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THE RED PATH 5

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WRATH OF THE  
EMPEROR

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A KHÂRN THE BETRAYER STORY  
*by* CHRIS DOWS



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# THE RED PATH 5: WRATH OF THE EMPEROR

Chris Dows



The blast hit Khârn with all the force of a power maul. Amplified and focussed in the confines of the now-ruined corridor, it threw Khârn backwards into Samzar, knocking them both to the deck as fragments of twisted metal spun overhead. Khârn recovered first, his head spinning from the impact, warning runes still flickering red from the combat in the fighting pit. He watched as Samzar staggered to his feet and looked behind him, weapon raised and ready. Khârn had dismissed the champion's insistence he be the last to leave the fighting pits lest a mutineer decided to chance an attack in the confusion. Khârn needed no one to guard his back. Hefting Gorechild, Khârn looked to Samzar and nodded for him to go in front. Warily, he did as he was bade, moving into the battered passageway with his chainsword at the ready.

Khârn felt a searing pain in his right shoulder and the unmistakable warmth of blood seeping from a wound. It had opened up again. Stepping forwards, more pain lanced up through his left leg. His foot was certainly broken and he shook his head angrily to clear the blurring in his vision. Even in this condition there was no one on the ship who could match him, but there were many who might try. It would be the last mistake they ever made. He watched as Samzar looked up at the ragged hole in the ceiling where the explosion had ruptured the upper decks. More debris crashed down around him, but the danger appeared to be over. Samzar turned and beckoned for Khârn to follow, and as he moved off, the *Skulltaker* shuddered and moaned. There was a tremendous creaking, then Khârn felt himself falling to his left. The entire ship was rolling over on its side.

Before him, Samzar fell out of sight. Khârn pushed himself away from the bulkhead with his bare left shoulder and tried to right himself. His left foot was

on the bottom of the wall at an acute angle, and more pain shot through him. Khârn lumbered forwards, gritting his teeth with the effort, but he had not taken more than a couple of steps when a mass of twisted metal crashed down through the hole in the ceiling close to Samzar's position. The stern of the ship dropped like a stone and Khârn tipped backwards, scrabbling with his left hand against the rusting bulkhead wall. Before him the corridor rose into the air as the *Skulltaker* angled upwards, and he was just about to bring Gorechild down onto the deck to secure his position when the mass of wreckage that had fallen through the ceiling began to slide towards him.

Khârn immediately realised it did not threaten his life, but if a raiding party – or anyone else for that matter – found him tangled amongst the debris, he would present an easy target. Pulling Gorechild to his chest, he allowed himself to fall onto his back and used the ever-steepening angle of the vessel to slide head first between the deck plates and wall bulkheads. Smaller pieces of wreckage bounced off him as he fell, but with a couple of extra kicks he managed to stay just ahead of the tidal wave of twisted iron and plascrete that threatened to bury him. Falling into the space of a large intersection, Khârn swept out with Gorechild and rammed its teeth into the corner of the bisecting wall. His damaged shoulder had to take his full weight and that of several pieces of metal landing on top of him, but with a mighty heave he pulled himself out of the path of the falling debris. The ship jolted and tried to correct itself, but Khârn still looked down at an angle of around twenty degrees. This corridor would take him towards the port outer hull of the *Skulltaker*, not the way he wanted to go but a route to the bridge regardless.

*'Khârn, report.'*

Samzar's urgent voice crackled inside Khârn's helmet. Khârn looked back up the corridor down which he had slid. It was completely blocked.

'Get in position to repel boarders. Have you received any communication from Roderbar?'

Khârn spat the words into his vox. He had heard nothing from the shipmaster since the bombardment had started, which, for all of his faults, was unexpected. Roderbar would die in his command throne rather than abandon his position. As far as Khârn was concerned, that was his only saving grace.

*'I have tried to contact him but have received no reply. Same with Lukosz. We do... know... attacking...'*

Samzar's voice broke up then fizzled into static. Khârn fought down the rage building in his chest. He was not accustomed to being separated from a fight.

The buzzing in his head receded and he threw himself down the corridor, reaching the steeply angled walkway that stretched for nearly the full length of the *Skulltaker* in both directions. The high guard rail separating the gantry from the cavernous drop was strong enough to take the weight of Khârn as he leaned upon it, gripping with his left hand and pulling himself along as his foot screamed in protest at not finding flat ground. Stretching before and above him, the massive outer hull armour shook and sang with a fresh pounding from outside. Khârn had been in enough space battles to realise they were being hit by either one very large, very powerful vessel or several smaller ships. He also knew that just about the worst place to be in space combat was close to the exterior of an attacked vessel.

As if to reinforce that point, the passageway exploded before him.

The detonation point was far enough away to avoid him being showered in white-hot molten slag, but close enough for the sudden decompression to drag him from his feet and towards the gaping hole. Khârn's hold on the guard rail began to slip as he was sucked upwards with the escaping air from the chamber. Quickly holstering Gorechild on his back, he reached out with his ruined right arm to increase his grip. The hole in his shoulder tore wider still, and in the distance he heard the clanging of emergency doors sliding into their airtight housings. It would only be a matter of seconds before the air was completely vented and he could make his way to an internal emergency airlock and safety, so all he needed to do was stay in place. But then three more brilliant blooms erupted on the hull's interior above and to his left. Three more exits into space appeared, and the thunder of escaping air became deafening. Khârn started to pull himself along the rail towards the closest emergency door that had descended some yards distant, but his weight on the pole, quadrupled by the decompressive force, became too much. He felt the metal beneath his hands come away from its mountings. His view began to spin crazily, from the rapidly receding gantry to the darkened inner bulkheads to the looming hole in the outer hull. Khârn twisted and grasped for something to hold on to. With a bellow of frustration he tried to catch the dull red metal of the rupture's edges but it came away in his hands. All he could see now were the white streaks of stars flashing by.



‘Replace your helmets. Prepare to repel boarders!’

Lukosz bellowed at the half-dozen berzerkers bustling around the hangar deck, recovering ammunition and ordnance that had broken its storage and scattered across the blackened deck plates. They looked up to him with sneers and scowls, but a few of them could see Lukosz was in no mood for being contradicted and reluctantly walked over to the wall where their helms had slid during the *Skulltaker*'s loss of attitude. While Lukosz had not been able to raise Roderbar, he – or someone on the bridge – was clearly still alive and in control of the ship, because it had eventually regained its normal gravitational orientation and its guns were still firing. Most of the equipment that had not been locked down had slid over to the bulkhead walls of the deck and stayed there. Two Havocs had already recovered their heavy weapons and were checking them and cycling ammunition as they stepped back towards their brothers in arms. Within seconds a pair of heavy bolters had been trained directly at one of the landing bay doors on the far side of the deck. Two other Havocs muttered dark promises to their missile launchers as they readied them on either side of the defensive position. Lukosz resisted the temptation to go over and make them do what he said. He knew from experience that heavy weapons could be assembled far faster without the restricted view and movement created by a helmet, but the berzerkers with missile launchers would be unwise to open fire without head protection, regardless of how loudly their blood might be singing in their veins. Lukosz hoped they were taking note of the constant groans and creaks from the *Skulltaker*. The ship itself was promising a far greater threat than a group of marauding foes, regardless of who they might be.

Lukosz looked across the cavernous space, past the Thunderhawks, past the claimed White Scars bikes chained to the deck, and counted the number of berzerkers he could see. There were less than two dozen. Just his accursed luck to have a fraction of the warband here. If their assailants knew the layout of the cruiser, they would choose a different route in. Trying to board a ship from a narrow transport's hold into a wide open, heavily defended area would be very low on a list of desperate options. He did not yet know the identity of their attackers, but he suspected them to be Imperial Adeptus Astartes warriors due to the force and precision with which they were bombarding the *Skulltaker*. The boarders would split into smaller groups, enter at multiple points and head for key areas in a coordinated assault. Looking over to a wall console, Lukosz activated a schematic of the *Skulltaker* and studied it. The image flickered and faded with every rumble that tore its way somewhere through the vessel, but he saw enough to plan exactly how to deploy the pitiful numbers he had.

Lukosz knew he was too far away from the bridge to reach it in time, so instead chose the primary access to gunnery control as his defensive objective. He would keep the Havocs on this deck and split the rest of his warriors across vital junctions and intersections, confident they could repel any boarders they encountered. Their meagre number was not tactically ideal but he knew the warband would outfight any enemy until every last berzerker was dead – perhaps even to the destruction of the *Skulltaker* itself. While admirable in many respects, it was not the most appealing of scenarios.

‘Samzar.’

There was a hiss of static, then the familiar rumble of his comrade’s voice filled his ears.

‘Yes, Lukosz. I hear you.’

Samzar sounded distant, as if he was distracted.

‘I am preparing to repel boarders on the port flank. All key areas are covered, but reinforcements will be needed.’

Samzar breathed heavily and muttered something Lukosz could not quite make out through the interference.

‘I have commanded several kill packs to join you but there are... obstacles... damaged and... lost Khârn...’

Lukosz stiffened. Lost Khârn? What in the darkness of the warp did Samzar mean by that? He tried to clarify the message, but all he received was crackling static in return.

The deck vibrated beneath his feet, pitching him to one side, and he saw the majority of the berzerkers look to him. Despite their individual motivations, they had enough clarity of vision to realise some forward planning would be to their advantage. Lukosz began barking orders, quickly selecting and dispatching teams of two and three to sensitive areas of the *Skulltaker* he hoped could still be reached. There was no hesitation, no resistance, no need for clarification. With curt nods and muttered curses, the berzerkers started thudding out of the hangar’s access doors into the bowels of the ship, weapons raised and ready to sate their bloodlust. Lukosz’s blood raced within his veins and he gloried in the sensation. Insufficient numbers or no, he would defend this ship and Khârn, if he still lived, to the bitter end.



Khârn ignored the swelling in his exposed left arm and brought Gorechild down

onto the surface of the outer deck. Without the benefit of gravity, artificial or otherwise, he knew the blow would not have anything like the power of a normal swing, but all he needed was for the chainaxe's teeth to bite into the thick steel and anchor him in position. The handful of molten metal he had ripped from the rupture's now-solid edge floated off into space behind him, cooled to absolute zero. With Gorechild gouged into the hull and holding firm, he had saved himself from a similar fate.

The ship tipped beneath him, and he wrapped the chains on his rapidly freezing arm around Gorechild's shaft to secure his anchorage. Yet another warning rune changed from amber to red and began winking for attention on his retinal display. The air within his armour was leaking out of the junction with his bare arm, and the signal indicated he had no more than ten minutes left of useful consciousness. Khârn needed no reminder of his predicament. Pulling himself along the chains, he bounced gently against the gored flank of the *Skulltaker* and considered his position.

If he pulled himself back into the hole through which he had been ejected, he would have to navigate his way through a series of emergency airlock doors and then into the interior of the ship, with no guarantee of it being passable. There was not enough time.

Khârn played out the chains, keeping his feet clamped securely to the deck, and stood upright. The hull of the *Skulltaker* stretched out in all directions. Fire belched through several gaping holes, while others bore silent witness to the vacuum of space. The ship had taken a severe battering, and as a brilliant light arced past him and smashed into the plating on the decks above, it was clear to him the attack was gaining momentum. But who were the enemy?

In the distance, twinkling like malevolent stars, he could see three vessels. Even as he watched, they loomed closer, the lead ship unleashing yet another salvo. The *Skulltaker* lurched violently and Khârn lost his footing as the ship turned to avoid the barrage. As he reeled himself back towards the hull, the enemy fire soared overhead, and a deep rumbling came from somewhere within the *Skulltaker*. Khârn saw a line of torpedoes dart outwards towards the enemy ships. A number of them scored direct hits, blooms of white and yellow blossoming on their outlines, while several more continued their path towards a shimmering asteroid belt thousands of miles distant. Khârn grunted his pleasure. Roderbar was fighting back.

The vessels were too far away for him to identify their livery, but Khârn still recognised them as ships of the Adeptus Astartes. Exactly which Imperial

Chapter it might be was inconsequential. Whoever they were, they would make excellent trophies for the Blood God. Khârn played the chains out from Gorechild until he was drifting some distance away from the hull, and inspected its projections and indentations with methodical care. He could not assume that a given spot would provide access to the ship. Exterior airlocks would have to be avoided because his berzerkers would assume any attack would come through them. He had no desire to die in a hail of friendly fire the second he appeared through the hatch. Dismissing the burning sensation building in his lungs, he continued to scan the surface until a shaft of light caught his eye. A blast shield had not fully deployed to protect a nearby viewing portal.

Looking to his left, Khârn saw a crenulated ridge running up the side of a slab-like projection that would take him to within jumping distance of his goal. Reeling himself back towards Gorechild, he pulled at the chainaxe until it came free. Ignoring the protests from his wounded shoulder, Khârn mustered his strength and hurled Gorechild towards the projections. The chainaxe drifted over in slow motion, but its churning teeth once again gouged their way into the hull plating. Within seconds Khârn had pulled himself along its chains and was throwing himself from one ledge to another.

Something exploded behind Khârn and he was thrown against the outer plating of the *Skulltaker*, the impact adding to the flashing runes on his display. Pieces of metal soared in all directions, some careening off his back armour, some digging themselves into his bloated left arm. An object smashed into him and he coughed out a mouthful of air he could not afford to lose. Looking behind, he saw the blackened body of a berzerker, its head missing and legs bending backwards at an unnatural angle. Khârn looked to his right and saw the rear of an Imperial boarding torpedo jutting out of the side of the *Skulltaker*. The force of its impact had torn away several deck plates, most of which were spinning away into space. Brilliant flashes lit up the ragged hull fracture around its head, a clear indication the boarding party had deployed. Khârn's hearts thumped within his breast. The Blood God had sent him this gift and he would gladly take it. Judging the distance, Khârn kicked with his right leg and sailed above the hull of the *Skulltaker*, crashing into the side of the torpedo's hull. Taking hold of a protruding seam with his right hand, Khârn pulled hard on the metal hull plate and propelled his way through the rectangular entrance he had created, Gorechild at the ready.



The drop ship exploded just as a dozen berzerkers ran past it on their way to their various defensive positions. Lukosz had no time to call out a warning as the blast threw him into the console he had been addressing only seconds before, smashing it into useless, sparking glass. The *Skulltaker* made a low, wrenching sound, as if something had come away. Red-armoured Thunderhawk crews and servitors rushed straight towards the flaming wreck, bravely trying to prevent fire from spreading to the other ships. Lukosz had not run five yards before he saw that the majority of his defensive teams were dead or mortally wounded. Their armour had been torn apart by the lethal detonation, and while several of them slowly got back to their feet, Lukosz realised he had just lost around half of his defensive force.

Smoke belched out of the burning carcass of the Thunderhawk, and a Warpsmith surrounded by damage-control servitors frantically waved Lukosz back. He had no time for this. Calling back the remaining berzerkers, he met them at the end of the deck furthest away from the raging inferno and reassessed their position. He had twelve warriors to cover six crucial points. With most of the Havocs killed in the drop ship blast, they would have to rely on their excellent skill at close quarters, the gory melee fighting they all lived for. Lukosz was uncertain whether this would be enough without a guarantee of reinforcements from Samzar. It mattered not. The defensive teams had to get into position, and he needed to reach gunnery control as soon as possible. The deck of the *Skulltaker* suddenly dropped. Lukosz lost his footing and staggered over towards a nearby line of White Scars bikes. They strained against their chains but kept in position, their thick tyres and hefty suspensions absorbing the brunt of the movement. Lukosz pushed himself back upright with a curse, but then paused for an instant. Standing back a couple of paces, he looked the single-seat bikes up and down, calculating their length and width. His eyes flicked over to the line of blast doors leading to the interior of the *Skulltaker*. They were sealed at the moment, but fully opened...

Lukosz turned to the berzerkers and ordered them all to mount up. At first they looked to each other, but then understood what they were being commanded to do and began sawing through the tethers with excited hollers. Lukosz ordered the closest berzerker to come with him, a veteran World Eater called Faldocran, one he trusted to follow his orders without question, and began unshackling a bike for himself.

Amid the smoke swirling around them from the still-burning drop ship, they freed the bikes from their restraints and saddled up. The *Skulltaker* lurched and

rolled, tipping over several of the berzerkers who were not as accustomed to balancing on the machines, but Lukosz skirted around them with a deft flick of the steering. In a time long ago, he had ridden a similar machine into battle many times. Those attacks had often been on stable, open ground, but as he leant into a sharp turn, his old skills reawakened. Lukosz powered through the opening set of blast doors, and roared down the wide thoroughfare.

Minutes later, Lukosz's machine crashed to the deck and bounced twice before it skidded to a halt mere inches from a safety rail. Any further, and Lukosz would have broken through it and fallen over the edge into an open shaft.

Lukosz fully locked the bike's front wheel and spun around one hundred and eighty degrees to race up the next ramp. This was the level on which gunnery control was located, but the doors to the corridor that would put him in position were sealed shut in front of him. A red light winked balefully over the top of the bulkhead, indicating it had gone into combat lockdown when the attack had begun. Lukosz tried to contact Roderbar on the bridge to get it unlocked, but there was no reply. Switching channels, he voxed Faldocran to join him. Within seconds, his bike pulled up alongside Lukosz, their engines' heavy purrs reverberating around the metal chamber.

'Do we know if the passageway has decompressed?'

'There's only one way to find out.'

Lukosz backed up his mount as far as it would go, and Faldocran followed suit. The door had a manual release mechanism, and it would take time to get it working. There was a much quicker solution. As the two berzerkers depressed their firing runes simultaneously, the thick steel doors disappeared in a hail of bolter fire from the bikes' weapons. Five seconds later, all that was left was twisted shards of metal and smoke. Through the ticking, glowing remains of the hatch, Lukosz could see the gunnery control station's primary access passage. It was tantalisingly close. The Butcher's Nails were urging him to action, to abandon any caution and throw himself into whatever fight might come, and for a few seconds he struggled to concentrate.

Lukosz shook his head in anger and regained control over the Nails. It was a split-second longer than the last time he had forced his will upon them, and he noticed the fractionally greater effort required.

With an oath to the Blood God, Lukosz jumped off his bike and nodded to Faldocran to follow him. Weapons drawn, they ran down the wide corridor towards the gunnery control station.

As Lukosz was about to step into the station's cavernous chamber, his vision

whited out, a brilliant flash overwhelming his optical filters. For the briefest of moments he got the impression of huge lumbering forms with sand-coloured helmets and scarlet eye-lenses, and then his world erupted in a maelstrom of blue fire.



Khârn crashed to the deck of the ruined airlock the second he passed through the iris maw of the boarding torpedo's assault hatch. His lungs felt as if they were about to explode, and the impact drove precious air from his body as the grav system pulled him to the floor. The ten Adeptus Astartes warriors in front of him were laying down a barrage of fire towards the smashed doorway before them. They had not immediately noticed his entrance in the airless chamber, and Khârn was not going to give them time to realise their error. Using their armoured bodies as a shield from oncoming fire, Khârn activated Gorechild and ducked low, sweeping the whirling chainaxe across the back of the nearest tan-coloured figure's knees. The teeth chewed through the ceramite, slicing both legs in half and sending the warrior toppling to the deck. Khârn heard the crackle of his vox and frantic calls between berzerkers who had spotted his appearance from the other end of the corridor as the loyalists turned to face their new attacker. Their sergeant levelled his bolter at Khârn's head, but a swift parry with Gorechild rendered the weapon useless. Smashing his right pauldron into the assailant, Khârn knocked him into the smoking side of the boarding torpedo as concentrated fire tore into the boarding squad. The sergeant drew a chainsword and brought it up between himself and Khârn. Khârn ducked under his opponent's defensive strike and smashed his fist into the helmet grille of the Space Marine as he came back up. He was rewarded with the hissing of air from the rupture. Pushing himself away, Khârn swung Gorechild with tremendous speed, carving the top section off his opponent's pauldron and continuing into the side of the helmet. Blood and bone spat out in all directions, and as the decapitated body fell to the ground it was still shaking from the violence of the blow.

Khârn felt the muffled cry of triumph from the berzerkers reverberate through the deck plating and saw them rush towards the remaining Space Marines, power mauls and axes swinging with uncoordinated fury. Within seconds the boarders were being overwhelmed by warriors in scarlet armour, and with his head now spinning from the dangerous lack of oxygen, Khârn wasted no time in lending

his blade to the cause.

With the last of the invaders lying dead on the floor, Khârn left the berzerkers to take their trophies and move on to their next battles. By now Khârn was staggering rather than walking, the effects of asphyxiation taking hold of his oxygen-starved brain. Clattering between the corridor walls, he lumbered towards an emergency airlock that indicated a pressurised section beyond it. He threw himself into the chamber and tore his helmet off as air began to thunder and hiss around him.

Images flashed within Khârn's mind, the same symbols of wings and lightning that had come in his visitations and during the fight back into the *Skulltaker*. The combat in the airlock had been so fast and close-up he had not had time to process the detail of what he had seen, but the configuration on the Space Marines' pauldrons suddenly crystallised around the dream-like recollections of his visions. They had borne a lightning bolt surrounded by wings on their black pauldrons.

Angels Eradicant.

Khârn took in a deep breath of stale, metallic air and gripped Gorechild with renewed vigour. The swelling in his left arm was beginning to subside, an indication the damage caused by his exposure to the void was already healing rapidly. He may not have found the ship that had sent the message his Astropath had intercepted, but the Red Path had led him to fight the Astartes Praeses, the very purest of the loyalist Chapters tasked with defending the space around the Eye of Terror itself. Their heads would make fine trophies indeed!

Khârn's exultation was cut short by the *Skulltaker* lurching violently to one side. The battle for the ship was raging, and now more than ever he had to ensure he could continue towards the destiny Khorne had laid out for him. As he replaced his helmet, the cross-chatter of a dozen battles flooded into Khârn's mind. He had not even noticed it through his haze before. The cacophony was suddenly cut short by Roderbar's urgent voice.

*'Samzar, Lukosz. We have multiple incursions across all decks. Send reinforcements to the bridge. I am tracking several raiding parties making their way towards this location.'*

Static crackled for some seconds, mixed with howls of fury and shouted oaths as battle was joined across the ship. Khârn knew he was close to Roderbar.

'I am on my way to the bridge, Roderbar. How many ships are attacking us?'

In the background, Khârn heard a series of loud bangs. He heard Roderbar shout orders at his bridge crew before he breathlessly responded.

*‘Three Adeptus Astartes vessels, lord. They used the magnetic fields of the asteroid belt we passed last cycle to hide their presence. It was as close to a total surprise as I have ever encountered.’*

Khârn began running down the access corridor towards the bow of the *Skulltaker*, letting the pain from his many fresh injuries fuel his anger.

‘I do not want to hear your pitiful excuses, Roderbar. I want you to fight.’

Two Angels Eradicant appeared at the end of the passageway. As they turned to bring their bolters to bear, Khârn increased speed and launched himself at them, Gorechild held before him like a battering ram. As he smashed into the closest Space Marine, the momentum of his charge sent all three of them sprawling onto the deck and weapons fire spraying in all directions. Khârn rolled over his exposed arm, leaving a smear of dark blood on the deck as he got to his feet and swung his chainaxe into the head of the attacker before him. His helmet was torn asunder, Gorechild digging from scalp to lower jaw, and the second boarder took the opportunity to launch his own attack on Khârn as he heaved to free his weapon from his kill. The Angel Eradicant’s chainsword sliced into the exposed flesh of Khârn’s left arm, forcing him to release Gorechild and allow it to fall with the body in which it was embedded. Khârn took a step forward and lashed out with his left foot, planting it into the midriff of the charging Space Marine and unbalancing his opponent. Khârn scooped up the dead boarder’s bolter, ducked the murderous sweep of the attacking Space Marine’s chainsword and fired point-blank into the ruby-coloured lens of the Angel Eradicant’s right eye. The back of the helmet exploded outwards in a crimson shower, but Khârn still had to throw himself out of the path of the roaring chainsword as the body of the Space Marine fell back onto the deck.

As Khârn worked Gorechild free from the skull of his first trophy, he realised Roderbar was still speaking.

*‘...if you will allow it. I have already disabled one of their ships, but the other two vessels are moving to outflank us. The asteroid field will be risky, but if they follow us in it will reduce their capability to launch further assaults. Shall I give the order to enter?’*

Khârn slowly ran the fingers of his bare left hand across Gorechild’s teeth, drawing fresh blood. If they stayed in open space, the loyalists would destroy the *Skulltaker* at range once they realised that their boarding action was doomed to fail. They appeared to lack any concept of the mettle of those favoured by the Blood God. The unpredictability of the asteroids would make bombardment difficult, but posed its own risks in the inevitable strikes from the huge chunks of

spinning ice. Regardless of the ship's present damage, the odds were much better than remaining where they were.

'Do what you have to do, shipmaster.'

With that, Khâm broke into a run. Gorechild dripped with blood, hungry to take more Angels Eradicant skulls.



Cardinal Pradillo could not quite believe his tired old eyes. Standing at the top of the steps to the central avenue, it looked as if the entire planet had come out to greet the Living Saint on his return to Salandraxis. In the far distance, seven Angels Eradicant transports squatted in a tight formation, their weapons raised into the sky as a sign of respect for their passenger. Between the sea of bobbing heads and waving hands stood a thick line of green uniforms. Balacet had cursed and sworn at the number of troops he would have to commit for crowd control, wanting instead to put on an honour guard he hoped would rival the banners and flags of Alecia's Sisters of Battle. It was one argument Pradillo had been happy to stay out of. He had no interest in the pomp and ceremony before him. He was far more concerned that only three Adeptus Astartes cruisers were drifting in high orbit instead of six. Regardless of Balacet and Alecia's belief that they could protect the planet, Pradillo felt the reduced number to be ominous.

In the far distance, Pradillo could make out a golden glow and a wave of sound swept the mile or so down the avenue towards him. Tens of thousands cheered at the first sight of their Saint, and Pradillo heard several sharp intakes of breath from the members of the Ecclesiarchy to his left and right. Some of his fellow Adeptus Ministorum clerics had never seen Lozepath with their own eyes, and Pradillo knew full well the prospect of meeting a Living Saint was a life-defining moment. As the Astra Militarum stiffened to attention and the Sisters of Battle turned as one to face him, it made Pradillo feel even more wretched and ungrateful that he still harboured doubts about the safety of the planet.

It took five minutes for the details of Lozepath's procession to swim into Pradillo's focus. To the front, the ungainly form of a Dreadnought lumbered forward, weapon arm angled towards the golden carpet along which he strode, claw-like hand raised high and open in a sign of greeting. The man-machine was a fearsome sight, and from his vantage point Pradillo could see the Astra Militarum detail around him pressed into the crowd to give him extra room. Behind the Dreadnought marched a line of Adeptus Astartes veterans on either

side, cloaks and banners swaying in time with their movement. He had met the Angels Eradicant only once before, and found them to be respectful of the Ministorum, unlike some of the other Chapters he had encountered over his countless years of service.

Behind their columns followed the Adepta Sororitas, surrounding the raised platform on which Lozepath was being carried towards the High Temple by devoted serfs. Their simple white robes reflected the Living Saint's shimmering aura, and as he moved past the endless crowds on either side, the faithful citizens dropped to their knees and bowed their heads. Taking a faltering breath, Pradillo raised his chin and forced a smile lest Lozepath see his concern. He desperately needed to talk with His Holiness to dispel the deep misgivings he had.

The Dreadnought came to a halt before the steps in a whine of motors and hiss of hydraulics. Pradillo did not recognise the decorations and holy parchments adorning the machine, but felt compelled to bow in respect to these potent symbols of the Emperor's favour. The Dreadnought hinged forwards slightly in response, then clanked to one side, lowering his arm and coming to a watchful standstill down the avenue. Now revealed, the Adeptus Astartes Chapter Master marched over to join the Dreadnought, his Space Marines breaking off to the left and right of the steps. This left the Sisters of Battle, who moved away from the large palanquin, giving the servants space to gently lower Lozepath to the ground. As his feet touched the surface of the carpet, wails of thanks to the Emperor's mercy came from the cowed ranks of spectators. Pradillo felt ashamed his faith was not as strong as that of the common man.

All heads bowed as Lozepath adjusted his richly adorned belt and angled his mighty sword behind him. With his eyes averted, Pradillo could still see the glow from the Living Saint's force field dancing over the armoured figures flanking his progress. Finally, the bottom of Lozepath's cloak filled Pradillo's vision, and he grasped his hands together even tighter.

‘Cardinal Astral Pradillo. It pleases me to see you once again.’

Pradillo's heart thumped in his bony chest. Still averting his gaze, he mustered his failing strength to reply.

‘My joy knows no bounds at your safe return, Your Holiness.’

Lozepath raised his right hand, and despite the tremendous pain in his old bones, Pradillo sank to his knees in order to kiss it, the energy field creating a tickling sensation on his thin lips.

‘The forces of Chaos grow ever closer, Pradillo. Chapter Master Gaul of the honourable Angels Eradicant is convinced I am in grave danger.’

Pradillo released the hand and then struggled to his feet. He could hear some of his junior clerics shuffling behind him, but they had the good sense to remain where they were and not embarrass the cardinal by offering assistance in front of the Living Saint.

‘It is to my eternal shame that I share Lord Gaul’s misgivings, Your Holiness.’

Pradillo could feel Lozepath’s gaze bore into him. There was a steel-cold edge to his voice, something the cardinal had heard before.

‘Is that so? Come, Pradillo. We shall talk inside the High Temple.’

Taking that as a cue to raise his head, Pradillo nodded once and turned, fearing he may betray the doubt coursing through him. He knew Lozepath was wise beyond doubt and would certainly have anticipated Pradillo’s concerns about his own safety and that of the planet. Clearly, this was not the reaction he wanted from his cardinal. Shuffling towards the towering doors of the temple, Pradillo heard Lozepath murmur something to the Sister of Battle closest to him. By the time he had entered the serenity of the High Temple, Lozepath alone was by his side. With a rumble, the doors juddered shut behind them, cutting off the clamour of the crowds and the petal-strewn breeze. Pradillo felt the air become thick with anticipation. The same spirit that had pushed him to speak out against Lozepath’s crusade filled him again – he could remain silent no longer.

‘Your Holiness, I note with some concern that only half the fleet that set out from the Angels Eradicant fortress monastery has arrived. It is not my place to ask why, but our ability to protect you could only have been enhanced by their presence.’

In the soft, filtered light of the High Temple, it was easy for even Pradillo’s weak eyes to see the increasing intensity of the golden light from Lozepath’s body. Pradillo went back over his words in his mind. Surely there was nothing contentious or malicious in them?

‘Ah. A welcome sight.’

Pradillo followed Lozepath’s gaze to the throne nestled beneath the legs of the Emperor’s mighty statue. Try as he might, he could not match the speed of the Living Saint as he swept up the steps to the dais and, passing his sword to a gaggle of hovering cherubs, took his seat. Pradillo’s spirits rose as the Saint took his rightful seat, his dark thoughts receding to the shadows created by his renewed faith. The ornately carved chair intensified in colour now it was occupied once again and Pradillo felt a tear roll down his cheek. Lozepath beckoned the cardinal to approach, and he did so with joy in his heart. Perhaps Salandraxis would be safe after all. Bowing his head at the foot of the steps, he

heard Lozepath lean forwards in the throne and whisper to him.

‘I regret, Cardinal Pradillo, that in my absence you have forgotten the power the Emperor has bestowed upon me.’

Pradillo froze. How could he be accused of such a thing, now that his faith had regained its former strength? The voice continued, its tone devoid of any warmth, while the brilliance of the light emanating from the cloaked body continued to increase by the second.

‘I have no need of ships or men. I am all that is needed to combat the forces of Chaos.’

The light was becoming unbearable to witness. Pradillo closed his eyes as Lozepath screamed his next words in fury.

‘I am the wrath of the Emperor! I am His power! You will not doubt me!’

Pradillo felt as if he were on fire. Falling onto the steps, he rolled in agony at Lozepath’s feet, his vision filled with a light so brilliant it rivalled the intensity of the sun. He could smell flesh burning, and rubbed his hands over his skin in terror. When he got to his face, he realised what had happened. Instead of the familiar sensation of pressure on his eyeballs, there was nothing there but two empty sockets. Pradillo screamed with shock and pain and, just as it had begun, it stopped. Stretching out his hands, he felt his way up the steps until his shaking fingers brushed against the hem of Lozepath’s gown. His body shook with sobs, not from the loss of his sight, but in the knowledge he had been found guilty of his sins and rightly punished.

‘Forgive me, Your Holiness. Forgive me.’

Lozepath did not reply.



Lukosz hurtled back across the wide access passage with a screech of ceramite against metal, a wisp of glowing particles trailing behind him. Faldocran had been thrown even further and hit the ruined hatch they had breached moments ago. Lukosz and Faldocran had been caught in the middle of a teleportation attack, and where they had stood, now several bulky shapes were materialising. Despite the ice-blue vapour still clouding the corridor, Lukosz had seen enough of the attackers to know they were wearing Terminator armour. Lukosz had to get moving.

‘Faldocran! Get up and get your bike down here! Full speed!’

Static crackled for a long second until the veteran finally shouted his

acknowledgement over the roar of his bike's engine. It was screaming at dangerously high revolutions, indicating that Faldocran had understood the insanity that was Lukosz's plan. Lukosz heard Faldocran's bike smash into the sides of the corridor and felt the vibration through the deck plates.

'Lukosz – now!'

Lukosz dropped to one knee, keeping his head low, and felt a violent rush as Faldocran sped right overhead, his bike's heavy engine block washing Lukosz's neck with dry heat as it passed. As he got to his feet and started running, Lukosz saw Faldocran roll from his bike and the machine plough into a pair of tan-armoured figures, crushing them against a reinforced bulkhead. Drawing his power sword and bolter, Lukosz sprayed fire as he threw himself towards the gunnery control station and whoever might be foolish enough to stand in his way.



Khârn arrived at the entrance to the bridge access corridor just as the last berzerker fell to the Space Marine. The sandy grey of his armour was streaked with blood, and it was clear that this Angel Eradicant was a skilled fighter. He had taken on six of the warband single-handedly and emerged victorious. Khârn could see the doorway was still closed, but the melta bombs dangling from the veteran Angel Eradicant's waist would make short work of the bulkhead and give him entrance within seconds. All thoughts of carrying out his mission seemingly fled as he spotted Khârn. Flicking bone and gristle from his lightning-sheathed longsword, the Space Marine took on a defensive pose and awaited Khârn's charge.

Khârn sprinted forwards and brought Gorechild down in a blur, aiming to chop into the gap between the veteran's pauldron and helmet, but the Space Marine twisted his body and rammed his shoulder into Khârn's left arm. Gorechild sliced into the bridge's door, the mica-dragon teeth squealing against the metal as they tore a ragged line across its surface. The Angel Eradicant brought his power sword's crackling blade up behind the chainaxe's handle in an attempt to drive the tip under Khârn's jawline. Khârn turned his head to the left, but the longsword's point still caught the underside of the grille and sliced away a chunk of the ceramite before he could push the Space Marine away. Coils of white electricity danced across his vision as the sleek blade broke contact with his helmet. Khârn felt a dull concussion in his left arm as the veteran smashed his

fist into his bicep and immediately retaliated with a roar of fury. As Khârn drove his right gauntlet into his foe's helmet, the Space Marine fell backwards, allowing the Chosen of Khorne the room to swap Gorechild from his bloody left hand to his right. The veteran saw the danger and came back with a lightning-fast thrust of his power sword towards Khârn's damaged arm, but the angle of his attack was a fraction too wide. Khârn brought Gorechild vertically upwards into the joint between his right cuisse and abdominal armour, tearing into the poorly protected flesh of his inner thigh. Blood fountained out of the wound as the head of the chainaxe ate its way deeper into the Space Marine's thigh, covering Khârn's armour and spraying over the ceramite of the Angel Eradicant. Pulling Gorechild towards him, Khârn widened the cut and pulled further upwards into the lower torso of his opponent. By the time the chainaxe had come away, there was not enough muscle and tissue left to keep the leg attached. Completely unbalanced, the veteran fell to the side, and by the time he hit the floor Khârn had separated his head from his body as another worthy tribute to the Blood God.

Khârn took several deep breaths before stepping over the decapitated body and banging on the fortified door with the butt of Gorechild's handle.

'Roderbar, open the hatch. I would speak with you.'



Lukosz charged, a wordless battle cry on his ragged lips. Through his tinted tactical overlay, he saw the Angels Eradicant Terminator push the burning wreck of the White Scars bike away from him without effort, stepping out of the huge rupture the collision had created in the far wall of the broad corridor. In one hand he wielded a thunder hammer, and in the other a storm shield, both making the air hum with their powerful charges. Whether it was his shield or his Terminator armour that had saved him from the murderous impact of Faldocran's bike, Lukosz did not know or care. His Nails were raging at him to take the skull of this loyalist Space Marine, and no amount of protection would get in Lukosz's way.

Shaking himself back to clarity, Lukosz charged with a roar, pumping shell after shell into the rapidly approaching Angel Eradicant. Somewhere on his flank, Faldocran was locked in his own battle to the death with a clawed warrior. One member of the Terminator squad lay unmoving on the deck, his armour still engulfed in burning fuel, but that left three more to deal with.

The attacking Terminator led with his shield, a tactic Lukosz had experienced in countless boarding actions. Rather than waste his energy striking it with his power sword, he instead threw himself into a forward slide, ramming into one of the Terminator's legs with both his boots and toppling the veteran onto the deck. With his lighter armour, Lukosz was on his feet first and brought his sword down onto the head of his opponent. He gouged the top of the Terminator's bulky cowl, but it was a glancing blow. As his momentum took him around, the Angel Eradicant brought his thunder hammer up. Lukosz was too late to avoid contact.

It was like being hit by a Leman Russ tank. All the air left Lukosz's body and he felt himself flying through the corridor, his ears singing with the deafening concussion unleashed by the Terminator's power weapon. As he smashed into the ceiling and fell to the deck, warning runes flicked to scarlet. Feeling down his side, Lukosz's fingers traced a large depression in the ceramite. The force of the energy release had fractured his armour. Whatever damage it had done to his flesh was overridden by a rush of combat stimulants. Staggering to his feet, Lukosz was hit by another blow from behind. Crashing head first into the nearby wall, he instinctively rolled and ducked as the thunder hammer from another Terminator smashed into the passageway wall. Lukosz blindly lashed out with his power sword. His blade connected with something, but he was rewarded with yet another hammer blow, this time to the side of his helmet. He dropped to the deck, consciousness seeping from him.

Somewhere distant, Lukosz could hear the Butcher's Nails keening at him. Shadows moved before him, and then the corridor erupted in staccato flashes of light. Lukosz saw the crackling silhouette of Faldocran being lifted high against a bulkhead, speared by the twin claws of his Terminator opponent, searing lightning bursting into his body and snapping at the air. But then more figures arrived, their own weapons outlined by flashes of repeated fire. One of them was somehow familiar, with a broken horn on its helmet.

Samzar. It was Samzar, come to fight with his old comrade once again.

Lukosz saw the Terminator he had first fought point to the approaching berzerkers and send the remaining veterans of his squad to attack them. The leader looked away from the fight, cocking his head as if listening to some silent command, and Lukosz realised the Terminator now had clear passage to the gunnery control station. Staggering to his feet, Lukosz coughed and blood exploded from his mouth into his helmet. He could barely breathe, and knew he had been badly wounded. That was immaterial. He could not allow the Terminator to fulfil his mission. More than that, he still had a trophy to claim.

‘Blood for the Blood God!’ he rasped.

Lukosz threw himself at the Angels Eradicant veteran. The Terminator turned, smashing his storm shield into the side of Lukosz’s head and bringing his thunder hammer crashing down onto his pauldron. Swatted to the floor by the concussive force, Lukosz felt his rib plates come apart. Lukosz snorted at the pain in disgust. The Terminator did not stop to finish Lukosz off, instead turning and heading towards his target, a sudden urgency in his stride. Through a haze of red Lukosz thrust his power sword forwards between the Terminator’s boot and greave. The Angel Eradicant looked down and behind, but as he turned to defend himself Lukosz pushed the blade further, slicing through the ankle. With a cry of rage the veteran swung his thunder hammer. Lukosz summoned his remaining strength, withdrew his sword and lunged upwards – not to block the blow, but to drive his blade deep into the Terminator’s abdominal armour, straight up into his primary heart.



Lukosz opened his eyes. A shadow moved over him, a silhouette of an armoured figure. Looking down, he could see a smoking crater where his chest armour had once been. Beyond that, he could not see his legs. The shadow moved back, reached down and removed Lukosz’s helmet. As he blinked away the blood obscuring his view, the dark figure resolved itself into Samzar. Lukosz looked up into the desolate, haunted eyes of his brother in arms, and reached out a hand. He tried to clear the confusion in his head.

‘Brother... all is not lost. Honour and glory still await us. But beware you do not follow the wrong path.’

Lukosz could feel himself slipping into darkness. Taking hold of Samzar’s vambrace, he pulled him closer. A flicker of understanding flashed across his fellow World Eater’s face, and then Samzar nodded, his expression grim. Finally his eyes focussed on a point behind Lukosz, on a place only Samzar could see.

‘As long as the blood flows, nothing else matters to Khorne.’

All semblance of the man Lukosz had once known disappeared in that sentence. Despair overwhelmed him and he released his grip, falling to the deck of the *Skulltaker* as Samzar started up his chainsword. The last words Lukosz would ever hear were from a brother become a stranger.

‘Your skull will make a fitting trophy for the Blood God.’



Khârn listened to Samzar's garbled report with mounting anger. The boarders had been wiped out before they could destroy any sensitive part of the ship, but the warband's losses had been very heavy. Before he could respond, Roderbar turned in his command throne to face Khârn, his face ashen.

'The two Adeptus Astartes vessels are clearing a path through the asteroid field. They will be able to launch more attack vessels within minutes.'

Khârn looked to the tactical display before him and clenched his fists. This change of approach would surely be their undoing. And yet, the Red Path had brought them here. The Blood God did not want them to die like this.

'Then we shall use our own gunships and take the fight to them. They will not expect that.'

Khârn moved over to the internal vox and flicked the switch, ready to give the order.

'Lord.'

Despite the sheen of sweat covering his rotund face, Roderbar spoke with calm and authority.

'The last reports I received from the hangar decks were not good. We have lost many of our Thunderhawks. I do not think we are able to mount a counter-attack.'

Khârn's bloodlust began to rise once again.

'So be it. We will meet the Adeptus Astartes forces here, no matter how great they might be, and slaughter them all.'

'Wait.'

Roderbar was staring at one of his few undamaged screens.

'Their bombardment has stopped. They... are being fired upon.'

Khârn stepped back towards the shipmaster. What trickery was this?

'By whom?'

Khârn raised Gorechild and pointed it at Roderbar's head. Without blinking, the shipmaster pointed down to a blue light winking just below his bloody hand.

'There is an emergency communication coming in. Shall I...'

Khârn growled at the stupidity of the question. Roderbar flicked a switch, and a speaker crackled into life.

*'This is Captain Locq of the Hounds of Abaddon. I am engaging the Angels Eradicant fleet and will destroy it momentarily. I will board your vessel as soon as this has been achieved.'*

Khârn looked at Roderbar. The shipmaster was trying to hide his astonishment and failing.

*‘Any attempt by you to flee, open fire on my fleet or prevent access to your ship by my warriors will result in your immediate destruction. I await confirmation of your agreement to these terms. They are non-negotiable.’*

Khârn looked around the bridge. Smoke belched from ruined cogitators, parts of servitors were strewn between burning consoles and the entire ship groaned as if it were in pain. Blood raging, he bellowed an oath and slammed Gorechild into the briefing table, cleaving it in two. Breathing in deeply, he closed his eyes and saw the image of the blood river flowing before him. Turning to Roderbar, he nodded once.

With a grunt, the shipmaster reached up and pulled down his vox transmitter to respond.

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