

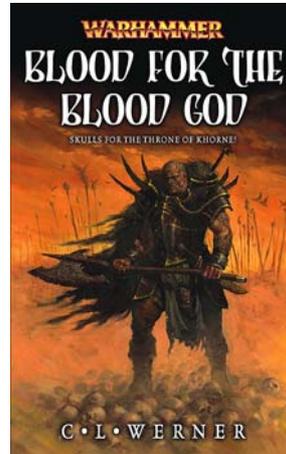


BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

A Warhammer novel

By C L Werner

The Skultaker is a feared champion of Khorne, a lone warrior of hideous strength and power who roams the Chaos Wastes slaying all who stand between him and his destiny. Blood for the Blood God tells the tale of this terror of the north and his gory quest to be free of the curse inflicted by the Blood God, Khorne. Can anyone defeat him or will the Wastes be drenched in the blood of fallen champions?



About the Author

The blazing wastelands of Arizona, home to rattlesnakes, gila monsters, and other unpleasant reptiles such as C. L. Werner. A scheming, twisted little desert rat, he is continually dreaming up new and imaginative rule interpretations of the many tabletop war games he can often be discovered dabbling with. When not finding new ways to ensure the dominion of the Horned Rat, C. L. Werner busies himself with a vast library of horror and sci-fi films and an equally extensive collection of mystery and fantasy books.

More Warhammer from C.L. Werner

PALACE OF THE PLAGUE LORD

RUNEFANG

The following is an excerpt from *Blood for the Blood God* by C L Werner. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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ROCK SHATTERED TO DUST beneath the immense weight of the mammoth, sending fragments spraying into the scraggly brush. Ninety hands high, its enormity cloaked in matted black fur nearly two feet thick, the mammoth towered over the land, seeming to dwarf even the distant mountains and their claw-like peaks. When the behemoth moved, the world trembled, each plodding step causing stones to topple from the hills around it. The boulders rattled and crashed down step-like terraces to smack against the brute's legs as they rolled into the plain below.

The mammoth ignored the impacts with godlike disdain, the flesh beneath its leathery hide scarcely scratched. The gigantic head swung from side to side, enormous black eyes studying the slopes around it, curled ivory tusks reflecting the summer sun. The massive trunk, like a bloated jungle python, reared back, coiling against the mammoth's scaly face. The maw beneath the trunk gaped wide and a deafening bellow boomed from the beast's body, the roar of a hunting titan.

Men covered their heads as the mammoth's bellow thundered across the sky, their skulls throbbing from the nearness of the sound. A walled platform had been lashed to the beast's back, a small fort of ivory and bone covered in hides of fur and skin. Within this fort, men clung to leather straps and watched the land pass beneath them as their colossal steed lumbered through the dusty hills.

Even as they guarded their ears against the trumpeting bellow, the men kept wary eyes trained upon the hills and ready hands upon the short throwing spears that rested in leather baskets beside them.

Each of the men was stocky in build, with powerful thews and bulging muscles. Their dusky skin bore the scars of sun and wind, their broad faces the lean hunger of hardship and travail.

Upon some, strange lesions and bizarre growths marred the uniformity of limb and visage; others carried still more outrageous displays of what was called 'the gift of the gods'. For these men were of the Tsavag tribe,

descended from the mighty Tong, who dwelled deep within the Wastes, on the very threshold of the Realm of the Gods. They wore their armour of bone and fur with pride, and adorned their dark topknots with talismans of ivory and bronze.

There was no arrogance in their adornment, for the Tsavag were too secure in their superiority to feel the need to boast.

A lone Tsavag stood in the cage of ivory chained around the mammoth's neck. Like his kinsmen, he was dark of skin, with a broad, hungry face. A trick of the gods had made his eyes the colour of gold, shining like coins from their dark setting. Blotches of discoloured skin ran across the tribesman's body, marking his flesh like the belly of a toad, but there was no aberration in the cords of muscle that swelled his arms, nor the sharp intelligence that peered from the golden eyes.

Dorgo Foecrusher was among the greatest of his tribe's warriors, son of their khagan, Hutga Steelskin. In his twenty-five summers he had killed a hundred foes in battle. Kurgan, Hung, even the despicable beastkin from the Grey had shed their lives on his blade.

Dorgo had earned the respect of his tribesmen with each victory, but still he yearned for more. There was one Tsavag he had never been able to impress, the only one of his tribe who mattered so far as he was concerned. If he was to succeed Hutga as khagan, he would need to prove himself worthy to the grizzled warlord.

He wondered if it would ever be possible to meet his father's high demands.

The warrior shook his head, forgetting for a time his mired ambitions. He needed to keep his mind on the hunt.

He lifted his gaze to the rocky hills that peppered the plain. They rose in crumbling mounds, worn down into cracked stumps by wind and rain.

Dorgo could still see the broken fragments of stone towers rising from their summits, could still make out the step-like plateaux that marched up the sides of the hills. Once those steps would have been terraced gardens, overflowing with rice and wheat, and green things of every description. The towers would have been filled with warriors, warily watching over the gardens at their feet. This place had been the granary of Teiyogtei, when that great warlord had carved his kingdom from the desolation of the steppes. The towers, the gardens, even the hills had been built with the sorcery of his shamans and the sweat of his slaves. With his gardens, Teiyogtei would feed his horde and expand his domain across all the Shadowlands.

The whispers of the shining dream still lingered in places like this, calling out to men like Dorgo, who possessed the imagination to hear them. The ruins of Teiyogtei's dream were scattered across his kingdom like old bones slowly wearing away beneath the unforgiving sun.

In his ambition, the king had not reckoned upon the wrath of the gods and he had been brought low. The Shadowlands never fell beneath the banners of the Tsavag and today only eight tribes remained of what had once been Teiyogtei's numberless horde.

Dorgo shook his head again, scolding himself for allowing his thoughts to wander once more. It was a failing his father never ceased to observe, scolding Dorgo that there was too much of the dreamer around him to ever make a good khagan. Dorgo's fist tightened as he recalled the scornful words. Perhaps he was a dreamer, but so too had Teiyogtei been.

The mammoth's trunk reared back again and the beast's bellow rolled across the land. Dorgo studied the hills, watching every sign of movement among the rocks.

Despite the years since they had been irrigated, plants still erupted from the dusty soil upon the terraces. This drew goats and elk into the hills where the uneven ground would protect them from wolves. Even men had a difficult time stalking the animals through the old gardens where the treacherous ground forever threatened a murderous fall to the plain below. The other tribes only even attempted the feat in times of famine, but the Tsavag were better, their minds sharper than the dull wit of Kurgan and Hung. They did not climb into the crumbling hills. They made their prey come to them.

The mammoth's trumpet was a sound to strike terror into any man, and beasts were not immune to such fear. When the mammoth bellowed, more than just rocks were knocked loose from the hills. Deer and elk, goats and sheep, even the sickle-clawed hill tiger would leap from their refuges, scattering through the rocks to escape the angry giant.

In their panic, even sure-footed goats and nimble deer would stumble, to pitch headlong to the plain below. The throwing spears of the Tsavag standing in the howdah made short work of any animals not killed by the fall. It was a method of hunting that had been developed by generations of tribesmen until it had been refined to a precise art.

Dorgo's people never lacked for meat, even in the hardest winter or the driest summer, simply because they had mastered the Crumbling Hills.

This day, however, only rocks clattered down from the hills. The Tsavag hunters and even the war mammoth beneath them began to sense an eerie wrongness around the hills around them, an unseen menace lurking

somewhere nearby. Tsavag hands left the ivory shafts of throwing spears to clutch at the grips of axe, sword and flail. A new urgency crept into the eyes watching the hills, no longer looking for the fleeing shapes of goat and elk.

Every man remembered tales and legends about the strange creatures that sometimes crept down into the hills from the forbidden Wastes. They wondered if such a monster would be bold enough to attack a war mammoth. They wondered if they would be bold enough to meet it, in turn.

Dorgo watched the rocks, waiting for the lurking menace to show itself, waiting for the attack to crash down upon them in an avalanche of violence. The brooding hills defied his vigilance, remaining silent and empty, mocking him with whatever secret they held.

When the attack came, it erupted from below not above. The silence was broken by savage war cries as the slopes of the hills exploded into brutality and violence. Warriors lunged into the sunlight from concealed burrows, like a mass of angered ground vipers. Taller than the Tsavag, their skins pale, their bodies twisted by grotesque knots of muscle, the warriors rushed at the startled war mammoth with panther-like speed.

Dorgo cursed as he saw the ragged armour of hide and bronze lashed around their disfigured frames, as he saw the ghastly masks of flesh that were tied across their faces. The warriors were of the Muhak, one of the Kurgan tribes and the most pitiless rivals of the Tsavag. Each Muhak carried a long spear with a jagged iron head, the edges of the point barbed and cruel. Dorgo saw at once that the Kurgan were sprinting towards the mammoth's legs, fearlessly charging at the behemoth to reach its soft underbelly. He roared commands to the hunters in the howdah behind him, cursing at them to hurl their javelins and stop the rushing Muhak.

Several of the warriors fell as javelins sank into their brutish bodies, but for each that crumpled to the ground, three darted beneath the mammoth's pillar-like legs, jabbing up at its belly with their cruel pikes. Dorgo struggled to turn the beast, to bring it around to confront the foe, but the stabbing pain in its vitals broke the Tsavag's tenuous control of the mammoth.

Maddened by the pain, the brute refused to move, simply bellowing and wailing in anguish. The Muhak beneath it continued to savage its belly, relenting only when oily ropes of entrails spilled from the wounds.

The mammoth reared back on its hind legs, crashing down in a bone-jarring impact. One Muhak, lingering to press his attack against the stricken beast, was smashed beneath the brute's leg, crushed into a pasty red smear.

The hunters in the howdah forgot their javelins as the platform lurched upward, pointing them at the sun. Hands tightened around the leather straps

in desperate, white-knuckled grips as gravity jerked at the men upon the tilting platform.

One Tsavag, slow to seize the strap, pitched in screaming despair to the ground thirty feet below, his head splattering against the rocky ground.

Dorgo whipped the mammoth with the ivory goad he held, trying to force it to obey the runes carved upon the ancient talisman. The gnawing fire of its wounds overwhelmed both training and spell, the mammoth's painful trumpets tearing at the sky. The Muhak retreated to the safety of the slopes, jeering at the Tsavag, throwing stones at their steed to encourage its frenzy.

The reeling mammoth fell back to earth with a mighty crash. The impact tore leather straps from their fastenings and three Tsavag plummeted from the behemoth's back to lie broken upon the ground below.

As the mammoth continued to stomp and bellow, the other hunters threw chains down from the howdah. Hand-over-hand they rappelled down the beast's flanks, desperate to escape its crazed agony. The boldest of the Muhak charged down from the slopes to confront the fleeing men.

Screams added to the clamour of the mammoth's pain as the Kurgan drove their long spears into the descending men, pinning them to the mammoth's thick hide as they pierced their bodies.

The few hunters who reached the ground tried to fend off the opportunistic Muhak, chopping at them with axe and sword. Two Muhak fell, too slow in reacting to the threat of foes who could strike back. The others cast aside their long spears, useless at close quarters, and drew cruel, bone cudgels from belts of dried sinew.

The Tsavag rushed the Kurgan, determined to avenge their butchered kin. Bone cracked against iron as the two sides converged, Tong curses mixing with Muhak war cries.

Against the overwhelming numbers of the Muhak, the handful of hunters had little real chance, but the reckoning was to be decided from another quarter. Through the well of pain that raced through its body, the rage of the stricken mammoth fought its way to overwhelm the beast's mind. Trumpeting its fury, the huge beast spun around, the sudden motion throwing a last Tsavag from the howdah.

The black eyes of the mammoth glared in berserk fury at the little men fighting around it. Lost in a red madness that did not differentiate between Tsavag and Muhak, the mammoth struck, smashing men beneath its ponderous feet, and goring them with its blunted tusks. Dorgo watched the serpent-like trunk lurch upwards, a struggling Tsavag trapped in its coils.

The mammoth tightened its hold, breaking the man's body in a spray of blood and ruptured organs. The tattered wreckage dripped back to earth and the brute reared back, bellowing as it plunged deeper into its rampage.

Dorgo grabbed the great iron spike resting beside him in his ivory cage. It was the tool of every mammoth master, as vital as the rune-covered goad, but it was one that no Tsavag ever wanted to use. Dorgo hesitated, but then saw the broken remains of a hunter ground into paste beneath the mammoth's pounding feet.

Snarling, he set the spike against the back of the mammoth's skull. With a roar as feral as that of the raging beast, he forced the spike through the scaly plates and the thick skull beneath. The mammoth reared one final time as the spike impaled its brain. Strength deserted the beast's body in an instant.

Dorgo clutched the bars of his cage, bracing himself as the mammoth toppled to the earth. The impact snapped the leather straps that bound cage to neck and Dorgo was thrown across the plain to crash against the rocky slope of the hill. The ivory cage crumpled under the impact, sending painful slivers scything into the Tsavag's body. He felt one ivory talon rip into his thigh and another punch through his forearm.

Wracking pain shot through his body, every nerve on fire. He tried to move, ignoring the desperate plea of his body to lie still. His arm was caught, transfixed upon the broken ivory bar. Biting down on the pain, Dorgo drew his iron knife and began to saw away at the wreckage.

As he worked, Dorgo could see the Muhak descending the slopes in force. They capered around the fallen mammoth, swatting at it with their clubs, stabbing it with their spears. Gleefully, the Kurgan warriors brained the injured Tsavag hunters, smashing their skulls with their clubs.

Among the celebrating Muhak was a hulking brute, his body so swollen with muscle that he more resembled an ogre than a man. The head that rose up from his thick, tree-stump neck bore the same flesh-mask as the other Muhak, but it had been cut away to allow the man's jaw to protrude forward and his dagger-like teeth to jut from his shrivelled lip. A latticework of scars and cuts adorned the warrior's body where it stood exposed by his crude hide armour. In his paw-like hands, he carried an immense mattock, the head of the hammer displaying a riot of blood-crusting spikes.

This, Dorgo knew, was no mere champion of the Muhak, but no less than Zar Lok, chieftain of the entire tribe.

Lok prowled among the dead Tsavag, lifting them from the bloodied ground to stare into the face of each corpse. One and all, he tossed them aside with callous contempt, stomping on to the next body with ever

increasing ire. A particularly mangled Tsavag, the face reduced to pulp, provoked the zar's already fragile temper. He turned upon the nearest of his warriors with a howl of fury, smashing the Muhak with his deadly hammer. The Kurgan's chest cracked like an eggshell, pitching him to the earth in a shrieking heap.

Lok gave the murdered warrior no further thought, stalking ahead to the bulk of the mammoth and the ruined howdah on its back.

A grim realisation came upon Dorgo. Lok was looking for someone among the dead and there was only one person that could be. The Muhak seldom ventured into the Crumbling Hills, their own hunting grounds far to the west. It had not been chance that had caused them to ambush the Tsavag, the Kurgan had carefully planned their attack.

The way Lok picked his way among the dead, Dorgo was sure he knew who had led the hunting party. Killing Hutga's son would avenge the death of the zar's son, who had been slain in a raid against the Tsavag some months before. Dorgo redoubled his efforts to saw through the cage. To fall into the zar's hands dead would be wretched enough, to do so alive...

The hulking zar moved away from the ruined howdah, roaring in disgusted frustration. Then his eyes caught the gleam of ivory against the slope and the shudder of frantic motion from within. A cruel smile spread across Lok's face, a smile of long-denied vengeance. He barked orders to his warriors and they began to converge on the wreckage.

Dorgo could hear the hide boots of the Muhak scraping against the rocky slope as they climbed to reach him. The iron knife continued to chew away at the ivory bar that pinned him to the cage. Grinding his teeth against the agony, the Tsavag looked around the wreckage for his sword, but the weapon had been thrown clear when the cage slammed into the slope.

He stared at the small knife, with no illusions about its potency against the clubs of the Muhak or Lok's mattock. The hammer was a gruesome relic from the time of Teiyogtei, a daemon weapon forged by the king and gifted to the ancient zar of the Muhak. One blow from the weapon was enough to fold iron as though it were cloth. Dorgo had already seen a graphic display of its power against flesh and bone.

Suddenly, the Muhak advance faltered. A sharp cry went up from the plain below, silenced in a liquid gurgle. The stalking warriors spun around in alarm, their powerful bodies coiling for action. Even Lok turned away, the zar's fists tightening around the heft of his daemoniac hammer.

Below, Dorgo could see a lone warrior striding towards the Muhak, his body encased in crimson armour, chased with bronze, his head enclosed within a skull-like helm.

A blade of darkness filled the stranger's hand, smoke rising from its hungry edge. At his feet sprawled the cleft debris of a Muhak, who had lingered near the mammoth, more eager for loot than helping Lok to claim his revenge.

The armoured warrior marched heedlessly through the spreading pool of gore, his skull-faced visage fixed upon the slope of the hill. Other Muhak scavengers backed away from the apparition, dropping their plunder of ivory and bronze. Their frightened mutters drifted up to Dorgo and the Kurgan around him.

It was the fear displayed by his warriors more than the sight of his butchered man that enraged Lok. Spitting with fury, he roared at the Muhak below, ordering them to kill the stranger. He punctuated his command with a menacing slap of his mattock against the ground, overcoming the trepidation of his warriors with their greater fear of him.

Five Muhak took up their clubs and axes stolen from the slain Tsavag. They began to circle the stranger, like a pack of slinking wolves stalking a lion. The skull-faced helm never turned, the attention of the man within focused upon the slope. There was a sense of disdain in his manner as he marched steadily onwards, ignoring the menacing men who had surrounded him.

The Muhak sprang at the armoured warrior with a savage cry. In a blur of motion, the stranger spun to face them. The strange black sword bit through the arm of the first Muhak, snapping it like a twig and throwing him back in a spray of blood and screams. A second Muhak, leaping at him from the left, caught the point of the sword in his chest.

Still in motion, the stranger ripped his weapon free, chewing through rib and lung as the edge erupted from the man's side. The third Muhak came at him from behind. He flopped to the ground as the black sword chopped through both legs as though they were brittle desert brambles.

The fourth, striking from the right, caught the tip of the blade slashing through his face. He fell, clutching at the broth of blood and brain drooling from his ruptured eyes.

The brutal assault was over almost before it had begun. The Muhak were accomplished ambushers, skilled as jackals at the art of coordinated attack, but their prey had been faster still, killing four of their number while the echo of their war cry still wailed across the plain.

The last scavenger faltered in his attack, staring with open-mouthed horror at the havoc the stranger had visited in the blink of an eye. Blood exploded from the man's mouth as the black sword slammed through his gut. The stranger ignored the scarlet that splattered against his armour and

the dying hands that clutched at the heavy fur cloak he wore. Callously, he ripped his trapped blade upwards, crunching through bone and flesh until the black sword tore free.

Slashed from stomach to shoulder, the Muhak slumped to the ground.

Something like terror crawled into Lok's beady eyes behind their mask of flayed flesh. The zar shouted at his warriors, fear lending a new note of rage to his voice. The Muhak hesitated, staring uncertainly at one another, no man eager to be the first to confront this strange and terrible foe.

Lok's mattock lashed out, pulverising the skull of the Kurgan closest to him, dropping him in a burst of blood and bone. The example was enough, the zar's tyranny reasserted. Twenty Muhak marauders, swollen bulks of muscle and rage, charged down the slope, their murderous cudgels lifted overhead in savage display.

To Dorgo's eyes, what followed was slaughter, not battle. Twenty warriors converged on one. When the carnage abated, when the screams had faded into death rattles, when the sound of flesh and bone being torn asunder ebbed, it was the one who stood triumphant.

The havoc of his black blade lay strewn and dying around the armoured killer. Gore dripped from the stranger, coating his crimson armour in a sanguine cloak, but none of it was his. Twenty men had faced him, but not one had landed a blow against their foe. The killer turned his head, studying the butchery. Then he turned his skull-helm once more to the slope where the ashen-faced Lok waited.

The Muhak zar watched the warrior march through the wreckage of his warband, every step causing his eyes to bulge wider with fear. Lok cast his gaze from side to side, but the strength of his followers had been spent. There were no fresh Kurgan to throw at the gore-drenched spectre. The zar spat into the dust, trying to let his fury overwhelm his fear.

'You still tempt the gods, eh pig!' Lok snarled, brandishing his mattock. 'You kill those dogs so you think you can fight Lok?' He brought the hammer crashing down, exploding a rock into pebbly splinters.

The armoured killer's approach did not falter, the man within the crimson plates unimpressed by the zar's bravado.

The air of arrogance goaded Lok's fury as surely as the ivory hook Dorgo had used on the mammoth. The Muhak chieftain's jutting jaw dropped open in a howl of rage, his immense bulk hurtling down the slope at his adversary. The armoured killer paused, waiting to meet the zar's charge. The black sword licked out like the tongue of a dragon, flashing through the chieftain's belly, spilling it onto the ground. At the same time, the mattock crashed into the nameless warrior, smashing into him like a

titan's fist. The daemonic weapon kicked him back, throwing him through the air. The armoured warrior smashed into the stiffening hulk of the slain mammoth, falling headfirst into the stream of filth oozing from its wound.

Lok wilted onto his knees, the mattock sliding from hands that were desperately fumbling at his ghastly wound. The zar struggled to press the wound closed, to staunch the seepage of blood and bile. In the fashion of a dying wolf, he refused to accept the gravity of his wound, refused to concede the approach of death, but even in his agony, a smile split the Muhak's brutal face. At least his enemy would follow him into the Hunting Halls.

Even this small joy fled from Lok, draining away with his lifeblood. The figure sprawled amid the muck and gore of the mammoth was rising, picking itself from its own ruin. Despite the ferocity of the blow Lok had struck, fuelled by the zar's immense strength and the mattock's obscene power, the warrior yet lived. The armoured killer stood for a moment, wiping filth from his skull-like mask. Then, slowly, remorselessly, he began to retrace his path up the slope.

The Muhak zar took one hand away from his wound, trying to reach his hammer on the ground beside him. The effort brought a fresh stream of pain shuddering through him, but the sight of the approaching destroyer was more terrible to him than any mere physical suffering. Lok felt the warrior's malignancy grow with each step, coiling around him in a stifling shroud of hate. There was more than death in the killer's black blade, more than shame. Lok could feel the jaws of hell closing around him, and hear the snarling laughter of daemons in his ears.

The warrior loomed above the zar, kicking the mattock away from his clutching hand. An armoured gauntlet reached down, pulling Lok's head by its mass of oily black hair. The zar struggled feebly in the iron grip, but could not prevent his head from being pulled back, exposing his throat to the sky. Then the black sword came chopping down, hewing through the thick, stumpy neck.

The chieftain's body slapped against the earth, his head staring down at the corpse as it dangled from the warrior's fist. The killer lifted his trophy high, presenting it to the darkening sky.

'A skull for the Skull Throne!' the iron voice of the warrior rasped. Lightning cracked across the cloudless heavens, as though in answer to his cry.

Dorgo freed himself from his prison, leaving a spike of ivory thrust through the meat of his arm. It would need the healing arts of a shaman

before the shard could be removed, otherwise the wound would bleed and he would not have the strength to make the long march back to his people. It was not mere survival that moved him to caution, nor bearing witness to the fate that had befallen his fellow hunters.

There was a still graver purpose that urged him on, something greater than his fear.

Zar Lok, chief of the Muhak, was dead, butchered by a nameless, tribeless warrior. In all the years since the fall of Teiyogtei, such a fate had never claimed a chieftain of one of the eight tribes. Word of this had to be brought to his father, brought to him before the other tribes discovered that Lok was dead. A delicate balance existed between the eight tribes, and someone had destroyed that balance, setting into motion events that would resound throughout the domain. The sooner Hutga learned of this, the better he would be able to prepare the Tsavag for what was coming.

Dorgo shuddered again, the image of the outlander burned into his mind. He could not shake the impression that Lok had somehow recognised his slayer. Even before he struck the first blow, the Kurgan seemed to know that his doom was at hand. More than the brutality of the Muhak's death, it was this terrible air of resignation and hopelessness that chilled his marrow.

Dorgo crept cautiously away from the wreckage of the ivory cage. He did not waste time looking for his lost sword, nor linger to claim a weapon from the butchered Muhak. Instead, he mounted the rocky slope, climbing the crumbling mound as the first step on his long journey back to the lands of the Tsavag.

Dorgo left the crimson warrior behind him, crouched beside Lok's mangled carcass, the zar's head resting on the ground before him. With slow, careful strokes, the warrior drew his black blade against the chieftain's head, carving away the flesh, layer by layer, exposing the gleaming skull beneath, cleaning the trophy he had offered to mighty Khome.

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

Price £6.99 (UK) / \$7.99 (US) / \$9.50 (CAN)

ISBN 13: 978 1 84416 668 8 (UK)

978 1 84416 608 4 (US)

- **Bookshops:** Distributed in the UK and the US by Simon & Schuster Books.
- **Games & hobby stores:** Distributed in UK and US by Games Workshop.
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