

WARHAMMER
40,000



THE RED PATH 8

COURT OF
DAEMONS

A KHÂRN THE BETRAYER STORY
by CHRIS DOWS

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THE RED PATH 8: COURT OF DAEMONS

Chris Dows



Gaul pushed against the bodies on top of him, all the time trying to pull his left arm away from whatever was pinning him down. With a clatter of armour, the heap above began to shift, revealing a sky black with smoke.

‘Maedinar, Ordelon. Report.’

Static hissed in his helmet. Gaul had not seen the veteran sergeant or his captain since they had engaged the berzerkers on the steps. Despite constant attempts, he had heard nothing from Tentera at all. He bitterly concluded that the venerable Chaplain had been overwhelmed at the wall, along with a great number of his battle-brothers. Such thoughts were pointless. He would have time to honour the fallen later. Right now, he had to rejoin the fight. Fury coursed through his veins, filling him with vengeful promise. Revitalised, he heaved himself upwards with a roar.

A bolt exploded less than an inch above his head. Gaul flattened back down, drawing Acritus with his free hand. Another bolt came, this time detonating on the Sister of Battle slumped lifelessly on top of him, tearing the body in half and spattering its remains in every direction. As he twisted and turned, his arm became free and Gaul felt the grip of a bolt pistol. Seizing it, he pushed himself upwards with a furious roar, levelling the weapon and firing at the Black Legion traitor advancing down the steps of the High Temple towards him. A shot thudded into Gaul’s chest, blowing a hole in his armour, but he kept on firing until his attacker’s helmet exploded. The body slumped down, and Gaul saw the firefight had attracted the attention of several other Chaos warriors.

Gaul threw himself down the steps, rolling and bouncing off the carpet of bodies until he crashed to the ruined avenue at the bottom. Shots tore all around

him, disintegrating what still stood of the grand columns and statues lining the walkway. Ducking towards the burning shell of a building, he continued to transmit on his vox, calling for all Angels Eradicant to muster at his location. The High Temple had been breached. Gaul knew the Living Saint was in grave danger.



Khârn hit the thick stone column of the High Temple with a force that broke it in two. Crashing onto the fractured, gold-inlaid floor, he rolled, propelling himself from the curved interior wall back towards the crumbling fluted support from which he had fallen. All the time he kept low, ignoring the frantic battles all around him in case Lozepath delivered another devastating blast. Warning runes flashed madly for attention within his helmet. He did not need them to tell him the ceramite on his right pauldron and rerebrace had been compromised by the impact.

His breastplate was still smouldering from the discharge of the Living Saint's sword, and while his body screamed with pain, Khârn knew he had been fortunate to withstand the blast at such close range. The fact he had survived was another sign the Blood God still favoured him. Khorne was not making it easy for him, but nor would he have expected him to.

The top of the column exploded above him, showering chunks of plascrete across the horns on his helmet. Khârn turned and only just blocked the sweeping blow of an Angel Eradicant's chainsword as it swung towards him. The Space Marine continued to press down, flames glinting in the red of his visor, and Khârn saw him bring his bolt pistol to bear with his other hand. Khârn knew his only option was to push upwards and break cover. With a roar, he launched himself forwards, the handle of Gorechild grinding against the chainsword's teeth. Despite his strength, Khârn knew his opponent had the advantage of elevation, so when he countered Khârn's upward thrust by pushing back, Khârn relaxed abruptly, allowing the Angel Eradicant to topple forwards over his body and crash head first into the broken column behind him. Khârn moved in a blur, getting to his feet and bringing Gorechild down on his assailant's flank. It chewed its way through the side of the pauldron down into the vambrace, rendering the arm useless. With a cry of frustration the Space Marine twisted away from the blow and fired his bolt pistol, but he was too slow. Khârn smashed backwards with a vicious kick, knocking the weapon away. Pulling

Gorechild free, Khârn brought it down into the helmet of the Angel Eradicant, carving a diagonal slice from the scalp to the neck. The body fell back, brain and bone glistening inside the rupture, then crashed onto its side.

Another blast of light hit Khârn, spinning him into the temple's wall. Stones fell onto his back as he rolled down to the floor.

'Behold, vile apostates of darkness. The Emperor of Mankind shall triumph over your feeble champion. He cannot survive the power of a Living Saint.'

Lozepath's voice rolled around the decimated interior of the High Temple, rising above the whirl of chainaxes and the chatter of bolters all around. Khârn scrambled back towards the broken column, shoulder burning with pain from the impact. A glance revealed that his pauldron was black with the force of the Living Saint's deflected blow. With Gorechild clutched to his chest, Khârn tried to locate the Living Saint. He heard a crash of multiple bodies hitting glass and stone, then the cries of Sisters of Battle forming a charge only yards away. Lozepath was cutting a swathe through the Hounds of Abaddon to get to Khârn, leaving the Adepta Sororitas and surviving Angels Eradicant to finish them off in his wake. Khârn knew it was only a matter of time before Lozepath threw every one of his warriors at him. If he left cover, Khârn would present a ready target for the enemy's bolters and the Living Saint's energy blasts.

None of this mattered. His bloodlust was sweeping over him with renewed vigour, his twin hearts pumping furiously to fuel his rage. It was time to take the fight to Lozepath.

A blinding flash of light passed through him, and a split second later the column against which he rested was torn apart. He heard Lozepath's booming laugh and taunting cries. Sprinting forwards, Khârn ducked underneath a searing golden stream that punched a hole through the temple wall directly behind him.

Khârn leapt over fallen effigies and chunks of stone, trampling bodies underfoot. Before him, three Sisters of Battle were engaging a Hound of Abaddon. Khârn angled himself forwards and rammed into the group, sending all four spinning to the blood-slick floor. Yards ahead, two Sisters turned and swept their weapons towards him with hoarse shouts of fury. The closest, a squad leader, brought her power sword up high while the other Sister thrust the butt of her bolter low in a practised, coordinated attack. Khârn ducked the high sword and brought Gorechild up in front of him, tearing the leader from crotch to mid-chest. Her scream of rage was a gargle of blood and froth, and as Khârn kicked her sundered body away to free his chainaxe, the second Sister evaporated in a cloud of steaming gore. Lozepath's aim had been wide, and he

clearly did not care who he killed in pursuit of his prey.

‘See how he runs, a cur hiding in the shadows cast by my holy purity. Come, chosen son of the Blood Father. I will be merciful. You shall be released from your torment, as will your foul brethren.’

Khârn felt the ground shake. More glass and metal showered down from above as the air erupted with fresh violence. The roar of dark oaths echoed from the walls, and Khârn knew it heralded the arrival of more Chaos forces. Before him, most of the remaining Angels Eradicant and Sisters of Battle stormed towards the main entrance, giving Lozepath more room to wield his deadly energy sword. The firing intensified ahead, stray bolter salvoes ricocheting back and forth around Khârn. He headed towards the very centre of the High Temple and a towering statue to the Emperor. Lozepath bellowed in rage behind him, and Khârn felt himself lifted into the air. His vision was filled with the flank of the golden statue hurtling towards him and he crashed into it chest-first. Khârn felt his left rib plate crack, and his bloody left arm dragged along the front of the effigy as he plunged onto the ornate throne built beneath the golden Emperor’s legs. Another blast came, but Khârn vaulted over the high seat for cover.

Khârn stepped onto the throne, Gorechild in both hands. In the near distance, Lozepath lurched forwards, the field of iridescence around him pulsating with his heartbeat. Khârn saw the glowing sword come up ready to strike, and he steeled himself to move. Before it could unleash its lethal beam, a volley of bolter fire roared from Lozepath’s left. Several Hounds of Abaddon opened fire as they charged, pumping shell after shell into the Living Saint. Khârn jumped off the throne and ran towards Lozepath, using the distraction to his advantage. The concentration of bolt explosions was unrelenting. Bringing his shield before him, Lozepath deflected the majority of the shots aimed at his body, but many others detonated on his energy field. The aura around the Saint changed colour into a swirling dark brown where the shots found their mark, but Khârn could see Lozepath was already channelling energy into his broadsword. Khârn increased speed and raised Gorechild ready to strike, but the Living Saint had weathered the onslaught. He unleashed a broiling stream of energy from the tip of his sword, the outer edge of the blast catching Khârn on his right arm and hurling him back towards the statue. As he skidded along the floor, Khârn saw the Hounds of Abaddon annihilated in the Living Saint’s furious attack.

Khârn rolled into a crouch, readying himself for Lozepath’s next attack. For a few seconds, the Living Saint swayed on his feet, the field around him dissipating until it became almost transparent. Khârn could see that he had

clearly been weakened by the maelstrom unleashed by the Hounds' attack, and the blood raced in his veins. For all of Lozepath's boastful claims of commanding the might of the righteous, there was a limit to it. Khârn would find that boundary, and smash it down.

The aura returned to its original state with a golden flicker as Lozepath raised his huge sword. This time Khârn was the faster, and dodged the beam that slammed into the base of the Emperor's effigy behind him, causing it to rock on its foundations. In that split second, Khârn knew how he could use the Saint's enormous power against him. A fine mist of dust and plascrete billowed up around Khârn and he looked up to the golden figure as Lozepath marched towards him. His face was a shimmering mask of hate, more resolute with every step. The Saint's blade rose again, brilliant energy coursing down through his arm to store and build within the mighty weapon.

Vaulting back over the ornately carved high seat, Khârn slashed into the undamaged leg of the golden Emperor, carving a deep gouge across it. The throne exploded behind him as Lozepath unleashed another blast, throwing him through the rocking legs of the effigy to the rear of the statue. Khârn rolled, spinning Gorechild to full speed the second he regained his feet and ran towards the left ankle, breaking Lozepath's line of sight. With a huge swing, Khârn slammed the chainaxe into the gold-clad leg. The mica-dragon teeth chewed through metal and stone, carving a thick, jagged line all the way through until the massive sculpture shifted. Khârn heard Lozepath scream in rage. The remains of the throne were torn apart in another white-hot blast, but Khârn had already thrown himself over to the right leg of the statue and was rending it apart. With a deafening crack, the effigy began to drop.

Khârn dodged the spinning chunks of debris flying in all directions from the Living Saint's raging attack. Leaning his right shoulder into the back of the leg, Khârn bellowed with the effort of pushing. A wrenching snap heralded the golden Emperor's slow forward movement, and as it succumbed to its own enormous weight the speed increased.

Holstering Gorechild on his back, he sprinted forwards, leaping off the smashed edge of the plinth and hurling himself at the rear of the statue with all the power he could muster. Khârn took hold of its deeply carved ridges and used them as handholds to scale the toppling idol. As it fell, he could feel tremendous explosions erupting in the front of the sculpture as Lozepath unleashed his power into it. Large chunks spun off the sides and a series of blasts tore ragged holes through the stone, but by now the statue was at an angle shallow enough for

Khârn to begin running up its length.

As he reached the base of the spine, the gold-encrusted arms broke off at the shoulders, dropping onto what remained of the columns and smaller effigies surrounding it, crushing them under their weight. Khârn knew Lozepath would not be foolish enough to let the statue fall on him, but that did not matter. By the time he had jumped over the deep crenulations of the idol's back, the head was crashing into the High Temple's outer wall with a thunderous explosion of stone and marble. With his view of the ground obscured, Khârn threw himself at a shimmer in the rising cloud of dust. As he hit the fractured tiles of the High Temple, the golden Emperor's enormous broken head crashed down inches away from him and came to rest on its side.

Khârn spotted a pulsating light between the decapitated head and torso. As it brightened, it picked out the dust swirling thickly around the temple's ruined interior. Reaching Gorechild, Khârn crunched over rubble and the dying Sisters, grinding them into the once-pristine floor. Some of the surviving Sisters in the temple had recovered enough to recommence fire, but Khârn ignored their efforts. His full concentration was fixed on the ebbing light. It was losing its intensity. Lozepath's skull was ready for the taking. The light faded and did not come back. Khârn swore an oath in an ancient tongue. Perhaps Lozepath had been dealt a fatal blow by the falling statue after all.

Khârn jumped onto the smashed torso of the golden Emperor and peered down onto the crushed floor. Lozepath appeared from nowhere, thrusting upwards with his broadsword and connecting with the inside of Khârn's thigh armour. Khârn leapt into the air, over the head of Lozepath, and twisted as he fell towards the hollow interior of the statue's head. Lozepath charged immediately, the sword's intensity building once again. From his crouched position, Khârn swept outwards with Gorechild, grinding into the side of the pulsating blade. The weight of his strike sent Lozepath spinning off to the right, but the Living Saint used the momentum to his advantage, whirling around in a full circle and sweeping the huge blade towards Khârn's head with one hand. Gorechild took the blow, but the impact sent shockwaves through Khârn's arms. Lozepath's face was twisted in rage, the pain of the impact with Khârn's chainaxe distorting his noble features. The aura around him was beginning to return, and Khârn knew it would only take a matter of moments for him to regenerate. He had to press home his advantage.

Khârn jumped forwards from his crouch with a cry of fury. Thrusting the shaft of Gorechild into Lozepath's shield, he pushed the Living Saint backwards

towards the golden Emperor's broken body. Lozepath leaned forwards and tried to counter the assault, but Khârn's brute strength was against him. As the Saint brought his sword up, Khârn saw the blade was growing ever brighter. Lozepath seemed to be gathering holy energy from the temple's structure. Despite the glow not reaching its full brilliance, the Living Saint thrust forwards into Khârn's unprotected left arm. He felt the flesh burn and crisp with the strike but turned into the blow nonetheless, bringing Gorechild down towards Lozepath's head with his right hand. The Saint brought his shield up to block the blow, and Khârn could see his aura was regaining its golden colour as his power continued to increase. Gorechild's teeth penetrated the shield's glowing field and bit deep into the ceramite with a satisfying shriek. Khârn delighted in watching the chainaxe cleave the glittering aquila emblazoned on it in two.

Something smashed into the side of Khârn's head. Blows rained down on him, frantic and furious, and he turned to see a Sister of Battle hammering at his armour with her empty bolter. Spittle and blood were flying from her mouth as she pounded him with the stock of the weapon, her words frenzied and incomprehensible. Khârn kicked out with a curse, hurling her backwards into the gaping hole of the golden Emperor's head. She hit the rim at neck height and disappeared into the darkness of the hollow, her spine broken with the impact. Khârn turned without further pause to press his attack on Lozepath.

A burning pain erupted in his upper chest.

Khârn looked down. The Living Saint's blade had penetrated the ceramite of his breastplate. Slowly, Khârn raised his head to meet Lozepath's gaze. He was staring directly into Khârn's eyes, his face triumphant, and his mouth distorted into a sneer as he twisted the pulsating blade and pushed it deeper still. Khârn felt muscle and sinew slice apart. Sheets of flame tore through the right side of his body.

Khârn barked a laugh, then grasped the flaming blade with his armoured gauntlet. Lozepath pushed again, but this time the blade did not progress. In his left hand, Khârn revved Gorechild to full speed, all the while staring into the hate-filled face of the Living Saint. The expression on Lozepath's face changed. Lozepath tried to withdraw the weapon from Khârn's body, but it would not move. As the Saint closed his eyes, the aura around him began to grow brighter.

Khârn swept Gorechild down onto the protruding blade in a blur. Sparks flew and he felt his body shudder as the chainaxe ground its way through the glowing sword. Lozepath fell backwards with a look of astonishment on his face, still clutching the handle. Khârn gripped the steel protruding from his chest and

pulled it out. Blood oozed from the blackened puncture in his armour, but he paid it no heed. Tossing the now-dull shard to one side in disgust, he advanced on Lozepath, who thrust again with the broken blade.

The shimmering glow around the Living Saint pulsed brightly, but the light was fluctuating far more rapidly than it had before.

Khârn struck.

Gorechild tore through Lozepath's right shoulder and angled down to the left armpit. Bone and muscle splattered outwards, showering Khârn with a fountain of gore. The Chosen of Khorne brought Gorechild up to his chest and stepped back to watch the Living Saint die. Lozepath's head and shoulders began to slide forwards with the sound of freshly butchered meat. Before the severed torso could drop to the floor, Khârn brought the chainaxe down in a tight curve, slicing through the neck and separating the head from the dissected body.

Screams of horror and shouts of fury filled the air, closely followed by a fresh hail of bolter fire. The sound of ricocheting shells drifted away as Khârn lifted Lozepath's head and stared at it, disgust and disappointment growing inside him. The golden aura had gone, replaced with the pallid skin of a mortal. How could this be the great trophy the Blood God had led him to? Was this wretch's skull really the prize he had been sent to claim?

Khârn leant back and lifted the severed head to the sky, roaring to the heavens through the shattered remains of the High Temple's glass ceiling. In that moment, he knew that Salandraxis had not yet fulfilled the promise given to him.

Fresh explosions tore into the fallen remains of the golden Emperor, peppering Khârn with spinning fragments of debris. Khârn strode through the destruction towards the fire, readying Gorechild for the inevitable revenge attack from the remains of the Imperial forces. But, despite his vision being clouded by smoke and tongues of flame, he could see that the High Temple's defenders had their backs to him. Through the gaps between the Sisters of Battle and Angels Eradicant he spotted Black Legion warriors in black-and-red armour. They were swarming towards the rapidly diminishing line of the Emperor's faithful, tearing into them with savage abandon. Khârn ducked low and broke into a sprint, joining battle against the nearest of the Imperial Space Marines. Raising Gorechild high, he swung into the thigh of an Angel Eradicant, carving through his leg and sending him crashing to the floor. The Hound of Abaddon who had been fighting him charged forwards, striking Khârn directly in the chest. Khârn swung Gorechild at him, gouging the vambrace of his chainsword arm. Instead of retaliating the Hound retreated, shouting into his vox as he did so.

As more loyalist bodies fell to his left and right, Khârn could see dozens of Black Legionnaires surging towards him, weapons readied but not opening fire. Khârn weighed Gorechild in his hands, preparing it for yet more blood. The longer he waited to attack, the more concentrated their numbers would become – and the more skulls he could take.

‘Khârn!’

The voice was unfiltered by a helmet. Khârn recognised it immediately. Turning behind him, he saw Locq standing on top of the head of the Emperor’s fallen statue, looking down at him with obvious satisfaction. The Hounds of Abaddon were now three deep on every side. Khârn’s grip on Gorechild tightened. Locq took a step towards the edge of the smashed idol, chainsword held loosely in one hand, helmet in the other. It was a brazen gesture. Skirmishes could still be heard within and outside the High Temple, and it would only take a stray shot to take his head off. Or, thought Khârn, a throw of his chainaxe. Khârn’s hands twitched on the weapon and a wave of bolter muzzles rattled closer. Khârn snorted derisively, lowered Gorechild slowly to his side and took off his own helmet to match Locq’s bravado. He would slaughter all those around him in good time, now he had the measure of them.

‘Your berzerkers are finished. I had them executed as the honourless scum they are. Many of the Hounds who joined your ranks turned on them. How does it feel to be betrayed, Khârn the Betrayer?’

Khârn’s bloodlust raged. He cared not for the loss of the warband, nor at whose hands they died. They had served their purpose, allowing him to follow the Red Path and reap a rich harvest for the Blood God. Khârn stepped forwards, but his way was immediately blocked by half a dozen Hounds of Abaddon, their chainswords and chainaxes buzzing inches from his face. He looked to them with a sneer, his voice rich with loathing.

‘Still you refuse to understand. I am on the Red Path, shown to me by the Blood God himself. I have no other allegiance than to Khorne. I serve him, and him alone. I shall not dance to the whims of your “Warmaster”, Locq. I will not be your prisoner. You have failed.’

The contented look on Locq’s face fell away, replaced instead by a dark fury. Locq jumped down from the golden Emperor’s decapitated head and marched forwards, the group of Hounds stepping back to allow him through. Khârn stared into Locq’s eyes. There was a fire there Khârn had not seen before.

‘I have no intention of taking you prisoner, Khârn. I will kill you and take your head.’

Khârn felt a tremendous blow lift him from the floor. A scorching blast of heat rushed across his face, and he instinctively brought his arm up to protect it as he crashed to the floor. The movement tore muscle fibres apart in his upper chest, the pain from Lozepath's strike exploding through him once again. Raising his head, he could see light pouring in from somewhere to his left, illuminating the rain of dust swirling around the interior of the ruined High Temple. Another thunderous roar echoed from its broken walls, and Hounds of Abaddon spun past him, some intact, some torn asunder. A few yards away, Khârn spotted his helmet. Rolling over to it, he quickly put it on and brought himself up into a crouch, Gorechild purring in his hands. This was not the pure energy of Lozepath's heavenly fire. This was high-explosive ammunition from a heavy gun.

Khârn heard the sound of tank tracks squealing and crunching their way over broken masonry. Jumping to his feet, Khârn caught a glance of a Leman Russ battle tank turning only yards away, its upper surface covered in brick and stone from the hole it had smashed in the High Temple's wall. The chatter of bolter fire broke out as Angels Eradicant poured forwards past both sides of the tank, firing and hacking at the Hounds of Abaddon who had abandoned their guard around Khârn to engage with the newly arrived loyalist reinforcements. Khârn's bloodlust surged to a new intensity, and he spun up Gorechild in readiness for a rich harvest.

The melee intensified within seconds. Khârn threw himself into the clamour, delighting in the fact that no matter what he hit, it would be yet more glory to Khorne. Gorechild tore into armoured flanks, pauldrons and helmets, devouring ceramite and spitting chunks of bloody flesh with abandon. Khârn did not have to search for targets; they were six deep before him, crashing and smashing into each other within the ruins of the High Temple, trampling on bodies and broken effigies in their bloodlust. To his left, Khârn caught a glimpse of the Angels Eradicant leader, clearly wounded but fighting with a ferocity fitting of any berzerker. Khârn rammed his way past a blood-crazed Black Legion warrior, sweeping Gorechild down over the back of his thighs and taking his legs from under him. The Master of the Angels Eradicant would be another great trophy, regardless of his injuries. But then Khârn saw Locq, pinned against the now-crippled Leman Russ and battling an Angel Eradicant only yards away.

Khârn brought his head down and broke into a sprint. He kept Gorechild before him, using his momentum and sheer force of will to crash through the lines of battling Space Marines. He did not acknowledge the blows of chainswords or

detonations of bolts on his armour. His focus was entirely on Locq. Within seconds he had broken through, just in time for the Hound of Abaddon to drive his chainsword through the stomach of the Angel Eradicant. Locq pushed the stricken Space Marine away with his boot, sending his victim crashing to the ground and looking for his next fight.

He would not have to wait long.

‘Locq!’

Khârn screamed the name. Through the raging noise of combat, Locq turned towards him. There was no hesitation, no boastful claims or posturing this time. The Hound of Abaddon raised his chainsword and sprinted to meet Khârn. Leaping into the air for extra momentum, Locq brought his buzzing weapon down towards Khârn’s head. Khârn brought Gorechild up to meet the challenge, but had to quickly alter the angle of his chainaxe as Locq skilfully twisted the churning blade towards Khârn’s left arm. The chainsword skidded across the flat of Gorechild’s head, and Locq shifted his weight to continue the movement down the shaft towards the exposed fingers on Khârn’s left hand. The Chosen of Khorne responded by twisting his wrist, sweeping Locq’s chainsword out and just over the knuckles of his fist. Khârn felt Locq’s boot crash into his knee. On the blood-slick floor of the High Temple, Khârn’s left foot slid back with the force of the blow, pain lancing up his leg from an old injury that had not yet fully healed. Locq seized his chance to spin and chop into Khârn’s right thigh. Khârn tossed Gorechild to his other hand just as the chainsword blade began to bite into his cuisse. He brought the ancient axe straight down with a thumping blow, not onto the blade but onto Locq’s gauntlet.

Gorechild chewed greedily through ceramite and bone. Locq’s hand and chainsword fell to the floor, the chain still spinning at full throttle. Khârn kicked it to one side to stop Locq from picking it up with his other hand, but the Hounds captain was already advancing. With a bellow of anger, Locq smashed his remaining fist into Khârn’s head.

Khârn shook off the blow and brought Gorechild down onto Locq’s right pauldron with both hands, his own oath to the Blood God on his lips. Such was the fury with which Khârn struck, the chainaxe tore a straight line down into the breastplate. Khârn twisted the handle clockwise, altering the path of the whirling teeth to the left. Locq reached down and tried to stop the blade from exiting his body, but it was too late. His right arm and a good part of his torso slid away and dropped to the floor. For some seconds he stood and faced Khârn, seemingly oblivious to the organs spilling out of his ruined flank. He tried to say

something, but Khârn was not listening. He swung Gorechild once above his head and drove it into the exposed side beneath Locq's chin. Locq's severed head spun with the force of the blow and hit the ground as his lifeless torso folded and collapsed onto itself.

As the battle raged between the diminishing Angels Eradicant forces and the Black Legion warband, Khârn stooped to retrieve his trophy. He looked at the severed head for a moment, then quickly threaded one of Gorechild's chains through the jaw and let it dangle with the others Salandraxis had given him that day. Khârn rose to his feet. The Blood Father might look favourably upon him for his harvest, but Khârn's bloodlust was not yet sated.

Through the milling bodies, Khârn spotted the heavily injured Master of the Angels Eradicant once again. When the closest veterans around him became aware of Khârn's intention, the Space Marines began falling back towards their leader, heading not for the entrance they had created with the Lemman Russ tank but the main doors. The Hounds of Abaddon followed, keen to rout the Imperial forces. Khârn launched himself at the nearest Black Legion warrior. The combat was brief and unsatisfying; Khârn eviscerated the Hound in a matter of seconds and headed out to the temple's main entrance in pursuit of the retreating Space Marines.

Khârn was only a few steps away from the gaping doorway when he was blown back into the temple by a massive shock wave. He landed on his back and careened off fallen masonry and pieces of broken statue, finally coming to a halt several yards away from the exit. Khârn cycled through his helmet's visual modes with an impatient grunt as he got up. He had been blown up enough times for one battle. Through the smoke and dust, he could see Locq's forces were being decimated by las-fire and heavy bolters outside the temple. Through the shattered remains of the glass roof, Khârn saw Imperial attack ships swoop and fire, raining down destruction on all those who had followed the Angels Eradicant into the open.

Khârn grinned as he decided it was time to take his fury to these new reinforcements. He would not leave Salandraxis while any of them still drew breath.

The firestorm Khârn ran into was without equal. At least two dozen Imperial ships were firing down onto the steps and the approach to the temple. Down below, fresh Astra Militarum troops swarmed out of transports to engage with the Khornate Black Legionnaires that had managed to survive the murderous fire from above. The troops were ill-matched to their power-armoured foe, but the

discipline with which they threw themselves at Locq's forces was commendable. What few Angels Eradicant had survived their attack on the High Temple appeared from the flanks, still led by their crippled leader. If he was strong enough to stand and fight despite his injuries, he would be claimed for the Blood Father. Khârn ran towards him, dodging explosions and ducking beneath chattering bolter fire from every direction. He had not seen a single berzerker for some time, but it troubled him not.

Khârn did not need anyone by his side to fight for the glory of the Blood God. His heart soared. The vision was fulfilling itself and the entire planet would be his to defile. Salandraxis was drowning in blood, and the Chosen of Khorne would be solely responsible for the planet's desecration.

A brilliant light filled the sky, followed by the report of a huge explosion. Khârn looked up to see missiles streaking towards the Imperial ships from the left and right, catching them completely unawares in a deadly crossfire. In the blink of an eye, four Vendetta gunships erupted into balls of flame. Another wave of rockets tore through the sky, annihilating more ships as they desperately tried to evade each other and the debris slicing through the air. Burning chunks of metal fell to the ground, hitting Imperial and Black Legion troops alike. Within seconds, the Imperial infantry companies began to scatter in an attempt to evade the gunships crashing around them.

Fire poured into the Imperial relief force from wave upon wave of Black Legion Thunderhawks, and within seconds the air was thick with them. The surviving Hounds from Locq's warband took the opportunity to surround the beleaguered Angels Eradicant Chapter Master. Before Khârn could reach the melee, the sand-coloured figure had disappeared under a flurry of strikes from chainswords and chainaxes. Infuriated at the loss of his trophy, Khârn readied Gorechild to take the attackers' heads instead. Within yards of the group, who were turning in readiness for his charge, the temple square's marble erupted in fire at his feet. Khârn turned to avoid the volley, only for another one to be unleashed before him.

Bellowing in rage, Khârn looked up to see a Black Legion Thunderhawk hovering menacingly before him. Twelve heavily armed transports rumbled overhead, split into groups of three and descended onto the burning citadel with shrieking engines. The lead group formed into a chevron and turned to face Khârn as they landed on the smouldering plaza, clearing the ground beneath them with their weapons until they came to a grinding rest a short distance from his position.

Black Legion warriors swarmed towards him from the landed ships, surrounding Khârn in a sea of bodies and blocking his escape. There must have been twenty times the number of Locq's forces. The gunship that had fired on him still hovered in the air, keeping its dorsal turrets trained on Khârn. As the assault ramp opened in the lead transport before him, the Thunderhawk powered up its engines and banked away, maintaining its aim as it withdrew. Rolling his powerful shoulders, Khârn readied Gorechild for an attack. However, instead of rushing him from all sides as he expected, the Black Legionnaires in front of him stepped back to form a clearing towards his position.

A dozen warriors in Terminator armour emerged in two columns of six, their massive bolters raised and trained on Khârn as they marched towards him. Coming to a halt at regular intervals between the ship and Khârn, all but the closest two turned to face each other as an honour guard for the towering figure exiting the transport. The nearest Terminators took aim at Khârn's head and stood, unmoving, as the smoke of a thousand fires swirled around the black-armoured figure striding closer. Its deathly white head looked straight forwards, red burning eyes fixing Khârn with their gaze. A claw-like right hand opened and closed in readiness, twin bolters built into its upper casing. Khârn had seen the gauntlet wielded by Horus himself in an age forgotten. In its left hand the figure held an enormous sword, the surface of the barbed blade shifting like a malevolent fluid. It was the daemon blade Drach'nyen.

The hundreds of Black Legionnaires bowed as their Warmaster passed. Khârn brought Gorechild up closer to his chest, eliciting the rattle of weapons all around him. Despite the furious pumping of his hearts, a strange calm descended over Khârn.

Abaddon the Despoiler came to a halt barely four yards away from Khârn. The towering Warmaster of Chaos looked him up and down, scrutinising and sizing him up. When he saw Locq's severed head dangling from the chain around his waist, Abaddon's lips parted in a facsimile of a smile. The furious scarlet eyes flicked back to Khârn's, and he rested his broadsword on the ground, runnels of blood flowing past its gleaming tip through the cracks in the plaza. At that signal, his Terminators closed ranks, blocking the path to the transport behind him while the other Black Legionnaires moved to surround them. Khârn could no longer see how deep their ranks were. One or one thousand, it mattered not.

'So, the Chosen of Khorne finally stands before me.'

Abaddon twisted the title into a thrust of contempt. Khârn snarled an oath below his breath.

‘It would be best for you to remember why I am named so, *Warmaster*. The Red Path has led me here. I have come at the will of the Blood Father, not your request.’

Khârn was pleased to see the anger rise in Abaddon’s face. Taking a step forward, the Warmaster levelled his daemon sword at Khârn’s head.

‘And it would be best for you to remember that I, too, have the favour of Khorne.’

Abaddon advanced closer. Khârn shifted his grip on Gorechild. The Terminators brought their weapons to readiness in a flash of metal.

‘I have the blessings of all the gods. The powers I command are beyond your comprehension.’

Now, finally, he understood why the Red Path had brought him to this place. All of the skulls he had taken on the Red Path up to this point, even the Living Saint’s, had been nothing but a precursor to this moment.

‘Whether you have the blessings of all the daemons in the warp or not, the Blood God commands a great trophy. I shall not bend my knee to you, Abaddon. I shall not serve. I am here for a different purpose.’

Abaddon swept his daemon sword outward in an elaborate arc, then brought its tip straight in line with the centre of Khârn’s forehead again. His eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted as he spat his next words.

‘As am I, berzerker. You spat on my offering. I should take your head as payment and wear it as a trophy.’

Khârn saw the rage behind Abaddon’s eyes. Nothing would give the Warmaster greater pleasure than to take his head, and nothing would satisfy Khârn more than to see him try. For several long seconds the Despoiler stared at him, oblivious to the fires licking into the darkening sky and the scream of war machines overhead. The massed ranks of Black Legionnaires stood immobile around them. Khârn wondered if they could understand the power they beheld at this moment. Two lords of darkness, chosen of the gods. Very soon, there would only be one.

Abaddon tightened his grip on Drach’nyen and Khârn readied himself for the attack. It did not come. Instead, Abaddon took in a breath and exhaled slowly.

‘That is not the destiny I have decreed for you. You shall follow me, Khârn the Betrayer. It is my will, and that of Khorne.’

Rage swept over Khârn at this insult to the Blood Father. Throwing himself forward, he brought Gorechild up to full speed and swung it in a wide arc towards Abaddon’s right flank.

In the blink of an eye, Abaddon turned towards the attack, bringing up his gauntlet and curling the talons into a fist. The lightning-streaked blow was so fast and powerful it pushed Gorechild away and spun Khârn to the left into a wall of black power armour. Khârn brought Gorechild up once again, ready to engage the warriors, but they stepped back at some unseen command, giving him space to turn. A flash of dull metal caught Khârn's eye and he ducked, but the flat of Abaddon's blade smashed into the side of his helmet and sent him reeling, crashing into a number of Black Legionnaires. Khârn's head sang with the impact, but his body knew what to do to regain his balance. He swung his chainaxe behind him as he recovered and was rewarded with the sensation of Gorechild chewing through weapons and armour. When he raised it to block the next blow from Abaddon, it was covered in the blood of his legionnaires.

Abaddon raised his sword and aimed it once again towards Khârn's head. Khârn brought Gorechild up, but instead of angling to the right, he flicked it around in his wrist, ducking to evade the sweeping blow from Abaddon's gauntlet and driving the chainaxe into the leg of the Despoiler. Khârn knew that trying to attack Abaddon's head in its deep cowl was pointless, no matter how exposed it seemed without a helmet, so he would instead cripple him limb by limb. Angling the next blow downwards, Gorechild's teeth bit into the thick ceramite of Abaddon's cuisse. The mica-dragon teeth gouged their way into the dense armour, sinking the axe head deep into Abaddon's left knee. The Despoiler bellowed in fury.

Khârn saw the daemon sword flashing down towards his arm. Letting go of Gorechild's haft, Khârn rolled away, kicking out at Abaddon's right leg. Springing to his feet, Khârn had hoped Abaddon would be unbalanced enough for him to charge him to the ground, but the Warmaster was standing fast. Khârn attacked regardless, ducking underneath the sword and throwing all of his weight into Abaddon's midriff.

Abaddon's towering form was forced backwards momentarily, but he swiftly regained his footing and struck at Khârn with his sword. This time, it was not with the flat of the blade. Khârn knew Drach'nyen would slice through the ceramite of his helmet, so he threw himself to the side, just avoiding the swing of the weapon as it cut through the tassels on his headpiece. Khârn rolled onto his feet just as Abaddon dislodged Gorechild from his leg with a blow from his daemon sword's pommel. The axe clattered away across the blood-covered marble and Khârn threw himself after it. As he rose and turned, he realised he had exposed his left arm to Abaddon's talon. He felt a crushing grip encircle his

chain-wrapped forearm and the world began to spin as Abaddon wheeled Khâm around. The features of the Black Legionnaires surrounding him became a blur, and then he felt himself flying through the air. Khâm braced himself for the impact with the ground, but something slammed into his back, driving the air explosively from his body. Below him the ground rushed up, and as he hit it, a veil of scarlet and brown danced across his vision.

Khâm shook his head violently and staggered to his feet. Some yards away, Abaddon was charging towards him, the Terminators creating a corridor for him to pass through. Looking up, Khâm realised he had been thrown all the way to Abaddon's drop-ship. Khâm's bloodlust reached its highest pitch. At last, this was a worthy fight. He sprinted forwards, battle stimulants numbing the searing pain coming from his dislocated left arm. Gorechild screamed for blood in his good hand, its teeth spitting dried blood and ceramite as they spun. Khâm could see blood congealing around the wound he had made in Abaddon's leg. With only a few strides separating them, Khâm jumped into the air and brought Gorechild above his head before hammering it down towards the Warmaster. The teeth glanced off Abaddon's sword and onto his pauldron, gnawing a ragged groove into the armour. As Khâm was knocked backwards by Abaddon's bone-cracking punch, he was sure the swirling patterns within the sword's blade took on the look of agonised faces.

Khâm smashed into the wall of Black Legionnaires, flattening two and sending others tumbling towards the gunship before being pushed back into the open by one of Abaddon's Terminators. The Warmaster was on him in an instant, and Khâm ducked just as the huge broadsword sliced above his head, splitting one of the vanes of his helmet. Khâm heard the mighty weapon thud into several Black Legion warriors, but Abaddon's rage had overtaken him. Khâm rammed himself into the Despoiler once again, but the Warmaster slammed the pommel of Drach'nyen into his stomach. Khâm was lifted from the ground with the servo-powered blow, and his fused ribcage fractured fully. He brought his boot down as hard as he could onto Abaddon's injured knee, and was rewarded with a grunt of pain. Dropping to the ground, Khâm saw Abaddon's right leg come towards him too late to avoid the blow. The impact sent him skidding along the ruined plaza's stones and clanging into the Thunderhawk's cargo pod. Abaddon glowered at him and swung his daemon sword with a cry of rage. Khâm brought Gorechild up to meet the furious blow, and it took all of his strength to prevent the blade from cleaving his skull.

Abaddon shifted his weight as he leaned in, and Khâm saw his chance. He

kicked at the wounded leg with all his might. Abaddon stepped back to avoid the blow, allowing Khârn to heave the daemon sword out of the way and roll to his feet. Lunging with Gorechild, he thrust the leading corner of the whirring blade into the skull device emblazoned on Abaddon's midriff. Abaddon lashed out with his right hand. Khârn moved fast enough to avoid full contact with the lethal talons, power arcing from the tips of the claws into his exposed skin. Even so, pain nearly overwhelmed him, and as he moved away Abaddon thrust forwards with Drach'nyen. The tip sliced its way through Khârn's vambrace. Instead of agony, the coldness of the void swept through his forearm, the edge of the cut sizzling darkly. Khârn pulled Gorechild free and spun away, but Abaddon pursued him with a turn of his own. His sword sliced into the top of Khârn's fractured chest armour and he felt hot blood well up through the freezing numbness somewhere below his neck.

Khârn swung Gorechild, aiming to cut into Abaddon's left arm and take it off below the elbow. Abaddon took hold of Gorechild with his lightning-wreathed claw, stopping the chainblade from hitting the armour and deflecting it into the side of the transport. At the same time Khârn reached for Abaddon's massive forearm, stopping his sword short. Khârn knew he would not hold out for long against the Warmaster's might. Using the hull of the Thunderhawk, Khârn pushed himself away. He grappled with Abaddon, forcing him back out into the arena and distancing them both from the ship. Khârn could feel every muscle in his body scream at him, but he needed more room in which to move. As Gorechild's blade spun closer to Abaddon's arm, so did the Despoiler's sword creep towards Khârn's neck. Khârn's vision began to darken as more blood pumped out of his body. He had his space to manoeuvre, but at what cost?

Summing up his remaining energy, Khârn pushed Gorechild again. Below him, the ground began to shake, gently at first but then more violently. Both he and Abaddon struggled to keep their balance, and Khârn tried to press home his attack. Still Abaddon resisted, pushing against Khârn with a renewed fury. Brilliant flashes danced over Abaddon's face, throwing his snarling features into stark relief. Out of the corners of his vision, Khârn saw lightning fork down into the Terminator guard. Bodies exploded in a shower of gore and spinning armour, torn apart by a maelstrom of light and brimstone that was pouring down onto them. Those not affected by the first impact raised their weapons to the unseen foe, only to succumb seconds later to the unnatural strikes. A thunderous booming sound filled the air and Khârn noticed movement above him. As Abaddon's eyes flashed to the change around them for a split second, a shadow

the size of a Fellblade swept across the two champions, smashing them both to the blackened ground.

Khârn looked up to see the sky had turned into a swirling mass of purple and black. Staggering to his feet, a wall of flame roared where the myriad corpses on the square had been. The inferno was tall and encircled both him and Abaddon. The Warmaster was poised low on the stone plaza, scanning the heavens. Khârn knew something huge had hit him, far bigger and more powerful than Abaddon, but he could not see what it was.

Greater fire plummeted from the broiling sky, consuming those buildings not already burning around the jagged ruins of the Imperial temple. Khârn's eyes were drawn to shadows writhing before him in the white-hot sheet of flame, then figures began to twist and solidify. Warp spawn, drawn to the desecration of this place. One by one they stepped out from the inferno into the arena that was now forming. They were bloodletters, Khorne's lesser daemons. Another appeared, and then another, until dozens stood in a perfect circle around him and Abaddon where the Black Legionnaires had stood, flicking out their tongues and brandishing their flaming swords. The inferno faded, revealing a sea of fallen warriors and the whole of Salandraxis in flames. Chaos had taken this holy planet and claimed it as its own. But Khârn still needed to take his trophy for the Blood Father. With a roar, he broke into a sprint and headed for Abaddon, who turned and readied himself for the onslaught.

Khârn heard a rush of air from above and looked up just in time to see a gigantic daemon descending on him, its talons stretching out to swat him to the ground, embers spiralling and burning the air beneath the darkness of its wings. Khârn ducked out of the way, but he was not fast enough to avoid the flat of the beast's massive double-headed axe smashing into him, sending him sprawling. In a split second Khârn was up again, raging in a blood fury, but the greater daemon stood between him and Abaddon, its mouth wide in a scowl of warning. Its sheer size blocked Abaddon from Khârn's view, and all around him the circle of bloodletters advanced, now numbering countless hundreds, closing in on him from all directions.

Khârn steeled himself to attack the bloodthirster, but its voice boomed in the broiling air before he could move.

'Cease.'

With that one word, the wind ebbed and the ocean of bloodletters halted, the abyssal legion cowering before their king. Witchfire crackled in the roiling sky above.

Khârn took a step back and regarded the towering creature. As he saw Abaddon emerge from its shadow he dropped into a crouch, preparing himself for the Despoiler's charge. But in the yellow light cast by the myriad swords of the bloodletters, he could see Abaddon's rage was directed not at him, but at the greater daemon.

‘This is no business of yours, warp spawn.’

Abaddon started towards Khârn but the bloodthirster slammed its axe in the ground and bellowed into Abaddon's face, the wind around them roaring with renewed force. Its voice was the crackle of hellfire, the infernal scream of the darkness beyond.

‘Hear the words of the Blood Father.’

Khârn strode towards the creature, Gorechild idling in his blood-soaked hands.

‘How dare you claim to speak on the Red God's behalf? I shall destroy you for your effrontery.’

From behind the flames, Khârn spotted movement. More daemons peeled themselves from the bloody remains of Black Legion and Angels Eradicant to join their brethren. In seconds they passed through the flames, gnashing and snarling in barely controlled rage as they crowded towards him. The bloodthirster spoke again.

‘You shall listen to his words or die.’

Khârn stared into the black, dead eyes of the creature before him. Perhaps the Blood God was indeed using his daemon legion as a conduit for his voice.

All the better.

The bloodthirster turned towards Abaddon, snarling and flicking its tail as it did so. The Warmaster shouted in fury, the blade Drach'nyen ready to tear the throat from its daemon brother should it speak words he did not favour.

‘The pantheon has promised me the service of Khorne's chosen. I demand the God of Brass and Bone honour the pact he struck with his brothers. I demand Khârn's oath for the coming war.’

Khârn glared at Abaddon and spat on the ground at his words.

‘Blood Father, I serve only you. I will not bend the knee to this cur.’

Abaddon sent curses to the skies but Khârn ignored him. Stepping back, the Chosen of Khorne opened his arms to embrace the assembled legion, imploring the Blood God to hear his words.

‘I have followed the Red Path as you commanded, and now I shall take this pretender's skull as you have bid me do.’

Khârn turned back to face Abaddon but he could not see him. The bloodthirster

dived onto Khârn in a frenzy of flapping wings and snarling teeth, pulling at his helmet until it finally released with the strain. The smell of the creature assaulted Khârn's senses, and the heat from the flames all around burned the skin on his face. Khârn struck out at the daemon's face, smashing his fists into its mouth and breaking dagger-like teeth. It responded by slamming its iron-black vambrace into the side of Khârn's head, jarring his skull and blurring his vision with the impact. Khârn felt the creature uncoil its claw and take hold of his gorget. Pulling him close, it lowered its head. Blood and drool spilled over Khârn's face as the daemon spoke, its voice guttural and obscene.

'The Despoiler's skull is not for you to take. The Blood God forbids it.'

Khârn's mind reeled.

He had travelled the Red Path only to find that his understanding of Khorne's desires was mistaken.

Khârn heard the mockery in Abaddon's voice as he shouted to the daemon court.

'It is as I said, berzerker. I have the favour of all the gods.'

Khârn felt himself drop backwards as the bloodthirster whirled, opened its wings amid a cloud of embers and landed close to Abaddon, bellowing in uncontrolled fury.

'Enough!'

The legion of bloodletters moved closer, their ranks swelled by hulking daemonic champions stepping from the dead of Salandraxis to loom over Khârn and Abaddon. The bloodthirster's incandescent gaze peered back towards Khârn under one of its black wings, the axe extended towards the Betrayer.

'Know this. The Blood Father is pleased with the skulls you have taken today, Khârn, Chosen of Khorne. But the Red Path is not ended.'

Khârn did not blink as the creature stared at him with burning intensity. Before he could respond, the bloodthirster turned to Abaddon, the double-headed axe swinging from Khârn to the Warmaster.

'You shall have redress, Despoiler.'

Khârn saw the rage in Abaddon's face subside. Clenching the crackling talons of his right hand, Abaddon looked past the daemon and stared directly at Khârn as the creature continued.

'For now, the Red Path follows the same direction as your desires.'

Khârn glowered at Abaddon, the rage building once again in his chest. All around, the lesser daemons started to writhe and judder as a single unholy voice filtered directly through them in a dark chorus.

‘It is the will of the Blood Father that you turn your blades to the same cause.’

Khâr’s blood boiled as lumbering daemons drew close to him, reaching out to his battered armour.

‘How can this be so? I shall never give service to this imposter.’

Khâr’s fury threatened to overwhelm him. Should he have answered the call from Abaddon when commanded? As if to answer his question, the chorus hissed and whispered once more. This time, the message held no ambiguity.

‘Know that it is for the greater glory of Khorne. Blood will flow. Such is his decree.’

The air fell silent, leaving only the furious crackling of the fires of Salandraxis. At Khâr’s shoulder stood eight daemon heralds, gazing at the Betrayer and the Despoiler, the oily night swirling above their heads. Within seconds the circle of fire subsided, leaving a ring of smoking bodies where the barrier had raged, and destruction as far as Khâr could see. The bloodthirster folded its wings as it joined its retinue and brought its axe across its ornate chest plate.

Khâr looked behind him at the rasping form of the daemon, then turned slowly towards Abaddon.

As the Chosen of Khorne stood beneath the bloodthirster, silhouetted by its brimstone bulk and his dark god’s infernal royalty, the daemon court’s myriad eyes slowly turned upon the Warmaster.

Abaddon was still looking straight at Khâr. The desire to drive Gorechild through his skull surged through Khâr’s body and mind, and he clutched the weapon until it began to shake in his hands. The bloodthirster emitted a low growl and hefted its axe threateningly. Khâr did not give it a second glance. If Khorne willed it, then he would stay his blade and follow the Red Path wherever it might take him.

Khâr walked towards Abaddon, who raised Drach’nyen slowly, deliberately. Khâr snorted and continued to stare into the Despoiler’s hate-fuelled eyes without breaking stride. Coming to a halt, he glowered at Abaddon for several seconds before slowly lowering Gorechild to his side, allowing the ancient axe to idle as he did so. Drawing in a breath to control his rage, he finally spoke.

‘Who would you have me slay?’

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