



HAMMER & ANVIL

JAMES SWALLOW

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HAMMER & ANVIL

James Swallow

The Sisters of Battle are the Emperor's most devout worshippers, fierce warriors preaching the purity of the Imperium and scourging their enemies with bolter and flamer. On a distant world, the Ecclesiarchy outpost of Sanctuary 101 was wiped out by an implacable foe – the fearless, soulless necrons. Now, a mission of the sisterhood has returned to reconsecrate the site – but the metallic nightmares still lurk in the darkness, guarding a secret that has lain dormant for millennia. A vicious battle will be fought – one that can only end in the total destruction of the unrelenting xenos, or the annihilation of the proud Adepta Sororitas.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Swallow is an award-winning *New York Times* bestselling author, who lives in London. His fiction from the dark future of Warhammer 40,000 includes the Horus Heresy novels *Nemesis* and *The Flight of the Eisenstein*; *Faith & Fire*; *Black Tide*, *Red Fury*; *3 Deus Encarmine* and *Deus Sanguinius* (collected as *The Blood Angels Omnibus*); the audio books *Red & Black*, *Heart of Rage*, *Oath of Moment* and *Legion of One*; and short stories for *Inferno!*, *What Price Victory*, *Tales of Heresy*, *Legends of the Space Marines*, *The Book of Blood*, *Age of Darkness* and *Victories of the Space Marines*.

His other credits include the non-fiction book *Dark Eye: The Films of David Fincher*, writing for *Star Trek Voyager*, scripts for videogames and audio dramas.

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IT WAS DIFFICULT to reckon the passage of time. Little of the weak light of the yellow-white Kavar sun penetrated through the swirling clouds, so charting the advance of the hours proved fruitless. Instead Decima went on, one foot in front of the other, watching the sand shift beneath her boots. More than once she fell, losing her step as she crested one of the dunes, tumbling, then scrambling after the container when it rolled away, afraid it might split open. But it remained intact; the metal pod was crafted using lost techniques from the Dark Age of Technology, and would have survived a fall from orbit unharmed.

The desert played other tricks on her. At times, Decima thought she saw shapes at the very edge of her perception, ghostly forms close by, but not so close that she could define them. Humanoid shapes? Or was it just the dance of the dust in the wind and her tired mind making patterns where none existed?

She remembered the glimpses she had caught of the things that had come to kill them, the forms that ended Elspeth and the others. In the gloomy corridors of the convent, the attackers had first shut down the fusion reactor and plunged the outpost into darkness as the storm took hold. Decima did not know how, as the power core was locked away behind thick shield doors and protected by gun-servitors. Still, it had been done.

So, in the dark, then. She only had impressions of them, blink-fast moments captured by the cruciform flare of muzzle flashes. Emaciated things that reflected any illumination, like torchlight off tarnished brass or the muddy rainbow of oil on water. A sickly green glow following them wherever they went. Silver cutting blades. Those things, and the screaming. Inhuman sounds of tortured air molecules being torn apart before lances of searing light. Decima remembered the purple after-images burned into her retinas, even as she tried to forget the smell of ancient soil and warm blood.

The sounds of the conflict, the skirl of beam fire and the chattering of bolters, these had followed her out onto the sands as she fled with the burden in tow. The noises were soon swallowed up by the clouds, along with any sight of the convent's central tower, the keep and outer guardian walls. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

She passed beyond the outer markers, skirting the narrow buttes that surrounded the valley where the outpost lay, and went on into the open erg. Decima had never ventured so far from the convent alone and without a vehicle.

As she began to wonder if she was far enough away, the digicompass transmitted a vibrating pulse down to the palm of her glove. Decima hesitated, studying it. Yes. She had entered the canyon at the base of the wind-sculpted towers far to the west, a point of relative calm among the more horrific of the planet's storm zones. The worst could sandblast flesh and strip an unprotected woman to the bone, or bury a stalled transport so it might never be found again. Lives had been lost from the convent's population through both manners of death over the years.

Decima fell into the lee of a tall, spindly finger of ruddy marble and shook dust from where it pooled in the clefts of her wargear, her combat cloak snapping as the wind ran over it. The ground became rocky here, islands of stone protruding from the sand, but in turn the airborne dust was harsher. Fines of powder became specks of flint, and Decima narrowed her eyes, pulling the shemagh tighter.

Working as quickly as she dared, the Battle Sister found a spot out of the weak sunlight and twisted a single grenade into the sand, turning it until it was almost hidden in the dust. She yanked the primer pin and sprinted away to a safe distance. Like the sounds of death and conflict from the outpost, the muffled grunt of the detonation was flattened and consumed by the sandstorm.

Decima brought the container back to the hollow her makeshift demolition had cut and climbed in with it. The grenade had excavated a space large enough to serve as a foxhole, but the woman had

other plans. With great care, she laid the metal container at the bottom of the hollow and took a precise reading from the compass; then, using the butt of her bolter as a makeshift shovel, Decima started to bury the pod.

She had only made two or three passes when she paused, her heart tight in her chest. The Sororitas thought about what she was doing, about the priceless value of the object she was consigning to the embrace of the desert, and it stopped her dead. Decima imagined herself like a mother interring the corpse of an infant, suddenly afraid to turn another spade of earth over its face for fear it might suddenly awaken in terror. Was it right to do this? To bury such a treasure in this wilderness where it might never be found again?

The artefact must never fall to the xenos. The voice of Canoness Agnes echoed in her thoughts. *This is my last command to you, Sister Decima.*

Her last command. By now, the canoness had to be dead. The battle had been lost even before Decima had fled. She had known it was inevitable when the order had been given. All human life at the outpost colony on Sanctuary 101 was in the process of being exterminated, and Decima's deed was the final action to be taken.

But what will happen to me? The thought crystallised for the first time in Decima's mind, and she trembled. She allowed herself to think beyond her mission, beyond the collective of the Order's will and to her own survival. She would bury the capsule and then... Return to the convent? Sit atop these rocks and wait to starve? The nearest Imperial colony was months away across the savage currents of the warp. Rescue, if it were ever to come, would mean a long, long wait—

There was motion in the sand near her boots. Something was in the hollow with her, lurking in the gravel. Something like silver or tarnished brass.

Decima exploded from the pit and rolled away, bringing up her boltgun, working the slide to clear it of any fouling by force of habit. Clumps of oily sand puffed out from the weapon as half-glimpsed shapes moved through the veil of the dust cloud, closing in. She saw gelid emerald light burning within iron skulls and limbs made of dead metal.

The bolter spoke, and she made every shot count, blowing open frames that mocked the bone-forms of human ribcages. Others mantled their fallen in silence, drawing a closing ring around her, advancing, inexorable.

Decima killed them – or so it seemed – and they melted into the sand, crackling green fire dissembling them, fading like the things from her sight. They resembled machines, but on some level the Battle Sister knew that they were nothing so simple. There was an ephemeral quality about their manner and motion, an unquantifiable something that hinted at a deeper truth. Whatever these things were, a living mind animated them. No machine could ever radiate such malice. This understanding came to Decima like a blow, even as she knew it would count for nothing.

The bolter ran dry, the slide locking open as the clip was spent, and Sister Decima, last survivor of Sanctuary 101, regretted that she had not saved the final round for herself.