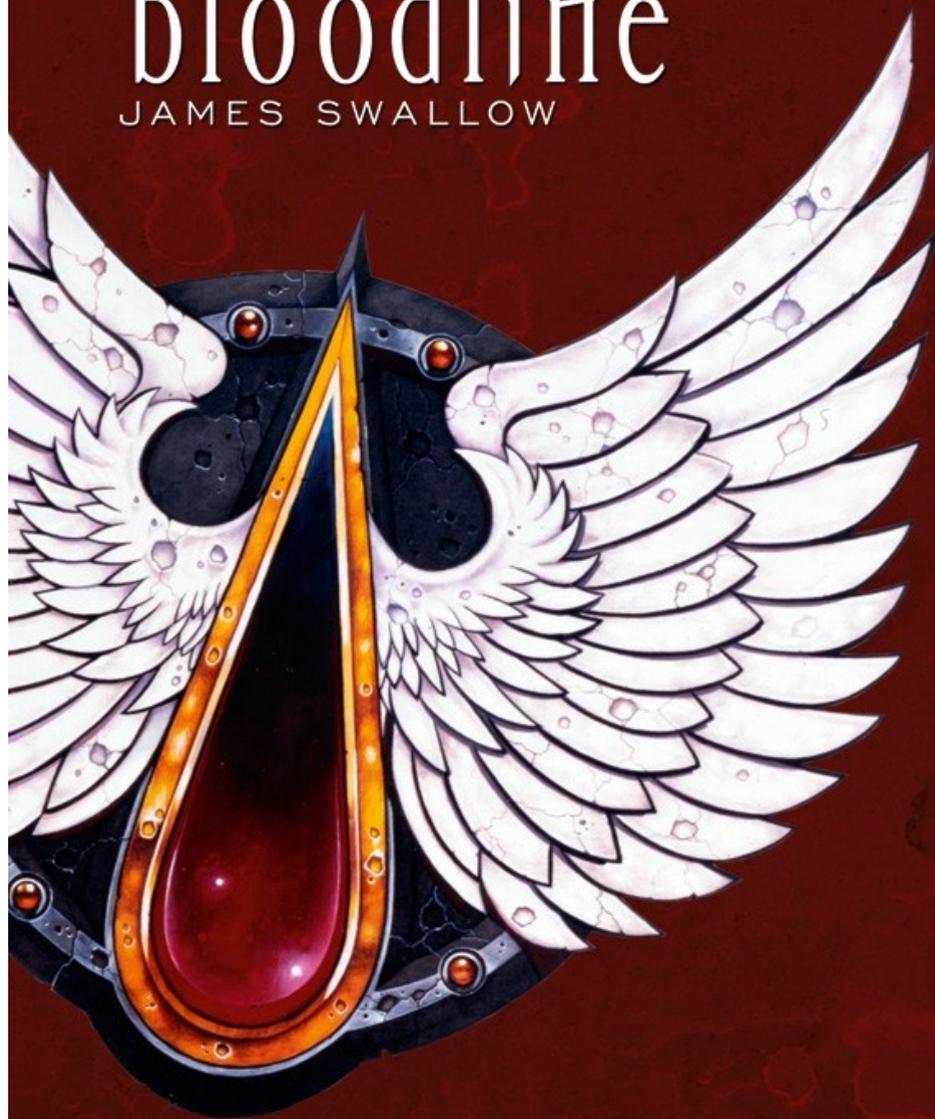


bloodline

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BLOODLINE

James Swallow

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INSIDE THE WALLS of the sepulchre, time had no meaning.

There were no windows through which to see the passage of night and day across the distant Chalice Mountains and the great red deserts of Baal, no mark of moments from waxen candles, no clock but the beating of Astartes hearts. Light, soft and oily, fell from lume-sconces in the stone walls, eternal and unflickering. It cast hazy shadows over the figures who moved about the chamber, their voices low and intense.

The sepulchre's perfume was one of metal and rust, a smell like wet copper; blood by the gallon had spilled in this place over the millennia, so much so that the scent of it had penetrated into the stone itself. In the middle of the chamber was a marble table, the white rock stained pink with the vitae of all those who had bled upon it. A Blood Angel lay there now, stripped of his wargear and clad only in thin cotton vestments. Black chains of tempered steel and manacle rings held him in place, for so great were his exertions that without them he would have broken his own limbs as he thrashed and tensed in agony; and yet the warrior lay not awake, not aware, but in some dreamless non-state that was neither wakefulness nor coma. It was only the pain he felt, his cries muffled by a gag of leather across his cracked lips.

Beyond the voices of the Sanguinary Priests and the rattle of the chains, the stifled cries of the warrior were echoed far above, down through the spiral corridors of the minaret that rose up overhead. Screams and shouts that would chill the soul reached into the sepulchre, from the pitiful ones held fast in the cells they could never be allowed to leave.

This place was the Tower of the Lost, the Tower of Amareo. Here it was that the Blood Angels brought their afflicted kinsmen when the nightmare gene curses of the Black Rage and the Red Thirst became too much for them. The dark bequest of their long-dead Primarch Sanguinius, the Rage and the Thirst lurked in the hearts of every son of Baal - and only in battle, in the final service of the Death Company, could it be given purpose.

But there were some that ventured down the crimson path to such a degree that not even that honourable end would suffice. The tower was their prison, their asylum, their purgatory.

And now another comrade balanced on the verge of joining them.

Corbulo, the highest of the blood priesthood, watched his brethren orbit the body on the marble table, taking readings with auspex devices and supervising the work of the medicae servitors.

Sensing his scrutiny, Brother Salel, one of the Sanguinary Priests, detached from the group and approached him. 'Master.' He gave a shallow bow.

'Lord Dante wishes to know if there has been any change in his condition,' said Corbulo, without preamble.

The priest gave a grim nod. 'Aye, and not for the better. The...' He paused, searching for the right word. 'The *mixture* grows more potent with each passing hour. I confess it is beyond the best of us to retard the process, let alone reverse it.'

'There must be some way...' Corbulo fell silent as he saw the slow shake of Salel's head.

'What he carries within him is like the distillate of a supernova, my lord. It consumes him, burns him from the inside out.' The other man sighed. 'No mortal vessel was ever meant to contain such greatness. This was inevitable.'

'You will turn him over to me, then,' said a new voice, one heavy and resonant, thick with old pain.

Corbulo turned to see an Astartes stalk out of the shadows, a Blood Angel in the night-black robes of a Chaplain. About him he wore steel honour chains bound to a book of catechism, and at his belt hung an ebon rod ending in a winged, golden chalice - the Blood Crozius, instrument of office for the Guardian of the Lost and the Warden of the Death Company. Brother Lemartes stared out at Corbulo from beneath his hood, his drawn, sunken face reminiscent of the death's-head skull that adorned his wargear. Lemartes was one of the few men in the history of the Chapter who had fallen into the embrace of the gene curse and survived it - many said he still lived within the shroud of the Black Rage, but so great was his will that he resisted it day and night. As such, he was amply qualified to lead the Death Company into battle time and again. Salel took a step back, unwilling to stand too close to the Chaplain's fuliginous aura.

Brother Corbulo studied him for a moment, and felt a curious pang of sorrow for Lemartes. What anguish it must be, he thought, to lead your tormented kinsmen into certain death, and each time remain the last man standing.

Lemartes held out his hand. 'Give him to me. He will find a kind of peace in the cells above.'

Corbulo shook his head, snapping back to the matter. 'No. *No*. Not yet, brother.'

'Then why bring him to my tower at all?' Lemartes retorted, showing his fangs. He pushed past the Sanguinary Priests to the marble table. 'Look at him. Release him, Corbulo! It will be a kindness.'

'It will be a waste!' retorted the high priest. 'You understand what he went through to bring the essence back to us? The battles fought and lives lost?'

Lemartes glared at him and spoke in a low whisper. 'What I understand is that none of that would have been needed if not for the failures of the Sanguinary Priesthood.' He leaned in. 'Brother Caecus was one of yours. His hubris opened our home to the forces of *Chaos!*' Lemartes spat the last word. '*You* are responsible for the Red Grail, Corbulo. *You* allowed our enemies to steal a measure of our Primarch's holy blood.'

He jabbed a finger at the warrior in chains. '*You* brought this upon him!'

Corbulo said nothing. The hateful truth was, there was damning weight to the guardian's words. The Blood Angel lying before him had been set on a quest to recover a vial of Sanguinius's precious vitae, kept alive for ten thousand years - and he had done so, wresting it from the grip of the self-styled primogenitor of the eightfold path, the traitor Fabius Bile. But in doing so, the warrior had been forced to find the one safe place in which to protect the holy fluid: he had injected it into his own bloodstream.

And now it was killing him. The powerful essence was too much, even for the enhanced physiology of an Adeptus Astartes. The warrior had barely made it home to the fortress-monastery on Baal before he collapsed in the throes of a crippling fever. The astonishing potency was destroying the Astartes, consuming his own blood and transforming it into something of incredible, lethal power.

'Rafen.' Lemartes intoned the warrior's name. 'He is strong, but not strong enough. Soon the Rage and the Thirst will consume him, and he will not return. We must let this run its course.'

'I believe he can survive!' Corbulo insisted. 'Each of us, every Blood Angel and successor is a Son of Sanguinius. Each of us carries the smallest measure of our primarch's blood within us, gifted during our ascension to Astartes—'

'The smallest measure,' Lemartes repeated. 'Aye! A mere drop, and that alone is enough to make a man into an angel of war! But Rafen has taken a dose a million times more potent! He cannot survive that.'

'So we take it from him,' said Corbulo, shooting a look at Salel. 'We purge Rafen of what he fought so hard to recover.'

'You... mean to employ the sarcophagus?' said Salel, his expression stiffening. 'Can such a thing be done?'

Lemartes shook his head. 'It is foolish to even consider it. If Astorath were here, Rafen would already have found peace at the edge of his axe blade—'

'But the High Chaplain is *not* here!' Corbulo insisted. 'His duties carry him far from Baal, and so the matter is left to us.'

Lemartes folded his arms over his chest. 'What would Lord Dante say of this?'

'He will endorse whatever path brings us back to equilibrium.' Corbulo looked down at Rafen's straining, tortured features, and tried to imagine the raging pain of the god-fire coursing through his veins. He could not let the warrior perish; Lemartes had cut him to the quick, and the guilt the priest felt was all too real. He had failed to protect the holy blood and allowed Fabius to steal it. He would not let the Chapter pay another cost by losing one more of their kinsmen to this matter. 'Take Brother Rafen to the Hall of Sarcophagi,' he commanded. 'Find *The Touch of Sanguine Dawn*, and place him within it.'

With a frown, Lemartes stepped back from the side of the table and allowed the servitors to gather up the twitching body of the Blood Angel. 'This will only draw out his suffering and make his death twice the agony. Where is your mercy, priest?' Corbulo looked the Guardian of the Lost in the eye. 'There will be no death today, Chaplain. I will not permit it.'

THE GREAT CHAMBER was some strange melding of hospice and sculpture garden. Dotted with plinths of stone, each crested with a great orb-like carving of gold and brass, the Hall of Sarcophagi pulsed with a heartbeat like a living thing. Trains of thick cables and fluid-carrying conduits snaked from one orb to another, others gathering in bunches that vanished through gridded iron plates in the floor. Above, life-support nodes extended down from ornate silver racks, threading into openings atop each sphere.

The smell of blood and stone was here as well, but somehow not so coarse as it was in the tower. There, it was the smell of death; here, it signified new life, rebirth.

Many of the golden orbs were occupied, each minded by a sleepless menial constantly at work adjusting the flows of gene-active philtres and the operation of nourishment tubules. Corbulo studied the sarcophagus closest to him; he knew it well. It was *Angel's White Sun*, one of the oldest in the Chapter's inventory, forged in the years of

the Great Crusade before the Heresy of Horus ten millennia ago. Like each of the orbs around it, *Angel's White Sun* was a master-crafted piece of machinery, so advanced that even the Techmarines under the command of Brother Incarael could not fully fathom the intricacies of its workings. It was as much a work of art as it was a device for remaking men. Inside each of the operable spheres lay a Blood Angel aspirant, their flesh drifting in a bath of amnio-fluids mingled with alterants and accelerants that worked at their genetic structure, rewriting their bodies cell by cell. These mechanisms, combined with the powerful implant technologies created for all Adeptus Astartes, could transform a normal human being into the majesty of a Blood Angel. The aspirants who entered the sarcophagi as men would one day emerge as warriors of Sanguinius - at least, those that did not die in the course of the changing.

Some Blood Angels, when not at their duties or called to battle, would come to the Hall of Sarcophagi and slumber inside the very orb where they had been quickened. Many, Corbulo among them, believed that such periodic returns to the womb of their rebirth, spent connected to the blood-sifts, could cleanse the soul and stave off the eventual encroachment of the Rage and the Thirst. The devices had the power to heal a man as well as to change him.

He hoped such a thing might save the life of Brother Rafen.

Corbulo walked the rows of the orbs until he found *The Touch of Sanguine Dawn*, a fine example of the most noble sarcophagus, tooled in white gold and platinum, plated in brass and polished glassaic. Like *Angel's White Sun*, it too dated back to the days before the Heresy, and it had been in service to the Chapter all that time, lovingly cared for by legions of helots and blood-servitors. Legend had it that *The Touch* was one of several sarcophagi carried into the battles of the Great Crusade itself, aboard the ships of the Blood Angel fleet.

Salel was supervising the menials; they had set Rafen inside and were almost complete in their preparations. Exsanguinator channels and vitae-guides had been bound into his flesh, blood pumps primed and ready to begin.

The senior Sanguinary Priest ran his hand down the open leaf of the sphere. Inside, the surface of the sarcophagus was etched with countless lines of tiny script in High Gothic, each one the name of a brother who had been quickened within it. He searched and found Rafen's name there, a way down the roll of honour.

'It is time,' said Salel.

Corbulo nodded and looked up. He found Rafen staring at him, in the first moment of lucidity he had seen from the Blood Angel in days. 'Brother-Sergeant...?'

Rafen's hand gripped his arm. 'I see...' he whispered. 'I see... *him*'.

'And he will guide you,' said the priest, signalling to Salel to seal the sarcophagus. 'To life... Or elsewhere.'

Rafen's eyes glazed over and his hand dropped as the orb folded shut like a closing flower. Corbulo heard the throb of fluids filling the interior, the crackle of metal as pressure within changed sharply.

Salel turned away. 'What now?'

The Touch of Sanguine Dawn shimmered like a jewel. 'We wait,' said Corbulo, 'and let the bloodline do its work.'

THEY LEFT THE chamber, neither of the priests once thinking to glance up at the gallery above; the thought to do such a thing was plucked from their heads and discarded. Unseen by them or any other, a single figure stood up there, half-shrouded in shadow, watching. His preternatural aura made him a ghost, and that was just as he wished it. Mephiston, Lord of Death, Librarian and master psyker of the Blood Angels Chapter, leaned forward on the balcony and peered *into* Rafen's sarcophagus, listening to the turmoil of the mind within.

He saw fire and pain and the colours of raw agony. The psyker's hands tensed into claws around the stone balustrade of the gallery, knuckles whitening. Rafen's psychic trace danced there before him like a stark flame in a hurricane, always on the verge of being snuffed out, fighting back with every spark of energy. Mephiston pushed his mind deeper into the maze of sensation, feeling for Rafen's conscious thoughts. Rafen was captured in the throes of a terrible fever-dream, a maddening flood of pain that manifested as baking heat and cloying dust. Mephiston could sense the warrior's self, reaching the echo of it. He saw a measure of what Rafen saw; an unreal, nightmarish landscape of horror and destruction. He saw a battlefield piled high with eviscerated corpses, awash in lakes of freshly spilled blood.

The Flaw. It could only be the power of the genecurse, he realised. The darkness within every Blood Angel given terrible freedom by the power of the primarch's blood. The force of it staggered the psyker, and memories of his own boiled to the surface, threatening to pollute the clarity of his telepathic connection - memories of Hades Hive and his own journey toward the madness of the Rage.

Grimly, Mephiston detached the invisible feelers of his psychic power from the turbulent mind of the younger warrior. He could do nothing to help him now.

As he severed the last link, the Librarian took with him one final image from Rafen's churning psyche - that of an aloof, winged figure clad in a magnificent sheath of golden armour, observing from a distance. *Judging him.*



'Take cover!'

Brother-Sergeant Cassiel heard the cry ring out across the landing bay of the starship Hermia, and threw himself into the lee of a support stanchion just as the crimson-hulled Stormbird fell through the atmosphere shield and collided with the deck. The steel beneath his boots resonated with the impact. He flinched as a howling, rising shriek filled the bay: the Stormbird's forward undercarriage had collapsed and it was riding on a pillar of fat yellow sparks, cutting a gouge through the decking. The proud winged teardrop of blood on the prow was scarred and wreathed in metal-smoke. The craft slowed and finally halted, moments later to be swarmed by dozens of legion serfs bearing tanks of fire retardants. Cassiel swore a Baalite curse under his breath

and approached the wounded craft. Beyond it, he could see the main hatch sliding shut like a gigantic iris; a sliver of green planet vanished out of sight. That would be the last he would see of the world called Nartaba Octus, the last any man would see of it as it was. The final few drop-ships were being taken aboard as the Hermia climbed up to a high combat orbit. From there, the ships of Task Force Ignis and the Blood Angels aboard them would conclude their work. The orders were clear, ratified by Sanguinius himself and struck with the signet of the Warmaster Horus Lupercal. All human survivors from the scientific colony on Octus had been recovered; the xenos infesting the planet - a horde of dark eldar that had defied full extermination on the ground - would be shown the displeasure of Terra with a space-to-surface barrage from the flotilla's laser batteries.

The alien reavers had fought hard, and with great tenacity. Cassiel had faced their kind elsewhere during the Great Crusade and punished them, but it seemed the xenos did not learn the Emperor's lesson. When they were done here, Nartaba Octus would forever bear the scars of this conflict as a warning to those who defied the Master of Mankind and his Sons.

But for the moment, more immediate matters held his attention. Reaching the Stormbird's hatch, he levered it open and extended his hand to help a brother exit the smoke-filled craft. He knew his face. 'Sarga? Are you injured?' he asked.

The warrior shook his head. 'No, Cassiel. But we have a casualty... Then the reaver scum damaged the ship with a drone... We barely made it back in one piece.'

Cassiel beckoned a medicae servitor to bring a grav-litter closer as a second Astartes emerged from the ship, carrying another over his shoulder. The wounded Blood Angel wore the white and red armour of an Apothecary, but the ceramite was marred with splashes of dark arterial crimson, still wet from the spilling.

Cassiel saw the source of the wound and almost recoiled in disgust. Through a rent at the waist of the warrior's power armour a length of something that resembled crystal, or perhaps ice, protruded from his body. Gruesome, sickly light glittered within the fragment, casting baleful colour across the Apothecary's pale face.

'He was tending to a civilian,' Sarga explained, his voice flat with anger. 'One of the sallow-eyed bastards shot him in the back. I killed it, but Meros had already fallen...'

Cassiel leaned closer. 'Meros? Brother Meros, do you hear me?'

The Blood Angel's eyes fluttered and he muttered something incoherent. 'He fought through a raider squad alone,' Sarga was saying. 'Must have thought he'd dealt with them all!'

'He's not dead yet,' Cassiel insisted, although Meros's corpse-like pallor put the question to those words. The sergeant placed him on the litter and moved with it, out toward the infirmary elsewhere on the same deck. His eyes were drawn to the glassy splinter in the Apothecary's side once more. Cassiel knew it for what it was; a soul-seeker.

The dart was the war-shot from an Eldar splinter gun, the venomous shard poisoned by conventional means, but doubly so by some monstrous form of psionic impregnation. So it was said, the toxin it exuded would not only destroy flesh, but also disintegrate a man's very soul.

Cassiel, like every servant of the Emperor's secular Imperium, paid little heed to such superstitious notions as spiritual ephemera, but he had seen the work of a soul-seeker before, seen it dissemble an Astartes from within... and part of him had been left wondering if the weapon had first killed the man's essence before it murdered his flesh.

Sarga was at his side, his expression bleak. 'He will die,' he said.

Cassiel shook his head. 'No. There's still time to ensure his survival. We will purge this from him.'

'How do you propose to do that?' Sarga demanded. *'Any attempt to dig out the round will shatter it—'*

'There may be another way,' said the sergeant.

It seemed strange to see them inside the steel walls of the Hermia's hull, in the compartment below the starship's infirmary. The very sight of the great golden sculptures lying here, set upon the deck plates, was somehow wrong, as if the contents of a familiar room had been upset and rearranged.

The lines on Sarga's worn, leathery face deepened. 'The sarcophagus...'

Cassiel directed a serf to guide the grav-litter to the closest capsule. 'Aboard ship on the orders of Legion Master Raldoron himself,' he said. 'Several have been distributed among the flotillas, to serve as critical care centres for the fatally injured.'

Sarga shot him a look. 'A wound that is fatal to an Astartes is a wound that cannot be survived by any man.'

'We will see.' Cassiel had the serfs place Meros inside the closest of the orbs.

'I cannot let this pass without comment,' Sarga went on. 'The shard in his side... It is tainted with alien sorcery! What if that taint contaminates the sarcophagus? There is no way to know what effect the psionic spoil may have—'

Cassiel silenced him with a glare. 'Sorcery? It is only a strain of poison, virulent indeed, but no more than that. It is not magick. And it will be purged.' He signalled to the helots to close the petals of the orb. 'The dark eldar took the lives of our brothers down on that blighted world. They will not take this one after the fact, and I will argue the will of my order with the Warmaster himself, should he see fit to challenge it!'

RAFEN WAS BURIED in sand. The particles were made of ground bone and flecks of metal, glittering redly in the punishing light of a bloated, hellish sun. With slow, deliberate motions, he dragged himself out of the clinging mass, the powder sluicing from him, pooling in the crevices of his wargear.

He found a bolt pistol and a sword nearby, both rusted and decrepit. He wondered if the gun would survive a pull of the trigger. The blade was a pitted, cracked thing.

The Blood Angel lurched forward, shaking off the last of the dust, and he stumbled; the power armour was sluggish, and he felt the full weight of the ceramite and steel across his shoulders. Heat in shimmering waves rose up all about him, and pinpricks of sweat blossomed on his brow.

Rafen grimaced; every movement seemed like a colossal effort. He felt uncharacteristically weak, as if his vitality was draining away. The Blood Angel set his jaw and drew himself up.

He began to walk across the desert battlefield, across the lines of the dunes against the harsh winds that bore gusts of stinging sand. He placed one foot in front of another, moving like an automaton. The masses of corpses and litter of blood he left behind, wandering into the dust and heat, searching. When he ventured to look back, there was nothing behind him but sand and more sand.

Through blurred vision, he glimpsed flashes of stark light off gold armour; or was that some kind of mirage?

No. The figure was still there, remaining beyond his reach, taunting him with its silence. Daring him to come closer.

Rafen looked away, trying to take stock of his circumstances. He had no recollection of arriving in this blighted, lifeless place, no concept of where he was or what purpose had brought him here. He came to a halt, for a moment losing sight of the golden figure as curtains of red dust whirled around him. He dug deep, pushing into his own thoughts, trying to dredge up the truth.

What is the last thing I can remember? He worked at the question, his sweat-filmed brow furrowing.

He remembered the journey back from the Dynikas system aboard the starship *Tycho*, the days passing in the wilderness of warp space. He remembered the battle on the planet before that, the dispatch of the enemy and the recovery...

He remembered the vial and the blood. Rafen's hand instinctively reached up and traced the place on his breast where he had stabbed the injector needle home. He remembered—

—the vial, the holy blood from the Red Grail itself, unfiltered and potent, kept alive for millennia by generations of clerics, coursing through his veins—

—gold and fire, lightning and sun; like nothing he had ever experienced before—

—fear that he would be destroyed by the brilliance—

—what a perfect death—

Rafen gasped and shuddered. The blood of Sanguinius coursed through him, the psychic power within it churning like nuclear flame. It had been too much for his body to contain; it *was* too much for him. He was like the ancient Terran legend of Ikarus, voyaging too close to the sun, burning and burning.

'Is... is this place death?' he shouted, his words ripped from him by the howling winds. 'Am I to be... punished for my... hubris?' Rafen found it hard to breathe. And in answer to his question, the sand became monsters.

THE RED DUST coalesced into things that bore the shape and colour of Space Marines, but they were hazy, nebulous forms that could not hold fine detail for more than a moment. Still, they were coherent enough that Rafen saw them for what they were supposed to be.

They were Blood Angels, after a fashion, but no stripe of that noble Chapter that had ever walked beneath the Imperium's light. These twisted phantoms were part parody, part monstrosity, hulking and lumbering things that mimicked the majesty of the Sons of Sanguinius through the lens of horror. Inverted, screaming aquilas decorated their armour, blood oozed from joints, and laughing, fanged masks showed eyes of glowing

red. Books of blank verse and babbling skulls dangled from the ends of barbed honour chains. The ghost-Astartes were abstracts, sketches made of sand by an insane artist. They attacked him, laughing in shrill voices.

Rafen fired the old bolter and it croaked, spitting out shells in puffs of flaking rust; but while the tumbling rounds found their mark, they did no damage. The point of each hit became a concave spattering of powder and the phantoms lost solidity, the crumbling mass-reactive bullets passing straight through without detonation.

Snarling, dizzy with pain and the leeching heat, the Blood Angel went to the broken-tipped sword and met the charge of the ghost-Astartes, swinging high-low for a lethal cut that would have opened any foe to the air. The sword bit, he felt it, but the sand-forms gave along the line of the rusted blade and let it fall harmlessly through them.

Rafen might as well have been using a rapier made of smoke.

But, to his dismay, the return of blows was by no means equal. The phantoms shifted their mass, compacting the sands almost to the density of rock, a split-second before landing a swinging punch on Rafen's jaw. As he was knocked back, a second and then a third granite-hard impact landed on his chest and sternum.

He fell back against the rise of the red dunes, light-headed, as they came at him again; and now the phantoms had no helmets to hide their faces. This time, he saw a twisted mirror of his own features snarling back at him, the image shivering and flickering like a poorly-tuned vid-pict.

Rafen threw himself forward and into the mass of one of the ghost-Astartes. It exploded apart in a torrent of grit before he could close his hands around its throat.

The sand ripped at the bare skin of his face and neck, clogging his nostrils and mouth, trying to suffocate him. He flailed around, like a man fighting off a swarm of hornets. Then he heard gunfire, the hard snapping crashes of a bolter, heard the sizzle of shots passing close to him. The dust ebbed away, retreating in a tide, re-forming, as a new figure crested the closest dune and came scrambling down the rise.

Rafen saw another Blood Angel - solid and well defined, caught in the haze of heat but certainly not one of his phantoms.

The new arrival let his weapon swing away on its tether and unlimbered a break-tooth chainaxe. The axe sputtered and choked, but the teeth still spun, and with quick motions he carved into the ghost-Astartes. Where Rafen's blade had passed through them like air, the other warrior's weapon hit firmly and shrieked through the mass of clogged dust and sand.

In moments, the grotesques were dissipating on the constant wind, discorporating until at last there was nothing left of them.

Rafen nodded warily to the other man. 'My... thanks, brother.' He saw more clearly now: the other Blood Angel wore the white and the crimson of an Apothecary, although the company colours and unit symbology were strange - not wrong, but somehow unfamiliar. The warrior's wargear was of an elderly design, the old Mark IV Maximus pattern that few Chapters still deployed. He met the Apothecary's gaze and saw that the other man was measuring him with a similarly questioning stare.

'Are you injured?' he asked, holstering the chainaxe. He walked with a limp, Rafen noted, favouring his side, and for the first time he noted the scarring of a deep wound

in the Apothecary's belly. The warrior hid his pain well, though; he had a strong face and eyes that seemed too young for it.

'No...' Rafen began. 'Yes. Perhaps.' He shook his head, and the world swam around him. 'The heat...'

'Aye, the heat,' agreed the Apothecary, and that was answer enough. He looked around, eyeing the shifting sands suspiciously. 'Those... things. What were they?'

'I don't know,' Rafen admitted. 'My weapons were useless against them.'

'Fortunate that mine were not, then,' came the reply. The other man managed a wan smile. 'I'm cheered to find you, brother. When I awoke in this place, for a while I feared I had gone mad.'

'We may yet, both of us,' said Rafen grimly. 'Tell me, how did you come to be here?'

'I...'

The Apothecary's face froze as cold understanding gripped him. 'I... Do not know.'

'What is the last thing you can recall?'

'The battle...' He spoke in hushed, tense tones. 'The xenos.' His hand slipped to the wound on his gut. 'They gave me this... The rest is darkness.'

Before Rafen could speak again, the other warrior caught sight of something over his shoulder and pointed. Even as he turned to see it, Rafen knew it would be the figure in the gold, watching them.

It stood sentinel, seemingly closer without having moved, briefly more defined in the gaps between the veils of dust that flashed past. Gold armour, an unmoving mask, furred silver wings. Watching.

'Do you see him?' Rafen asked.

'Aye. What is it?' The Apothecary's words were hushed.

The sands howled and clawed at their faces, forcing them to look away; when the torrent of dust abated, the figure was gone.

Far beyond where it had stood, in the distance a shape rose out of the shimmer. A pinnacle mountain, impossibly tall and wind-carved from stone as red as spilled blood.

'An omen,' said Rafen. 'An objective.'

THEY WALKED ON together, side by side through the howling cascade of the sandstorm, the distant tower of stone their only guiding marker in the featureless desert. Whatever the nature of this place, Meros's pragmatism did not waver in the face of it. The mountain was the only landmark in sight, so they would go to it. There was a certainty in that, a logic that the Apothecary could only feel as *right*. But quite how he could know that was something Brother Meros would not have been able to articulate.

It was strange: everything about him seemed unreal, detached from truth - and yet Meros felt the sure slip of the baking sands under each footfall, he felt his occlude tighten to tune his eyes against the hard radiation of the great red sun overhead, he felt the relentless heat upon his face. These things seemed very real.

If only I still dreamed, Meros thought. *Then perhaps I would know if this was true or some trick of the mind*. But Astartes did not dream, because they did not slumber - not in any manner that common men would understand. The catalepsean nodes implanted in his brain allowed Meros and his kindred to sleep without sleep, ever waking and

watchful even as their minds rested. And so, he had no mark against which to measure his current circumstance.

He glanced at the Blood Angel trudging alongside him. *An omen*, he had said. The words seemed peculiar coming from the mouth of an Astartes, resonant of old idolatry and superstition. And other things were subtly amiss: the other warrior's wargear was ornate and oddly proportioned, chased with much detailing, and tapers of parchment dense with lines of text that Meros could not read. All this, and his face was unknown to the Apothecary.

That in itself was not unusual - the IX Legiones Astartes numbered over one hundred thousand men under arms in service to Great Sanguinius, and Meros could not know every single one of them - but there was something about the dark-haired warrior that rang a wrong note in his mind. It was as if he did not *fit*.

Then again, Meros was just as displaced, stranded in this trackless no-man's-land with no understanding of how he had come to be here. His hand slipped to the place where he had been wounded. The memory of the shard burying itself in his gut was still fresh and he flinched as he recalled it. A sickening throb rang through him and he swallowed a gulp of dry air.

Meros glanced at the other warrior once more, trying to put the echo of the pain aside. 'I... never asked you your name,' he said.

'I am Rafen,' came the reply. 'Of the Fifth Company, under Brother-Captain Sendini.'

'Wh—who?' Meros forced the word out, his legs turning to lead, stumbling to a halt.

The name meant nothing to him. And the commander of the fifth... He was...

'Are you all right, brother?' said Rafen, watching him warily.

Meros began to shiver, his skin crawling beneath his armour. 'I... I...' A painful, prickling sensation washed up his arms, burning his skin like the touch of acid. With a trembling hand, the Apothecary pulled at his gauntlet and vambrace, disengaging the armour locks, letting them fall to the sand.

His bare arm was a livid red, veins bulging, flesh twitching. Unable to stop himself, Meros clawed at the exposed flesh and ribbons of epidermis came free, fluttering into the wind. He cried out even as the diseased tissue fell, scattering across the sands.

Impossibly, the more he scratched away, the more there was.

The decayed skin-threads danced in the air, and then to his horror, they began to *unfold*. Clever puzzles of discarded flesh split and divided, weaving into thread-thin lines that knit back into obscene forms; spindly humanoid outlines with elongated limbs and narrow, elfin skulls.

'The reavers!' Meros shouted. 'This is... their poison!'

The meshed threads of skin flitted and danced, and then turned back on the Apothecary, lashing out at him like a torrent of barbed whips.

RAFEN RECOILED AT what he saw, his hand snatching up the rusted bolt pistol from his belt, falling back to gain a span of distance from the motions of the strange flesh-forms. He knew the shape and the dance of them - somehow, these apparitions were dark eldar in origin, flashes of their cruel xenos hate appearing and disappearing in the ghosts of their faces. They looked like animated streamers of cloth, perhaps bandages

or garlands, coiling and turning to give the impression of a body beneath when in fact there was nothing there.

Whatever animated these forms, it was abhorrent to the Blood Angel. His erstwhile comrade was right on that matter, at the very least - even through the heavy dust of the air, Rafen could taste the sour tang of poison billowing about the lithe monsters. They were toxic horrors, spinning in a grotesque ballet.

The eldar-things rained down blows on the apothecary, lightning-fast and unrelenting. He tried to fight back with the rust-clogged chainaxe, but each sweep of the buzzing blade-head met only air as the threads parted to let it pass.

Rafen forgot the bolt pistol and drew the broken sword. He did not know the origin of the other warrior, but he could not simply stand by and do nothing.

'Away, daemon!' he shouted, wading into the whirling cyclone of whipping threads.

'Begone from here, or face your end!'

The rusted sword rose and fell, and in each place where the chainaxe's blunt edge had failed to score a hit, Rafen's blows cut the skin-matter into shreds. He fancied he heard screaming on the wind, coming from some far distant place.

Angry and vicious in their retreat, the tears of discarded flesh fluttered high into the air, coiling upon one another as if caught in the funnel of a whirlwind, and then vanishing into the unceasing murmur of the sandstorm.

The Apothecary was down on one knee, panting. His face was a maze of shallow scratches, and his bare arm a bloody ruin. He looked up. 'Rafen,' he rasped. 'Thank you, brother.'

'Brother?' Now the moment of the attack had passed as swiftly as it had begun, Rafen's confusion turned to ready distrust. He aimed the damaged tip of the sword at the other warrior's face. 'Are you really such a thing, or do you only pretend at it?' He took a step closer, bearing his teeth. 'Did you bring me here?' he demanded. 'I have fought warpspawn before, and won! I will do so again!'

'I do not... understand...' said the white-armoured Blood Angel, holding up his hands.

'You raise a blade to me? Why?'

'What breed of daemon tainted you?' Rafen snapped. 'Answer me!'

The Apothecary shook his head. 'These things you say, you speak in riddles!' He staggered to his feet, glaring at Rafen, his strength returning. 'You accuse me of complicity...' He shook his head. 'Those... those *creatures*... I have never seen the like. They are the avatars of the poison...' The warrior broke off, becoming pale.

'Primarch... It still runs in me.'

Rafen's broken blade was suddenly at his neck. 'Then perhaps I should end you.'

'You would do such a thing?' An expression of utter disgust crossed the other man's face. 'An Astartes, killing an Astartes? Brother against a brother?' He shook his head.

'Perhaps it is *you* that is tainted and false!' The Apothecary drew the chainaxe, his voice rising. 'When I came to your aid against the ghosts in the sand, I did not question your honour! Those phantoms had *your face*, Rafen! But I did not kill you because of it!'

For a long moment, Rafen wavered on the cusp of drawing back the weapon to strike, but then he relaxed his stance and stepped away.

'I do not know what you are,' he said. Rafen turned his back and walked on.

MEROS FOLLOWED HIM; there was little else he could do.

Once, in the time before he had been raised up to join the Blood Angels, when he had still been a child, still human, Meros had heard a mad old seer speak of darker powers and places beyond the understanding of men. The recall of that moment was so far distant that it was barely even a memory anymore. His past life had been smoothed away by the monumental changes that had made him one of the Emperor's finest warriors, so now all that remained were impressions.

But clear enough to return to him now, enough to remember the fear in the old seer's eyes. The warp is the sea of souls, he had said. In it, all things can be made and unmade. Everything is mutable, blood and time like sand...

Like sand...

Meros walked behind Rafen, following him up the lee of a steep dune, the constant buzzing dust plucking at him, ripping what moisture there was from his lips and nostrils. Even the nictating membranes over his eyes were gummed with deposits of blown sand, forcing him to blink and brush at his face. His hand came away red with the powdery deposits. Meros lumbered after the other Blood Angel, the only other sound the labouring of the myoma muscle-quads in their power armour.

He reached the top of the ridge and found Rafen standing still. Meros halted and followed the other warrior's gaze, up and up.

They stood at the foot of the pinnacle mountain, the spire of red rock reaching away into the clouds of dust—

But it was not a mountain. It had never been one. From a distance, the eye had been tricked to believe that was so, the scraps of the shape and image parsed to form what one expected to see.

Laying his gaze upon it all, however, was a revelation.

Rafen and Meros stood at the foot of a great statue, a carving taller than the highest Titan, the base buried in the red sand, the top visible against the shadow of the crimson sun.

'My liege,' breathed Rafen, sinking to one knee. Meros did the same, but unlike the other warrior, he did not turn his face away.

Meros looked up. He saw how the rocky crags formed the shape of voluminous robes that ended in a hood, and the carved planes of an infinitely noble face framed there. The patrician, shining majesty of Sanguinius's aspect looked down on them in judgement, his hands clasped before him, his mighty wings gathered in around his shoulders like a cloak.

'How can this be here?' he breathed.

'Where is *here*?' Rafen replied. 'I fear this is the answer. This place is death.'

Then Meros saw a glitter of gold and raised his arm to point at it. 'Who is that?'

RAFEN RAISED HIS head and saw the warrior in golden armour. He stood upon a ridge along the lower part of the massive statue-mountain, a carved line representing a fold in the robes of the primarch. For the first time, the Blood Angel saw him clearly. About a beatific face-mask, a broad iron halo described a perfect circle. Intricately tooled armour in gold and brass gave the figure a muscular silhouette that mimicked

the finery of a Chapter Master's ornate ceremonial wargear, but where Lord Dante would wear upon his back the engine of a powerful jetpack, this figure grew wings of shining white steel, glittering with the ruddy light of the swollen sun overhead. Great trains of oath-papers hung from his hips, fluttering on the breeze.

'No,' muttered Rafen. He saw it clearly and yet did not wish to believe it. 'You are a myth,' he whispered. '*An illusion.*'

'Who would pretend at the glory of our primarch?' Rafen heard the Apothecary say the words, disbelief equal in his tone. 'No one has the right to wear the gold...'

'*Sanguinor.*' The word slipped from his mouth. Rafen had heard the tales of the golden guardian many times, the reports of battles so ancient, so far removed from his experiences that they seemed more like fables, like the folklore of the nomadic Tribes of the Blood on Baal Secundus. He had heard these things, and yet he had never truly *believed* in them.

The galaxy contained many strange sights, many unknowable truths, and Rafen had lived his life in the face of them without credulity. It was how he had been trained by his late mentor, Koris. To see clearly, to challenge everything. The story of the Sanguinor had remained just that - a story. A tale told by the oldest of the veterans in the lulls between battle, a legend meant to steady the will. A metaphor for honour and courage.

And yet it stood before them now. The stories told of this avatar of all that was good and noble in the character of his Chapter, an undying force of pure will that would give its blessing to warriors fighting against the most hopeless of odds. The golden angel of vengeance who would descend from the skies in the moment of greatest need. The eternal and unending warrior.

Rafen had never truly believed, for he had fought at the spearpoint of wars that shook the pillars of his Chapter's history, and never seen the face of this legend; and to see it now, in this place, brought a sudden fury to the Blood Angel. He stepped forward, filling his lungs to shout. 'What do you want?' he bellowed, his voice rising over the constant winds to echo off the mountainside. 'Is this your judgement? Show your face! I will tolerate these illusions no more! Reveal yourself!' He raised the bolter and took aim. 'Or must I shed your blood to find the truth?'

MEROS SAW RAFEN draw the pistol and he felt the rush of adrenaline flood through him. The figure in gold could only be one thing, one being - for the strictures of the IX Legiones Astartes forbade any but the primarch himself and his personal guard from donning such armour. It could only be the Lord of the Blood, the Great Angel himself; and here before Meros the warrior Rafen was bringing a weapon to bear upon him. The Apothecary shot forward and grabbed Rafen's arm, pulling it up and away. 'What are you doing?' he snapped. 'Are you insane? You dare draw a firearm in the presence of your primarch?'

'Primarch?' Rafen turned on him, knocking him back with a savage shove. 'Whatever you see up there, it is not Sanguinius, the Emperor's Light find him! It is an echo at best, a shadow of his glory released upon the moment of his death!'

Rafen's words fell like a rain of stones, the force behind them, the certainty, striking Meros with the power of a physical blow. '*What did you say?*' he whispered. In the

next second he was at Rafen's throat, shaking him, glaring into his eyes. 'He is not dead! The Primarch *is not dead*, how dare you speak such lies? I saw him stride the battleground at Melchior with my own eyes. I heard his voice call me to arms!' Meros was livid with anger and confusion, unable to comprehend what would possess the other Blood Angel to voice such folly.

Rafen struggled against him. 'Then either the Rage has taken you, or you are a liar and a fool! My primarch lies dead, ten thousand years and gone—'

'*Falsehood!*' Meros's towering anger slipped its leash and he struck out at the unspeakable lie as it fell from Rafen's mouth. His blow hit home, knocking the rusted bolt pistol from the other warrior's grip. The weapon tumbled away down the incline of the dune and vanished into the sandstorm.

Despite the clinging, parching heat, a sudden chill washed over Meros as he found a moment of new understanding. 'You...!' He pointed a finger at Rafen's face. 'You do not exist. You never did! You are the poison, eating at my brain! You are the soul-seeker's venom!' It made a horrific kind of sense; Meros knew full well from his decades in service to the Legion's medicae corps that the dark eldar were masters of toxins, their cruelty extending to the deliberate, mind-killing methods of their tainted weapons. All this, everything around him - Rafen, the sand-phantoms and the flesh-ghosts, the mountain and the desert and the golden figure - all of it was a hallucination.

He was not here. He was somewhere else, perhaps still on Nartaba Octus, bleeding out his last while his mind lay trapped in a prison of dreams.

But Meros would not meet his end without a fight.

WITH A ROAR, the Apothecary came thundering back at him, the decrepit bolter across his back tossed away, the sputtering chainaxe in his grip.

Rafen saw the look in the other warrior's eye and knew the colour of frenzy when he saw it. He met the spinning, broken teeth of the weapon with the cracked edge of the sword. Each of the ruined blades ground against one another, spitting thick sparks, metal howling and crackling as it burned.

They were a match, these two. Blade met blade again and again, each time blunting on the defence of the other, each time scoring no better than nicks and cuts, never to the bone, never deep enough to cripple.

In the endless storm, under the unmoving red sun, they fought for hours, shifting back and forth, gaining and losing ground, their lethal dance without conclusion. Attack and riposte; feint and strike; block and advance. Each form in their battle schema met opposition and reflected back upon the aggressor.

Thick, chemical sweat sluiced from their bio-altered glands, mingling with clotted blood. The howling wind was the chorus to the grunts of their effort, the thud and clang of sword and chainaxe meeting, parting, meeting again. The heat and the pain dragged on both of them, dulling their strength.

'Why...!' The Apothecary spoke through cracked lips as their weapons locked for the hundredth time. 'Why will you not leave me? You will not have my death...'

'Your words,' Rafen gasped, 'my thoughts, false one...'

'You cannot reach me!' he shouted back. 'Your words mean nothing! You are the falsehood, *you* are the darkness in my blood! I am Meros, Blood Angel, Son of Sanguinius, and I deny you!'

'Meros?' The name cut like a knife across Rafen's heart.

The break-tip sword dropped from its raised position, and suddenly the warrior's guard was open, but the Apothecary did not strike. He held the chainaxe high, wary of this new tactic.

'What perfidy is this?' Rafen asked, weary and wrathful in equal measure. 'Is that name plucked from my thoughts? Does my mind turn against me now?' He turned and shouted toward the golden figure, who had not wavered from his place of observation. The warrior beat his fist against his chest. 'I know Meros!' he bellowed. 'I know him here!'

Rafen pressed the hilt of the broken sword to his sternum, to the very spot where his vital progenoid gland lay deep within the flesh of his torso. The progenoid, a complex knot of genetic material, was the legacy of countless cohorts of Blood Angels, removed at the point of death and implanted anew in the bodies of the next generation. They were the most precious of the Chapter's bequests, the living sources of the gene-memory passed on from brother to brother, assuring that the Sons of Sanguinius would live on forever.

The progenoid implanted in Rafen's flesh was such a thing, and he honoured the stewardship of it - just as the warriors who had borne it before him had honoured it until their deaths. Rafen knew the names of every one of them, every Blood Angel down through the passage of ten thousand years and more.

Meros was one of those names. An Apothecary, a warrior of note and record who had fought during the darkest chapter of mankind's history; the civil war known as the Horus Heresy.

He shook his head. 'It... is not possible!' In this place of delusion and dark nightmare, it could not be real. Rafen struggled to understand. The burning blood that even now coursed through him - was this the way it would destroy him, twisting his mind, unravelling everything about him, clawing at the threads of his history?

He turned back toward Meros, his voice rising. 'You cannot be here...'

The other Blood Angel did not pay him any heed, for his daemons - and Rafen's - had emerged from the storms to assault them both once more.

THEY CAME, AND they brought the night with them.

It was as if the crimson sun had never shone upon the red desert; now there was only a sky ink-black and scarred with stars that burned cold, the watcher upon the towering sculpture rendered in shadow and cool, aloof shades of silver.

Meros's poison attacked, the thread-things weaving about him, ripping into his skin. His armour... his armour was suddenly gone, and now all he fought in were his duty robes, stained with blood and patches of dark sweat. The heat of the day was gone, replaced by a bone-deep cold that sucked the energy from him.

Meros battled with the chainaxe, his questions to Rafen forgotten for the moment. Each hit missed, each blow went wide; his wraiths, however, scored every strike with perfect accuracy.

THE SANDS WERE trying to murder him.

Rafen brought up his hands to cover his face as a hurricane exploded out of the dust. Darkness and cold flooded in, as if he had been thrown into an icy lake. Distantly he registered that the dragging weight of his wargear had somehow ceased to pull upon him. All he felt was the scratching agony of the whirling flecks of grit ripping through the robes surrounding him, scoring his flesh.

He did not dwell on the changes that unfolded. In this unreal place, all Rafen could do was to cling to what he knew to be true, and draw that close.

The broken sword in his hand turned and rattled through the air, and did nothing. The sandstorm ejected him with a sound like laughter and breaking stones, mocking him as he stumbled.

THE WRAITHS DANCED away as they toyed with the Apothecary. Meros lurched from his knees and found Rafen beside him. The Blood Angel extended a hand to him and pulled him up. He met the other man's gaze.

'Will you kill me, then?' he asked. 'Or let them do the deed?'

'I understand now,' Rafen replied, nodding toward the silent watcher in gold. 'Do you not see, Meros? We are here and our daemons are here. Alone, they will kill us.'

Over Rafen's shoulder, the sands twisted into the form of a monstrous armoured Astartes, feral and abhorrent. It came on, clawed hands raised in attack. Behind Meros, the threads of skin reformed into something resembling a dark eldar Incubi, hollow-eyed and leering. Both shapes were becoming solid, real. *Lethal*.

'What is the bloodline?' Rafen asked suddenly. The words had a ritual, rote quality to them.

'The eternal bond of brotherhood,' Meros said, the reply coming to him from nowhere. 'The will to survive beyond death.'

Rafen weighed the old, rusted blade in his hand. 'This is my will, kinsman,' he told him, and gestured to the axe in Meros's grip. 'And that is yours. Do you see?'

A smile formed on Meros's lips. 'I do.'

'To the fight, then,' said the other Blood Angel, 'if it may be the last.' He rocked off his feet, leading with the broken sword, throwing himself not at his twisted doppelganger, but at the avatar of Meros's pain and anguish.

Meros moved at the same moment, the understanding coming to him. He swung the chainaxe at the phantom that screamed with Rafen's face, turning the blade toward the neck.

SWORD AND AXE found their marks as one, each killing the nemesis of the other; and in silence, the tainted dreams that tormented the Blood Angels were swiftly ended. The ghostly apparitions dissolved into nothing, captured on the winds and blown to the horizon.

'It is done,' said Meros, turning to face Rafen. 'We are freed. *Brother*'. He extended a hand to the warrior and Rafen reached for it—

—and time seemed to become fluid, slow and heavy.

The darkness was closing in, and all around the landscape began to ripple and fade as the certainty that underpinned the unreal place came apart. With no threat to make it whole and give it purpose, the desert was crumbling. The statue-mountain became smoke, dissipating on the never-ending winds.

A great, sudden fear reached into Rafen's chest and clutched tight around his hearts with claws of ice. Meros saw the look in his eyes and his expression begged the question.

'Rafen? What is wrong?'

So much, kinsman. Rafen tried to give voice to the words, but he could not move. He was frozen there, his flesh ignoring every command he gave it. *So much is wrong.* If the Apothecary truly was Meros of the Blood Angels, if he truly was the Astartes who lay as no more than bone and ashes in the halls of the dead on Baal, then in some way Rafen could not fathom, the man lived in another time, another place.

A place before the death of Sanguinius. Oh, what glory to live in that moment. And what horror yet to come.

With all his might, with every last moment of his strength, Rafen fought to utter a warning. From his mouth came a single, strangled word. A curse.

'Horus—'

Gold shimmered in the darkness. The figure in armour was there, and Meros did not seem to see him. With infinite slowness, a gauntlet of brass and shining amber raised to place a hand over the silent lips of an unmoving mask. The message was without ambiguity, the command unmistakable.

Silence.

Unaware, Meros held out a hand to touch the other warrior's shoulder. 'Rafen? We are victorious... What troubles you?'

But then the moment faded, and the sands became as blood, drowning them both.

THE TOUCH OF *Sanguine Dawn* opened and cast crimson liquid across the flagstones of the all of Sarcophagi in a steaming tide.

Wet with fluids, Rafen stumbled from the interior of the golden orb and fell to one knee, lie coughed and tore the breather tubes from his nostrils, taking ragged gulps of air. 'I... I am alive...'

'Indeed.' The dark voice drew his gaze up. He found himself looking into burning eyes that dared him to break away. The power of Lord Mephiston's will was almost impossible to resist.

Finally, he released Rafen and the warrior looked down at the tracks along his arms where numerous vitae guides had been implanted. 'The... blood...'

'Gone,' Mephiston told him. 'The measure of the Primarch's sacred vitae has been returned to the Red Grail, to its rightful state. Balance, restored at last.'

Rafen slowly climbed to his feet, as blood-servitors swept in to clean and reconsecrate the ancient sarcophagus. 'Then at last my mission is complete. I feared it would destroy me.'

The psyker-lord looked up, to the ornate stained-glass windows set in the walls over their heads. 'You have stood at the edge of death's abyss for weeks, Rafen. Lemartes and many others believed you would perish, and pass unto the Emperor's right hand.'

But you defy the odds once again.' He turned that baleful gaze back toward the Blood Angel. 'One might wonder if you were blessed. Or cursed.'

Rafen drew himself up. 'Whatever the Emperor wills'

Mephiston came closer. 'A question, Brother-Sergeant. What did you see in there?' 'Nothing...'. The lie came to him before he could stop himself. He thought of red sands, a golden warrior, a kinsman millennia-dead. Now, as he stood here in this place of stone and steel, what he had experienced seemed like the fantasy of a fevered mind. Rafen's hand strayed to his chest, to the place where his progenoid gene-seed implant lay dormant. 'I... dreamed. Nothing more.'

'Perhaps,' said the psyker. 'It is written that the Great Angel was possessed of a powerful psionic talent. Some say that he read the hearts and minds of his warrior sons as if they were open pages of a book. That he saw his own death at the hands of the Archtraitor. That to him, even the veil of time was a malleable thing.' He nodded. 'The power of Sanguinius resonated through his very blood. Even ten thousand years on, we know this to be true.' Rafen watched as Mephiston crossed to *The Touch of Sanguine Dawn* and stroked it with infinite gentleness. 'These great sarcophagi,' he went on, 'they were built to his design. They are links to his will. And one might wonder if, after so many centuries of use, if they might not have absorbed some measure of his eternal power.' He turned back to face Rafen. 'Do you understand, Brother-Sergeant?'

When Rafen spoke again, the truth welled up in him. 'I saw something,' he admitted. 'What was it?'

'A myth,' Rafen whispered.



'Open it,' commanded the warrior in gold. 'Do it now.'

'My lord—' Brother-Sergeant Cassiel tried to object, but a single sharp look was enough to silence his objections. 'As you wish.' He threw a nod to the legion serfs crowded around the flanks of The Touch of Sanguine Dawn, and as one they opened the petals of the sphere.

Dark rivers of crimson flowed from the interior, running away into drain vents. Light from the Hernia's lumeglobes revealed the figure within, a muscled form pale in flesh, breathing hard. With every passing second, the colour returned to him.

Sarga leaned in. 'The wound has closed. I see no signs of lingering infection.'

'What about the shard itself?' asked Cassiel.

Sarga nodded to himself. 'Destroyed. The sarcophagus disintegrated it, purged all trace of it from his system. He lives.'

'Get him out,' said the gold-armoured warrior.

The serfs did as they were ordered to, and moved to carry the Blood Angel to a grav-litter. He stirred, and pushed them away, standing on his own, blinking in the light.

'We... are freed...' he whispered.

Cassiel gave him a fresh robe. 'Meros. How do you feel, brother?'

He gave a nod. 'I live. Thanks to you.'

'It would seem so.'

Meros turned to see who had addressed him, and a flash of shock crossed his face.

'You—?' But then in the next moment, he composed himself. 'Forgive me. The golden armour... I thought you were... Someone else.'

'You know who I am?' The warrior was a towering figure, resplendent in the master-crafted wargear of a High Sanguinary Guard - the praetorians of the Primarch himself. Dark, shoulder-length hair fell about his gorget, framing a long, noble aspect.

'You are Azkaellon,' said Meros, 'bearer of the Glaive Encarmine and the banner-master. First among the Sanguinary Guard.' He met the other man's gaze. 'What do you wish of me?'

'I came to see if you would die,' Azkaellon replied, his voice cold and steady. 'I learned of your bravery on Nartaba Octus and wished to see the face of a battle-brother who would meet such odds. With those wounds, I expected to witness your passing... but clearly the strength of the Great Angel himself runs strong in your heart.'

Meros gave a shallow bow. 'I will not die yet. Sanguinius will tell me when that time is at hand.'

For the first time, Azkaellon showed a flicker of emotion; the briefest of smiles. 'You seem certain,' he went on. 'Tell me, Meros. How do you know that to be so?' He nodded to the sarcophagus. 'Did you... see something while you slumbered?'

Meros recalled visions of red sands, a golden warrior and a kinsman he did not know. His hand strayed to where his progenoid gene-seed implant lay beneath his flesh. 'My own fears made manifest,' he replied, at length. 'Now banished forever.'

'As it should be,' Azkaellon said, with a nod. 'Now rest, Meros.' He looked around at Cassiel and the others. 'All of you, gather your strength and prepare for battle. I have this hour received orders from our primarch. The Hermia and Task Force Ignis are to rendezvous with the rest of our Legion's ships.'

'Which flotilla?' said Sarga.

Azkaellon did not grace him with a glance. 'All of them. The Legion musters in its entirety for battle and new glory.'

Meros's brow furrowed. Such an assemblage of the Sons of Sanguinius was unprecedented. For the primarch to gather them all for war, the deed would be of great import. 'Where are we going?' he asked.

'Our liege-lord's brother, the Warmaster Horus Lupercal, has given us a duty that only the Blood Angels are capable of said the Sanguinary Guard. 'We are to bring the light of the Imperium to the worlds of the Signus Cluster.'