

BLOOD ANGELS: DEUS SANGUINIUS

A Blood Angels novel by James Swallow

FOLLOWING HIS TRIUMPHS against the forces of Chaos on the planet Cybele, brother Arkio of the Blood Angels is being worshipped as the reincarnation of Sanguinius, the Chapter's primarch. Only Rafen, Arkio's brother, has his doubts, but dare not voice them lest he himself be denounced as a traitor.

When Chief Librarian Mephiston arrives to investigate Arkio's claims, the forces of Chaos spring their cunning trap... Forced to the edge of no return, can the Blood Angels control their bloodthirsty nature or will this noble Chapter destroy itself in a vicious civil war?



James Swallow has previously written adventures in the dark future of Warhammer 40,000 for *Inferno!* magazine and *What Price Victory*. He has also worked on a number of novels, including *Judge Dredd: Eclipse*, *Rogue Trooper: Blood Relative* and *The Butterfly Effect*. His non-fiction includes *Dark Eye: The Films of David Fincher* and guides to genre television and animation, and scripts for videogames and audio dramas.

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from BLOOD ANGELS: DEUS SANGUINIUS

IN THE MIDST of all the madness, the warrior found himself a small corner of darkness where he could shut himself off, a tiny sanctuary of silence. It was his shelter, after a fashion, a bolthole in which he could shutter away the churn of doubts and fears and concentrate instead on finding answers to the questions that plagued him. The room had once been a basement store for volatiles and dangerous chemicals, and it still carried the tang of free hydrocarbons in the thick air, the very stink of them embedded into the dull iron walls.

He peered out of the doorway to ensure that he was not being followed, and then shouldered shut the heavy hatch. It met the frame with a low booming, and he closed the latches. The bioluminescence in the ceiling was cracked and dull, a thin trickle of greenish glow-fluid staining the cage around it. The chamber's only real light source was the grille near the top of the wall, which peered out at ground level to the streets beyond. Now and then, the faint snap-crack of a lasgun discharge passed through the vent, and the wave-like rush of a distant cheering crowd.

He removed the heavy hessian sack from the cord across his shoulder and dropped the bag to the floor. The delicacy he displayed seemed at odds with the huge, muscled figure he presented. Even out of the characteristic power armour of the Adeptus Astartes, the warrior manifested an impressive sight in his tunic and robes; he would tower over normal men even when barefoot, and the Space Marine filled the room with his presence. Gently and with reverence, he drew the sackcloth from the object he had so painstakingly recovered from the rubble of the street chapel. It had been buried there, forgotten

by the people who had once paid fealty to it in favour of a new subject of devotion. That thought brought the beginnings of a glower to his hard, blunt features, and he forced it away.

The hessian bag fell away and in his cupped hands the Space Marine held an icon of the One True Master. It was a representation of the God-Emperor of Mankind, there in his infinite sagacity at rest atop the Golden Throne of Terra. He ran his fingers over the old, careworn idol; it had been made from brass off-cuts, from a factory that forged shells for the Leman Russ tanks of the Imperial Guard. He placed it on an upturned wooden box so that it rested in the shaft of light falling from the vent grille, the rays of the tepid orange sun casting it with a faint halo. He folded his arms over his chest, hands like flat blades, wrists crossed; the fingers and thumb taking on the shape of the double-headed Imperial aquila, one eye looking to the past, the other staring into the future, unblinking.

The Blood Angel bowed his head and sank to his knees before the Emperor, then spread his arms wide to show his wrists to the air. A mesh of faint scars caught the light on his forearms, the silent trophies of a hundred battles. Across one limb there was the red ink of a tattoo, showing a single drop of blood framed by two wings.

'In the name of Holy Terra,' he said, his voice low, 'in the name of Sanguinius, Lord of the Blood and the Red Angel, hear me, Master of Man. Grant me a fraction of your most perfect insight and guide me.' He closed his eyes. 'Hear these words, the contrition of your errant son Rafen, of Baal Secundus. I beseech you, Lord Emperor, hear me and my confession.'

THE INQUISITOR RAMIUS Stele rose to his feet, his meditation at an end, and gathered himself together. He rubbed a hand over his brow, touching the aquila electoo on his bald pate, and frowned. The closer he came toward the fruition of his plans, the more it seemed to fatigue him. He sniffed and his fingers wandered to his nostrils; they came away with a trickle of blood on them, and the inquisitor grimaced at the dark, purple-black fluid. Cautiously, he dabbed away the liquid with a kerchief and watched the stain spread across the cloth, moving like a cancer over the cotton threads.

Stele balled the kerchief and stuffed it into an inner pocket of his robes, dragging the heavy coat of his office about his shoulders. The symbol of the High Inquisition, the stylised capital 'I' in brass adorned with a white gold skull, hung from a chain about his neck, and Stele fingered it absently. There were times when it felt as if the medallion was a noose upon him, weighing him down, tying him to the petty world of men. He glanced at the emblem, rubbing away a faint bloodstain from its surface. Soon enough, he would be rid of it, rid off all the trappings that bound him to the corpse-god.

Stele took a moment to look about him, at the walls where dull brown handprints and splashes of old gore still marred the walls. In the battle for Shenlong, this place had been the site of one of the Word Bearers Chaos Marines' most brutal atrocities, where civilians had been gutted alive as a penitent sacrifice to the Ruinous Powers. While many of the chambers in the Ikari fortress had been cleaned and reconsecrated, Stele had quietly ensured that the death room had remained as it was. Here, where the screaming souls of the brutalised dead had etched their pain into the stone and mortar, the inquisitor found the membrane between the world and the warp to be thinner. Resting here, letting his psyche drift free of its organic shell, Stele could taste the faint, seductive texture of the empyrean just tantalisingly beyond his reach. It was for him a far more divine experience than kneeling in false piety to the Emperor of Man.

Stele left the dank room behind and exited, to find his honour guards waiting outside. Towering above him in their crimson sheaths of ceramite armour, bolters at arms, they seemed less like men and more like animated statues cut from red rock. Only the brilliant polished gold of their helmets set them aside from the rank and file of the Blood Angels Space Marines. Stele paid them no heed. He had no idea of who these men were, their names, hopes and dreams, anything; in truth, he cared less for them than he did his automaton servo-skulls, which rose from the floor on gravity impellers as he strode away. The silver orbs hummed after him, watchful as hawks, with the Marines two steps behind.

At the junction of the corridor, Stele's lexmechanic stood

waiting, lurch-a-backed. Its head bobbed by way of a greeting. 'Your meditation is concluded?' The servitor became nervous in the confines of the room and it had elected to remain outside for the duration. 'Matters present themselves for your attention.'

'Indeed,' he replied. The last traces of the dark miasma clouding Stele's mind faded away, the seductive vestiges of the warp's caress retreating. He missed it.

'Your servant Ulan has descended from the *Bellus* with news,' the lexmechanic continued. 'A concern which she was unwilling to confide to me.'

Was there wounded pride in the servitor's voice? Stele doubted it; his helot's mentality had been so thoroughly expunged in its service that there was little vestige in it that could be considered to be a personality. 'She waits in the chapel for your indulgence, inquisitor,' it added.

'Good, I will attend to her before I—'

An anxious, wordless shout broke through the air and Stele whirled in surprise. His hand drifted toward the butt of the elegant lasgun in his belt, but his action was slow and leisurely compared the whip-fast movements of the honour guards. The Blood Angels had their bolters to bear in an instant, training their weapons on a trio of figures framed in a side corridor.

At the head of the group was a man, florid-faced with watery eyes. His clothes, and those of the two women with him, were worn and slightly unkempt but in a rich, opulent style. Stele decided that they were most likely from Shenlong's mercantile class, dispossessed land-owners still clinging to the courtly ways of life from before the Word Bearers invasion. 'My-my lord inquisitor!' said the man, lips trembling. 'Forgive me, but—'

He took half a step closer to Stele and suddenly one of the Marines was there, blocking his path like a crimson wall. 'Stay back,' grated the Blood Angel.

The lexmechanic turned on the other Marine. 'How did these civilians get in here? These levels of the Ikari fortress are prohibited to all but the servants of Arkio the Blessed and the God-Emperor.'

A pair of gasps fled from the lips of the two women at the mention of Arkio's name. The man made the sign of the aquila and bowed his head. 'Please, forgive me, lords, but it was in devotion to his name that we dared to venture past the wards below...'

Stele raised a quizzical eyebrow and stepped forward, gently pushing the Marine's bolter away. 'Really? And what devotion do you have to share?'

The man licked his lips. 'I... We... Hoped to lay eyes upon the Blessed himself. To ask for his benediction.' He wiped a tear from his eye. 'All that we have was taken in the invasion. We have nothing now.'

Inwardly, Stele sneered. This pompous oaf was weeping over the loss of his money and chattels while others on Shenlong could barely feed themselves. The man's words did nothing but reinforce the inquisitor's hatred for the corruption of the Imperium, the maggot-ridden carcass of a society that served only to glorify the empowered and the rich. Stele betrayed none of these thoughts outwardly. 'Those of us who show our devotion to the Blessed will be rewarded,' said the inquisitor. 'Will you do so?'

A flurry of nods came from the merchant. 'Oh yes, yes! For the one who liberated us, I would gladly give all that I can, and ask only for his beneficence in return.'

'You would give all that you can,' Stele repeated, allowing the hint of a smile to cross his lips as he studied the women. The resemblance between them was clear. The younger of the two, perhaps no more than sixteen summers, watched him with wide eyes. She was attractive, in a virginal, parochial sort of way. The other, closer to his age, had the docile look of enforced pliancy about her. Stele considered them both; perhaps he could grant himself a distraction. 'This is your wife and daughter?' he asked, the question trailing away into the air.

'Uh...' The man fumbled at a response and found none.

Stele nodded. 'Take them to my chambers,' he told the honour guard, and the Marine obeyed, ushering the women away under the eye of a bolter. 'I'll call upon them at my leisure,' The inquisitor threw the man a nod. 'Your devotion is great. The Blessed has a worthy servant in you.'

As he continued on his way to the chapel, Stele heard the man mumble out ragged, broken words of thanks.

RAFEN HAD NOT dared to enter any of the tabernacles inside the Ikari fortress, all too aware of what he would see inside. Troops of Shenlongi had taken hammers and chisels to the intricate mosaics and the friezes that the Chaos invasion force hadn't already destroyed, and pulled them up. The enemy was gone now, routed and killed, but the people they had briefly subjugated completed the deconsecrations the Word Bearers had begun. Only the object of their veneration differed. In place of sanctioned Imperial idolatry they had daubed crude renditions of the Blood Angels sigil and the newly-created icon of their Blessed Arkio, the golden halo crossed by a shining spear. The sight of it burned in Rafen's heart like a torch, but he could not dare to speak openly of the doubts that thundered about him, much less even consider giving a confession in such a place. There was no doubt in his mind that any words he spoke would be spirited away to the ears of High Priest Sachiel, and to have him listening to Rafen's heartfelt thoughts would be a grave mistake.

Neither could Rafen visit one of the churches that the commoners and citizens used, down in the city-sprawls crammed into the gaps between Shenlong's kilometres-high factory cathedrals. The sight of a Space Marine, even one without his hallowed armour, would never pass unnoticed among the populace – and just as the people had taken Arkio to their hearts in the fortress, so the man they called the New Blood Lord had also supplanted the Emperor in chapels all across the forge-world.

So here, in a dim and ill-lit chamber, in a street ruined by shell fire and abandoned by life, Rafen had created his own place of worship, some small and safe conduit to his messiah where no prying ears would spy upon his prayers.

'I must confess,' he told the brass idol of the God-Emperor, 'I was forced to forsake my oath to the liege lord of my Chapter, to turn from Sanguinius to my sibling... the man they call Arkio the Blessed.' Rafen bit back the tremors in his voice. 'I know not what my brother has become, but only that

my heart cannot accept what Sachiel and Stele claim to be self-evident. I cannot accede that Arkio is Sanguinius Reborn, and yet knowing this I took an oath of fealty to him.' He shook his head in answer to an unspoken question. 'This is not cowardice on my part, I swear. The Sanguinary High Priest Sachiel would surely have executed me had I not knelt before Arkio, but with my death there would be no voice to speak out against this insanity. Forgive me, lord, for this duplicity.'

Rafen drew a shuddering breath. 'Grant me insight,' he said, entreating in his voice, 'show me a path. I ask of you, what do you wish of me? On Cybele, against the assaults of the foul Word Bearers I was ready to give my life and come to your right hand at the Throne, but in your wisdom the warship *Bellus* came to our aid and with it my young brother. I thought I was blessed to see my sibling after so long apart... Our ties of blood are as strong as the fellowship of my battle-brothers.'

The Blood Angel recalled the instant on the war grave world when Arkio rose in their moment of blackest despair, with a plan to turn the fight against the Traitor Marines; Arkio's uncanny flash of brilliance led them to bring down a Word Bearers warship and beat back the Corrupted from Cybele. At first, it seemed no more than a chance insight from Rafen's sibling, but then the young Marine had single-handedly saved Sachiel's life from a daemon creature, rallied the men and become the figurehead which turned the tide against the Chaos forces. By the time they had left Cybele aboard the *Bellus*, there were men wondering aloud if Arkio was not touched by Sanguinius himself, and then came the moment when the Spear of Telesto seemed to prove the truth behind the whispered rumours.

STELE LEFT HIS guard at the tall copper doors to the chapel and strode inside, the lexmechanic's clawed iron feet clattering after him. The astropath Ulan stood in the centre of the chamber, arms folded. Her sightless eyes glanced up from the hood of her dark robes and she gave a half-bow. 'My lord inquisitor,' she began, her quiet tones a whisper of wind through gravestones.

He approached her, for one brief moment letting his gaze stray to the titanium canister that lay atop the altar. The

thought of the coiled power inside the long container made him thirst in a way that nothing else could slake. With a near physical effort, Stele turned his whole attention to the thin psyker girl. 'Speak to me.'

Ulan glanced at the lexmechanic, and Stele nodded, turning. 'Servitor, wait outside.'

The machine-slave turned on its heel and left them to their privacy. As the chapel door thudded shut, Ulan began to talk. 'Matters aboard the *Bellus* proceed, Lord Stele,' she said carefully. 'Questions as to the fate of the astropath Horin and his chorus have been suppressed. There is no other conduit to the galaxy at large now, save me.'

Stele made a dismissive gesture. 'You came to tell me that which I already know?' Without his notice, the inquisitor's trigger finger twitched, unconsciously repeating the action it had performed when Stele executed the *Bellus's* cadre of telepaths. 'I installed you aboard the battle barge to be my eyes and ears.'

'And so I am,' she replied. 'I have news. The warning that was sent from Shenlong to Baal, the message to the Blood Angels Commander Dante... It has been heeded.'

'Dante has replied?'

She shook her head. 'The master of the monastery on Baal favours a more direct approach, Lord. A ship is on its way. I have intercepted the shadows of signals from the depths of the immaterium. It will arrive soon.'

Stele accepted this with a nod. 'Do you know what kind of vessel? Something more powerful than the *Bellus*?'

'Unlikely,' she noted. 'There is but one Blood Angels ship matching the tonnage of the *Bellus* within operational range of Shenlong, and that is the *Europae*, the Lord Mephiston's personal command.'

'Dante would not send his lieutenant Mephiston without good cause,' Stele spoke his thoughts aloud. 'Not yet, at any rate. No, it will be a smaller craft.'

'The advent of any Adeptus Astartes reinforcements will jeopardise the strategy,' Ulan said flatly. 'They will be outside our sphere of influence, an incalculable variable. The matter must be addressed.'

'Yes, and so it will be,' said the inquisitor, considering the situation. 'Return to orbit and maintain your post. You are to contact me the instant Dante's envoy reaches contact range.' Stele toyed with the silver purity seal stud in his ear. 'I must prepare.'

'New arrivals will not be turned so easily to loyalty to the Blessed,' the psyker warned. 'Termination presents the better option.'

'You are too narrow-minded, Ulan. Commander Dante is about to deliver me a valuable object lesson.' Stele dismissed her with a wave of his hand. 'Go now.'

When he was alone, the inquisitor let his control slip away and he crossed to the altar and the metal box upon it. The grey cylinder bore sigils and purity seals showing the oaths of the Ordo Hereticus and the Blood Angels, some engraved in the titanium itself, others on strips of sanctified parchment, fixed by fat discs of sealing wax embossed with devotional symbolism.

He laid his hands on the surface of the container and felt the warmth radiating out from the object inside. The Spear of Telesto, one of a handful of battle weapons and hallowed objects forged – so the myths would have it – by the very hand of the God-Emperor himself. The inquisitor felt himself drawn magnetically to the umbra of the device, even now as it lay in quietus.

Stele smothered a surge of jealousy; the reaction was the same each time he considered the Marine Arkio and his affinity with the artefact. On the mission of the *Bellus* into ork space to recover the archeotech weapon, it had been Stele who wrested it from the grip of a greenskin warlord, Stele who held it high in victory, but only in Arkio's hands had the Holy Lance awakened. On some basic, animalistic level, he could not excise the constant core of resentment he felt for the young Astartes.

He shook the thoughts away. The higher part of Stele's mind, the ice-cold engine that calculated the intricate clockwork of his schemes, knew better. Arkio was the ideal candidate to wield the spear, the perfect subject for veneration by his battle-brothers – and in the end, Stele's guidance of his

path would lead the inquisitor to such power that would make the spear seem like a child's toy in comparison.

'MY BROTHER LAID his hands on the Spear of Telesto,' Rafen's words echoed off the iron walls of his makeshift meditation cell. 'The Holy Lance that Sanguinius himself once commanded, and then...' His voice trailed off, the memory as fresh now weeks later as it had been the moment it happened. For a brief instant, Rafen felt the divine radiance of the spear on his face again, the golden light shining off the teardrop blade as Arkio held the haft high in the Great Chapel of the *Bellus*. Try as he might, Rafen could not explain what he had seen that day. The sudden vision of his sibling's face melting and merging into a brief incarnation of the long-perished primarch of the Blood Angels, the winged Lord Sanguinius.

'It was his example that lit the way to this blighted world.' The Blood Angel's head bobbed as he considered the desolation of Shenlong. 'Fired by the oratory of Inquisitor Steele, my brethren clamoured for a chance to visit retribution on the Word Bearers who had desecrated Cybele. It was only Brother-Sergeant Koris and his fellow veterans who spoke of caution, and they were censured for it.' The words were suddenly flowing from Rafen's lips in a torrent; it was as if speaking them aloud lifted a great weight from his shoulders. The icon of the God-Emperor watched him with calm and unmoving eyes, silently listening to the Marine as he unfolded the tale.

He opened his mouth to speak again and a knife of emotion cut into him. Rafen saw Koris's face there before him, the craggy old warhound, eyes hard but never without honour. It had been one of the greatest privileges of Rafen's service to count the veteran as a mentor and a friend, but all the strength the Marine could muster did not stop his former teacher from falling into the dark grip of the Blood Angels gene-curse, the warped berzerker battle lust known as the black rage. Inducted into the Death Company, as all men who succumbed to the red thirst were, Rafen had watched Koris as the old warrior relived the great battle of Sanguinius against the arch-traitor Horus, played out in the depths of the Ikari fortress. 'He died there,' Rafen told his god, 'and you took him to the peace he

deserved... But he did not release his grip on life easily. His words... He left me with a warning.'

The moment replayed in the Marine's mind.

'Rafen. Lad, I see you.'

'I am here, old friend.'

'The Pure One calls me, but first I must... Warn...'

'Warn me? Of what?'

'Stele! Do not trust the ordos whoreson! He brought me to this, all of it! Arkio... Be wary of your sibling, lad. He has been cursed with the power to destroy the Blood Angels! I see it! I see-'

'Gone now,' Rafen admitted, 'and without him I felt cut adrift and alone, while my brothers took up Arkio's cause as their own. I saw no other path to take... I broke the disciplines we swore to and damned protocol...' He shook his head, calculating the enormity of his transgressions. 'Under cover of lies I sent word to the monastery on Baal and the Lord Commander Dante, in hopes that he might come to end this madness... But in your wisdom, you have yet to guide him here.'

Rafen opened his eyes and looked into the unmoving face of the God-Emperor. 'I beg of you, lord, I must know. Am I the heretic, the dissenter, the apostate deserving only of death? If Arkio truly is the Great Sanguinius reborn, then why do I doubt it so? Which of us is the one fallen from the path, he or I?'

'LORD INQUISITOR?'

Stele turned to see Sachiël approach, a questioning look on his face. The Sanguinary High Priest's battle armour caught the light through the chapel windows, glinting off the white detailing that marked his wargear. Stele stepped down from the altar and fixed him with a sullen eye. 'Sachiël. Where is Arkio?'

'The Blessed observes the trials in the plaza below, Lord Stele. He bade me to find you.' Sachiël paused, frowning. 'He has questions...'

Stele crossed to a set of stained-glass doors and waved his hand over a discreet wall sensor. On ancient mechanics, the glass gates parted to reveal a broad stone balcony jutting from the equator of the fortress. The instant the doors opened, a

wall of sound thundered into the chapel; all at once, there were chants and cheers of victory, the screaming of the dying, the discharges of multiple weapons. The inquisitor walked out into the noise, to the lip of the balcony, and Sachiel followed.

Below them, the vast open plaza fronting the Ikari fortress was a ring of shanty-built grandstands and huts ringing a makeshift arena. The floor of the stadium was littered with the dead and a few pieces of broken cover. Gunfire flashed and snapped back and forth as figures swarmed over one another, some armed only with blunt clubs and crude knives, others clinging to lasrifles or ballistic stubber guns. In the stands, the faithful roared in approval as kills were made and the numbers of the fighters gradually diminished.

Stele glanced at Sachiel. The Blood Angel observed the unfolding battle with an arch look, clearly unimpressed by the crudity of the fighting. 'How many so far?' he demanded of the priest.

'Three hundred and nine chosen at last count,' he replied. 'The Blessed himself is making the selections.'

Stele saw the sunlight glinting as it touched a huge figure in golden armour, drifting over the battle on angelic wings. As he watched, the messianic shape singled out a wiry man wielding two swords and nodded to him. He dropped his weapons and wept with joy, the crowd chanting its accord once again. 'One more,' said Stele. 'We'll have the thousand soon enough.'

'As the Blessed chooses,' said the priest. 'He will have his army.'

The inquisitor looked away. 'You don't approve?'

Sachiel's face flushed red. 'How can you ask such a thing? It is as Arkio commands, and he is the Reborn. I would not question his wisdom.'

Stele smiled. 'The Warriors of the Reborn,' he said, gesturing to the men penned into a holding area at the edge of the arena. 'A thousand of the most zealous and devoted to the name of Arkio... And yet, there are Blood Angels who hesitate at his decision to raise this helot army.'

Sachiel blinked. 'We do not doubt,' he snapped, 'It is only... new to us. Understand, inquisitor, we have lived our lives to

the tenets of the *Book of the Lords* and the *Codex Astartes*, and the recruiting of these commoners goes against those convictions.'

'We are past the time for ancient dogma,' Stele replied, 'Arkio the Blessed ushers in a new age for the Blood Angels, and the Warriors of the Reborn are merely an aspect of that.' He pointed into the crowd of tired, bloody fighters. 'Look at them, Sachiel. They have fought all day and still they would cut out their own hearts if Arkio demanded it of them. When he embarks on his glorious homecoming to Baal, the chosen thousand will accompany him. They will be the vanguard of a new breed of initiates to the Blood Angels, a new generation of the Adeptus Astartes.'

When the priest did not answer him, Stele turned to press him for a reply; but instead he saw the look of surprise on Sachiel's face.

'The Blessed...' began the priest.

From nowhere a sudden rumble of wind beat at Stele and he staggered back a step, forcing down the urge to shield himself with his hands. A shape, swift and brilliant, rushed up before the edge of the balcony and hung before him, blotting out the glow of the Shenlong sun. Sachiel fell into a deep bow and tapped his fist to the symbol of a winged blood droplet on his chest plate. The inquisitor looked up into a face of striking nobility, a countenance that combined a most patrician aspect with the promise of a darker heart beneath. A face that mirrored that of Sanguinius himself.

'Stele,' said Arkio, hovering there on wings spread like wide white sails. 'I would speak with you.'

'I SAW HIM turn death upon innocents,' Rafen's voice was heavy with anguish. 'By my blood, I watched my own brother cull men and women all too willing to accept murder, as if it were some horrific benediction. This is not the promise to which I granted my life as an aspirant. This is not the Emperor's will, I hope and pray that it is not. Arkio rules this world now by force of temper, with Sachiel as his instrument and the Inquisitor Stele as advisor forever at his side. It is not *right*. By the Red Grail, the marrow in my bones sings it is not

so!’ Anger boiled up inside Rafen and he came to his feet, fists balling, his words bouncing off the chamber walls. ‘I pray that Lord Dante will have the grace and wisdom to end this matter before our Chapter is split asunder beneath its weight, but until that moment comes I must answer the call of my blood.’ He took a breath, his burst of fury subsiding. ‘Until a sign comes to me, bright and undeniable, my heart will set the compass of my deeds from this moment forth.’

Rafen laid a hand on the icon of the Emperor and bowed his head once again. ‘Hear me, hear the pledge of Rafen, son of Axan, child of the Broken Mesa clan, Blood Angel and Adeptus Astartes. I recant the false oath I have taken to Arkio the Blessed and in its stead I restore my allegiance to Sanguinius and the God-Emperor of Mankind. This I swear, my blood, my body, my soul as the price.’ The declaration seemed to take all the energy from him, and Rafen staggered back a step. ‘This I swear,’ he repeated.

After a long moment, he gathered himself together and opened the hatch, pausing to throw the holy icon a last glance. Here, in this forgotten place, the symbol would lie safe from the hands of those who sought to revise their beliefs in the face of Arkio’s new Blood Crusade. ‘There is one thing of which I have absolutely no doubt,’ he told the statue. ‘A single act for which I know I and I alone will be responsible. By what means and when are unclear to me, but my brother Arkio will perish and I shall be the one to end him. I know it in my blood, and it damns me.’

Rafen left the room behind, the leaden burden of his dilemma pressing down upon him as he stepped back into the Shenlong sunlight. He picked his way through the ruined streets and did not look back.

Before him, the vast cone of the Ikari fortress rose to fill the horizon like a monstrous volcanic mountain.

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