



WARHAMMER
40,000

BLOOD ANGELS

THE CHALICE

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He works the metal, agonising, painstaking pain, fearful of error.

Yes, there is fear there, even in the soul of one who has had fear bled out of him. This thing shall never be made again; if it is destroyed, eternity will be diminished. If he fears anything, he fears for the loss of it, in a Chapter that has had loss etched on its soul since its inception.

So he goes carefully, minutely. There are machines that could work more quickly, but they have no conception of passion, and so are not used. Only flesh carves this thing, guided by a mind that knows its value.

When he fights, feeling the simmer of immortal rages beneath the surface, he is not like this. He roars with the rest, forgetting in slaughter what he can never forget in rest.

Only now, here, in the chamber on Baal he was gifted when joining the Sanguinary Priesthood, does his grip falter. Only here is his soul bent to a task other than the letting of blood or the suppression of the cholera that makes them glorious, or the search, the fruitless search, for something like a cure.

He looks down at it, and it glistens back at him, near-flawless, glossy with the liquid depth of pure gold. He sees his reflection in the curve of the bowl, and the paleness of his skin is lent lustre by it.

He marvels at its age. He can feel it, resonant in the metal. The Blood Angels appreciate age, and the centuries add to its weight. He reaches for a micro-scalpel, taking it up and tracing around the edge of a jewel-housing. He removes a sliver of old grime – the dust of the world it was found on – and discards it.

It increases in beauty. He smiles as he works, for that beauty touches his soul. He aches for it. He turns it in his hands, transported.

These are the things that exalt us, he thinks. Not the rage, not the thirst, not the nightmares. We created *this*. We made *this*.

He works the metal. The error, where it persists, shall be overcome.

Laurentis, Captain of the Eighth, charges the enemy, reckless, fearing nothing.

His nine brothers come with him, their battle cries ringing from vox-augmenters, throaty with raw aggression. They fall into combat, trusting to their peerless armour, preferring blades, staying close. The enemy – shapeshifters, creatures of hell – scream back at them. Each one is a little god, a shard of a greater malevolence, capable of ripping out the minds of mortals and devouring them.

Laurentis slays them, crying out with every stroke of his shining blade. He is furious now, goaded across the edge of rage, dancing ever closer along its precipitous drop. Above him the skies of Arantia are black, clotted like a scab. Daemons boil up from the seething soils, their yellow eyes ringed with fire. His brothers race into the open wound of hatred, shining in gold and red, their voices clear as they declaim words of denunciation taught long ago by the Angel Who Fell.

All of them too are on the dagger's edge – of physical exhaustion, of mental disintegration, of submission to the velvet darkness of their secret weakness. No living men, not even those suffused with the sacred blood and gifted service, should live to fight such creatures.

And yet, driven by primal fury, they cut towards the goal – the tower, horn-shaped, dark against a flame-flared horizon. They slay and they slay, their blades smouldering as they cut through psychic sinew.

Ariosto falls, his chest torn open. Michealis is downed next, his neck broken and his helm-less head driven into the dust. The rest keep fighting, driving forwards, cutting a path to the tower. Laurentis remains at the head of them, hauling them through by his will. His armour is more black than red, scarred and charred by the remnants of cursed bodies.

‘For the Angel!’ he cries, the sound like a shaft of gold.

They fight on. The enemy, where it stands, shall be overcome.

He reaches the last of the work that lies within his power.

He lets the tools fall, and traces the outlines of gold with naked fingers. He feels the artistry, the unbroken curves, laid down by greater souls. A twinge of envy disfigures the moment, and he admonishes himself. He has been born into an age of iron, and the makers of this thing lived in an age of gold, but that is fate, and to wish otherwise is a very great sin, among the greatest.

All that remains, he thinks, is to preserve. We can still cherish. And, when the heavens align and the star-charts in Mephiston's orreriium are favourable, there may be fragments of an old genius to rescue.

His fingers reach the edge, and he feels the void in the metal. It is the only flaw remaining, the one he cannot counteract. He tries not to look at it, for the wound is a physical pain to witness.

We feel too much, he thinks; that is the clot in our souls.

Yet he knows that passion is also their majesty, and he would not trade it, not for the savagery of the Wolves, nor the nobility of the sons of Macragge, nor the steadfastness of Dorn's praetorians.

There is always a price, he thinks. Beauty will always be bought with pain.

They gain the tower. Orfeo dies taking the gates, though he wins passage for the others. Algeas and Kivo are slain on the ascent of the First Stair, though they make the neverborn whimper as they banish them.

The interior is now a coiled entrail of madness, with stone that shrieks and flags that churn. They all fight the visions in there – a starship, bloated with corruption, a grotesque god overshadowing a knight in gold and red...

Laurentis pushes the dream down. He is bellowing now, his vision blurred with anger, his body working like a furnace. The daemons hurl themselves at him, trying to bring him down by sheer weight of twisted flesh, but he tears them into wailing scraps. He hears the death-cries of Aenotas and Sorvilo as they smash the doors to the topmost chamber.

They have done enough – he bursts in, reaches the altar. It is made of sheened stone, glistening like amethyst, and there are images of obscenity carved across it. His surviving brothers join him, making the chamber echo with the roar of bolters. Laurentis seizes the prize. It hangs by a thread of gold, and for a second its beauty strikes at him.

Then the screaming starts up again, and the enemy howls back. Laurentis stows the prize in his armour and takes up his sword.

They have what they came for. Now they have to get out.

Outside, the unquiet air of Baal stirs again. A flicker of carnelian lights the skies, streaking red over spoiled plains.

He looks up from his labour, sensing the newcomer before he sees him. The captain limps in, his armour still bearing its battle-damage. He is helmless, his face crisscrossed with new scars.

The Sanguinary Priest rises. ‘You are the only one?’ he asks.

Laurentis nods. He is weak, suffering from terrible wounds that despite his long journey have not yet healed. He reaches for the golden thread and hands it over.

The Sanguinary Priest takes it, reverently. He turns it in his palm. Despite the wearing ages it has spent in its unholy prison, the jewel at the end of the chain is still unsullied – a ruby, many-faceted, winking in the light of the candles.

He detaches it and takes it to the chalice, where the single flaw waits to be made whole. He presses the ruby into the space, and hears the faint click as it takes. Then he lifts it to the light. Baal’s sullen sun, a shaft of red through the arched window, makes it glow.

It is whole again. When the rites are completed, the chalice will once more carry blood within its sacred rim.

Laurentis is unsteady on his feet, but holds position. The Sanguinary Priest looks at him, at the scars, at the wounds in his armour.

‘You have done well,’ the Sanguinary Priest says.

The captain nods. The Sanguinary Priest can read his thoughts as if he had spoken aloud.

So many dead.

The Sanguinary Priest turns back to the chalice. There was sacrifice, but there always is. That is what they are for – to suffer, to die, to guard those rare fortresses in which the mastery of the species is still preserved.

‘There is always a price,’ the Sanguinary Priest murmurs, placing the chalice down and taking up tools again. ‘Beauty will always be bought with pain.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Scars*, the novella *Brotherhood of the Storm* and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *Battle of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

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