

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**

**GALL OF  
CHAOS**

**GIFT OF THE GODS**

*by* **BEN COUNTER**

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‘Banishment,’ spat Lord Antonidas Hajos of the Dire Claws. In the darkness of the shuttlecraft, his face was lit from beneath by the glowing power coils of his armour. ‘Why did they not just kill me? Put my head upon a pike at the fortress gates? Why was it banishment?’

‘It is written,’ replied Chirurgeon Koridis. ‘The Chapter pronounced exile as the punishment for attempting to usurp their Chapter Master.’

‘A law from an age of cowards!’ snarled Hajos. ‘Those were the times when the Dire Claws still skulked beneath the Imperial yoke! Even though we have cast off the Corpse-God for the lords of the warp, the cowardice remains. They feared to make a martyr of me, chirurgeon! The discontented would kneel before my severed head and carry it onto the battlements of our fortress in triumph! I was banished because they fear what I would become in death.’

The shuttle touched down. It had been fuelled only enough to reach the world nearest to the Dire Claws capital ship on which Hajos had been tried. Now it had reached that world, and its engines shut down for the last time.

‘They shall curse their folly,’ said Hajos, ‘that they let me live.’

The shuttle’s rear ramp boomed open to reveal a sweltering mass of jungle, a dark green ocean of choking foliage. The ship had come to rest on a hill of clear ground, and Hajos could see for miles across the rolling canopy, broken occasionally by mountains and plateaus. The sky overhead was deep blue and hung with heavy clouds, and it was speckled with columns of shrieking avian creatures set to flight by the shuttle’s arrival.

‘We were fortunate,’ said Koridis as he emerged from the shuttle beside Hajos.

‘Fortunate? We were betrayed!’ Hajos’ battered, leathery face creased with anger. ‘We have been reduced to vagabonds, and you call us fortunate?’

‘We could have been exiled to a dead world,’ replied Koridis, his own expression unchanging. Of all the Dire Claws, Koridis seemed the most immune to Hajos’ rages. ‘Or one otherwise inimical to survival. This is a world full of life.’

Hajos seemed about to speak, but something mollified him and his face turned from angry to stern. ‘Full of life,’ he said. ‘Brethren! Scout around! I will not tarry here!’

Less than half of Squad Morituris had accompanied Hajos on his exile. They had joined him in storming the throne room of the Dire Claws’ fortress-monastery, and those who now jumped down from the shuttle were all that had survived the ensuing firefight. Sergeant Morituris had been among the dead, and now Brother Forelm was their de facto leader.

‘Perimeter!’ ordered Forelm, gesturing with his power axe. ‘Give me eyes all around! Seek a foothold, we are too exposed up here! Get to it, vermin!’

‘Where there is life,’ said Hajos as the Dire Claws spread out, ‘there are the foundations of an empire. From less than this have mighty civilisations been wrought.’

‘Our priority should be our immediate survival,’ said Koridis. The surgeon had joined Hajos in exile for reasons of his own – he had not been among the would-be Chapter Master’s conspirators. He had claimed that his purpose was to retrieve the gene-seed of any fallen exiles and return it one day to the Dire Claws, but few had believed him.

‘I shall let the brethren deal with that,’ replied Hajos. ‘I must think for the long term. Survival is not enough, not for a Dire Claw! We do not survive, Koridis. We rule!’

‘I see signs of habitation,’ came a vox from one of Forelm’s brethren. ‘Smoke from small fires, and cleared land to our south-west.’

‘Then this,’ said Hajos with a rare smile, ‘is where it begins.’

The people of this world called it Jaeglor, the Endless Green, the Devourer of the Unwary. They lived in a collection of huts and low earth lodges, and they kept fires lit to ward off the jungle’s predators. They watched, terrified, from the treeline as Lord Hajos and the Dire Claws entered their village.

‘You!’ demanded Hajos, pointing at one of the tribesmen who seemed a little less cowed than the others. ‘Come forth!’ he beckoned the man forward with a finger of his power claw.

The man walked unsteadily into the open. His well-tanned skin was covered in

decorative scars and painted handprints, and he wore little more than a loincloth of animal hide. He was hung with bones and tiny animal skulls dangling from hooks and tendons worked into his skin. It was impossible to guess his age, but he looked about as old as someone on this world could get.

He spoke a few halting words that Hajos did not understand. 'Can you translate?' Lord Hajos asked of Koridis.

'It is an old Low Gothic dialect,' said Koridis. 'I have tomes in such a language. These people must be psuedo-natives left over from the latter days of the Scattering, reverted to sub-feudal levels.'

'What does he say?'

'He asks who we are.'

'Then tell him.'

Koridis translated, and the tribespeople swapped nervous glances as they drank in the news that these enormous armoured warriors had come from the sky and brought their superior gods with them. It was impossible to gauge how much of it they believed, or even understood. People such as these had been separated from the bulk of humanity for so long that many thought they were autochthonous, born from the earth of whatever world they had settled thousands of years ago.

'He asks that we show mercy,' said Koridis, translating the words of the tribe's elder. 'His people are pious and humble. They will make offerings to their god if it will placate us.'

'Pious?' said Hajos. 'To whom? Who is their god? Ask them!'

Koridis translated Hajos' demand and in reply, the elder pointed to the far end of the village, where a dozen huts clustered around a rise in the earth. Atop that rise was a statue of black stone. 'They call it Serpentias,' said Koridis. 'It sounds like a typical ancestor-god, some ancient leader deified and worshipped.'

Hajos crossed the village to the statue, followed by the fearful eyes of the tribespeople. Up close, Serpentias did not strike Lord Hajos as impressive. The statue was of a huge and muscular man, caught in a pose of open-mouthed anguish, yelling at the sky. There was no denying that the crude sculpting had a certain flair to it, as if Serpentias' aggression and ambition had been captured in the grainy black stone, but it was a strange idol to have captured the devotion of a people.

Hajos crouched by the base of the statue, scattering the offerings of trinkets and animal skulls the tribe had left there. He gripped the statue around the knees and, as the servos of his armour hissed and smoked with the effort, the mass of stone

shifted. With a roar, Lord Hajos uprooted the statue from the earth where it had stood for centuries. The tribespeople shrieked with alarm as he adjusted his grip to hold Serpentias like a stricken enemy over his head.

‘There are no gods but those of the warp!’ bellowed Hajos, knowing Koridis would translate his words. ‘All others shall be cast down! The lords of the warp are your gods now, not this sham god of stone! To the lords of Plague, of Secrets, of Excess and of the Shedding of Blood, you will pledge your souls! Or you will be broken!’

Hajos cast down the statue. It shattered into thousands of chunks of stone. A terrible wailing rose from the tribespeople, until the elder turned to them and shouted out a few words of their language. The wailing quieted and the elder turned back to Koridis and conversed for a moment.

‘They do not wish war,’ said Koridis as Hajos walked back from the site of Serpentias’ fall. ‘These people make gods of the strong. If you prove strong enough, they will not defy us.’

‘So we must prove our strength?’ said Hajos. ‘I do not foresee that as being a problem.’

The first trial of Serpentias had been to delve into the smoking volcanic labyrinth beneath the Scalding Vale and read there the secrets left behind by the ancients. Those ancients had founded the various tribes and scattered them across the jungles to carve out their own kingdoms, make war with one another, and rise and fall as fate would have it. From among them rose heroes like Serpentias, and to such heroes, the legends maintained, those ancients left secrets to be uncovered.

This was the knowledge Koridis had gleaned from interrogating the elder of Serpentias’ tribe. Hajos had immediately set off to the Scalding Vale to find what the ancients had left behind for himself.

They were not proving amenable to the worship of the Dark Gods, these people of Jaeglor. It was no surprise. The demands of the warp powers could be onerous to the weak or the squeamish. The Dire Claws had to break down the faith and morality of the Jaeglori before they could become devotees of Chaos. The first step was to prove Lord Antonidas Hajos superior to the fallen Serpentias.

The volcanic caverns were lit by channels of superheated rock in the walls, like pulsing veins fat with blood. Hajos felt his body’s augmentations fighting to keep him alive in the heat and almost complete lack of oxygen.

*‘The readings indicate a junction ahead of you, my lord,’* came the vox from

Brother Forelm. Forelm was near the entrance to the caverns, reading the layout of the tunnels and chambers with the squad's auspex. *'Heavy toxic readings and heat spikes.'*

'Then this Serpentias must have learned to hold his breath,' said Hajos. 'A strange qualification for godhood. Any life sign readings?'

*'Nothing,'* replied Forelm. *'But the heat and magnetism could mask them.'*

Hajos' question was answered more conclusively by the mass of rippling wet muscle that surged at him from a side passage. It was a fat, worm-like creature with a round mouth ringed with teeth of flinty stone. The worm poured into the main tunnel, filling it like a flood of liquid flesh. Its jaws were as wide as Hajos was tall. Hajos reacted with a Space Marine's superhuman speed, rounding on the creature as it loomed down to swallow him. He thrust his arms out and pinned its circular maw open, fighting against the tremendous force of the worm as it sought to close its jaws and bite Hajos in half at the waist.

'Foul thing!' growled Hajos. 'What dares a worm to threaten the Lord of Jaeglor?' With a grunt, Hajos drove his arms outwards and felt the muscle tearing. Teeth broke loose from their roots and plinked to the floor. The worm let out a foul exhalation of sulphur and ash, and Hajos forced himself out of its mouth.

Hajos activated the power field around his claw. The blades had already punched deep into the muscles around the worm's jaws and they smouldered as the blood and flesh caught between them ignited. Hajos rammed the claws into the worm's body just behind its head, shredding the flesh and leaving the head hanging by a precarious string of skin. A stream of gore and gritty half-digested rock flowed it.

'What more has this world for me?' yelled Hajos into the darkness. 'You think me a morsel to be swallowed down? You will be corrected!'

A trio of rock worms erupted from the many side tunnels. Each was a cousin to the first, faster and smaller, though still huge enough to swallow a man whole. Hajos was ready for them this time. He blasted the head of the first into a mass of ragged, glistening flesh with a burst from his bolt pistol, then turned to the next and met its strike with his power claw, stabbing the blades deep down its throat and slicing through to its minuscule brain. He ripped the claw free as the third squirmed its way down the tunnel ahead of him. Hajos met it with a boot, stamping down on its upper jaw, driving it down into the scalding rock. He slashed his claw along the length of its body, slicing it lengthways and laying the foul length of its organs open to the scorching air.

The thing stopped thrashing. Hajos extricated himself from the mass of torn muscle and skin. The tunnel was shin-deep in gore, boiling in the volcanic heat.

‘There is no threat here worth speaking of,’ voxed Hajos as he continued down towards the nadir of the tunnel complex. ‘This Serpentias was a weakling or a liar.’

In a long, low chamber created by some strata of rock eroded away an aeon ago, Hajos saw what lay beneath the Scalding Vale. A mass of machinery had become entombed here, in places encased in rock that had flowed into the chamber as lava and cooled. The steel was scarred and wounded, not just by thousands of years underground but by the familiar marks of atmospheric entry and micrometeorite strikes. Hajos made out the front section of a spaceship, aerodynamically configured for planetside flight, with its cockpit shattered and laid open. Heat had blistered the plastics of the cockpit so the instrument panels and pilot’s seat looked more like something biological, a mass of glossy black organs that had bubbled up from an infected wound.

Hajos saw the corroded remains of a skeleton in the cockpit, almost swallowed by the melted plastic. The bones were eaten away but in places were shored up with silvery implants, like a weave of fine metallic wire, underpinning the structure of the bone.

Most of the paint had blistered off the hull in the heat, but Hajos could still see the bright orange and blue livery and markings in a language that bore no relation to High or Low Gothic. The shape of the spacecraft echoed the heavy prows of Imperial warships, but with a sleeker, faster appearance and none of the ornamentation common to ships of the Imperium.

The craft was a relic of the Dark Age of Technology or perhaps even the Age of Terra, epochs that pre-dated the conquest of Earth, the rise of the Corpse-Emperor and the Imperium of Man. It followed the same principles of the Standard Template Constructs that still guided the Imperium’s technology, but in a purer, more refined form. If Serpentias had truly delved down here, he had learned the ancients travelled in ships of steel and possessed technological magic that had now been lost. The exact significance of the spacecraft would have been lost to him but he could not have returned from this place without his understanding of the ancients being fundamentally altered.

‘So this is what you found,’ said Hajos. He picked up the skull from the ruins of the cockpit. Over the millennia it had become a pitted, rock-like chunk. ‘It is as we suspected. This world is just one more relic of the Scattering, fallen to ignorance and savagery. Nothing special at all.’ Hajos allowed himself a smile,

his grin echoing the rictus of the sku









numb from the outside in as his nervous system was burned out. His organs would cook and pop. And with a Space Marine's titanic capacity to undergo injury and pain, he would suffer every elongated second.

The lava closed over the litter. Hajos' mighty body disappeared beneath the surface.

Serpentias, like so many deified heroes before him, had to undergo a final transformation before he could become a god. He had to sacrifice himself so his might and wisdom would be unlocked from his physical form and imbue his tribe with greatness. It was the gift all such savage gods gave their people – their self-annihilation, to move beyond the grossness of the flesh and on to godhood.

Koridis' suspicions about Serpentias had been confirmed when he examined the statue of the god that Hajos had shattered. Encased in the volcanic rock were chunks of bone. It had not been a statue at all.

*'Say the word,'* voxed Forelm.

*'A few moments more,'* replied Koridis. It paid to be sure.

In the sky, a spiral galaxy opened like an eye with a pupil of dying stars. Whatever gods of the warp had turned their attention to Jaeglor, they were watching intently. Koridis counted off the seconds and concluded that Lord Hajos had died some moments ago, boiled and suffocated beneath the lava.

*'Bring him in.'*

Forelm gave the signal and the sturdiest tribesmen hauled on the smouldervine ropes to drag Lord Hajos back out of the molten rock. His body was encased in lava that began to cool immediately as he was dragged back up the crater slope.

*'Their new god,'* said Koridis. *'The champion of the warp. The conduit of the Dark Gods' will.'*

*'If it works,'* replied Forelm.

*'It is how Serpentias became a god,'* said Koridis. *'A new deity will draw the attention of tribes across this world. The peoples towards the equator are much more warlike, and when they bow to this new idol, we can sweep across Jaeglor and claim the planet.'* He did not add that he would be the high priest of this new empire of the warp, but that went without saying.

The lava encasing Lord Hajos was cooling and blackening in the night air. Soon he would be returned to the village and set up in the clearing where Serpentias had once stood. Word would spread of the hero who had descended from the stars, outdone the deeds of the one-time god and sacrificed himself to the fires.

The tribesmen surrounded the cooling statue. They knelt and wailed, and the elders cut new scars into their bodies in imitation of the new constellations

above them.

When Koridis had joined Lord Hajos on his exile, he had not known exactly what form the opportunity would take. The legend of Serpentias had given him the perfect way to found his church, and to remove the biggest obstacle to its expansion – Lord Hajos, whose ambition masked his lack of imagination.

When they looked back, thought Koridis, they would say this was how it started. This was where it began.

And it would never end.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ben Counter** is one of Black Library's most popular Warhammer 40,000 authors, with two Horus Heresy novels to his name – *Galaxy in Flames* and *Battle for the Abyss*. He is the author of the Soul Drinkers series and *The Grey Knights Omnibus*. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The World Engine* and *Malodrax*, and has turned his attention to the Space Wolves with the novella *Arjac Rockfist: Anvil of Fenris* and a number of short stories. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit which has won him his most prized possession: a prestigious Golden Demon award. He lives in Portsmouth, England.

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