and the image shifted in his mind's eye. Phorus was not, as he had thought, caught in an partial eclipse of a star and so rendered dark by shadow.

The planet appeared *burned*, seared black from pole to pole. No features were visible, and all other colour was utterly absent.

'Report from the *Ignis*,' said DuCade's aide. 'They shot a probe into the planet's gravity well. The drone shows no trace of atmospheric or ambient energy output.'

'They were in the process of terraforming Phorus,' insisted the Angel. 'There will be signifiers.'

'Yes, my lord.' The major bowed slightly. 'I mean, no, my lord. There's nothing there. The probe's telemetry shows a world that is completely dead. Lifeless. Right down to the microscopic level.'

Azkaellon watched his master become very still, the slight movement of his great wings folded against his armour the only motion from him.

'Lord Sanguinius,' said the admiral. 'How do you wish to proceed? We'll be crossing Phorus orbit in one minute.'

'There's nothing for us here,' said the primarch, after a moment. 'Maintain course and heading in towards the core of the system.'

The Guard Commander found he could not turn his gaze away from the corpse of a planet as it drifted past the bow of the *Red Tear*, falling level with the flagship as it passed into the system proper.

And then, like the eye of an ocean predator rolling slowly to follow the movement of a prey animal, Phorus *moved*.

Shifting in place, the black orb began to change aspect, turning against its normal rotation, the scorched surface rippling. Alarms sounded on a dozen consoles as sensor-servitors detected events that did not tally with any planetary motion known or predicted by their programmers.

Sanguinius surged forwards, coming to the armourglass of the portal, his hands pressing on the clear barrier. 'Admiral! Order the fleet to extend the distance from Phorus, now!'

'What...?' Azkaellon struggled for a moment to frame his question, as DuCade snapped out the order behind him. 'What is happening down there?'

'I don't know,' his master replied, the answer sending a ripple of ice through him.

IN PLAIN SIGHT of every starship of the Blood Angels fleet, Phorus turned and turned, passing through an impossibly fast day-night cycle, moving as if its connection to the laws of nature had been severed. The dark sphere finally found a kind of equilibrium, presenting what had been its southern polar regions to the *Red Tear* and all those who watched through viewports and screen-relays.

New colour, a violent flame-orange among the dead black, emerged in points of burning light across the curvature of Phorus's ruined surface. If a being could have stood upon the planet and lived, they would have witnessed decapitated mountains painted soot-dark sinking into abyssal sinkholes, and great chasms opening up from horizon to horizon. Magma flame jetted high into the air, ejected from the deep core of the planet, hot enough that the hellish glow was visible from orbital space.

And from above – *only* from above – the full dimension of what was being wrought upon Phorus

was slowly becoming clear. At first it seemed that the planet was suffering a sudden and inexplicable geological catastrophe. The gravity of the outpost world went into wild flux as cracks wider than the reach of oceans spread across the surface.

Planets died this way, collapsing under their own mass and breaking apart; it was a common occurrence if one thought in astronomical terms. But never like this, without warning or precursor, seemingly triggered by the arrival of an audience to witness it.

Phorus was not dying; this was something else entirely.

Following lines of circumference, the monstrous fissures spread about the planet, and against all reason they propagated in perfect rows, one crossing over the other, each of them slicing through layers of blackened rock and burned ice. Landmasses splintered in a mathematical symmetry that was too precise, too flawless to be the action of tortured nature. It seemed as if an invisible artisan of godlike scope cradled Phorus in claws of force, cutting lines into the ruined surface as a man might delicately slice into the skin of a ripe fruit.

It ended as swiftly as it had begun, the planet briefly possessing and then losing a new atmosphere as a huge volume of toxic gases escaped from the flaming rocky mantle, boiling into space. Phorus's landscape had been grotesquely altered, sculpted into a web of magma-choked canyons, each broad enough to drown a hive-city. A grand design emerged from it all, at once seamless and horrific.

From the bridge of the *Red Tear* the sigil was clearly visible, burning like a brand upon the darkness. The lines of flame passed together and crossed over, one after another, so that they formed a brazen star with eight points.

The primarch broke the stunned silence that had fallen across the command deck, turning away from the smouldering corpse of the planet. 'It's a message.'

'What does it mean?' The major's voice trembled.

'Mark me,' said Sanguinius, showing his teeth, 'I will have the answer to that question, even if I must rip it from the throats of our enemies.' He delivered the words with cold, feral intent. 'If this is meant to unman us, the xenos have underestimated the will of the—'

'My lord.' Admiral DuCade rose from her command throne, and with one hand she pressed a vox-pod to her right ear. 'A priority message from the heavy cruiser *Chalice*.'

Azkaellon recalled the ship's name; it was part of the fleet's sternguard force, trailing a few hundred kilometres back along the line of the formation. The primarch shot her a look as DuCade went on.

'And the same report from several others now...' The tinny mutter of overlapping communications signals was audible from the brassy pod. She held it away, trying to compose herself as best a woman could when she had such news to impart. 'Primarch, the captain of the *Chalice* and several picket ships around the edges of the flotilla are reporting the occurrence of an unusual astronomical phenomenon.'

Sanguinius turned back to the great portal and peered out, past the fires of ruined Phorus. Azkaellon came closer, and as he did he heard the Angel release a gasp.

Sanguinius pointed, raising his gauntlet to the void. 'There. Do you see it?'

The Guard Commander grimaced as he looked; then he too felt his breath catch in his throat. 'The stars...'

Beyond the baleful red glow of Signus Alpha and the shimmers of its sister suns, the scattering of stars and nebulae that lay within sight of the *Red Tear* were changing. Azkaellon had the sudden impression of a colossal curtain falling across a stage the size of a galaxy. A great veil, impenetrable and stygian, blotting out everything.

Struck silent, he stood at the Angel's side and watched the stars go out.