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# THE WEAKNESS OF OTHERS

LAURIE GOULDING



A KHARN THE BETRAYER SHORT STORY

# **Table of Contents**

[Cover](#)

[The Weakness of Others](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Legal](#)

[eBook license](#)

# THE WEAKNESS OF OTHERS

*by Laurie Goulding*

The flamer is bulky and unfamiliar in my grip, and far heavier than my holstered pistol. Half-remembered rote training guides my hand. *Open the reservoir, adjust the ignition angle. Thumb the safety and squeeze the trigger.*

From within, there are more screams and the reports of unspent bolt rounds detonating in their magazines. The heat of the flames drives steam from the frozen earth all around.

Movement.

The crash of an armoured body flailing to the ground. Footfalls. Frantic.

Hefting the flamer in my off-hand, I swing Gorechild in a wide arc. My timing is perfect – the shrieking teeth of the chainaxe greet the burning man in the instant that he emerges from the archway, cleaving through armoured gorget, meat and bone. His head strikes the floor before he would even have registered the fresh pain of the blow.

The tally reading in my visor scores the kill. *1,302.*

A small red skull icon flashes next to it as the telemeter transmits the location. I do not know who receives the data. All I know is that my kills are always waiting for me when I return, fresh skulls jumbled into heaps at my arming post.

None shall surpass my count this day.

The old Legion had encouraged ‘The Contest’. Certainly, it was already an established tradition when I first stood before Centurion Gruner upon the training grounds of Bodt, along with the other recruits assigned to his instruction. A Terran-born veteran of the Unification Wars, the Master of Neophytes had eyed us for a long while before growling in his clipped Jermanic accent.

‘You are weak. I see that just from looking at you. Stronger than your friends

and family ever were – you can thank the Emperor for that. But I don't think a single one of you has the fire inside.'

We shuffled nervously under the gaze of this giant, his bare torso rippling with transhuman strength and sporting an elaborate tattoo of some canine predator tearing into its prey. Though our enhancement surgery scars were still fresh, we had been deemed ready to begin our legionary training.

'We do not start with boltguns or the axe,' he continued. 'And I don't tell you how to tie your boots. Instead I show how the War Hounds know who is best.'

From the burlap sack at his hip, the centurion produced an object and held it out to us reverentially. Empty eye sockets stared from between his oversized fingers in the pale dawn light, the smooth bone polished almost to a sheen.

'All legionaries compete in The Contest. The rules are simple – first to reach one thousand skulls wins.'

Murmured excitement rippled through the group. One neophyte raised his hand.

'My lord, what do we win?'

Gruner shrugged. 'Don't know. No one has come close enough yet.'

As he carefully replaced the skull, I warily raised my own hand.

'My lord... where do we get the skulls from?'

The tattooed giant had roared with laughter, drawing the attention of those other legionaries and neophytes close enough to witness my first humiliation.

I dismiss the memory with several twitching blinks. My senses return. I shoulder the flamer and quicken my pace.

The main causeway is treacherous underfoot, the blood which before had run freely upon the flagstones now freezing in the plummeting temperatures of the Skalathrax night. Hoarfrost rimes the armour of the fallen, marked with darker patches of cinnabar where Gorechild has done his work.

True enough, I have never known cold like it. Not the deep cold of the tundra on Gedren V, nor the icy gales that scoured the mountain passes on Tekeli. This is a cold which burns and bites. A cold which threatens to steal away the fire inside.

But not from me.

Victory or death. The sons of Angron will never again know defeat. I will not allow it. Our foes will fall, or we will offer ourselves to Khorne in their stead.

To the west, the keening of another sonic attack echoes in the darkness. My boots skid upon loose debris as I double back towards the sound, the rage

building within me once more. Fulgrim may have forsaken them, but his bastard children shall pay the price for hi—

Too late, I spot the ambush. Time slows.

The shadows around me erupt in a blaze of bolter fire, shells detonating and peppering the flesh of my bare arm with shrapnel. In the milliseconds before I leap, I count three shooters and another concealed figure.

My pistol is in my hand before I leave the ground, and a burst of incandescent plasma vaporises the head of the nearest attacker. Momentary regret over the loss of the skull. *1,303.*

A stray bolt strikes my breastplate, sending my leap wide and forcing me to dispatch the concealed warrior with an improvised backhand strike. I whirl around to cleave through the boltgun of the third before slamming him insensible to the floor and hurling Gorechild to the left. The chainaxe bites deep into the throat of the last legionary, and arterial blood strikes the vaulted roof of the arcade. *1,305.*

The rage fades. I stand over the prone warrior as he scrabbles to find a weapon.

Words. Anger. His face is familiar to me.

*Gruner.*

Backed into a corner amongst the bodies of our fallen brethren, he speaks of madness and of betrayal. He curses me, the berserker champion who would strike down his own Legion once more.

Whelp-master. Who are you to doubt me?

I was the first to stand upon the walls of the Imperial Palace. I was the last to be borne away from Terra, my body broken by the slaying of *one million* of the Emperor's lackeys through the breach at Lions Gate. None shall *ever* surpass my count.

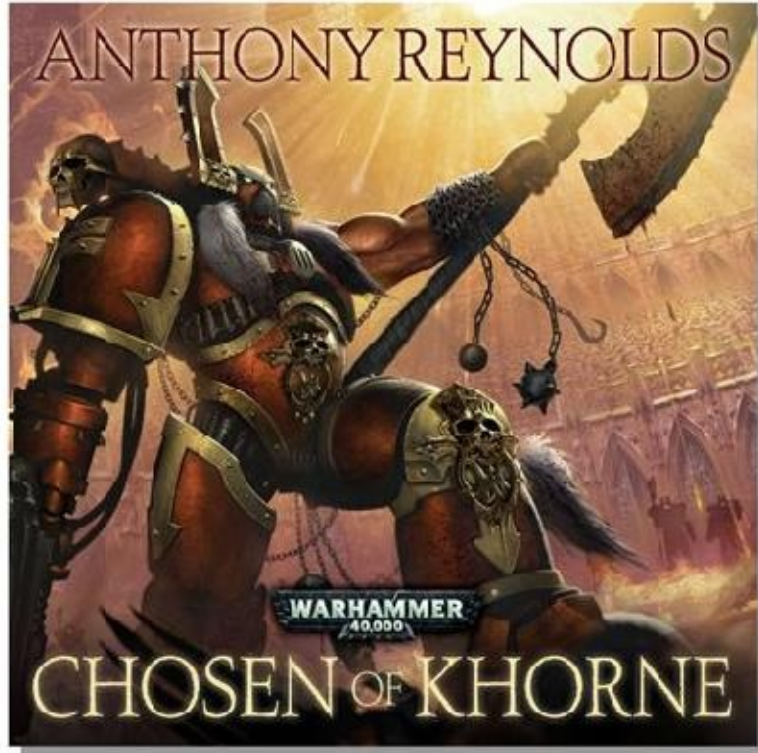
The Contest is over. I won.

The weakness of others is the reason we were defeated. Weakness in the other Legions, and our own. If this is all that remains of the honour of the World Eaters, then I am glad to be called their betrayer.

*1,306.*

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

LAURIE GOULDING was born in London, grew up in Burton-upon-Trent, and then experienced a slight regression in Winchester before finally settling in Nottingham. As the original director of Black Library TV he would regularly make the authors uncomfortable by sticking a camera in their faces – now he achieves the same effect by wielding a red pen as a member of the editorial team. His own writing allows him to exercise the enthusiasm born of more than twenty years as a Games Workshop hobbyist, and proves that an obsessive and encyclopaedic knowledge of the Warhammer universes can be a useful thing after all.



Khâm the Betrayer takes to the field of battle as the champion of his old comrade Argus Brond, but his own motives go far beyond the petty squabbling of rival Chaos warlords...

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