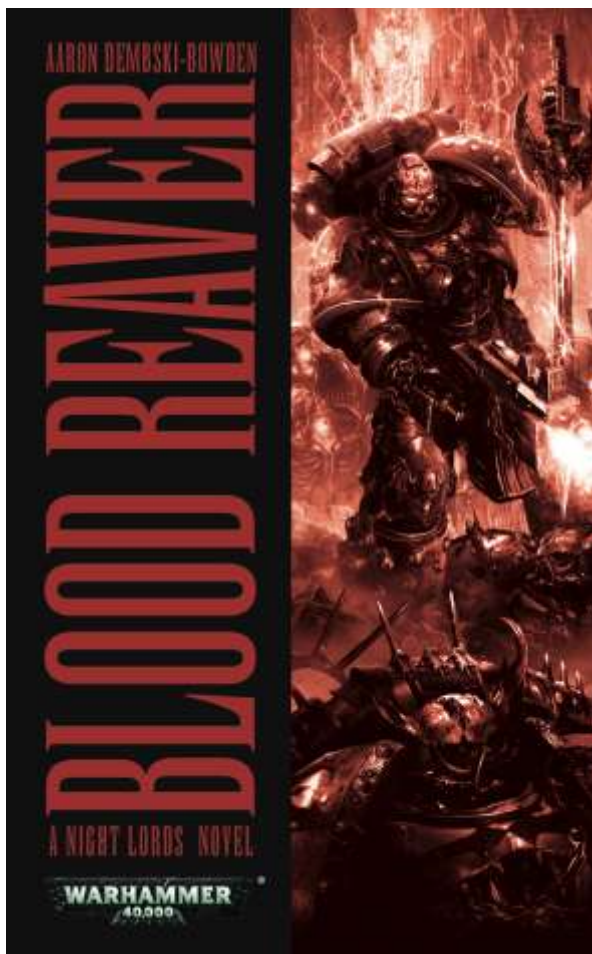




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# **BLOOD REAVER**

*A Night Lords novel*

*By Aaron Dembski-Bowden*

## **A UNION OF CHAOS**

Driven on by their hatred of the False Emperor, the Night Lords stalk the shadows of the galaxy, eternally seeking revenge for the death of their primarch. Their dark quest leads them to a fractious alliance with the Red Corsairs, united only by a common enemy. Together with this piratical band of renegades, they bring their ways of destruction to the fortress-monastery of the Marines Errant. Their mission: to steal the loyalist Chapter's gene-seed, dooming them to a slow demise.

### **About the Author**

**Aaron Dembski-Bowden** is a British author with his beginnings in the videogame and RPG industries. He's been a deeply entrenched fan of Warhammer 40,000 ever since he first ruined his copy of *Space Crusade* by painting the models with all the skill expected of an overexcited nine-year-old. He lives and works in Northern Ireland with his fiancée Katie, hiding from the world in the middle of nowhere. His hobbies generally revolve around reading anything within reach, and helping people spell his surname.

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THE WARRIOR TURNED his helm over in his hands. Gauntleted fingertips stroked along the dents and scratches marring the midnight ceramite. The faceplate was painted white with an artisan's care, in stylised mimicry of a human skull. One scarlet eye lens was ruined, cobwebbed by cracks. The other stared, dispassionate in deactivation, reflecting the darkening sky above.

He told himself that this wasn't symbolic. His helm's ruination didn't reflect the damage done to his Legion. Even as he quenched the notion, he wondered from whence it came. The war had a proven and profane habit of fanning the embers of melancholy, but still. There were limits.

The warrior took a breath, seeing inhuman creatures dance and bleed behind his closed eyes. He'd been dreaming of the eldar lately, for months before setting foot on this desolate world. Thousands of them: spindly things with gaunt faces and hollow eyes, aboard a burning ship of black sails and false bone.

'Soul Hunter,' someone called. His brother's voice, making the name somewhere between a joke and a title of respect.

The warrior replaced his helm. One eye lens flickered live, bathing the vista in the killing-red of his targeting vision. The other showed angry grey static and the distracting after-images of visual input lag. It still echoed with a grainy and colourless view of the setting sun a few moments after he'd turned away from it.

'What?' the warrior asked.

'The Angel is breaking.'

The warrior smiled as he drew the gladius sheathed at his shin. Fading sunlight flashed off the blade's edge as the steel

met cold air.

‘Glorious.’

CRUCIFYING ONE OF the Imperial Astartes had been a delicious conceit, and served well as a means to an end. The warrior hung slack from his bonds, bathed in pain but surrendering no sound from his split lips. *The Emperor’s ‘Angels of Death’*, the warrior smiled. *Stoic to the last.*

With no iron spikes to hand, getting him up there required a degree of improvisation. Ultimately, the leader ordered his men to bind the Angel to the hull of their tank by impaling the prisoner’s limbs with their gladii.

Blood still dripped to the decking in liquid percussion, but had long since ceased to trickle with rainwater eagerness. The Adeptus Astartes physiology, despite its gene-written immortality, only held so much blood.

Beneath the crucified captive, a helm rested in repose. The warrior dismissed another unwelcome tide of reflection at the sight of a helm so like his own but for the colours of allegiance and the bonds of a bloodline. With no real venom, he crushed it beneath his boot. How keen and insipid, the tendrils of melancholy lately.

The warrior looked up, baring features destroyed by mutilating knives. His armour was ceramite – halved with rich blue and pure white – pitted and cracked around the impaling short swords. His face, once so grim and proud, was a skinless display of bare veins and bloody, layered musculature. Even his eyelids had been cut away.

‘Hail, brother,’ the warrior greeted the captive. ‘Do you know who we are?’

WITH THE ANGEL broken, a confession took no time at all. To speak the words, he came up close, the purred question rasping through his helm’s vocabulator into the air between them. The warrior’s faceplate was almost pressed to the Angel’s flayed features – two skulls staring at one another as the sun went down.

‘Where is Ganges?’

AS HIS BROTHERS prepared, the warrior watched the distant fortress burning on the horizon, paying heed to how it

devoured the world around it. A sprawl of towers and landing platforms – its dark mass ate the land while its smoking breath choked the sky. And yet it offered so little of worth when laid bare to plundering hands. Why attack a world if the one node of resources was already drained dry? Piracy without profit was nothing more than begging.

Undignified. Oh, yes. And embarrassing.

The warrior stared at its distant battlements – a meagre stronghold on a lifeless world, claimed by a thin-blooded Chapter calling itself the Marines Errant. A raid for weapons, for supplies, for precious, precious ammunition... wasted. The Chapter's own crusades bled their reserves to nothing, leaving naught but scraps for the Eighth Legion's grasping hands.

The fortress fell within a day, offering as little sport as plunder. Servitors and robed Mechanicum acolytes tore through the databanks in the nigh-abandoned stronghold, but discovered only what every warrior already knew: the raid was a waste of their diminishing ammunition reserves. The Marines Errant no longer stored their secondary armoury here.

'Things have changed since we last sailed these reaches of the void,' the Exalted growled to his command crew. The confession pained him, pained them all. 'We have hurled our last spears... to conquer a husk.'

Amidst the bitterness of desperation and disappointment, the embers of possibility still burned. One word cycled through the streams of data, over and over again. *Ganges*. Representing the ties in this sector of space between the Marines Errant and the Martian Mechanicus, a deep-void outpost was responsible for a significant supply of raw material for the Chapter's armoury. The Marines Errant, so proud in their armour of oceanic blue and marble white, maintained order within the subsector by vigilant destruction of human and alien pirates. In protecting Mechanicus interests, they earned the allegiance of Mars. In earning such unity, they garnered a share in the Mechanicus's significant munitions production. A circle of symbiosis, fuelled by mutual interest.

The warrior admired that.

What mattered most was this deep-space refinery's location,

and that eluded all who sought to find it. Sealed behind unbreakable encryptions, the only answer that mattered remained known to none.

The few prisoners taken from the hollow monastery offered little in the way of information. Human attendants, lobotomised servitors, Chapter serfs... None knew where Ganges lay in the heavens. What few Imperial warriors had defended this worthless world died to their brothers' bolters and blades, embracing their deaths as honourable sacrifice rather than risk capture and desecration.

A single defender yet drew breath. The warrior dragged him onto the ash plains to be flayed under the setting sun.

Even now, the Errant still drew breath, though not for much longer. He had revealed all the Eighth Legion needed to know.

*Ganges.* A raid there would reap much richer rewards.

In orbit, the Vectine system's sun was a vast orb of adrenal orange, a colour of deep fire and desperate strength. On the surface of the third world, it was a weeping eye, closed by the smog that blocked most of its brightness. The warrior watched it finally set behind the devastated stronghold.

A voice came to him, carried on the crackling waves of the vox network.

'Soul Hunter,' it said.

'Stop calling me that.'

'Sorry. Uzas is eating the Errant's gene-seed.'

'The Errant is dead? Already?'

'Not quite. But if you wish to execute him yourself, now is the time. Uzas is making a mess.'

The warrior shook his head, though there was no one to see it. He knew why his brother was asking: the Errant had been the one to break his helm, firing a bolter at close range during the assault and savaging the faceplate. Vengeance, even vengeance this petty, was tempting.

'We have all we need from him,' the warrior said. 'We should return to the ship soon.'

'As you say, brother.'

The warrior watched as the stars opened their eyes, scarcely piercing the dense cloud cover, little more than pinpricks of dull light. Ganges was out there, and with it, the chance to breathe easily again.

***BLOOD REAVER*** can be purchased direct from this website and GW mail order, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, and better bookstores.

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