

GOLD BLOOD

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WARHAMMER
40,000

AN APOCALYPSE SHORT STORY

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COLD BLOOD

David Guymer

The thin atmosphere rifled across Circios's brazen armour, whistling through the vents of his idling jump pack. Particulates ricocheted off him and he closed his eyes, imagining he was swooping through stubber-fire, stomach rippling with the thrill of the descent. His two hearts beat a furious polyrhythm with the altitude runes that flickered down his helmet's internal display.

7,500 m... 7,200 m...

The moon was so small he could almost reach out and crush it in his fist. Black lightened to cold grey at the horizon, curving far below like the edge of a coin. The light of a white dwarf star provided a distant warmth, its glimmer barely discernible from the stars that flooded one hemisphere of the sky. The other half was cold, dead and dark, benighted by the monstrous mass of the moon's parent world. Circios could almost feel the pull of the gas giant on his back, but still he fell.

... 6,800 m... 6,200 m...

He had not yet reached terminal velocity. Nor would he. The air was too thin for that.

... 5,400 m ... 4,200 m... 1,900 m...

Some lost themselves to the power of flight.

Circios flew only that he might fall.

The surface expanded like an abyss, as cratered as his own armour, as dark as his own violent dreams.

... 800 m ... 200 m...

He held on to the last...

... 100 m.

One day.

A brief splutter of thrust arrested his descent. The ancient roar of afterburners trembled through his armour, then nothing. No sound but the hiss of stabilisers, the metronomic *click-click-click* in his ear of a scanning vox. It was the silence

of space. His recycled breath, tasting of too-old blood, was suddenly loud, and despite the methane crystals skittering across his power armour, he felt warm.

The darkness flared with petrochem bursts as the other four talons of the assault wing followed his lead, silent in the barren troposphere as solar flares. Aside from the crushed heart of the Bloodlords, re-effected upon the left pauldron in fresh blood each day, the wing bore no unifying insignia. They came to spill blood and once it was spent they would fly.

Chapter, company, rank, loyalty; what were they but bonds of blood?

Of the four, Agon was easiest to distinguish. Like Circios, he was a veteran of the Abyssal Crusade that had so debased their lineage. His helmet was frilled like a lizard's by an array of small antennae and receiver studs. Pallas, by contrast, was as sleek as a bird of prey, bearing nothing but the power spear with which he craved to deliver impalement from above. Above him, Skeiron might almost have been his twin, but for the aquiline sweep of his helmet and the spread-winged motif of his jump pack. The fifth member of the wing, Homadus, was that most prized of beasts: a Bloodlord perfectly content to slay from afar. The muzzle of his meltagun emitted a radiant warmth which sent wispy white trails of ethane mist out behind them.

Click. 'The facility is on the auspex.' Agon's voice crackled across the frequency into Circios's helmet. *Click.* 'You have taken us off target. Correct three degrees north.'

Telemetric runes blinked a violent red across his helmet display. Circios scowled, but altered heading just the same, a jet of thrust bearing them across a rugged plain of frozen rock. His armour's integrated suite of topographic scanners clicked and whirred, mapping out ridges, gullies and craters from the darkness.

He was not so scornful as to let pride deny him fresh blood.

The thought of it made his neck tingle. He hungered. There would be blood.

He wanted it now.

Click. 'What was that?'

Circios growled, imagining the bite of his chainaxe through a gushing vein. He glazed for a moment, then came back. Had he spoken into the vox-channel without realising? He gave a harsh smile that his helmet masked. Who cared, anyway?

'Nothing,' he spoke into the microbead. 'For every drop Sabaktes offers to the Lord of Skulls, we will spill a gallon more.'

There was no answer, but he did not need an open vox to feel their hunger.

Others craved battle for its own worth, but for the Bloodlords it was all for one thing, and it went far beyond a craving. Over five thousand years he had personally slaughtered millions, but the blood hunger could not be sated. It was visceral, it was real, told in the grey shiver of starlight on burnished bronze.

The cratered plain of clay-like rock inclined beneath them as Circios and his wing soared overhead. Another jet of thrust corrected for the altitude lost to their course correction. His genhanced oculobe picked out the methane-capped peaks of a distant range and focused.

What he saw made him grin.

A fortification of crenellated ferrocrete and rugged armaplas jutted from the scarp like a bionic jaw. It was veined with white ammonia ice. From its high walls, surrounded by casemates that bristled with ordnance, a frozen aquila the size of a gunship presided over the lowlands. Three half-buried tunnels cut down through the foothills, each terminating in a hab-dome half a kilometre high and six in circumference. The stars gave them a metallic shine.

Otherwise, the entire complex was oddly dark.

Circios restrained his blood hunger well, but he doubted the champions dispatched upon habs alpha and beta could boast even his meagre self-control. He would have expected some response to their presence by now. But there was nothing, just the blinking perimeter lights of the orbital pad, sited on flat ground several kilometres to the west. It was connected to the citadel not by tunnel, but by a surface road. The frozen rock was rutted with tread marks.

Perhaps the flotilla's warp shadow had been detected?

The threat of forbearance clenched his throat. With an effort he managed to exhale without a snarl. The Imperium might have evacuated its materiel, even the more densely programmed gun-servitors, but it was not about to expend a drop of promethium on breaking a penal legion from the paltry gravity of their prison.

Click. 'Punishment hab gamma. Marked.' Agon's voice again, grinding though the vox-static. Targeting icons appeared in Circios's helmet display. He grunted acknowledgment. Ready runes ignited for the others.

Click. 'One degree south. Zero thrust. Drop in six... five... four... three...'

The gothic bulk of the light destroyer, *Bloodhammer*, marred the Lagrange point like an open wound, frozen by the cold of the void. A kilometre of shackled weapons arrays, dormant void banks and silent plasma drives snarled from geostationary orbit between the asymmetric pulls of the gas giant, Ixus IX, and

its moon. Atmosphere vented from hangar doors as Dreadclaw assault craft hurled into space where they listed under their own inertia before thrusters fired and hauled them into a controlled descent to the rocky world below.

Upon the narrow, dagger-like bridge anticipation was a static force. It made hairs stand on end and crew-serfs turn from blinking displays to speak in hushed whispers. Chaos Space Marines in ancient bronze power armour stalked between stations, tension on the triggers of combi-bolters as they ensured the unwavering focus of the crew. Emergency lighting cast faces a dull red, the lumen strips glowing through the bleeding flesh that was grafted to the bulkheads. The murk pooled between consoles, draining into a bloody sink in the comms pit at the centre of the bridge. There, thirty crew-serfs clutched at their headsets, kept their heads down, and sweated in the churning heat of the vox-banks.

There was blood on the air.

Slumped in his command throne, Navarch Ladon's pallid face throbbed between red and black as the living ceiling pulsed. The left hemisphere of his brain had been supplanted with bionics and junctioned to the command throne by the layers of insulated cabling that lay spooled over the bronzed ceramite of his lap. He tilted his head, as far forward as his leash would allow, and glared down into the comms pit.

'*Crimson Hew and Flesheater?*' he demanded with a painful rasp of effort.

A uniformed crew-serf looked up from her station, and covered her micro-bead with one hand. 'No signal, navarch. The escorts wait on the moon's far side.'

Ladon nodded his approval. 'And the landing craft?'

'Surface-bound. Ready for extraction.'

Ladon wheezed out, staring through the arrow-slit viewport to the carbonaceous moonlet below. The body was so tiny. Even from orbit he could pick out the turrets of the citadel, track the straight lines of the access tunnels to the hab-domes, watch the landing lights of the Dreadclaws as they bore more warriors and armour to the surface. His fingers drummed the port control panel of the throne. The temptation to obliterate the entire facility from orbit and deny the bloodletting to those still capable was powerful.

Perhaps it was cruelly fortuitous that he could not.

With an effort, he pulled his fingers back and returned his attention to the frozen orb in the viewport. It was small. Cold. Two-dimensional.

'Lord Sabaktes,' he hissed, stabbing a sequence into the console that brought the command throne shuddering around to face the bridge's aft, which the Warpsmith had suborned as his personal dominion.

The bipedal construct of ceramite, bronze and whirring servos that housed Sabaktes's living remnants was nominally facing Ladon's way but, from the coded commands that trickled through the neuralgic blocks and datashields that Sabaktes had erected around the command throne, he knew that the Warpsmith's attention was anywhere but on this physical avatar. *Bloodhammer's* rudimentary logic engines had been stripped away, replaced with churning cogitators from the Warpsmith's own laborium. Blood and insulated wiring leaked from the tears in the bulkhead. Bulky adaptors had been implanted into the system, seemingly at random but, every so often, a snaking mechatendril engaged with a metallic hiss. Each time, Sabaktes's chassis trembled slightly, and Ladon dimly sensed a torrent of code stream between *Bloodhammer's* daemonic spirit and the Warpsmith.

'When will you return my ship to me, Sabaktes? I am as useless as the Emperor Himself in this throne.'

'It is for your own protection, navarch.' The Warpsmith spoke in a metallic growl, the recognition of rank a means of appropriate designation rather than respect.

'You think I need protection?'

'I think your minimalist approach to augmetic supplementation is inadequate,' the Warpsmith countered, blankly. 'This is why the Polemarch defers to our wisdom.'

Ladon had no answer, except that the Polemarch was little more than a feral beast in power armour. The hunger tainted the Bloodlords gene-seed like a daemon's curse, borne in the hearts of all who fled the darkest days of the Abyssal Crusade. Through fleshmetal reconstruction and daemonic transubstantiation, the Warpsmiths alone had subverted the hunger's grip. They were capable of remaining level-headed when even neophytes five millennia unborn fell prey to hunger and turned savage.

Sabaktes continued, the same distance in his speech, as though he conversed with a datascreen. 'The blood hunger of the Lord of Skulls is powerful, too potent even for *Bloodhammer's* daemon-spirit. Together, they would overwhelm you.'

'And *this* is the abomination you fought so hard for on Anachron.'

Sabaktes said nothing, but of course, Ladon had posed him no question. Ladon almost smiled. Whatever happened, it had been worth it to give the World Eaters there a bloody nose. And the blood of the Blood Father's chosen had been doubly sweet. He shook off the memory.

‘The Imperials remain unaware of our approach.’

It seemed improbable. Stealth and restraint were not characteristic traits of the Bloodlords. Luck would complete the trinity. The Bloodlords – and the Spears of Olympus before them, lost in the Eye of Terror to a daemon’s madness – had ever been cursed with ill fortune.

‘It is one calculated outcome amongst many. That it is more favourable than others makes it neither intrinsically unlikely nor suspicious.’

Ladon had the urge to rise, to pace, but he was integrated into the intelligence matrix of the command throne. In any case, even his genhanced muscles were atrophied, and the servo-motors of his baroque power armour had seized millennia ago.

That was easy for him to say.

Circios made moonfall with a thump, driving up a cloud of black dust that expanded slowly outwards, like a holographic nebula. His massive suit’s stabilisers compensated for the impact and he was rising, actuators buzzing as he strode through the dust towards punishment hab gamma, even as four more impacts split the frozen rock behind. He felt them as vibrations through his boots.

He could not hear them.

From above, the dome had seemed small, but from the ground it was massive, large enough perhaps for eighty thousand condemned men. It was utterly dark, constructed of black rock quarried from the labour camps and without windows or lighting of any kind. The structure’s apparent smoothness was due to tightly interlocking plascrete-reinforced plates, fortifying it against the fearsome tidal shear of Ixus IX. There was a smattering of gun batteries but they were small calibre affairs compared to the defences of the citadel, and none with an arc of fire this close to the superstructure. Circios judged the dome to be sturdy enough to withstand about fifteen seconds of bombardment from *Bloodhammer*.

But while the Blood Father did not care from whence the blood flowed, Circios did, and he did not, nor would he ever, care to share.

Anticipation brought twinned palpitations to his chest and he had to force his hand from his chainaxe to point out what looked like a ground-level hatch within the plascrete shell. It was about two metres high and a half wide. Circios felt claustrophobic just thinking about it. It reminded him of the months caged aboard *Bloodhammer*, nothing to chain his sanity from the entreaties of the warp but a visceral hatred and thoughts darker than any being of the empyrean could

construe. He indicated the maintenance panel beside the airlock. It was iced up, the airlock itself banked with grit.

One of the Bloodlords made the low grav hop to the service panel. From his birdlike gait and power spear, Circios recognised Skeiron.

It would have taken a team of men with a plasma torch half an hour to cut through the ammonia crust and release the panel's cover plate, but the Chaos Space Marine ripped it clear off in a second. The moon's gravity had yet to reclaim it when the final three members of the wing closed. Homadus covered the door with his melta as Skeiron knelt and made a few surly taps at the maintenance console. It was a plastek board with two dozen fat keys and some multicoloured wiring. Three coloured diodes stayed dim. Skeiron stabbed in another sequence, then thumped the hab wall. The tail end of a frustrated howl burst through the vox as he activated his microbead.

Click. 'It is locked.'

Circios snarled, but spared the vox his wrath.

'It is an airlock of a punishment hab. Of course it is locked.'

Skeiron turned, glaring down his helmet's aquiline beak. *Click.* 'It is dead. I cannot override the seals without power.'

Circios clenched his fist, looking to the inert shell of the hab-dome. He turned to Homadus, envisioning his chainaxe tearing through the warrior's visor.

'Melt through it. Do it fast.'

'Entry to hab-dome alpha confirmed,' called a crew-serf from the comms pit, deactivating his headset and looking up to the command throne.

The bridge crackled with cosmic chatter and vox-static. Crew-serfs and officers ran between stations, transferring dataslates, anxiously conferring.

'How much blood spilled?' Ladon wheezed, leaning forward as if to taste it himself until his cranial umbilical checked him.

The crew-serf hesitated, looking to an officer who pointedly refused him eye contact. 'N-no contact, navarch.'

Ladon thumped his throne in fury, then with a rictus snarl stabbed in the command to rotate back towards Sabaktes. 'No contact?' The Warpsmith's mechatendrils went about their programmed functions. His biomechanical exoskeleton was unreadable. 'The Lord of Skulls was *your* prize, Sabaktes. It was clear from the start that you had no means of controlling it. If I find you have taken my ship on another fool's errand...'

The navarch's threat was unspoken. And unfounded. Locked out of

Bloodhammer's systems and with Sabaktes's warriors patrolling the bridge, there was little he could do but threaten. A mechatendril disengaged from an adaptor and rippled. Ladon did not think it mere wishful thinking that his systems reported an anxious twinge through the techno-empyrean pathways of *Bloodhammer*'s systems. Perhaps the Warpsmith had nothing to fear from Ladon.

But the growing hunger of the Lord of Skulls was another matter.

'Re-direct Rhino transports from alpha to the remaining complexes,' spoke Sabaktes with synthetic detachment. 'The blood of the Imperium's foulest will be spilled. It must be harvested for the Lord of Skulls.'

Ladon gave Sabaktes a warning glare that the Warpsmith's machined oculars implacably returned, then keyed in the command to rotate the command throne forwards. The crew-serfs of the comms pit were hunched over their receivers where he had left them, their headsets crackling with stellar noise punctuated by bursts of static. Ladon felt his gelatinized blood run hot. Five millennia of bloodletting and battle had ingrained the sound of bolter fire into his daemon-plagued sleep cycles.

'Hab-dome beta breached,' called one of the crew-serfs, before unnecessarily adding, 'Resistance.'

Ladon's weakened facial muscles forged a crooked grin. Let slaughter commence.

Raised voices barked through the transmission, a storm of bolter rounds, followed by a strange hum that Ladon initially dismissed as feedback. A second later there came the discharge of some kind of energy weapon. A harsh yell filled the wavelength and then died.

Static.

Then more shouts.

'*By the axe of the Blood Father...*'

'*They will not bleed...*'

Another energy lash whipped across the channel, followed by the shriek of a chainaxe shearing through metal.

'Sabaktes,' Ladon hissed, staring helplessly into the viewport even as he pushed against the datashields the Warpsmith had erected between him and the *Bloodhammer*'s critical systems, including its sensorium. 'That does not sound like las-fire.'

'Navarch!'

The shout came before the Warpsmith could answer – assuming he was going

to – and originated from amongst the pinging runes of the auspex station at the bridge’s starboard side.

‘What now?’

‘There is still no weapons fire from the facility.’

‘I see that.’

The crew-serf quailed, backed into his console, and rubbed his knuckles nervously. ‘Forgive me, navarch, but the facility’s systems are unpowered. Weapons, doors, environment: it’s all down.’

‘Wait,’ Ladon snarled. Another blood-crazed howl crackled out of the comms pit. Ladon fought down the urge to rip free of his cranial umbilical and stamp the auspex operator beneath his boots. ‘No environment of any kind? You mean that place is airless?’

‘Y-yes, navarch.’

One half of Ladon’s pallid jaw grimaced. Trust a Warpsmith to overlook something as minor as oxygen.

‘Then what are we fighting down there?’

Circios stalked through the dust, listening with mounting hunger to the snatches of battle bleeding into their vox frequency. Impatiently, he watched the plascrete hatch glow white hot as molecular bonds were excited to the point of release. The packed ice steamed, releasing a caustic cloud of organic fumes. No noise carried through the thin air, and Homadus’s melta emitted neither energy lance nor particle stream. It was as if the Chaos Space Marine had ritually squared his stance, levelled his unholy artifact and now thermically disassembled the airlock with sorcery.

‘Faster,’ Circios growled, willing it so, staring into the heat of melting plascrete until his eyes hurt.

He was so intent that had it not been for the exclamation of surprise that crackled through his micro-bead, he would not have noticed that the coloured diodes on the service console were now blinking. Homadus released his weapon’s trigger and pulled back with a snarl. Skeiron was already tapping at the console. There was excitement in his movements.

Circios shared it, even as the reminder of the savagery he was reduced to sickened him.

Click. ‘Power is back.’ Skeiron’s voice came through like crunched foil, too agitated to deactivate his microbead and filling the frequency with fraught breathing before continuing. ‘The outage has reset the codes. This will be too

easy.'

Circios flexed his fingers, finally allowing himself the foul pleasure of unhitching his chainaxe. Starlight glinted from its adamantium teeth, orange, yellow and green from the blinking console smearing across its burnished flat surface. His thumb played over the trigger.

'Why now?' he asked, swallowing his hunger a minute longer. 'And why was power down in the first place?'

Click. 'Who cares?' Skeiron's voice.

Drawing his bolt pistol in his left hand, Circios turned and looked up into the abyssal disc of Ixus IX. He saw lights in the sky, what looked like a wing of Hell Talon fighter-bombers taking advantage of the facility's passivity to strike for the landing pad. The orbital fighters were supposed to be holding back, covering the ground transports that were even now speeding across the frozen valley from the drop-ships, hungry for the blood that Circios and the other assault wings should already be spilling.

But it was not the way of the Bloodlords to refrain whilst others feasted.

Circios watched the coming together of lights as though hypnotised: the oscillating perimeter display of the landing pad, the steady pulse of a Hell Talon as it descended.

The short-lived bloom of fire as a sudden burst from a flak battery cut through its hull and detonated its fuel tanks.

Circios's visor tinted black just a fraction of a second too late to fully spare his eyes the glare. Pieces of slag rained down onto the landing pad, melting the frigid moonscape for half a kilometre around it. The weapon platform swivelled, re-angled, tracked, then unleashed another burst of solid shells into the sky.

'Agon!' Circios roared into his microbead. 'What is happening?'

More weapons systems throughout the facility were coming online. Flak batteries around the top of the hab-dome were going through initiation cycles: turning, firing, turning, before auto-targeters guided them towards the scattering Hell Talons and turned the sky white with super-heated autocannon rounds.

Had there been air, it would have been deafening.

Despite travelling flat out, the ground transports had only covered half the valley's length. Las-fire from automated batteries across the dome's sides stitched across the frozen moonscape, the blaze of las-fire heating the surface air enough to raise a screen of white vapour across the speeding vehicles. It was mostly small arms, hot-shot rounds and multilasers, but one Rhino took a penetrating hit through the glacia plate, felling the driver with a hot-shot burn

between the eyes, and sending it skidding. Another vehicle charged through the firestorm, black smoke belching from its exhausts before it pitched into a newly exposed crater and sank into the silvery-white pool of molten ammonia.

A static hum from the citadel set Circios's teeth on edge, running through his armoured body to conjure blue jolts from the revving blades of his jump pack. He didn't need Agon's auspex unit to report the initialisation of the citadel's void banks.

Click. 'Someone is home.' Agon sounded pleased.

It was bloodier when prey fought back.

The diodes of the service console blinked to solid amber and Skeiron stepped back, a halo of energy flaring across his activating power spear as the airlock slid open.

Click. 'Transmission from *Bloodhammer.*' Agon just about forced the words through the rigor of bloodlust.

'Ignore it,' Circios replied, thumbing his chainaxe to active it and forcing vertigo aside to push his bulk into the airlock. In his mind, he was already drowning in an ocean of blood. 'There is nothing they can tell us now.'

Light sources and weapons arrays flickered into life across the previously dead Imperial world, catching off the exposed bulkheads of the destroyer that hung above it like a raptor. Navarch Ladon saw the first explosions as the lead Hell Talon wing was shredded by autocannon fire, ambushed by an automated defence array. His atrophied limbs mustered fury enough to crack the plastek display of the port console as he beat at the arms of the command throne.

'Navarch!'

'What?' Ladon wheezed, turning to face a pale auspex technician. The crew-serf attended a bank of dials. Each of them was shivering into a red zone.

'A power surge, navarch. And... a transmission.'

'Where?'

The technician stammered, hurriedly fumbling over his controls. 'Hab-dome gamma, navarch. Several kilometres underground, I th-think.'

Ladon thought for a moment, but the cries of unsated hunger coming through the vox made reason impossible. Even his semi-synthetic hearts lusted for slaughter. He must have sat a long moment in reverie because Sabaktes's voice roused him.

'Signals have been relayed through the facility's satellites to *Crimson Hew* and *Flesheater.*' The Warpsmith paused, a shiver of a mechatendril and a blink of

light from the exposed circuit panel an indication he had received further data. ‘They have been assigned new coordinates. We will triangulate the source and bleed the Imperials where they hide.’

Ladon nodded automatically, licking his toothless gums as he turned to the viewport. ‘Contact all assault wings. Tell them to converge on Circios at hab-g-’

There was a burst of light from the moon’s surface, the sudden wail of warning klaxons from numerous stations cutting him off.

‘Report!’ he yelled, and then, when nobody looked up from their readouts to answer. ‘Report!’

‘Void shields,’ Sabaktes answered calmly, his own nervous system fully integrated to *Bloodhammer*’s sensorium. ‘It appears that power has been restored to the facility’s systems.’

‘You do not say,’ Ladon growled.

‘Torpedoes incoming!’ a crew-serf yelled, already embracing his work station.

‘Shields,’ Ladon barked, though he knew it would take several long minutes to re-initialise the generators. Minutes they did not have.

‘Brace!’

The second airlock door juddered open and then stalled. Circios shoved his shoulder plate into the breach and braced, his blood too hot to wait for Skeiron to resolve the jam, and manually forced it wide.

Pallas barged past, power spear throbbing silently, into what looked like a vehicle hangar. Chimera and Trojan tanks were parked in marked bays. Their black finish held close to the shadows that the emergency lighting spilled between them. Mining equipment lay scattered. Promethium dribbled from a dropped canister, flowing down into a drain. There were no bodies. That had to mean something. Didn’t it? Circios’s fingers clenched and unclenched from the trigger of his bolt pistol. He looked up.

Two levels of iron gantries were deserted, but for abandoned tools.

Where was everyone?

The walls were closing in, the warp whispering with the voices of the slain. Circios scratched at the side of his helmet, straining to hear even though the laws of physics made it impossible. His bolt pistol jerkily tracked the hangar wall. Then back. There was something there. In the shadows. No. He blinked the fever sweat from his eyes. For a moment he had thought he’d seen a spider-like shadow between the legs of a mining walker.

Agon rapped his knuckles on the other side of Circios’s helmet, making the

champion start, then activated his microbead.

Click. ‘Environmental controls are reinitialising, along with everything else, but the air remains thin. Even for us.’

The obvious stated, Circios kept his helmet on.

At that moment he would have fed his own arm to his chainaxe, would have slaughtered his entire wing, just to see the thinnest trickle of red. Fortunately, that was the very moment that Skeiron chose to rage into the vox, fire his eagle-winged jump pack, and send his bronze bulk arcing towards the uppermost gantry. The platform groaned. His power spear radiated a dangerous hue as he stabbed it into the uncertain shadow.

Click. ‘I hear battle, where is it?’

The others said nothing as they fanned out to search the hangar. The air in Circios’s helmet felt close, filled with heavy breathing, the *click-click-click* of the frequency scan, the fractured strains of combat, and the occasional fevered rejoinder, ‘*Blood.*’

‘Power must have been returned on an automated restart cycle. The weapons arrays are servitor-controlled. There is no one here.’

Click. ‘Something is here,’ said Agon cryptically. He held up his vambrace, stabbing at the auspex display, then whacking the bulky power cell mag-locked to his thigh. He turned, looked up, facing deeper into the hab, and then pointed to a door. It was conventional steel, not airtight – Homadus’s melta would carve through it in seconds. Agon angled his forearm for another glance at the readout before letting it drop with a snarl that went beyond the upper range of the vox, coming across as a whine of white noise. *Click.* ‘Strange power spike.’

‘What kind?’

Click. ‘Don’t know. Don’t care.’ There was a short crackle of background as Agon moved in that direction, Circios and the others following, and then, *Click.* ‘I will open them from groin to throat. I will drink their blood and wear their flesh for my own as I slaughter their kith.’

Agon spread his fingers to the door and pressed his helmet against it. The vibrations sounded through the open frequency and into Circios’s own helmet. It sounded like some titanic machinery deep within the moonlet’s ice-locked crust was grinding into life. He could hear a metallic tramp, as of the disciplined march of armoured men.

Click. ‘Do you hear that?’

Circios was too lost to his hunger to care who it was that spoke. Both his hearts were racing.

‘Homadus,’ he voxed, then waited, staring at the door.

Nothing happened.

And then a piercing scream filled Circios’s helm with static.

Both gauntlets sprang to the sides of his helmet as if he could silence the pain that way, but the scream was inside, and there was nothing he could do to shut off the transmission. The signal scrunched down towards a single screaming note, leaving echoes in Circios’s ears even after it died.

‘Homadus!’

The first volley of torpedoes detonated against *Bloodhammer*’s unshielded hull, a succession of concussive blows tearing through its ventral armour and exposing the lower decks to space. Crew-serfs and servitors were thrown into the void in an eruption of blood from the vessel’s living walls. The human serfs survived for pointless seconds before they froze. The servitors attempted to go about their programmed tasks even as the blood around them froze solid, sealing the breach as efficiently as any bulkhead.

Groaning its blood hunger and pain, *Bloodhammer* forced its shields prematurely online. Void banks overheated, frying tens of kilometres of wiring and setting fires throughout the massive vessel as backup generators took over. On the bridge, Bloodlords and crew-serfs alike grabbed for anything riveted to the hull as the next salvo came in, its force diffracted across the patchily erected shield in a pyrotechnic display of warp energy. Ladon was slammed into the back of the command throne and a crew-serf from the auspex station was ripped from his console, flung the full width of the bridge to smash through a datascreen.

‘Reinforce ventral void banks. Present dorsal arrays and engage broadsides.’

The navarch grimaced feebly as fire again rippled across the void shields. Damage report machines drowned their operators in spools of ticker tape. Ladon closed his eyes, tried to access *Bloodhammer*’s daemon-spirit, but was cast back into his own augmented brain by Sabaktes’s blocks. All he could do was watch, give orders, and trust his crew to act.

It was infuriating.

‘Sabaktes, report.’

‘It is not an Imperial transmission,’ said Sabaktes, flat as a monofilament wire. ‘It is not human.’ The Warpsmith’s body rocked with the rest of the bridge but didn’t fall. His mechatendrils tethered him effectively to the bulkhead, and his boots were mag-locked to the deck. Warning runes cast his chassis in a harsh

light. The buffeting did nothing to disturb his thought algorithms. ‘Cannot identify the power signature. Chemical, fission, plasma, warp: all negative.’ One mechatendril disengaged, chasing down a train of logic and reengaging with an adaptor module to the cogitator circuitry. ‘The xenos encryption routines are unusually sophisticated, but they can be dissected.’

Ladon braced, another salvo twinkling as they caught the light of Ixus system’s tiny sun.

‘I don’t care about the transmission. Give me weapons, thrusters. Anything!’

‘Revivification protocols... Sarkon ... Transcendent shard. Curious.’

‘Sabaktes!’

In desperation, Ladon routed his thoughts again into *Bloodhammer*’s systems, expecting to be repulsed as he had on every occasion since Anachron. But he was not. In an instant of binary connection, Ladon sensed the Warpsmith’s distraction, billions of operations per second directed towards that alien message. There was a momentary discomfort in his insular cortex as Ladon broached the enfeebled datashields. And then he was out.

The ship was his again!

Immediately, he wrested control of shields, combat thrusters, and weapons systems from the sluggish hands of his crew. His expanded awareness encompassed the sensorium arrays. The frigid moonlet shimmered, a shadow of the visible spectrum against the cosmic microwave background, incoming torpedoes perceived by the high energy x-rays emitted by their plasma drives. The gaping tear in his belly made him grip the arms of his command throne and howl.

For pain, for bloodlust.

There was another mind within *Bloodhammer* but his. In fact, he wasn’t certain that it still *was* only in the ship. It was powerful, hungry. It demanded battle, and Ladon too felt the forgotten craving awaken in his gut. He shut his eyes tight and screamed.

Crew-serfs ran to his side. They were life signs, blips on an auspex suite in the armoured core of the conning tower. Vaguely, he was aware of one of those blips fading from the display. An officer lapsed into his grip, head lolling on a broken neck to plant its cheek into Ladon’s gauntlet.

Old perhaps, weary maybe, but he was still a Bloodlord.

He was still a Space Marine.

‘Navarch! Navarch, what are you doing?’

The officer who spoke gripped the bulkhead as the entire bridge yawed onto

its starboard side. A handful of crew-serfs too slow to react to the change in pitch flailed at the fleshy surfaces as they flew upwards, smacked into the viewport and stayed there. The methane mountains of the moon's surface reared large behind them in the crystalflex screen. Las-fire and solid rounds illuminated the display, growing closer.

It was battle.

And he craved it.

Bloodhammer was going down.

Howling its madness through every frequency and deep into the tangled conduits of the warp, *Bloodhammer* struck the thermosphere like a match in a promethium pool. And from the frozen emptiness of the moonlet's upper atmosphere, there was light.

The ship blazed red, then pink as blood became vapour, and then finally magnesium white, trailing a crimson haze as over-heated plasma drives powered it ever further down. Had the moonlet boasted more than a token atmosphere and a gravity well that even registered on the destroyer's astrometric arrays, then that first impact would have crushed it down to a hundred burning embers. As it was, the atmospheric pressure crumpled the bow like a can beneath a man's boot. Compression sent bolts and rivets scything through the prow compartments whilst, further aft, armour plates were ripped clean off and hurled clear to glower like daemons in the void.

And then *Bloodhammer* opened fire.

Plasma batteries, ectoplasma cannons, and obliterator bombs ignited its kilometre broadside, suddenly brighter than the coldly distant sun. Indiscriminate in its fury, devastation rained down onto the moon's surface, blasting a twenty kilometre trench through the frozen moonscape towards the citadel. Landing boats and vehicles were atomised in an instant, the plascrete domes of habs alpha and beta enduring a second longer before *Bloodhammer* found its range and unleashed the might of its fury upon the citadel. Void shields and dispersion fields responded with equal brilliance, and torpedoes hurled from armoured silos, coded to bypass their own shields, were thrust into the sky.

Their magnetic guidance systems were irrelevant now that *Bloodhammer* filled the heavens.

It broke into the stratosphere, still plunging, heat shields blazing like supernovae. Explosion after vivid explosion burst across its shields. Hazard runes illuminated every deck before the screens shattered, showering the

Bloodlords in glass and slicing the defenceless meat around them. And still it fell, driven by a primal urge to kill, to feast, to daub itself in an enemy's blood. Flak batteries abandoned the remaining aircraft to unload a torrent of solid shells into the vessel's bow. The shields blistered, turning purple like a bruise, but did not fail.

Muscle-locked to the arms of its command throne, *Bloodhammer's* flesh-wrapped avatar merely salivated, accepting and then relaying the neural impulse that a second later resulted in a barrage of ordnance from the port batteries. The mountains behind the citadel began to crumble, but the void shields held firm.

On an impulse *Bloodhammer* altered heading, yawing starboard and turning its prow onto the mountain range that flanked the approach to the citadel. Methane peaks scraped at the ship's wounded belly before being crushed and scattered as the destroyer's bulk ploughed into them. The manoeuvre exposed *Bloodhammer* to the full firepower of the Imperial facility, descending into the arc of the lascannon and earthshaker emplacements. Even the multilasers of hab-dome gamma, surviving in the void-shield shadow of the citadel on the opposite side of the valley, poured their fire into *Bloodhammer's* port shields.

The effect was pyrotechnic but ineffectual, such weapons never intended to be fielded against a target so vast.

Driven by a blood hunger its daemon-spirit could not resist or deny, it continued its terminal trajectory, its lust for retaliation now confined to bow-mounted vortex missiles. A quartet of twisting contrails screwed the length of the valley, detonating with seismic force upon the citadel's shields. But the shields held and *Bloodhammer's* path sent it crashing through the mountains.

The starboard void banks blazed with the effort of countering impacts across the full length of the hull and then – with an explosion of warp energy that obliterated half of the ship and a dozen kilometres of rock – spectacularly failed. The frozen scarp sheared through interior bulkheads, mutilated flesh grafts painting the flattened mountain range pink as tank-sized sheets of hull were ripped away and sent tumbling. What remained of the great destroyer rammed into a sheer face of compacted ice and keeled onto the wreck of its starboard side.

Combat thrusters and weapons arrays steamed, port and ventral shields still flickering defiantly as las-fire stitched across its crippled bulk.

Lesser beasts of burnished bronze, Rhinos and other vehicles, pulled up under the barrage of ice and debris. Bloodlords poured from their assault ramps, goreshields raised to the burning rain, power spears glowing dully under the

blaze of tracer rounds and void discharges. Sporadic bursts of bolter fire spat across the no-man's-land between them and hab-dome gamma.

Another force marched across the frozen waste.

Emerging from hab-dome gamma, their metallic bodies burned coldly under the firestorm, the soulless gleam in their eyes foreshadowing the green whips of energy that lashed across the ruins to drive the Bloodlords into the cover that *Bloodhammer's* fiery descent had provided by the hectare. The answering storm of bolter fire shredded metal limbs from skeletal frames, but did little to slow the relentless march. A squad of blood-drenched Terminators roved fearlessly from cover, turned their goreshields to the incoming fire, and advanced. Their corrupted armour scattered the multilasers of the surviving hab-dome like wind, but those Gaussian lances seemed to strip it down, layer by layer, until nothing remained of the butcher within but a frozen skeleton, draped around the haft of a power spear like a banner.

From their cover the Bloodlords reloaded, boltguns blazing on full-auto into the rigid deathmasks of the automated dead. Strange skimmers swooped through the enfiling fire, their skeletal appearance distorted by the weirdly patterned shift of their shielding. The ghostly arks hovered just behind the front line, cryptic shadows dancing across their shields, grav-emitters casting an eldritch glow upon the faces of the fallen. Even as explosive rounds tore the front lines to pieces, repair scarabs swarmed over those cut down by earlier salvos, re-annealing severed limbs and sealing external damage. Jerkily they rose, covered in shiny beetles, bodies undergoing repairs even as they turned glowing rifles once again upon the enemy and resumed their march.

They would not die. And they would not bleed.

Helplessly, *Bloodhammer* strained to add its fire but it was nose down. Its ventral armaments were blasted into space while its port batteries could target nothing but the red speck of the *Crimson Hew*, still in orbit. It raged, swiveling its weapons arrays in a furious search for a target. Some other will stoked that fury, reveled in it, an entity older and more wrathful even than *Bloodhammer*. A true child of the Blood God stirred within its belly. It felt the cycling of treads along its bones, the bite of a chainaxe through its flesh.

Bloodhammer groaned in helpless rage.

The Lord of Skulls was coming.

Blood geysered over the graveyard stillness of the hab-dome gamma vehicle hangar, snap-frozen into scarlet jewels that hung like stars in a hololithic chart. A

silver claw ripped through Homadus's ceramite chest plate, spinning like a buzz-saw in airless silence and hoisting him off the ground. The articulated limb belonged to a mechanical spider the size of a small tank. Its body was segmented into metallic plates, inscribed with geometric hieroglyphs that pulsed from beneath with a dark green lambency. Its mandibles clicked silently and it waved its forelimbs in challenge. His corpse still stuck in its buzz-claw, Homadus's arms and legs flapped, blood and bronze mulched into a homogeneous paste and splattered over the rockcrete floor.

Circios shivered in ecstasy as gore coated his visor.

He almost gave himself to the urge to rip off his helm, dare the near-vacuum, and gorge on a gene-brother's blood. Impacts pounded through the rockcrete floor and the hangar trembled, but Circios ignored it. The vox-echo of Homadus's scream lingered in his micro-bead as he activated his own, thumbed his chainaxe to maximum speed and snarled into the receiver.

'Kill! Maim! *Bleed!*'

Circios swung his chainaxe for the limb that had Homadus impaled. Adamantium teeth chewed through an alloy that defied description and then stalled. At the same time, bloody red fire ignited beneath Pallas and Skeiron, their jump packs throwing them up onto the high gantries. Circios snarled and thumbed the chainaxe's belt drive to reverse, spitting the limb from its teeth just as another gleaming appendage smacked him in the shoulder. He slammed onto his side, a rapid-fire burst flaring in eerie silence from the frosted muzzle of his bolt pistol, his gauntlet's auto-stabilisers robbing him even of that sensation.

The spider shrugged off the explosive rounds. Even the tear in its leg was beginning to heal. It scuttled back, spear-like midlimbs warding off the hovering Bloodlords, throwing its buzz-claw backwards and forwards to try and dislodge Homadus.

But Chaos Space Marines were tougher than that.

Circios charged in, bolt pistol blazing, hacking again at the healing scar on the spider's limb. The creature pulled the appendage from the chainaxe's whirring teeth, then swung the buzz-claw and its impaled corpse like a club. Circios ducked, then rose as the leg flashed overhead, attacking the limb from the reverse angle and, with a metallic shriek that even his power armour could not fully compensate for, sheared it from the creature's body.

Circios stared in bewilderment and horror.

There was an electric spark from the point of severance. Mercuric tendrils of living metal flicked from the creature's carapace around the remembered matrix

of a limb. The whole thing was beginning to regrow.

Battle made his hearts pound. But there was no release. There was no blood. 'Bleed!' he roared, burying his chainaxe in the spider's headsection.

The spider spasmed for a second, motor controls rerouting around damaged pathways, and struck back with its regenerating limb. Circios caught it in his chainaxe. The mechanism jammed as the living metal continued to spread, entrapping its teeth in the spider's own re-growing exoskeleton. Circios howled as the weapon was ripped from his hands. Pure outrage roared the command 'Fire!' down his spinal column and through the adjunctive nerves to his jump pack. It ignited, driving him forwards and headlong into the spider's thoracic plate. Legs flailed as a tonne and a half of Chaos Space Marine with a fury of petrochem thrust behind it drove the spider to the ground, scraped it ten metres across the rockcrete, then slammed it through the rear hatch of a parked Chimera transport.

Heaving with unsated hunger, Circios rose. He gripped the spider's head section in his right gauntlet, crushing an articulated mandible in his servo-enhanced grip, then pounded its green-glowing eyes with frenzied blows. Screaming from well beyond the reach of satiation, he released his grip, unloading his pistol clip into the thing's head. The Chaos Space Marine staggered back, twin hearts thumping as if enraged at sharing a single chest. Vision blurring, he tried to slam a fresh clip into his bolt pistol, struck the base of the butt and sent the clip spinning across the rockcrete. He threw the pistol down and clawed at his chest.

By the Blood Father's curse, he would rip this creature limb from limb and *make* it bleed.

The spider disentangled its limbs from the Chimera's mangled rear, just as Pallas descended like an orbital strike. His power spear clove clean through the creature's abdomen and deep into the rockcrete beneath. The spider continued to struggle but couldn't move, helpless to do anything but twitch as Agon jumped onto its carapace and stuffed a Krak grenade into the wound. Pallas was still mounted on its body, jerking his power spear through its innards, crying into the vox for blood, when the charge detonated. The channel filled with howls as Pallas's legs were eviscerated by shrapnel. The scrap metal was fading, phasing out; Circios roared for it to stop, to bleed, but the remains would do neither.

Pallas crashed into the roof of another tank several metres away. He was still howling, but with pain. It was hunger.

With nothing left but the might of his own fallen body, Circios clawed at his

helmet and staggered to the doorway that Agon had indicated as the source of the hab-dome's strange power spike. His breath tasted poisonous. The door wavered in his vision. The blood hunger of Agon and Skeiron filled his ears. He saw Agon's knees buckle, blood suddenly gouting from the Chaos Space Marine's mouth to paint the inside of his visor red. Agon clutched his chest and fell. A veteran of the Abyssal Crusade. A scion of fallen Olympus.

His hearts had burst.

Forcing the last drop of life from his jump pack, Circios crashed through the steel doorway and rolled like a felled log through the soaring interior of hab-dome gamma's primary cell block. Prefab plascrete corridors ran ahead and then branched, flanked by cells at every step. Extending several kilometres overhead, level after level of criss-crossing walkways, cells and stunner platforms shuddered under what felt like a bombardment. All of it extended outwards from a vast, open-pit quarry that had been the focus of the hab-dome's corrective labour. He saw the penal legionnaires at last.

They screamed silent torment from their cells. Some clutched at barred hatches, fingers frozen into claws.

Dead by asphyxiation.

'No!' Circios howled, staggering upright.

Spreading his fists for balance he looked up. There were men on the walkways. Like wraiths they patrolled the empty block, their routine too methodical even for the Imperial Guard. An unearthly green light gleamed from within their eye sockets and from the long barrels of their strange carbines.

They were not men.

Their skulls were hollow. Their blood was cold. In the soulless deliberacy of their movements, the way the emergency lighting caught the edges of skulls and pectoral cages, they were more like metallic skeletons than men of bone and blood. From the quarry, seven of the gleaming zombies marched in lockstep towards him. At least Circios thought it was seven. His vision swam with hunger. They were covered in black dirt. As if they had been digging.

As one they raised their carbines.

An arc of emerald lightning scorched past him, flaying the armour from Skeiron's bones even as the Bloodlord's jump pack hoisted him from the ground. The half-full petrochem canisters ignited midair and consumed him, scattering his ashes over the advancing husks.

With the enthusiasm of an automated guidance system, the other six adjusted their aim towards Circios.

Spiteful bursts of bolter fire spat in chill silence, muzzle-flashes exposing the smote ribs of hab-dome alpha. Firing every step of the way, the Bloodlords fell back, arcs of green lightning carving through plascrete and ceramite as easily as mere human flesh. The metallic warriors advanced through the shelling and rubble in relentless file. Where one fell, it was replaced by another, the body lying still until, with a twitch of anima and a grim reemergence of its eyes' empty glow, it would arise, hoist its gauss carbine, and march again.

They were unstoppable.

But for every Bloodlord felled by enemy fire, another three were claimed by their own hands. Power spears, bolt rounds, shards of plascrete and even their own fists were plunged into beating hearts to silence the pounding hunger.

This enemy offered no release. And still they came.

The smoking hulks of Rhino transports and flailing daemonic walkers littered the Bloodlords' retreat, all the way through the ruined hab-dome and into the foothills beneath the wreckage of *Bloodhammer* itself. Blood pumped from the hull in a vaporous haze, lingering in low gravity and immuring the Bloodlords in its folds. The Chaos Space Marines howled in repellent rapture, rising from cover in invitation of death, greeting it with an explosive hail of bolter rounds.

The ship groaned.

At first, few of the Bloodlords felt the pain that shuddered through its hull, too intent on slaughter to recognise that which approached above their heads. Those few that did dismissed it as the rage of *Bloodhammer*'s daemon-spirit, but it grew louder, transforming into a keening shriek like a chainfist through a plasteel bulkhead that even the thin atmosphere and the ravages of battle could not hide.

A panting neophyte lowered his boltgun, lips flecked with hunger, and looked up to witness a chainaxe the length of a man tearing through the ship's hull from within. The head of the chainaxe showed through a flap of skin, adamantium teeth howling through metal and flesh. Then it withdrew, only to come again and shear right through the hull to leave a tear almost ten metres high. The Chaos Space Marine snarled, swung around his boltgun and opened fire on it just as an explosion of gore blew out the weakened bulkhead. The warrior was thrown onto his back, shielding his visor as shrapnel rattled against his vambrace.

'Blood Father be damned...' the Bloodlord mouthed in impious dread as, with a final, brutal piece of axe-work, the Lord of Skulls hacked itself from *Bloodhammer*'s hull.

Twenty metres of crimson ceramite and brass totems forging a humanoid shell

for the berserker-spirit within, the daemon-engine's tracks tipped it from the reinforced hangar and onto the surface of the moon. Treads milled furiously until they gained traction on the frozen rock and dragged the possessed monstrosity out onto the guns of the enemy. Angry arcs of viridian lightning atomised swathes of ceramite from its torso. Blood belched from its mouth, an apoplectic shriek of raw hunger shorting out every vox in range as its skull-studded dozer blade of iron and brass bludgeoned through the rubble. The scream became laughter as the foe drew near, the mockery of an immortal trickling through every channel still open.

The Lord of Skulls was bloodlust in its basest form.

These soulless machines would not deny the Blood God.

Skulls for the Skull Throne!

The warp turbulence lanced through the skull of every living thing, the thunder of blood behind their ears as the daemon-engine fired its main weapon. Gore splattered from the great brass barrel that protruded from its sternum, a shell of crimson ichor sailing over the front line and into the shimmering skimmers behind.

For a second nothing happened. Silence. Then blood erupted in a mushroom cloud. The alien vehicles were immolated, the metallic bodies of their crew dissolving into a silvery red stew of boiling blood.

Howling with sick pleasure, the Bloodlords charged in the daemon-engine's wake, firing from the hip and falling on the gore-slickened machines where they found them. Like dogs on a carcass, they tore them limb from limb and feasted on cold, alien bones. The laughter of daemons preceded them across the airless plain. Swinging its left arm with its integrated gatling cannon through the bloody haze of its own making, the Lord of Skulls set its sights upon the closest of the enemy and let rip. Bullets tore through the glaze of gore. Man and machine. Khorne cared not. The storm of shells turned everything still standing in its forward arc to floating scraps of flesh and metal.

The Lord of Skulls continued to rumble forward, chainaxe hacking through the listless creatures while those spared the initial slaughter smashed into the dozer blade and disappeared under its tracks. The engine's ichor cannon fired point blank and, in a metallic blaze of gore and fury, it was through the enemy line. Blood seeped from the wide barrel of its gorecannon as the weapon angled upwards to target the last standing hab-dome.

Purging this world would cost the Bloodlords dear, but the Lord of Skulls demanded every drop of their veins' coin. Its daemoniac metabolism hungered for

the blood of the cruellest of butchers, the most savage and heartless of killers.

And where, in a galaxy of bloodshed and horror, would it find a richer feast than the Bloodlords?

Hunks of plascrete and twisted iron gantries rained down on Circios's head, swept from their stanchions on a boiling torrent of blood that gushed from the ruptured walls and ceiling. His hunger was consuming, and he charged down the enemy's carbines even as a girder smacked into the roof of his helmet and threw him to the ground. Immediately he tried to push himself up, only for the weight of falling rubble to force him back down.

His gauntlets were slick with gore. His breath caught, his struggles easing, and he smeared a sticky palm print down his chest plate, pawing at his hearts.

He had died.

That was the only explanation. Buried under a plascrete cairn, his hearts had ruptured like Agon's. He could even see the cursed Blood Father through the crimson smog that hung over the breach in the hab-dome wall. It was as red as flayed muscle and bound in brass, crashing over the moon's surface upon what looked like a throne of skulls. Howling defiance at the god that had cursed his once-noble Chapter, Circios threw off the mound of debris, ripped his helmet from his face, and rose.

He breathed deep of blood's scent, choked, a numbing cold spreading from his face and beneath his armour's enviro-seals to constrict his throat. Tracks produced a distant rumble. Boltguns stuttered like crickets. A daemon's chain-axe roared. Hate and loathing alone unable to stop him, his lips closed over his wrist, gorging on the blood that coated it. His mouth froze to his vambrace, but still he feasted, locked to his own wrist like a starving ghoul.

The blood was cold, but it was still blood.

Mouth filled with the coppery taste he glanced up, snarling at the ponderous intrusion of metallic warriors. Growling like a scavenger disturbed from its find, Circios ripped the arm from his mouth, inducing his iced lips to bleed. His hearts slowed and he looked on, drawing a final breath of caustic gruel that choked the last vestiges of blood hunger as the Lord of Skulls crashed into the hab-dome, chainaxe hacking a path through fallen gantries as its gatling cannon filled the cell block with indiscriminate death.

This was it, he thought; the depths to which he had fallen. He shook his head savagely.

No.

Circios straightened and turned his back. Stamping through the rubble, the aliens encircled him and, one by one, pivoted to face him and then halted. Their faces were humanoid but expressionless, their eyes windows to a vacant soul. Blood and grit painted their skeletal frames. Without his helmet's spectral filters, their strange weapons glowed brightly, the illumination diffracted into a smear by the slow-settling blood cloud. There was a gathering hum as the weapons drew power. Standing taller than he had in millennia, Circios stared down the flickering barrels of their carbines.

Some warriors fought for victory, for glory, for power over the weak or triumph over the strong.

A smile cracked his frozen lips.

For five thousand accursed years, Circios had flown only that he might fall.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

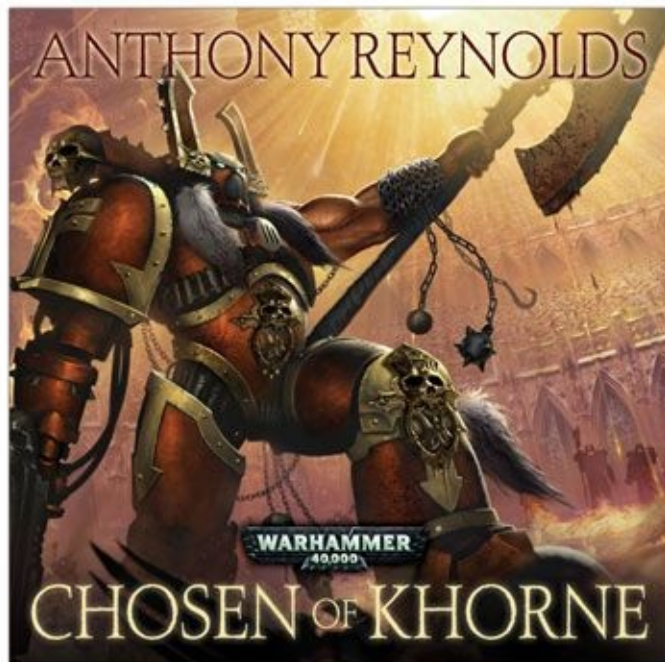
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