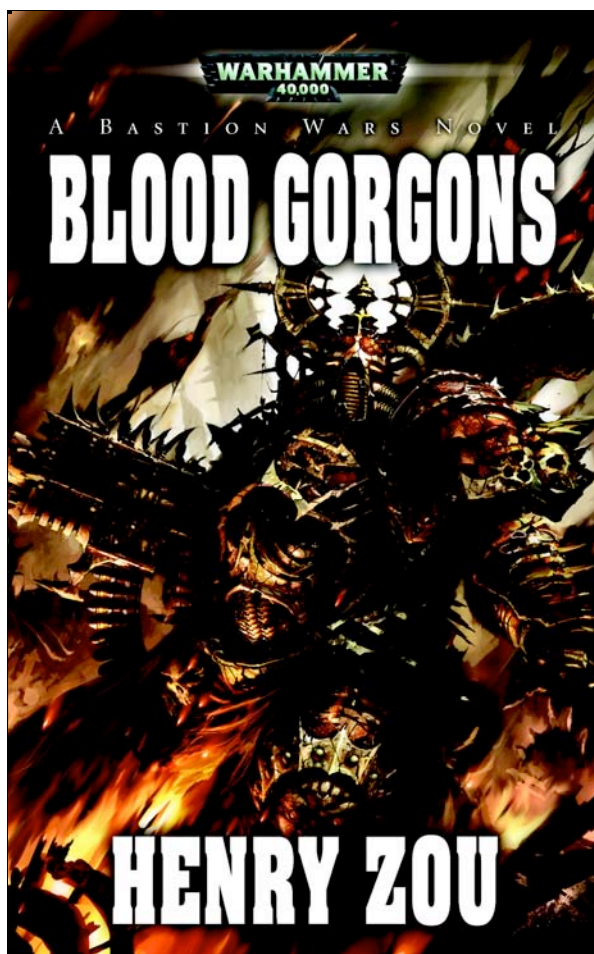




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BLOOD GORGONS

A Bastion Wars novel

By Henry Zou

Already weakened by the loss of their leader, the Blood Gorgons Chaos Space Marines are called to the defence of one of their recruiting worlds to protect the populace from a plague of undeath. The expeditionary force is struck down by mysterious enemies, leaving only one survivor – Bond-Brother Barsabbas. Stranded and alone, Barsabbas must dig deep into his hatred and his cunning to survive, and discover what is going on. Threatened from within and without, can the Blood Gorgons survive the ultimate threat to their existence?

About the Author

Henry Zou is an Australian writer from Sydney. He has been known to write down ideas whenever they come to him, whether it be on paper, tables and even the walls of his kitchen. His previous landlords were not impressed. Many of these ideas have found their way into his writing, including Planetkill, Emperor's Mercy and Flesh & Iron.

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GAMMADIN STOPPED MID-STRIDE, his boot sinking into a mud crater. He raised his hand.

The shore grass swayed beneath a sudden bar of wind. He could smell the scent of humans on the gust, but there was something else too. More than the gamey, mammalian oil of human skin, there was something organic that stung Gammadin's olfactory glands.

He realised that they were not here simply hunting for slave samples any more. Without a doubt, there was something purposeful manifesting itself. Something knew of the Blood Gorgon presence and was prepared for it, this Gammadin could feel. He knew.

Gammadin's helmet optics were already scanning the surrounding area for danger. The banks of the lake were wide and flat, covered in clumps of dry grass and semi-aquatic rushes. There could be danger there. A fluid stream of information was filtered from his helmet's sensors into his neural relays – wind current, visibility and metallic resonance.

Hammurabi sank into a squat beside Gammadin, leaning on his sword. 'I feel it too, Khorsaad. There is a background roar in my ears.'

Probing psychically, Gammadin attempted to expand his consciousness into the surrounding environs, but he found himself mentally disorientated. The air and slight buzzing of insects made him listless, almost distracted.

He had felt the same way ever since Muhr had invoked his black arts.

Muhr. Gammadin growled deep within his blackened hearts. What did he know of the events here?

‘Khorsaad!’ Hammurabi began, rising suddenly.

They came over the crest, hugging the line where the water met the earth. Slashing, frothing and flailing as they went, a stampede of people.

It was unclear who fired the first shot. A bolt-round exploded in the midst of the rapidly advancing human tide, but they ran undeterred. Closer now, Gammadin could see their faces, contorted in fright and utterly unaware of the Blood Gorgons in their path of flight.

‘Formation!’ Gammadin shouted at his Impassives.

The Impassives tightened into a defensive shell around Gammadin. In a circle, they fired into the oncoming avalanche of thrashing limbs, flashing bursts of ammunition into the mob. The horde rushed into and directly over the Blood Gorgons. Naked bodies collided against the anchored warriors, bouncing off their solid weight and swarming around them like an estuary.

‘We are being fired upon,’ voxed Bond-Brother Carcosa as he placed a hand to his suddenly bleeding neck.

‘We are receiving fire,’ Khadath affirmed as panicked bodies drummed and bumped against him.

From the distant slopes, a high-pitched whistling could be heard as high-velocity missiles whipped through the grass. They came from every direction at once, slicing into the enamel of his armour. It was an indiscriminate volley, slicing down the fleeing humans as it ricocheted against their plate.

Gammadin magnified his vision threefold towards the slopes. He saw thin humanoids in dark blue carapace

standing up from the grass, darting from position to position. They raised long rifles and moved with the fluid coordination of trained marksmen. Gammadin recognised their attackers as dark eldar and knew there was treachery on this world.

He threw the tulwar blade in his palm underhand; the heavy dagger shot out in a wide arc before meeting a dark eldar almost forty metres away, sending it sprawling into the grass. Before his blade had found its target, Gammadin had already picked out several shots with his combi-bolter. The mag scope of his vision lens spun and whirled as it tracked multiple targets before seeking a new one as Gammadin put them down. His rage was building. A xenos round, a crystallised shard of poison, sliced through the back of his knee joint. The toxin tingled in the wound, potent enough to have immediately paralysed any normal human being. The wound only enraged Gammadin further, his killing becoming methodical as he picked target after target.

The eight Impassives fanned out to lay down a curtain of fire. Like Gammadin, they were not pressured to shoot wild. Even as a constant shred of dark eldar weaponry hummed through the air, they picked their shots. The Blood Gorgons refused to give ground, despite the fleeing humans who were adding to the confusion. Growing bold, the dark eldar emerged from the grass to charge down the sandy gradient in a ragged line. A grenade went off at close range, shaking the world and jetting up sheets of mud.

Gammadin's withdrawal was being cut off. The dark eldar hooked around their flanks as the stampede of captives blocked and hemmed in the Impassives. Gammadin nearly lost his footing in the treacherous mud as the storm of xenos weaponry thickened considerably.

Splinter rifles rippled shots across the mud flat, steaming up a fog of dirt particles. The airborne mud hung in swirls and lazy drifts, choking the Blood Gorgons' targeting systems.

'We must withdraw,' Gammadin voxed over the squad link.

As they fell back, the dark eldar pressured them, staying in their pocket and exchanging a blizzard of shots. Blood-Sergeant Abasilis and his bond, Bond-Brother Gharne, moved to intercept the dark eldar flanking pincer on their left, banging off crisp, precise shots. Gharne had been blinded in the firefight, his helmet discarded and his eyes shorn by shrapnel. Abasilis called out coordinates to the sightless Gharne, directing his bolter wherever the enemy gathered to return fire.

Movement was the only thing that prevented the Blood Gorgons from being pinned in the open. Gammadin, still facing the enemy, moved backwards into the lake. His combi-bolter was spent of bolt shells. The dark eldar chased him, daring to rush so close that Gammadin could see into the vision slits of their helmets. Easily excited, the dark eldar were growing careless in their pursuit. Gammadin raised his right arm, the monstrous chitin of his pincer, and caught them as they lunged in. With his left he expelled the last of his flamer.

The dark eldar caught in the high pressure stream shrieked and died loudly, their inferior carapaces charring under the chemical flame. Capable of stripping paint off a tank-hide in its raw form, when ignited the palmitic acid burned to a glowing white two thousand degrees. Within seconds the dark eldar were melted into stumps of fused plating and flesh. Corrosive fumes

billowed out in a thick, cloying raft, driving back those dark eldar who were hounding Gammadin too closely.

Behind Gammadin, Blood-Sergeant Khadath, Carcosa and Blood-Captain Hammurabi escorted Muhr, who was extracting Nagael's gene-seed with his scissor hands. The trio surrounded the witch-chirurgion, firing outwards as they fought their way towards Gammadin. A dark eldar raider, too confident in his abilities, darted low at Hammurabi, twin blades trailing. The ancient captain dismissed him with a back-handed slap, breaking the dark eldar's neck while he continued to cycle through his bolter. Khadath suddenly fell, his neck ruptured. Carcosa caught him by his bolter sling and dragged him backwards.

Gammadin milked the last of his flame chambers as he watched the dark eldar close in. How many of them were there? Hundreds? Certainly, judging by the bodies that were beached on the shores.

The remaining Impassives, their bolters now slung, slaughtered their way deep into the lake with mace, axe and hammer. They drove a path through the dark eldar who tried to engage them hand to hand. For all the speed and deft blade-skill of the xenos raiders, the Impassives crushed them with brute strength. Bond-Brother Gemistos led the way, sprinting at full speed, all three hundred kilos of him. An ironclad juggernaut crashed through the dark eldar, swinging his antlered helmet from side to side.

Together the Impassives clustered around Gammadin like a shield wall. They became a solid phalanx of ceramite. The dark eldar could not manoeuvre close enough to surround them. Bolt shells whistled and spat through the water grass.

And that was when Muhr revealed his hand.

Trailing behind, the witch moved away from his lord. The dark eldar around him did not strike nor fire upon him, even as he raised his arms to summon his powers. A sudden wind gusted across the river, flattening the grass on the banks as it reached a high-pitched crescendo.

‘Witch!’ shouted Gammadin. ‘What manner of—’

Gammadin was cut short as Muhr clapped his hands. The air pressure dropped as if in a vacuum. Shadows began to rise out of the boiling current, humanoid in shape, with multiple reaching hands.

The water frothed violently around the Impassives. Shadowy apparitions bubbled forth from the river and began to swarm over them. The mud beneath the Chaos Space Marines’ feet gurgled wetly, slipping and sliding as if falling away.

‘Muhr. You are not worthy of the Blood Gorgon title,’ Gammadin whispered on the squad link.

The lake bottom suddenly imploded with a thunderous gurgle. It yawned like a sinkhole, thirstily draining water into its aqueous abyss. Four Impassives were carried down by the crashing flood of water. Gammadin sank down on one knee, fighting for purchase in the mud. Warning lights flashed across his vision as the spirit of his armour began to babble nonsense in his ears. The ground beneath him continued to give way. Sensing his weakness, warp hounds began to paddle across the lake towards him.

‘I have plenty left for you!’ he roared, drawing a scimitar from his back scabbard. The pitted blade was almost two metres in length, scarred and nicked from centuries of service. It resembled a tool rather than a blade, a piece of metal stripped of any elegance in favour of the utility of killing. Dragging it to his left he met the charging hounds with three horizontal strikes, rushing

past them as they leapt into the air and leaving severed corpses in his wake.

He turned to meet Muhr the betrayer. The sorcerer was wise to keep his distance, stepping away even as his hands throbbed with black, sorcerous fire.

‘Witch. What have you done here?’ Gammadin demanded.

‘You’re a tiresome one,’ Muhr replied. ‘The Blood Gorgons need leadership. I tire of roving like vagabonds, adrift in space with no purpose.’

‘We are raiders, Muhr. That’s our way of doing things,’ growled Gammadin. He tried to rise to his feet, but the lake bottom sucked and slurped. The waterline lowered visibly as the Champion Ascendant planted his foot into solid mud, but it yielded completely. The gushing water pushed against him and suddenly Gammadin was going over.

‘You’re going to die now,’ Muhr said.

It was the last thing Lord Gammadin heard as the lake opened up to swallow him whole.

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