



A KHORNE BLOODBOUND STORY

THE ROAD OF BLADES

JOSH REYNOLDS



WARHAMMER
AGE OF SIGMAR

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THE ROAD OF BLADES

Josh Reynolds

Ahazian Kel twisted in his saddle as the barbed arrow sank into the meat of his bicep. He looked down at it, and then up, to see where it had come from. More arrows followed the first. Most of these splintered against the warped plates of his crimson and brass armour, but several found gaps and pierced his flesh. More annoyingly, one found the eye of his horse, killing the scaly brute instantly.

The animal fell with a sibilant whinny, and Ahazian tumbled from his saddle with a curse. The Deathbringer rolled to his feet in a slew of choking dust and shredded grasses, weapons in hand. He ignored the broken arrows jutting from his scarred body. A little pain was good, like salt for meat. The goreaxe squirmed in his grip, eager to bite flesh, and the skullhammer throbbed, ready to crush bone. The thorns of metal set into their hafts bit comfortingly into his palms, sinking into old grooves of scar tissue. The weapons were a part of him, an extension of his arms and will. He stepped away from the dying horse, deeper into the waving, waist-high grasses of the plain, and set his feet, awaiting his attackers. If they wanted him, he saw no reason to disappoint them.

He didn't have long to wait. A dozen horsemen galloped towards him through the sea of black grasses, their reptilian steeds shrieking with hunger. The cannibal-horses of the Caldera would, and often did, devour anything that fell beneath their scything hooves, even their own riders. The Horse-Lords of the Caldera were little better than their fierce steeds, and the other tribes of the steppes justly feared falling into their hands.

Clad in armour made from bronze plates and the reddish scales of their stallions, and draped in dark robes of firewurm silk, they made for a most impressive sight. Each rider carried a stubby, curved bow and an array of hand weapons that even the most ardent blood reaver would eye with envy. Masks of bone hid their faces.

Intimidating. But then, so was he. He stood hands taller than the tallest of them, and his broad frame was clad in heavy armour. His helmet curved upwards, coalescing into the rune of Khorne, marking his allegiances for all who wished to see. He spread his arms, extending his weapons outward, in a gesture of welcome.

One of the riders bent, and drew an arrow from the quiver on his saddle. He loosed so swiftly that Ahazian almost missed it. His goreaxe snapped up, and the arrow split itself on the blade. More arrows followed. His skullhammer swept out, smashing them from the air. The clans of the Caldera had fought his kind before, and knew that to get too close, too soon, was to die. They galloped in a wide circle, surrounding him, screaming their war cries.

When Anhur of the Axe had led the Eight Tribes across these lands, he'd sent Kung of the Long Arm to cast down the fang-standards of the clans, and humble them. Since Anhur's death, at the fall of Klaxus, the clans had recovered their courage. Mostly, they contented themselves with raiding the slave-caravans of the Furnace-Kings, or warring upon weaker steppe tribes. That they were here, now, seemed almost an omen.

'Khorne smiles upon me,' Ahazian murmured. Perhaps the Blood God had sent him one last gift, before he left this place. Or perhaps they'd seen a lone rider and not realised his true nature until it was too late. Either way, he had little patience for such obstructions. He was close to the end of his quest. The Road of Blades called out to him, and he would not falter now.

Bored, he slammed his weapons together and glared at the circling horsemen. 'Come on then. I am Ahazian Kel, scion of the Ekran, and I walk the Eightfold Path. I have no time for cowards.'

As if his words were a signal, a horseman screamed and galloped towards him, drawing a sword as he did so. Ahazian turned to meet him. He slammed his shoulder into the horse's chest, and swept its front hooves out from under it with his skullhammer. Thick bones snapped, and the scaly creature fell with a scream that was almost human. His goreaxe slammed down, shearing through the fallen rider's blade and the head behind. An arrow smacked into the small of Ahazian's back, and he whipped around. He smashed aside a lance that sought his midsection, and removed its wielder's arm for good measure.

He killed two more before the rest broke. The Caldera retreated, leaving him standing over the corpses of their fellows. 'Perhaps your folk are not so foolish as all that, eh?' he asked, looking down at one of the dead men. 'They know when they are beaten, at least. Unlike my own.' His amusement faded, as he silenced a wounded horse. He crushed the beast's head, and let his skullhammer drink in its blood.

He looked around. The Black Grasses were exactly what their name implied

– a steppe, covered in tall, blackened grasses, rustling in a hot wind. And beyond them, limned in the red light of the setting sun, the ruins of Caldus. Caldus, where the ancestors of the Calderan clans had made their final stand against the armies of the Bloodbound, before being scattered to the winds. ‘And here you are, standing against one of us again,’ he said to one of the corpses, laughing. ‘Perhaps you are a foolish people, after all.’

It was Caldus he had come to find. Caldus and what lay beyond it – the Road of Blades. The road to his destiny. Khorne had called him, and Ahazian Kel had come.

There were no more kels. Just him. There were no more Ekran, save in the armies of the Bloodbound. And all their works had been cast into the fire with them. That was the price one paid, for defying Khorne. And yet... and yet. Khorne prized defiance, even as he punished it. To fight was to earn Khorne’s blessings. And for a kel, there was only battle. To wage war, one must become war. That was the truest adage of the Ekran. Masters did not matter. Armies and nations were but distractions to the purity of war.

Ahazian Kel, last hero of the Ekran, sought to become war itself. But for that, he required greater weapons than those he currently wielded, weapons which could only be found in the Soulmau. The goreaxe stirred in his grip, as if the thought had angered it. ‘I killed your first wielder to claim you,’ he said, chidingly. ‘There is little difference, that I can see. You discard masters, and your masters discard you. That is the fate of all weapons.’

The wind brought a scent to him. He tilted his head, taking it in. Old blood. Rust. Hot metal. The Road of Blades was close. He set off through the grasses, already forgetting the men and beasts he’d killed. The walk was long, but his endurance was inhuman. Gone were the days of honest sweat and aching muscles. He was like a blade, honed to perfection. A killing edge that would never dull, no matter how many lives he took.

He would never bend, until he broke. Such were the blessings of Khorne.

The distant ruins of Caldus grew larger – broken towers of basalt and feldspar rose above crumbling walls of blazestone. He saw the remains of a massive gateway, its ancient gilt work long since stripped from it by scavenging clans and treasure seekers. Where once the clans of the Caldera had lived and toiled, now only beasts dwelled. The Children of Chaos eagerly occupied whatever mankind abandoned, and warred amongst themselves for control of the ashes. That too was the way of Khorne. Only the strong survived.

The grasses grew thin, and soon disappeared entirely. A scar stretched across the plain, from the baroque portcullis of the city gate to a point just out of sight. It was as if some great blast of heat had scoured a path, burning away the grasses and leaving behind... what?

Weapons. Sourly amused, he realised that it was not called the Road of Blades without cause. Swords, mostly. But some axes. Spear blades. Arrowheads. The weapons had twisted in the heat, melting together into a flat ribbon as wide as several men. Ahazian studied them, trying to calculate the number of blades needed to craft such a pathway. They rattled softly, in their

captivity, as if unseen hands were trying to pry them up. He had not noticed the sound before, but now, it was all he could hear. Metal squealed against metal. Pommels thumped.

A road of fire-warped weapons. 'How fitting,' he said. The weapons stilled at the sound of his voice, and he tensed, his instincts screaming a warning. But he saw no enemies. Only the ashes of the defeated, still drifting above their blades. That was the story told around the campfires of the Bloodbound. Of proud Caldus, and its fall, and how one of the Forgemasters of Khorne had taken the weapons of those who died in the city's defence and made from them a road of blades. A road that was but one of eight. Eight roads for eight realms, all leading to the same place... the Soulmau. The great smithy-citadel of Khorne, where the weapons of mortals and daemons alike were crafted by the Forgemasters and their servants. It extended outward from the Brass Citadel through all realms, for wherever there was war, there was a need for weapons. Its forges were fired by the flames of a dying sun, and its ever shifting ramparts swelled and contracted to the drumbeat of eternal battle.

Ahazian stepped onto the road. The weapons shifted beneath his feet, and he paused, waiting. It was said, in some war camps, that only the worthy could walk the road and survive. But then, that was said of most things of this sort. But Ahazian knew that all of existence was but a test of worth. Every breath, each step – all a test.

He turned and squinted into the distance. The red sun was setting, casting crimson shadows across the steppes. There was a haze, far ahead of him. A shimmering heat-sign. That was where he must go. The Soulmau awaited him, like a promise yet to be kept. He strode towards it, following the curve of the road.

Ahazian could not say when he had first heard of the legendary smithy-citadel of Khorne. It was there, the savages of the Ashdwell whispered, that the weapons of the gods themselves were forged – even Warmaker, the Blood God's great two-handed sword. Weapons such as those he desired. Those he deserved. Others contended that even the deep forges of the Furnace-Kings were but puny shadows of the Soulmau, though he knew of none who had ever seen it and lived to tell the tale.

Like much of what he knew of the gods and their realms, it was all stories told at a remove, passed down from one warrior to another. And all of these stories might be true, or none of them at all. The gods, he knew, were vast, and contained multitudes – daemons and lesser spirits – all bound to the will and whim of their patrons.

Perhaps it was one of those multitudes that had sent him the signs and portents which had set him upon this path. He had seen the silhouette of an anvil in the blood smear of a dying orruk, and read strange sigils carved on the splintery insides of an Ashdwell sylvaneth. A flock of carrion birds had followed him for eight days, and croaked the name of Caldus to him at the eighth hour of each day. In red dreams, he had witnessed a titanic shape, wolf-fanged and mighty, striding through the heavens, and heard a voice, tolling like a bell. It had called out to him, commanding him to travel alone across the

Furnace Lands, through the Felstone Plains and to the steppes of the Caldera. And he had done so.

Implacable, he had fought his way towards the setting sun, through enemies great and small. All to reach the Road of Blades. But now that he was here, he felt – not anticipation. Wariness, perhaps. His instincts had been honed on a thousand battlefields. If this was a test, he had not yet passed it.

Ahazian tightened his grip on his weapons and increased his pace. He could feel the broken blades turning beneath him, like serpents stirring in their sleep. As if the road were waking up. The ashes grew thick, filling his mouth and stinging his eyes. They swirled about the road, caught in the eternal heat of their burning.

He stopped. He thought he'd seen something, in the ashes. Like the outline of a shape. Almost human, but not quite. More of them, now. Following behind him, approaching him from ahead. Crowding him. The weapons were clattering again. But the sound had changed. It was almost... eager? 'Ha,' he said, softly. 'So be it.'

The first blade rose up like an adder, and he crushed it with his skullhammer. A second tore itself free of the road and whirled towards him, borne aloft in a cloud of ash. Two more followed its example. An axe wrenched itself upright and spun towards his head. He bulled forward, knowing that to hesitate was to be overwhelmed. To stop and fight was the impulse of all warriors, but it was better to seek out a true challenge than to shed blood for no purpose. There were no enemies here, only the echoes of a defeated people. Khorne might not care from whence the blood flowed, but Ahazian did, especially if it promised to be his own.

He pressed on, smashing weapons aside. Beneath the rattle of metal and the hiss of ash, he thought he heard voices, cursing him, or warning him. The souls of the dead, perhaps, or maybe even those who'd failed to meet the road's challenge. Arrowheads dug into his flesh like fangs as he swatted the axe from the air. Swords drew sparks from his shoulder-plates and back-plate. A spear blade crashed against his greave, and twisted away. Only once did he stumble, when a length of chain tangled his legs. But a quick strike with his goreaxe freed him, before the rest could take advantage.

Ahazian was bleeding from a score of wounds when he reached what he'd sought. The gateway rose up out of nothing, a coruscating vortex composed of swirling ash, splinters of molten metal, and a harsh, eye-searing light. It was not a physical thing, so much as the memory of one. Not a true gate, but a wound cut into the flesh of Aqshy, bleeding heat and light. Sweat beaded on his flesh as he approached the light, goreaxe raised to shield his eyes. Behind him, the road undulated. Weapon points gleamed in the raw light of the gateway as they surged towards him. He did not slow, or hesitate. He hurled himself through the gate.

He slammed down onto a hard, metal surface. He clambered to his feet and took in his surroundings at a glance. Fumes of sulphurous gas hung thick upon the dense air, partially obscuring the heights above, and the depths below. The gantry he stood on was a narrow strip of heat-scarred iron, extending over an

indistinct molten expanse, far below. The path ahead led to a massive portcullis, wrought from brass and stone in the shape of raging flames. The portcullis itself was set into some vast, central edifice, the shape of which he found himself unable to comprehend. From everywhere echoed the din of industry and the grinding of stone. The noise was a force unto itself, battering at his senses.

The gantry vibrated from the quaquaversal reverberation, creaking in its vague moorings. Ahazian caught sight of movement some distance above him. Another gantry, gleaming like silver, stretched towards the central edifice from out of the choking haze. A lean figure strode across it, carrying a broad-bladed impaling spear over its shoulder. The figure stopped, as if it had caught sight of Ahazian. It shouted something, but the words were lost in the clamour. A greeting, or maybe a challenge.

‘It seems that I am not alone on this path, then. No matter.’ Ahazian raised his goreaxe in salute. A roar from below dragged his eyes downward, towards a third gantry, composed of what appeared to be fire-blackened bones. A heavy figure, clad in heavy armour the colour of clotting blood, glared up at him. It clutched an axe in one hand and had a heavy shield strapped to its other arm. ‘A path of silver, a path of bones, and a path of fire,’ Ahazian muttered. Perhaps the Road of Blades was not so unique as the stories had made out.

The bulky warrior below began to lumber towards what Ahazian suspected was his own portcullis. Annoyance flared in him. He had come too far to be beaten to his goal by some plodding oaf. He broke into a run. But as he did so, he felt the gantry begin to shudder and buck. He staggered, and nearly fell, as the portcullis ground open with a clatter of chains. Something massive stepped out onto the juddering gantry.

It was not alive, at least not in any way he recognised. It was shaped like a man, though it was the size of one of the gargants said to dwell in the Firepeaks. Its hide was brass and blackened iron, and it was draped with smoking chains. Vents spewed smoke whenever it moved. Its head was a mockery of his own helmet, and it clutched an enormous axe in its talons. With a grinding roar, it lurched towards him, axe raised. With every step, it caused the gantry to shudder and groan.

‘Another test? Another stone on which to hone my edge – come then. I fear nothing that walks.’ Ahazian’s weapons hummed in his grip as he lunged to meet the automaton. They were eager for battle, even against something that could not bleed. The great axe hissed down, and he twisted aside, nearly losing his footing. He struck out at the automaton’s joints, trying to slow it down. But it ignored his attacks the way he’d ignored the arrows of the Caldera earlier.

It was a weapon, and felt no pain from his blows, which only added to his frustration. ‘Scream, damn you – howl, shriek, something,’ he growled. Screams were his music, and never before had he been denied them. Even the bark-skinned sylvaneth screamed. But this thing refused to give him his due. Then, conceivably, that was the point. Like the living weapons of the road, this thing was not to be fought – but avoided.

Filled with new certainty, Ahazian hunched forward, avoiding a sweeping

blow that would have removed his head, and threw himself between its legs. He rolled to his feet as it turned towards him, gears whining. Then, with a shout, he brought his skullhammer down on the trembling surface of the gantry. The iron had been weakened by the automaton's weight, and it burst at the point of impact. The automaton staggered towards him, axe raised for a killing blow. Chunks of hot metal splattered across his helmet as he struck the gantry again and again. Then, with a final, echoing screech, the iron gave way and the gantry collapsed, carrying the automaton with it. The thing plunged down into the molten depths below.

Ahazian heard a creaking behind him and turned, expecting to see a second automaton. Instead, he saw the bars of the portcullis descending. They meant to trap him out here, whoever they were. He snarled in anger and sprang to stop it. But even as he moved, he knew he wouldn't reach it in time. With a roar, he sent his goreaxe spinning towards the portcullis. The weapon wedged itself between the bars and the stone frame of the gateway, slowing the mechanism's descent. Sparks flashed as the metal of the blade bit at the stonework.

The Deathbringer dived through the gateway even as his goreaxe snapped in two, and the portcullis slammed down. He glanced at the remains of the weapon. Another test. One of sacrifice. Ahazian found himself in an immense, circular antechamber, hewn from volcanic rock. The walls were bare, save for thick pillars of feldspar and eight portals, including the one he'd entered through. 'Smaller than I thought it'd be,' he said. On the floor was a mosaic of images – daemons, warriors, gods, all locked in battle – curling around colossal grates. Above him, the chamber stretched up into a smoky darkness.

The skin between his shoulder blades itched and he peered upwards. Between the pillars, he glimpsed what might have been individual tiers or levels, lit by firelight. This was only the bottom level, then. He heard the ringing of hammers on anvils, and the hiss of hot metal being cooled. Distant voices spoke, but he could not make out their words. The air stank of smoke and blood.

'Are we expected to fight our way to the top, then?' someone rumbled. Ahazian turned to see the brutish warrior he'd noticed before stump through an archway marked with symbols of death. The warrior's armour was gashed and dented in places, and he'd lost his shield, but he still had his axe. Strange charms and tokens hung from his neck, and his breastplate was etched with scenes of battle. His helmet was crafted in the shape of a skull, and the haft of his axe was a human femur. He waved the weapon at Ahazian. 'Answer me, fool, or I shall gut you and read the answer in your entrails.'

Ahazian stepped back towards the centre of the chamber. Perhaps this was the last test. A trial by combat, to see who was worthy of the Soulma's gifts. 'Do not make threats you cannot keep, brute.' He spread his arms. 'Come to me, if you wish to die.'

'Does that go for all of us, or just him?'

Ahazian risked a glance to his left. The spear-wielder he'd seen before stepped through an archway of gold. The warrior wore an open-faced helmet

and a polished cuirass of brass, marked with the rune of Khorne. His scarred, tattooed limbs were bare of armour, but his movements were so quick, Ahazian doubted he required the extra protection. Even so, blood dripped freely down his limbs from numerous wounds. 'Feel free to join in, if you like,' Ahazian said. 'I've never had a problem killing strangers.'

'Too much talking, not enough dying,' the brute rumbled. He charged towards Ahazian, axe raised. Ahazian braced himself to meet the warrior's rush, glad at last to face a living opponent. Even if he did smell like an open grave. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of more warriors entering the chamber through the other archways. He had little time to spare for them, however, as his adversary hacked at him. He caught the blade of the axe on the head of his skullhammer. His muscles bulged as he fought to force his larger opponent back. 'Strong,' the brute grunted.

'Only the strong survive,' Ahazian said.

'And only the clever prosper,' the spear-wielder interjected. The wide blade of his impaling spear skidded off the armour under Ahazian's arm. He caught the weapon just behind the blade and yanked it forward, so that it slammed into the chest of the brute. The hulking warrior staggered back with a curse. Ahazian spun and smashed his skullhammer into the chest of the spear-wielder, knocking him flat.

'A clever warrior wouldn't have got so close,' Ahazian growled, as he raised his weapon. He would crack this fool's skull and then finish off the other one. However, as he moved to do so, smoke began to rise from the grates in the floor. It flowed upwards so swiftly and thickly that soon Ahazian could see nothing around him. The sounds of battle grew dim, and faded away entirely. Even the floor beneath his feet felt different. He could no longer feel the presence of his opponents. It was as if they had been stolen away by unseen hands. For a moment, curiosity warred with anger.

Then, in the smoke, came a light. A dull, orange glow. Acting on instinct, he moved towards it. The floor trembled beneath him as he moved, and he heard the thunderous creaking of unseen gears. From somewhere, a voice began to speak.

In the beginning, before the Age of Blood, before the realms cracked and the four brothers made war upon one another, there was fire. From fire, came heat. From heat, shape. And shape split into eight. And the eight became as death. Eight Lamentations.

Ahazian stopped. 'The Eight...' he whispered. Every warrior marked by Khorne knew the legend of the Eight Lamentations. Eight weapons, given by Khorne as gifts to his brother gods, but then lost. A single Lamentation could shatter armies. All eight together would rend the walls of reality, and cast down all that opposed them. Were these the weapons that had drawn him here? Was this why he had been summoned, to wield one of the Eight? The thought excited him. It was only fitting, was it not?

The smoke swelled, and Ahazian wondered if the chamber were changing shape, somehow. Everything seemed to be moving, drawing him closer to the orange glow. He pressed on, moving as quickly as he dared, without being able

to see his surroundings. And through it all, the voice continued its tale.

The Eight were the raw stuff of Chaos, hammered and shaped to a killing edge by the chosen weapon smiths of Khorne. To each of his Forgemasters was given a task – to craft a weapon unlike any other: a weapon fit for a god. Or one as unto a god.

‘I am not a god, but I would gladly slaughter a pantheon for such a weapon,’ Ahazian said. His words were swallowed up by the smoke, without even an echo to mark their passing. With such a weapon in his hand, he would be as war itself.

Then came the Age of Blood and the Eight were lost. But it is said by the Brass Oracles that there will come eight warriors – Godchosen – who will reclaim the Eight for Khorne, and march with them at the head of his armies, at the end of all things...

Abruptly, the smoke billowed and began to disperse, as he was enveloped in a great heat. His boots scraped on rough stone, and he waved a hand to clear his vision. He was in a forge. Larger than any he’d ever seen, but crude. Primitive. It was a cavern, chopped and hewn so as to make room for fire-pits and cooling basins. Racks of weapons decorated the curved walls – hackblades, wrath-hammers, weapons of all shapes and sizes.

And at the heart of the forge, a huge anvil, and the smith himself, standing over it. One big hand clutched a hammer, while the other held something flat on the anvil. The hammer came down once, twice, three times, filling the forge with the sound of metal ringing on metal. The sound sliced at his senses, setting his teeth on edge.

Ahazian recognised the heavily muscled being before him. He’d seen skullgrinders before, though the war-smiths of Khorne were not a common sight. The creature’s armour was blackened and warped, as if he had been at the centre of a lightning strike. When the skull-faced helm turned, Ahazian saw that it was scored and marked in similar fashion.

‘You are of the Ekran.’

The skullgrinder’s voice was like an avalanche. Ahazian hesitated. Then, he said, ‘I am Ahazian Kel.’

‘The last kel.’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you kill the others?’

Ahazian took a tighter grip on his skullhammer. ‘Some. Who are you to ask such questions?’

‘I am he who called you here, Ahazian Kel. I am Volundr of Hespht. The Skull-Cracker. The Sword-Binder. Do you know my name?’

Ahazian did. ‘It is said, in certain circles, that it was by your hand that the sword Marrowcutter was forged. That you broke a hundred daemons on your anvil, and used their blood to cool the blade of the greatest of the Eight Lamentations.’

A low, guttural laugh slipped from the skullgrinder. ‘Even so, even so. You know who I am, then. But do you know what I am?’

‘The Forgemaster of Aqshy.’

‘Yes. One of eight sworn war-smiths, bound in service to Khorne. Though we are but seven, now. The forges of Azyr are cold, and my brother is gone. Even Khorne cannot find him.’ Volundr lifted what he’d been working on from the anvil. It was an axe – a black goreaxe, chased in gold. ‘This axe once belonged to another, who failed to live up to its promise and my expectations. Thus, I have re-forged it, and made it stronger.’

The skullgrinder turned, the axe licking out. Ahazian jerked back, bringing his skullhammer up to block the blow. His hammer burst as the axe bit into it, and he was knocked backwards. Volundr gave him no time to recover, or even mourn the loss of a faithful weapon. The skullgrinder spun the axe as if it weighed no more than a feather, and chopped at Ahazian’s head. Ahazian ducked aside. He didn’t waste time wondering why the skullgrinder had called him here only to kill him. Such was the skullgrinder’s strength, he had no doubt that a single blow would mean his end. He had to stay out of reach.

‘Why did you come, kel?’ Volundr rumbled. ‘Answer me quickly.’

‘I came seeking weapons,’ Ahazian said, avoiding another blow. He cast around, seeking a way out. His spirit rebelled at the thought of retreat, but he had not come all this way merely to die. There were weapons here – one of them might give him an edge.

‘Which weapons? This one, perhaps?’ The axe slashed down, nearly taking Ahazian’s leg off. He threw himself backwards, towards a rack of blades. ‘Or perhaps you came seeking one of the Eight Lamentations, eh? Did you come seeking Marrowcutter, or perhaps the spear called Gung?’

‘And if I did?’

‘Is that the only reason you dared walk the Road of Blades?’

‘What other reason is there?’ Ahazian snarled. He snatched up a hackblade and turned. The axe sheared through it, even as he brought it up. He cast the jagged stump into Volundr’s face.

‘To test yourself. To see if you were worthy of wielding these weapons you seek.’

‘I would not be here if I was not,’ Ahazian said. He twisted aside and then lunged back, grabbing the axe by the haft. Volundr laughed and jerked him off his feet. He slammed Ahazian back against the wall with humiliating ease, holding him pinned.

‘No. I suppose not.’ Volundr studied him for a moment. ‘They are not here, you know. They were lost. Scattered across the mortal realms by unknown hands.’

‘Then why call me here?’ Ahazian demanded, struggling to get free.

‘To see if you are worthy of the quest. Do you think yourself one of the Godchosen, then, Ahazian Kel? Are you one of the eight champions destined to wield the Lamentations in Khorne’s name, in the final bloodletting, when the stars themselves are snuffed out?’

Ahazian clawed at the haft of the axe, trying to free himself. He lashed out at Volundr with his feet. It felt like kicking stone. Volundr chuckled. ‘Or perhaps such dreams are beyond you. Maybe you are simply a butcher, seeking a better quality of blade. Which is it?’

'It is whichever Khorne wills,' Ahazian hissed. 'I am his weapon, to wield as he sees fit.' He thrust his fingers into the eye slits of Volundr's helm. The skullgrinder roared in fury and stumbled back, releasing him. Ahazian crumpled to the ground, gasping. Volundr had dropped the axe, and was clutching at his helm. Ahazian snatched the weapon up and lunged to his feet. He swung it towards Volundr's neck. But, at the last moment, he pulled the blow.

Volundr lowered his hands. His eyes gleamed, in the depths of his helm. 'Very good. You have a brain, Ekran.' He straightened. 'More than I can say for some of the others. But then, my brothers have never been as particular as myself, regarding their tools.'

'Tool,' Ahazian repeated. 'Those others, they were summoned as I was.' He thought of the brute, and wondered whether such a creature would have the wit to pass such a test. He doubted it. But perhaps the other Forgemasters valued different properties in their tools.

Volundr nodded. 'By my brothers. The other remaining Forgemasters.'

'Why? To what purpose?'

Volundr turned back to his anvil. 'The time for war – the last war – will soon be upon us. The weak gods of the lesser realms have returned to contest our dominion anew, even as Khorne's brothers scheme in the shadows between worlds.' He slammed his hammer down on the anvil. 'The Eight Lamentations must be found. And we will find them. You will be my hand in this task, as the others who were called will serve my brothers.'

Ahazian nodded. He'd been right. It had been a test, all of it.

'And it still is,' Volundr said, as if reading his thoughts. 'If you are brave enough to continue. Your destiny awaits, Ahazian Kel. Will you falter?'

'I told you before – I am Khorne's, to wield as he sees fit.'

Volundr nodded and struck the anvil again. 'Good. Then I will not have to shatter your skull on my anvil.'

Ahazian extended the haft of the axe to Volundr. 'A good weapon. But not what I came for.'

Volundr shook his head. 'No.' He chuckled and struck the anvil one last time.

'But it will serve until you have a better one.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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An extract from *Eight Lamentations: Spear of Shadows*.



Somewhere in the mortal realms, the smith raised his hammer. He brought it down, striking the white-hot length of metal he held pinned against the anvil with one fire-blackened hand. He rotated it and delivered a second strike. A third, a fourth, until the smoky air of the cavernous forge resonated with the sound of raw creation.

It was the first smithy, long forgotten save in the dreams of those who worked with iron and flame. It was a place of stone and wood and steel, at once a grand temple and a brute cave, its dimensions and shape changing with every twitch of the smoke that inundated it. It was nowhere and everywhere, existing only in the hollows of ancestral memory, or in the stories of the oldest mortal smiths. Racks of weapons such as had never been wielded by mortals gleamed in the light of the forge, their killing edges honed and impatient to perform their function. Beneath them were less murderous tools, though no less necessary.

The smith made little distinction between them – weapons were tools, and tools were weapons. War was no less a labour than ploughing the soil, and hewing down a forest was no less a slaughter, though the victims could not, save in rare instances, scream.

The smith was impossibly broad and powerful, for all that his shape was crooked, and bent strangely, as if succumbing to unseen pressures. His thick limbs moved with a surety of purpose that no mechanism could replicate. He wore a pair of oft-patched trousers and a battered apron, his bare arms and back glistening with sweat where it wasn't stained with tattoo-like whorls of soot or marked with runic scars. Boots of crimson dragon-hide protected his feet, the iridescent scales glinting in the firelight, and tools of all shapes and sizes hung from the wide leather belt strapped about his waist.

A spade-shaped beard, composed of swirling ash, and moustaches of flowing smoke covered the lower half of his lumpen features. A thick mane of fiery hair cascaded down his scalp, spilling over his shoulders and crackling against his flesh. Eyes like molten metal were fixed on his task with a calm that came only with age.

The smith was older than the realms. A breaker of stars, and a maker of suns.

He had forged weapons without number, and no two were the same – a fact he took no small amount of pride in. He was a craftsman, and he put a bit of himself into the metal, even as he hammered it into shape. This one needed a little more hammering than most. He raised it from the anvil and studied it. ‘Bit more heat,’ he murmured. His voice at its quietest was like the rumble of an avalanche.

He shoved the length of smouldering iron into the maw of the forge. Flames crawled up his sinewy arm, and the metal twisted in his grip as it grew hot once more, but he did not flinch. The fire held no terrors for one such as him. Tongs and gloves were for lesser smiths. Besides, there was much to be seen in the fire, if you weren’t afraid of getting close. He peered into the dancing hues of red and orange, wondering what they would show him this time. Shapes began to take form, indistinct and uncertain. He stirred the embers.

As the flames roared up anew, clawing greedily at the metal, he felt his students shy back. He chuckled. ‘What sort of smiths are afraid of a bit of fire?’

He glanced at them, head tilted. Vague dream-shapes huddled in the smoke. Small and large, broad and gossamer-thin. Hundreds of them – duardin, human, aelf, even a few ogors – crowded the ever-shifting confines of the smithy, watching as he plied his trade. All who sought to shape metal were welcome in this forge, barring an obvious few.

There were always some who made themselves unwelcome. Those who’d failed to learn the most important lessons, and used what he’d taught them for bitter ends. Not many, thankfully, but some. They hid from his gaze, even as they sought to emulate his skill. But he would find them eventually, and cast their works into the fire.

The voices of his students rose in sudden warning. The smith turned, eyes narrowing in consternation. Talons of fire emerged from the forge, gripping either side of the hearth. Bestial features, composed of crackling flame and swirling ash, congealed. Teeth made from cinders gnashed in a paroxysm of fury. A molten claw caught at his arm, and his thick hide blackened at its touch. The smith grunted and jerked his arm back. The daemon lunged after him with a hot roar, its shape expanding as if to fill the smithy. Great wings of ash stretched, and a horned head emerged from within the hearth.

‘No,’ the smith said, simply, as his students scattered. He dropped the metal he’d been heating and caught the twisting flame shape before it could grow any larger. He had to be quick. It shrieked as he dragged it around and slammed it down onto the anvil. Burning claws gouged his bare arms and tore his apron to ribbons, as flapping wings battered against his shoulders, but the smith’s grip was unbreakable. He raised his hammer. The intruder’s eyes widened in realisation. It warbled a protest.

The hammer rang down. Then again and again, flattening and shaping the flame into a more agreeable form. The daemon screamed in protest as its essence was reduced with every blow. All of its arrogance and malice fled, leaving behind only fear, and soon, not even that.

The smith lifted what was left of the weakly struggling daemon. He

recognised the signature on its soul-bindings as easily as if he'd carved them himself. Daemons were like any other raw material, in that they required careful shaping by their summoner to make them fit for purpose. This one had been made for strength and speed and not much else.

'Crude, always so crude,' he said. 'No pride in his work, that one. No artistry. I tried to teach him, but – ah well. We'll make something of you, though, never fear. I've made better from worse materials, in my time.'

So saying, he plunged the daemon into the slack tub beside the anvil. Water hissed into vapour as parts of the creature sloughed away into motes of cinder, swirling upwards to float above the anvil. What was left in the tub was only a bit of blackened iron, pitted and veined an angry crimson, the barest hint of a snarling face scraped into its surface. The smith bounced it on his palm until it cooled, and then dropped it into the pocket of his apron.

'Now, I wonder what that was all about.'

It had been some time since he had been attacked in this place, in such a way. That it had happened at all spoke of desperation on someone's part. As if they'd hoped to prevent him from seeing something. He looked up at the cloud of floating cinders and reached to grasp a handful. He set aside his hammer and ran a thick finger through them, reading them as a mortal might read a book.

With a grunt, he cast them back into the forge and gave the coals a stir with his hand. An indistinct image took shape in the flames. Moments later, it split into eight, these clearer – a sword, a mace, a spear... eight weapons.

The smith frowned and stirred the coals fiercely, calling up more images. He needed to be certain of what he saw. In the flames, a woman clad in crystalline armour drew one of the eight – a howling daemon-sword – from its cage of meat, and traded thunderous blows with a Stormcast Eternal clad in bruise-coloured armour. She shattered her opponent's runeblade, and the smith winced to see one of his most potent works so easily destroyed. He waved a hand, conjuring more pictures out of the wavering flames.

A bloated pox-warrior, one side of his body eaten away and replaced by the thrashing shape of a monstrous kraken, wrapped slimy tendrils about the haft of a great mace, banded in runic iron, and tore it from the hands of a dying ogor. An aelf swordsman, eyes hidden beneath a cerulean blindfold, ducked beneath the sweeping bite of an obsidian axe that pulsed with volcanic hunger, and backed away from the hulking orruk who clutched it.

Angrily, the smith swept out a hand, summoning more images. They came faster and faster, dancing about his hand like the fragments of a half-remembered dream – he saw wars yet unwaged and the deaths yet to come, and felt his temper fray. The images moved so fast that even he couldn't keep track of them all. Frustrated, he caught those he could, holding them tight, only for them to slip between his fingers and rejoin the flames. The time had come around at last. He would need to make ready.

He ran his wide hands through his fiery hair and growled softly. 'Best get to work.' He turned and fixed several of his students with a glare. 'You there – stop skulking and find something to write with. Be quick, now!'

His students hurried to obey. When they returned, bearing chisels and heavy

tomes of stone and iron, he began to speak. 'In the beginning, there was fire. And from fire came heat. From heat, shape. And that shape split into eight. The eight were the raw stuff of Chaos, hammered and sculpted to a killing edge by the sworn forgemasters of the dread Soulmau, the chosen weaponsmiths of Khorne.'

He paused a moment, before continuing. 'But as the realms shuddered and the Age of Chaos gave way to the Age of Blood, the weapons known as the Eight Lamentations were thought lost.' In the fire, scenes of death and madness played themselves out, over and over again, a cycle without end.

Grungni, Lord of all Forges and Master-Smith, sighed.

'Until now.'

Elsewhere. Another forge, cruder than Grungni's. A cavern, ripped open and hewn from volcanic stone by the bleeding hands of many slaves. Fire pits and cooling basins occupied the wide, flat floor. Racks decorated the uneven walls, and hackblades, wrath-hammers, weapons of all shapes and sizes, hung from them in disorganised fashion.

At the heart of the forge, within a circle of fire pits, sat a huge anvil. And upon the anvil, a hulking figure leaned, head bowed. Sweat rolled down his muscular arms to splatter with a hiss upon the anvil. His crimson and brass armour was blackened in places, as if it had been exposed to an impossible heat. He inhaled deeply, trying to ignore the weakness that crept through him. He had infused the daemon with some of his own strength, in the hopes that it would prove a match for the Lord of all Forges. Or at least last longer than a handful of moments. He consoled himself with the thought that it was not every man who could match wills with a god and survive.

'Then, I am no mere man,' Volundr of Hesphut murmured to himself. 'I am Forgemaster of Aqshy.' A warrior-smith of Khorne. Skullgrinder of the Soulmau. He had forged weapons without number, as well as the wars in which they were wielded. He had raised up thousands of heroes, and cracked the skulls of thousands more.

But for the moment, he was simply tired.

'Well?'

The voice, cold and soft, echoed from the shadows of the forge. Volundr straightened, skull-faced helm turning towards the speaker who sat in the darkness, wrapped in concealing robes the colour of cooling ashes. Qyat of the Folded Soul, Forgemaster of Ulgu, was more smoke than fire, and his shape was seemingly without substance beneath his voluminous attire. 'He saw,' Volundr rumbled. 'As I predicted, Qyat.'

A second voice, harsh and sharp like shattering iron, intruded. 'You seek to excuse your own failure, Skull-Cracker.'

Volundr snorted. 'Excuse? No. I merely explain, Wolant.' He turned, pointing a blunt finger at the second speaker, who stood beyond the glare of the fire pits, his profusion of muscular arms crossed over his massive barrel chest.

Wolant Sevenhand, Forgemaster of Chamon, was a brass-skinned, eight-

armed abomination, clad in armour of gold. Seven of his arms ended in sinewy, fire-toughened hands. The eighth ended in the blunt shape of a hammer, strapped to a mangled wrist in an effort to correct a long-ago injury. 'If you think you can succeed where I failed, then try your luck by all means,' Volundr continued.

'You dare--?' Wolant growled, reaching for one of the many hammers that hung from his belt. Before he could grab it, Volundr snatched up his own from the floor and slammed it down on the anvil, filling the smithy with a hollow, booming echo. Wolant staggered, claspings his hands to the side of his head.

Volundr pointed his hammer at the other skullgrinder. 'Remember whose smithy you stand in, Sevenhand. I'll not suffer your bluster here.'

'I'm sure our bellicose brother meant no harm, Volundr. He is a choleric, self-important creature, as you well know, and prone to rash action.' Qyat unfolded himself and stood. He loomed over the other two skullgrinders, a tower of lean, pale muscle, clad in black iron. 'Even so, if he is so rude as to threaten you again, I shall lop off another of his hands.'

'My thanks, brother,' Volundr said.

'Even as I will pluck out your eye, if you continue to stare at me so balefully,' Qyat added, mildly. He spread his thin hands. 'Respect costs men like us so little, my brothers. Why be miserly?'

Volundr bowed his head. 'Forgive me, brother,' he said. Weak as he was, he was in no shape for a confrontation with a creature as deadly as the Folded Soul. Wolant was bad enough, for all that he was a brute. He set the head of his hammer down on the anvil and leaned forwards, bracing himself on the haft. 'Wolant is right. I failed. The master-smith knows. And now he is aware that we know, as well.'

Wolant growled. 'If you had not failed--'

'But he did, and so new stratagems must be forged in the fires of adversity.' Qyat pressed his hands together, as if in prayer. 'The Crippled God cannot be allowed to take from us that which is ours.'

Wolant laughed. 'Ours, Folded Soul?' He spread his arms. 'Mine, you mean. Perhaps yours, if I am unlucky. Or someone else entirely, for we three are not alone in our quest. Our brother forgemasters begin their own hunts. The Eight Lamentations call to we who forged them, ready to spill blood once more.' Seven fists shook in a gesture of challenge and defiance. 'Only one of us may earn Khorne's favour by recovering them. Or had you forgotten?'

'None of us have forgotten,' Volundr said. 'We have each chosen our champions, and cast them into the realms to seek the Eight. But that does not mean we cannot work together against those outside our fraternity.' He shook his head. 'Grungni is not our only foe in this endeavour. Others seek the Eight as well. If we do not work together, we will--'

Wolant clapped four of his hands together, interrupting. 'Nonsense. The greater the obstacle, the greater the glory. I came only out of respect for the Folded Soul's cunning. Not to join my fate to yours. My champion will acquire the Eight Lamentations for me, and the skulls of your servants as well, if they get in his way.' He laughed again, and turned away. Volundr watched him

stride towards one of the great archways that lined the cavern wall, and wondered whether he could split the other smith's skull while his back was turned.

Qyat chuckled softly, as if reading his thoughts. 'Would that you could crack his thick skull on your anvil. Though I would be forced to slay you in turn, brother, should you choose to break the iron-oath in such a way.'

Volundr grunted. The iron-oath was the only thing keeping the remaining forgemasters from each other's throats. The truce was a tenuous thing, but it had held for three centuries. And he would not be the one to break it. He gestured dismissively. 'It will be more satisfying to snatch victory from him. My champion is most determined.'

'As is mine.'

Volundr nodded. 'Then may the best champion win.' He turned his attentions to the fire pits and gestured, drawing up the cinders and sparks into the air. He stirred the smoke, casting his gaze across the mortal realms, seeking a singular ember of Aqshy's fire. When he found it, he cast his words into the fire, knowing that they would be heard.

'Ahazian Kel. Last of the Ekran. Deathbringer. Heed your master's voice.'

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