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## ***DAEMON WORLD***

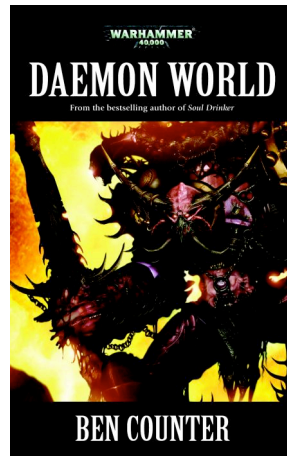
*A Warhammer 40,000 novel*

*By Ben Counter*

*Deep within the twisted hell-storms of the warp lies the daemon world of Torvendis, a planet damned by the dark powers of Chaos. Savage battle has raged for so long that the very bedrock of the world is formed from a strata of crushed bodies.*

*The arrival of a mysterious stranger threatens to upset the balance of power currently held by Lady Charybdia, princess of Slaanesh, precipitating a bloody revolution. But are the stranger's motives as straightforward as they appear, or do the fickle powers of Chaos have one last trick to play?*

*With battling daemons, seas of blood and rampant sorcery, Daemon World presents a unique and frenetic view of the Warhammer 40,000 universe. Ben Counter's classic novel of Chaos madness is now available in this new edition, complete with an afterword by the author.*



### **About the Author**

Ben Counter is fast becoming one of the Black Library's most popular authors. An Ancient History graduate and avid miniature painter, he lives near Portsmouth, England.

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The following is an excerpt from *DAEMON WORLD* by Ben Counter. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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GOLGOTH HAD KILLED old men before. Old women too, and children, and horses and warhounds and just about everything it might cross a man's mind to kill. He had crept into Kordar's war host when he was still too young to earn his first kill, and had fought alongside his older tribesmen as fiercely as any thrice-blooded warrior. Eight years later Golgoth had killed Kordar, a contest both men had seen coming ever since the day when the beardless boy had ignored the rules to take his first lives, and taken control of the Bladestone settlement.

In the raids and skirmishes that followed, Golgoth lost count of how many he killed in dreary, petty bloodlettings. The days of Kordar were gone. Lady Charybdia had subdued everything west of the Canis Mountains. There was nothing left the tribes could fight against, and no leaders who would challenge one another. The times of battle were to become another legend, like the million other legends that hung in the air of Torvendis like the morning mist.

When Grik was dead and Golgoth led the Emerald Sword, the times of battles would return.

Yes, he had killed enough old men. He was fully prepared to kill one more.

This particular old man didn't look so old up close. His skin was lined but his eyes were bright, as if it was weather and not age that had preyed upon him. His hair was dark and his hands still strong. Golgoth could tell a warrior when he saw one – the hermit's nose and cheekbone had been broken long ago, his knuckles were lumpen

and scarred. He stayed sitting by his small fire as Golgoth approached.

‘Who are you, stranger?’ barked Golgoth as he strode up to the hermit, Varkith and Tarn at his side.

The hermit looked up, smiling faintly. ‘A traveller making his way across the Canis Mountains, much like yourselves.’

‘No one travels alone here, old man.’

The hermit poked the fire at his feet, though it gave off little heat. ‘I am not alone. Torvendis is with me. I can read its ways so well it speaks to me like a friend.’

Golgoth stepped closer. ‘Are you armed?’

‘What you see,’ replied the hermit, spreading his arms, ‘is what you get.’

The hermit did not waver, though Golgoth and his companions were an imposing trio of men. Varkith was nine heads tall, his fists as big as a normal man’s head. Tarn, on the other hand, had once worked for the chieftain Grik before being cast out and joining Golgoth – he had strangled Grik’s enemies in their beds and killed with no more thought than most men gave to drawing breath.

‘A caravan passed this way,’ said Golgoth, still unsure what to make of the hermit. ‘Three wagons and twelve men, led by a sorcerer. What do you know of it?’

‘Eleven men,’ replied the hermit. ‘And harpies.’

Tarn glanced at Golgoth, and Golgoth knew they were both thinking the same thing. Harpies were feral, daemonic, bat-winged creatures that flocked to the bleakest peaks of the mountains; it took a powerful man indeed to tame them. And the most cunning harpies were only seen if they wanted to be, so even Lonn could miss them if he didn’t know what to look for. Had Grik fathomed that Golgoth would stalk the caravan and bring a true-sighted Touched with him?

‘You were close enough to see all this, and they let you live? I find that difficult to believe, old man.’

The hermit stood up. He was taller than Golgoth had expected, as tall as he was. ‘Age has its benefits, stripling. I know things that your people thought were forgotten. Perhaps there is something you

could learn before you kill yourself and your tribesmen taking on an enemy you can't handle.'

A barely perceptible gesture from Golgoth kept Varkith from tearing the hermit's head from his shoulders. It was some time since anyone had spoken to Golgoth like that, and longer still since they had done so and remained unscathed. But Golgoth knew he could kill this man at any time, whether with his own hands or through the two warriors beside him. But anyone surviving to reach old age in the Canis Mountains was rare enough, and one who could spy on one of Grik's tribute caravans with impunity was simply impossible.

Golgoth was curious. So the old man lived, for the time being.

The flicker of a flame caught Golgoth's eye. Some distance away his warriors were making camp and setting a fire of their own – Golgoth would have to join them soon if he was to get any rest at all before dawn. It was another five days' journey before they got to the Snake's Throat, a deep pass that marked the only path around the daemon-infested lower foothills on the other side of the Canis Mountains. They needed to stay tight and focused – an old vagrant shouldn't be allowed to take their minds off the mission.

'This man,' the hermit was saying as he looked first at Tarn and then at Varkith, 'is a killer and nothing more. And this one is an animal with a human face, which I see you have trained well. But you... you could learn.'

The hermit held up a hand. There was light dancing around his fingertips, pale and blue-white. As Golgoth watched the fire flowed up and turned in on itself like a knot, forming a sigil like a snake tied into a figure of eight and swallowing its own tail. Golgoth watched, mesmerised, as the flame flaked away in tiny silver sparks, each one dancing in its own intricate pattern, leaving trails of light in the air that weaved into a glowing tapestry.

'You have thirty-five men, Golgoth. Grik has half a tribe at his side, sorcerers and daemons. If you face him as you are, you will die. But there are things I could teach you, and if you learn, you might just survive.'

The tapestry of light coalesced into an image – a barbarian with axe in hand, surely Golgoth, striding through the knee-deep remains

of his enemies, beneath the cured skins of the chieftain's tent. Then, suddenly, the image dissolved into the night, and left only the hermit's face, suddenly serious.

Not a hermit. A sorcerer? A Touched? Or something else?

'My name is Kron,' said the old man. 'When the dawn comes, we can begin.'

It was a risk, Golgoth knew that. But then again, it had been a risk to sneak into battle when his beard had yet to grow, and to challenge Kordar – but he had blooded himself a hundred times over since then and still wore Kordar's jawbone on his belt. There was something about Kron that Golgoth couldn't shake out of his head – his every word was afire with conviction, and it seemed that Golgoth had waited a lifetime to meet someone who could speak to him without fear. In any case, he told himself, he needed someone who knew these mountains, and he had lost enough men so that he could make space around the fire for one more.

Golgoth led Tarn, Varkith and the old man towards the warriors' camp, imagining himself wading through the corpses of Grik's lackeys, feeling a new determination to make the hermit's illusion become real.

It never occurred to him to ask how the old man had known his name.

TO THE WEST OF the Canis Mountains, beyond the rolling foothills and past the toothed banks of the Blackwater Delta, the heart of a continent was bounded by a wall of bone-white stone that grew in great plates and ribs from the broken earth. Soldiers swarmed along it like insects picking over a skeleton, pikes and spears bristling. Within the wall a city grew denser and denser like a spider's web, first with isolated colonnades and plazas melting from the ground, then with massive chunks of fortress walls that lurched upwards as if trying to haul their stones into Torvendis's jaundiced sky.

Paved streets were ribbons of stone diving in and out of the grey-brown earth, running further into the city which grew closer and taller as if there was something at its heart that nourished it. Mushroom-like blooms of polished rock were ringed with windows

in which barely-human knots of limbs writhed. Shanty towns clung to larger buildings like frightened pets, blossoming and dying as their inhabitants were dragged this way and that, draining into incense-filled catacombs or flooding out in great purges to turn the ground dark with their shadows. Pleasure-cults, in pack-animal mobs, roamed as the buildings grew taller and broader, sought out new sensations in streets that narrowed and crushed as the buildings expanded and contracted like huge stone organs.

Further towards the centre the ground fell away into massive strip mines torn beneath the city, spindles of rock remaining to which buildings were chained to keep them flying away. For this was a place saturated with power, flowing up through the wounded earth below and seeping from the orgiastic sense-rites that thronged the walkways and platforms above. Precarious top-heavy factory hulks, like inverted pyramids, shook as they belched the smoke of rendered bodies. Streams of elixir distilled from hordes of sacrifices ran down their sides and rained onto screaming cultists. Silk-clad legionaries, their armour bright metallic like beetles' carapaces, kept key intersections clear of the pleasure-seeking crowds and policed their infinitely complex ceremonies with shock-prods, halberds and guns.

Observation towers leaned insanely, shaking as if with laughter, and trained spindly arrays of clockwork sensors on the heavens, seeking new experiences in the patterns of Torvendis's many moons. Temples to Slaanesh were suspended on ropes of human hair above bottomless pits, silken pavilions protected by huge sweeping blades of gold and silver, armatures and daemon-bound engines studded with diamonds.

Billowing clouds of incense turned the sky purple-black, where segmented sky-wyrms coiled and banners to the Pleasure God rippled up into the sky. In a wide ring around the city's very heart stood spiked barricades guarded by the Traitor Space Marines of the Violators Chapter, their armour sky blue with purple-grey ichor weeping from the joints. And beyond these barriers stood Charybdis Keep.

The city itself didn't have a name, and was usually referred to as the 'City', or the 'Capital', or not mentioned at all. For it was simply the hinterland of Charybdia Keep. The mines beneath the city supplied its materials, and the city was itself a mine for slave-courtesans and the substances that could only be rendered down from the living. The keep was the seat of power on Torvendis, a power that had achieved dominance such as few had ever achieved in the planet's long and tortuous history. The keep was the spiritual, military, political and physical lynchpin of the planet.

It was built of pale grey fossilised remains precisely quarried from the rocks of Torvendis and tessellated into massive straight-edged blocks. Polished ribs and gleaming teeth sparkled on its surface. Corners were braced with webs of skeletal fingers. Schools of ossified sea monsters were packed into the dense foundation blocks that formed pillars sunk deep into the earth. The keep was a kilometre high, and every stone in its construction had once been something living.

A chamber at the very peak of Charybdia Keep had once been the eye of some unimaginably huge creature, now a vitrified crystalline dome that sat on the battlements like a diamond in a crown. From here an observer would command a magnificent all-round view of the city, and watch as the buildings rippled slowly, shifting and changing like something alive. Which, in many ways, it was.

THERE WAS ONLY ever one such observer at the pinnacle of Charybdia Keep. Not because no one else was permitted there, but because there was only one person on Torvendis who could survive the insanity that was the keep long enough to reach the chamber. That observer was Lady Charybdia.

Lady Charybdia sat back in the deep upholstery that filled the lower half of the globe, feeling it close around her. She waved a hand and the transparent surface above her clouded, shimmering with many colours as she focused her sight through the crystal. For a moment she let her senses relax, dulling them to the warmth of the



chamber and the feel of the silk against her skin, the whispers that caressed her face after travelling as screams far across the city.

It was as if she was sinking from some rarified, divine place into the drudgery of reality. The air was still. The thick velvet around her pulled back from her skin. The scent of all the emotions of the city died away. Everything was quiet. Lady Charybdia could throw her senses back into hyper-reality with a thought, but she always liked to dampen them now, for the few moments before she used the chamber, so she would not get flooded by a planet's worth of sensation.

She usually felt as if she were just a receptacle for sensations, pure and transparent. She was suddenly very aware of her body, the same vessel of flesh that had served her for so long, but one that was very changed from its original form. Her fingers were too long, jointed in many places like spiders' legs. Her face was like porcelain with wide gleaming eyes and high cheekbones, running up into a forehead split with a ridge of hardened skin that ran back along a grossly distended skull extending back for a full metre. The blades of her pelvis flared like petals of bone curving up from her waist, and her spine was greatly elongated with hundreds of vertebrae that writhed of their own accord. Her skin was decorated, not with anything so crude as tattoos, but with elegant spirals so faintly etched that they were only visible to someone who concentrated for many minutes on the play of light against Lady Charybdia's body. Very few people, however, would dare to stare at Torvendis's ruler in such a way. The thought pleased her.

The clouded crystal swam, and images emerged. Lady Charybdia willed them into distinct columns and rows, each one a different facet of the planet that she considered to belong to her. It existed for the pleasure of Slaanesh, the god to whom she offered all her praises – but the rocks and the seas and the flesh and blood of its inhabitants, those were hers to mould like clay into whatever form she saw fit. It was this act, and the place of her imagination in it, that formed her worship. For Torvendis to be dedicated to her god, she had to own and control it completely.

Focusing on each image in turn, she looked out upon Torvendis. A writhing slab of flesh throbbed in one of the city's many buildings, bathed in the light of their lust – Lady Charybdia felt a faint nostalgia for the days when she had been young and naïve, and had thrown herself with abandon into the orgiastic rites of Slaanesh. She had suffered the degradations and triumphs of those times and emerged as a true emissary of the Prince of Pleasure, given to the pure pleasures refined from the bodies and souls of her subjects. Though she herself was an aesthete, there were still untold millions of her underlings who worshipped Slaanesh in only as sophisticated a manner as their unenlightened minds could comprehend – hence the pulsing knot of tangled limbs.

One strand of her attention sought out the corruption-drenched lands to the south, where magic saturated the earth like blood on velvet. Those who survived there farmed the land and traded with one another for the basics of existence, but their bloodlines had been devolved and they were blank-faced, cattle-minded people. She could feel the cloying stupidity that lay behind their eyes – it smelled thick and spongy, it felt damp and sticky, and sounded like bubbling mud.

In the oceans that bounded Torvendis's largest continent schools of sea creatures lolled in the lightless depths, gnarled and mutated versions of those from which the keep's foundations were built. The constant fear of predation and lust for prey was a sweet, sharp tang in the salt water.

A straggle of barbarian warriors hiked across the tooth-like mountains. Charybdia cared little for such people – they led raids on the settlements that grew up around her outer walls, but they were like flies that could be swatted away by her legions if she ever got round to paying them any attention. The warriors were muscled and battered by a life amongst the elements – they had weapons slung over their backs and murder in their eyes. Charybdia had seen such men grow up, fight, and die a thousand times over. She moved on.

Deep below her, slave-gangs laboured in the shadows of the keep's foundations. The slaves were drawn from the city's unwanted children and the able-bodied captives that Charybdia's forces took in

battle, and the vast majority of them lived and died in the mines. Though they would never know it, their labours provided most of the raw ingredients for Lady Charybdia's life of aesthetic excess, for beneath the earth lay endless slabs of the dead. Torvendis's history was so long and crammed with conflict that the battlefield dead lay thick in layers like geological strata – it was from these seams of violent death that the slaves hacked fossilised bone and blood-rusted weaponry. Every now and again they would uncover something that could produce a completely new experience – a specimen of a species previously unused in the keep's architecture, a nugget of surviving tissue potent with age, a talisman still drenched with magic that could have the memories of battle and bloodshed wrenched from it.

Hundred-strong gangs sweated in the infernal heat and darkness of a rock face from which jutted stone claws gnarled in death and spikes of still-sharp steel. The slaves' limbs were corded with muscles but their faces were drawn with fatigue. They were of all species – legions of indistinguishable humans, massive orks, monstrous ogryns, even a few shackled monsters from the alien fleets that traversed the cold space between the galaxies, goaded with shock-flails to tear at the rock with their claws.

Most had been captured from those peoples of Torvendis who had at one point been in Lady Charybdia's way, with the others brought in by raiders throughout the Maelstrom and handed over in tribute. But none of them would live one tenth of their normal lifespan – the lucky ones dropped dead of exhaustion or were crushed by chunks of fallen bone. Those who did try to flee would be butchered by the guards who stalked them. The guards missed nothing – their outer layers of skin were pared off so every breath of air was a raw wind of knives against their raw nerves, every movement was like a radar blip of pain in their minds. They carried shock-flails for herding the slave crowds, and implanted vibroblades in their hands and feet to make short work of any potential escapee.

Lady Charybdia watched for a few moments as the slaves hacked away at the huge slope of rock, others sorting through the spoils that flowed down the rockface. They picked out finger bones, scraps of

metal, the occasional jewelled armband or half-recognisable helmet. Many would call it a waste, thought Lady Charybdia – so many resources were poured into the mines that they probably formed her empire’s primary expense. But she knew it was worth it. The constant refinement of sensation was her own form of Slaaneshi worship, and if the unwanted and defeated could not be put to work honouring her god, then what good were they at all?

And besides, the smell was wonderful. She reached out with her senses and the scent of despair filled her, thick and purple, hot inside her head. It was the first she had discovered, back when it seemed the galaxy itself was young, and she had never tired of it. They knew they would die, one way or another, and it was not just fear but an utter lack of hope. The smell of abandonment and tragedy. A million million broken spirits, bleeding out into the air and into the sense-centres of Lady Charybdia’s soul.

She let the images shift and swim, looking for something amiss. Torvendis turned and its stories continued, every ending sparking a host of new tales. It was as it had always been.

Except... there was one thing. A tiny nugget of wrongness in the cauldron of Torvendis. Just past the Canis Mountains in the swamplands where nothing lived, a hard, sharp, cold thing glimmered. Charybdia looked closer, and the image in the crystal blurred into focus. This did not belong on Torvendis – it was from somewhere outside, maybe even from beyond the warp storm of the Maelstrom.

It was a spaceship. Shaped like a teardrop with a long tapering prow, the bulbous main body ribbed and studded with portholes. It was an old design, a shuttle or interceptor that had not flown in realspace since the Horus Heresy ten thousand years before.

There was a visitor on her planet, and Lady Charybdia made it her business to know of any visitors. And, usually, to order them destroyed.

She waved a hand and the images dissolved, leaving the glowing night sky of Torvendis shining down on her. The Slaughtersong was high, she saw, a curious omen of change and progress tempered with danger. Perhaps the visitor was more than a mere curiosity. In any

case, they must possess some manner of sorcery or technology to arrive unannounced, and hence they were worth finding.

She would have to confer with her soothsayers. Lady Charybdia folded her arms around her, clasping her shoulders with her elongated fingers, and drifted down into the thick velvet. She sunk, and was disgorged several floors below. Around every corner of the keep's tortured architecture was a different style of decoration – the corridor in which she emerged was crusted with gnarled gothic mouldings, with a high vaulted ceiling and stained glass windows coloured with the blood of a thousand species. She had trod it many times – one way lay the grand staircase lined with statues in which were trapped the souls of innocents, which sang the unbearably sad song of their imprisonment. She headed the other way, towards the lair of her chief soothsayer, Vai'Gar.

This was a minor matter. While Lady Charybdia had many enemies on Torvendis, none had any real chance of threatening her. Once Vai'Gar had sought out the intruder and he had been dealt with, she would return to the depths of Charybdia Keep and enjoy the pure pleasures of her masterpiece.

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