



WARHAMMER
40,000



THE RED PATH 3

ABADDON
DENIED

A KHÂRN THE BETRAYER STORY
by CHRIS DOWS



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THE RED PATH 3: ABADDON DENIED

Chris Dows

‘All ahead slow. Conduct full augur sweep of the bow rupture.’

Shipmaster Odervirk studied the lines of information streaming in from the sensors of the *Malevolent Shade* and frowned. Every auspex, scanner and augur indicated the heavily damaged White Scars vessel drifting in free space was ripe for the taking. Not one of its weapons was charged, most of its shields were down and there was a gaping hole in the port side of the strike cruiser that presented a perfect opportunity for boarding. The data before him was undeniable, but he had been in too many combat situations to ignore the tension mounting within his body. How had the vessel survived the savage attack that had inflicted such damage in the first place?

In his experience, there were only three reasons for a ship or flotilla not to have finished them off. The first was if they intended to salvage the cruiser and transfer their flag, which, despite its damage, was perfectly spaceworthy from what he could see. The second was if they had sustained greater damage in the exchange; the third was if the attacker had been destroyed. This was a possibility, but the lack of a debris field or another drifting hulk in the vicinity led Odervirk to discount it. Sitting back with a sigh, he drummed his fingers on the control panel set into his command throne, his gaze flicking from one screen to the other. He knew full well Locq would be impatient for information.

‘Ahead one quarter. Keep all weapons at readiness.’

Odervirk felt the rumble of engines increase deep in the bowels of the *Malevolent Shade*. He turned to face the forward viewing canopy. Its heavy blast doors were half open, giving him a wide slit through which to watch the slowly approaching White Scars ship. Scans could be manipulated to deceive. Nothing beat seeing things for yourself. With his one good eye he picked out the details

of the wreck in the brightness thrown out by the three suns of this system.

‘Do we have a positive identification yet?’

Odervirk’s question did not arise from idle curiosity, but instead concerned the ship’s defensive capabilities. Many Space Marine vessels featured modifications and upgrades. At the cost of a few seconds, he wanted to know as much about any potential threat as possible before he committed his own ship to an engagement.

‘*Wings of the Eagle*, shipmaster.’

Odervirk looked down to the officer sitting at his station on the bridge’s lower level and acknowledged his report with a grunt. The vessel was not known to him, which did little to alleviate his caution. Turning back to the viewing canopy, he watched the massive hulk slide past to the background hum of crew and machinery carrying out their duties. It took the unmistakable clanking of power-armoured figures moving down the bridge’s access corridor to break his concentration. Locq was entering the command deck with his entourage, and it was clear from the tone of his voice that he was less than happy.

‘Why are we going so slowly, shipmaster? I need to get on board that vessel.’

As Locq stomped closer, Odervirk continued to study the damage wreaked upon the *Wings of the Eagle*. Given the prickly, inelegant lines of the vessel, he found the name absurd. A ship should threaten even at the sound of its name, and for that he felt his own *Malevolent Shade* promised exactly what it could deliver – destruction and darkness. Odervirk could feel the hairs on the back of his hands begin to prickle as Locq came to a threatening standstill beside him. In all of his faithful years of service to Urkanthos, the shipmaster had never got used to the vibrations given off by power armour. He had known some bridge personnel so sensitive to the inaudible hum generated by the suits that they could barely stand to be in the same room, such was the physical discomfort they endured. An itching hand was the least of his problems; as he turned to face the glowering captain, he chose his words with care. Odervirk enjoyed his position as master of this vessel, and while all the members of the Black Legion commanded respect, he knew how mercurial the Hounds of Abaddon could be.

‘It is not imprudent to be cautious, captain. I appreciate your frustration at finding Haeleon abandoned, but all evidence points to an encounter with the White Scars.’

Odervirk watched Locq’s eyes flick over to the reinforced viewing bulkhead. They had arrived to find no berzerker ship in orbit, but they had quickly detected evidence of a battle on the planet’s surface. A brief inspection had shown the

loyalist White Scars Chapter had been involved in the action.

‘The Betrayer is close – this is no coincidence. Bring us in.’

Decks below, the shipmaster knew, Locq’s Hounds of Abaddon were waiting impatiently to board the White Scars vessel. While he knew his caution could be seen as unnecessarily vigilant, cowardly even, Odervirk had gained the trust of Urkanthos himself and was not about to rush any decisions that might endanger his ship, regardless of Locq’s impatience. There was something about this captain Odervirk did not trust. Odervirk looked directly into Locq’s burning eyes without blinking. Locq knew the Lord Purgator had chosen him as shipmaster personally.

‘Given that the answers you seek to Khârn’s whereabouts are likely held aboard this vessel, I am doing everything I can to ensure you are able to get the information you need. This does not include thundering at full speed towards a potential trap.’

Odervirk’s face remained impassive. Unlike the rest of his crew, he was not frightened by the Black Legionnaires. He had long ago accepted he might die directly at their hands, and it had given him the peace to focus on his work. He could see Locq’s hand tighten on the handle of his chainsword. The shipmaster was not impressed.

‘I am led to believe the White Scars are a significant threat, Captain Locq. I do not doubt your Hounds will be victorious against them, but I need to ensure their weapons are as inoperative as they appear. This will take a few moments longer, and once I am satisfied, I will inform you immediately.’

Locq’s burning stare flicked from Odervirk’s eye to the steel plate that formed most of his face. He knew what Locq was thinking; the instant he delivered Khârn to Abaddon, Locq would execute the shipmaster for his belligerence. Odervirk tried not to show his derision; he was confident enough in his own abilities to believe Urkanthos would not allow it. And besides, the way things were going, he doubted the captain would live long enough to finish his mission.



The hole in the side of the White Scars cruiser was so large it could have accommodated a half-dozen drop ships side by side. Instead, a single gunship carrying Locq and a small boarding party glided into the smashed infrastructure. As the White Scars ship rotated, it allowed one of the three suns to illuminate the Thunderhawk’s way. It had not taken long to find a rupture large enough for the

ship to dock against, and within seconds Locq was leading out a twenty-strong contingent of Hounds into the confines of the vessel. Meledorn, one of his veterans, took point. Like many of the cohort, he had served Urkanthos faithfully for decades. For all the oaths he had sworn to Locq, he would be reporting secretly to the Lord Purgator still. This did not concern Locq at all. Having a favourite of the Chaos Lord as his second-in-command to witness his actions would dispel any suspicions Urkanthos might have of Locq. Meledorn also happened to be an excellent warrior.

Locq was not surprised when their progress became hampered by the damage inside the ship. Even with their ordnance and augmented strength, whole areas were either totally impassable or would take too long to clear, the only route available taking them to the outer corridors of the vessel. What did surprise Locq was the total absence of White Scars and surviving mortal crew.

Coming to a large junction, Meledorn raised his hand and stopped. Locq walked forwards, chainsword in hand, and joined the scout. Meledorn nodded ahead, towards the poorly illuminated walkway stretching into the distance. Nothing appeared as a threat on his auto-senses and scanners, but of all the places they had moved through, the width of this passageway held the most potential danger. Locq smiled to himself. The Hounds of Abaddon were not ones to run from a fight, and gods help anyone who tried to ambush them. He nodded to Meledorn, and the scout moved ahead slowly. Locq signalled behind, and the rest of the raiding party formed up, hefting their blades and training their bolters in all directions.

A blinding flash filled Locq's vision and something smashed into him, throwing him backwards onto the metal deck. The air was filled with a thunderous roar of escaping air and it took Locq precious seconds to get to his feet and realise what had happened. Before him, a White Scars drop ship had rammed itself through the corridor into the inner hull, having blasted its way through the outer skin of the crippled ship. They had lain in wait within the shadows of their own smashed vessel, tracking the landing party's progress and timing their attack to perfection. Locq could see two of his raiding party had disappeared, either crushed by the attacking vessel or eviscerated in its fire. The ship had cut his group in half. Gunning his chainsword, Locq started towards the smoking transporter – just as a hole exploded in its side, allowing its occupants to charge towards him with a scream of fury.

Locq smashed into the first White Scar, ramming his duelling tulwar out of the way with his left shoulder while thrusting his chainsword up underneath his

attacker's pauldron. The teeth ground and tore into the upper chest armour, digging into the armpit of the Chogorian and rendering his left arm useless. The White Scar roared in rage, bringing his right knee up into Locq's side. Locq took the impact easily and let himself fall back against the buckled inner hull plates. With the wall behind him, he put more pressure on his blade, not stopping until the Space Marine's arm clattered to the ground, blood spraying over Locq's helmet from the gaping wound. Locq pushed himself away from the wall, but he suddenly found himself with little room to move as the rest of his raiding party joined battle. Locq's opponent took the opportunity to slash at him with his tulwar, undaunted by his crippling injury, but Locq forced himself enough space to block the attack and kick the White Scar back towards the smoking ruin of the drop ship. Somewhere behind him, two frag grenades went off, and he felt shards of metal thud into the back of his armour. Regardless of who had detonated them, there would now be fewer attackers for him to worry about.

Locq brought his chainsword high, carving through the tulwar from above and slicing into the abdomen of the White Scar. Still the Chogorian did not give up, pulling out a dagger and slashing it across the right lens of Locq's helmet. Locq hurled himself forwards, driving the chainsword home as they both slammed into the side of the drop ship. The White Scar finally slid to the ground, shuddering in his death throes as he hit the deck plates. Locq sensed movement coming up fast behind him. Ducking and turning, he brought his chainsword out in a wide arc, slicing into the knee of the White Scar charging towards him and bringing him down. From the smoking corridor behind, two of Locq's raiding party emerged through a pile of bodies, their armour battered and scored from their own battles. Such was his bloodlust, the first of the two denied Locq his kill by driving his axe into the top of the collapsed White Scar's head, cleaving a gap wide enough for Locq to see the exposed scalp and black top-knot, then bounded into the hole cut into the side of the White Scar's drop ship. The interior erupted in flashes of light, and Locq threw himself to the side as bolter fire tore out in all directions. His second Hound rolled below the stray fire and lobbed a grenade into the ship's interior. The second after it detonated Locq was inside, chainsword at the ready. What met him were the remains of the overzealous Hound and the White Scars who had ambushed him, having lain in wait to attack after their first wave.

Through the hole blasted out of the opposite side, Locq was gratified to see Meledorn and several others grappling with around a dozen Chogorians. As he threw himself into the melee, two White Scars turned to attack, slashing and

stabbing with their tulwars and ceremonial daggers. It was still difficult to move freely given the number of power-armoured figures, but Locq thrust forwards, the last surviving Hound from his side of the corridor joining in the attack with a volley of bolter fire. One Chogorian spun away, a shot passing through the grille of his helmet in a bloody cloud, but the other rampaged forwards, his weapon raised and pointing towards Locq's head. Locq dived to the ground and rolled, hitting the White Scar below the knees and toppling him over onto his front as he fired. Turning to his side, Locq got up on one knee and thrust his chainsword two-handedly into the spine of the Space Marine. The blade churned its way into flesh, severing nerves and sinews to totally incapacitate the Chogorian. Unable to move his legs, his attempts to flip himself onto his back and face Locq were futile; Locq severed his head as tribute to the Blood God, a rush of pleasure coursing through his veins as he did so.

Locq was suddenly aware of a stillness in the corridor. Rising, he could see the remains of his boarding party regarding the carnage they had created. To the left, he could just make out Meledorn beneath a heap of White Scars bodies, the handle of a tulwar projecting from beneath his helmet. The enemy dead surrounding him were a fitting tribute to his sacrifice, but not one Locq was going to acknowledge. This left ten survivors – half of the original party. He had not anticipated such losses; the White Scars' tactic had worked well, even if they had been wiped out. The cost had been high, but discovering where Khâm had gone would be worth the blood price.

'To the bridge. We have work to do.' Locq turned away from the corpses before him and opened a vox-link.

'Odervirk.'

'Yes, Captain Locq.'

'Scan for drop ships hiding within the damaged infrastructure of the vessel. They will likely be powered down so you will have to move in closer.'

'Captain, I would urge—'

Locq was in no mood for the shipmaster's contradictions.

'Carry out my orders, Odervirk, or I will find someone who will.'

There was a gratifying silence over the vox, which Locq took to be agreement.

'Prepare a contingent of your machine priests to board this vessel once we have retrieved the information from the bridge.'

Odervirk's answer was loaded with suspicion.

'May I ask why?'

Locq signalled the Hounds to follow him. They did not have time to take their

trophies for the Blood God.

‘We shall claim this vessel for the glory of Abaddon. See that it is done.’

Locq deactivated the link as soon as he had finished. He could not care less about the work involved in such a task. He needed to find this accursed berzerker, and find him fast.



Klaxons blared on the *Skulltaker*, rousing Khârn from his meditation. The visions he had experienced on Haeleon were still vivid in his memory. Open firepits had roared for three days, stoked with oils and chemicals that had brought the temperature of his private chamber to that of the planet. For three days, he had refused water and attempted to commune with the Blood God, but still, nothing. As he rose and took up Gorechild, he vowed swift and bloody punishment on whoever had raised the alarm.



Lukosz was about to demand an explanation from Roderbar and Samzar about the call to general quarters when Khârn stormed onto the bridge, his face a mask of fury. He cursed silently to himself; this was not the time for such distraction. Khârn’s command had been clear. He was only to be disturbed under the direst of circumstances, a state of affairs that had left Lukosz to watch for further sedition within the warband. For now, they seemed satisfied to wait for Khârn’s promises of greater glory to crystallise. With his own Butcher’s Nails scratching at the back of his mind for action, Lukosz was not fool enough to think the calm would last for long.

Lukosz stepped to one side, allowing Khârn room to wedge Gorechild into the deck and grab a hold of the shipmaster’s ornate tunic. Khârn lifted Roderbar’s huge form out of his reinforced command throne in a swift, effortless movement and raised him into the air. For a human, Roderbar was unusually large, and because his duties kept him almost constantly at his station it meant he was running to fat. Lukosz had little respect for those who did not master their own physique, but there was no denying his experience of space combat and his brilliant tactical mind, the agility of which was belied by his corpulent frame. That being said, his explanation for rousing Khârn from his self-imposed exile

would need to be good.

‘We have a ship of unknown origin just outside our weapons range. It appeared from the warp only moments ago. The vessel is a good match for us but not taking any hostile action at this time. They are clearly interested in us.’

Despite being lifted from his chair, Roderbar’s deep, rich voice was remarkably calm. Sweat dripped from his jowls, but his gaze did not leave Khârn’s burning eyes. Lukosz could hear the seams of Roderbar’s tunic begin to pop and split under his tremendous weight as the whole bridge watched. From the humblest rating to the most senior officer, Lukosz suspected they were calculating an unexpected promotion within the next minute or so. Roderbar’s breathing became heavier, but he did not struggle or protest. After a few seconds, Khârn threw him back down onto the command chair with a snort of disgust. Samzar took up the interrogation without bidding.

‘What configuration is the vessel? Are there any identifiable markings?’

Roderbar wriggled back into position and composed himself. After clearing his throat a couple of times, he looked straight at Samzar, ignoring the glowering form of Khârn, who slowly walked back to where he had left Gorechild stuck in the deck plating to lever the ancient axe loose.

‘It is a strike cruiser, lord, and an old one at that. Its current attitude is not revealing any identifiable signs or sigils. Wait...’

Roderbar looked down to an officer seated at one of the myriad consoles below deck level, and Lukosz followed his gaze. Unlike the rest of the miserable wretches who busied themselves in the gloom, the officer was mostly intact as a human being, with only one arm replaced by a mechanical device.

‘There is a request for communication coming in.’

Roderbar straightened his tunic and turned to his vox-unit. Before he could issue the command to transfer the call, the officer spoke again, her eyes averted to the unseen deck.

‘The request is addressed to you, Lord Khârn.’

The whispering from Lukosz’s Butcher’s Nails grew louder, into a murmured warning.

‘Are we combat ready, Roderbar?’ Lukosz was surprised at just how calm Khârn’s voice was.

‘Yes, Lord Khârn. The gun crews are in readiness. The shield generators are... Lord Khârn?’

Khârn did not seem interested in the confirmation from the shipmaster, but instead stared down at the communications officer, contemplating the

unexpected turn of events. Lukosz knew better than to offer an opinion. If it was wanted, it would be asked for. He cast a glance over to Samzar, who was struggling to control a twitch in the side of his face. After long seconds, Khâr spoke directly to the officer, his voice low and heavy with suspicion.

‘Open the channel. Let us hear what they have to say.’

Lukosz watched the officer turn back to her flickering screens, and noticed she favoured her unaltered arm to manipulate the controls. A crackling spat from the vox speakers set around the bridge, then the low hum of an open transmission rolled around the bustling room. Roderbar turned a brass dial, and the volume increased to compensate for the background chatter of machinery.

‘This is Talomar Locq, captain of the Black Legion and the Hounds of Abaddon. I will speak with Khâr the Betrayer. Immediately.’

This was a voice accustomed to command. While Lukosz knew Khâr’s view of the Black Legion to be less than favourable, he admired their discipline. It was something his warband lacked, and he felt they were often the weaker for it. Lukosz looked over to Khâr. The threat in the captain’s address had not even registered.

‘Black Legion,’ Khâr murmured to himself.

The hum from the speakers grew louder for a few seconds, then Locq spoke again, his voice noticeably strained.

‘Khâr the Betrayer. I would speak with you and you alone. Prepare for my arrival.’

Khâr raised his hand to mute the transmission. He turned and walked a few paces around the deck, Gorechild resting on his shoulder as all eyes followed him. Samzar hissed to Lukosz. His comrade was getting increasingly agitated.

‘How dare this cur make demands of us? We should destroy him before he attacks us. It is clearly a ruse. Shipmaster, bring us about and—’

‘Samzar, silence.’

Khâr’s words were like Gorechild cutting through flesh. Lukosz watched as his brother’s face turned to confusion and then anger. He looked down to Samzar’s shaking hand as it drifted towards his chainsword. Lukosz stepped forwards, placed a firm hand on his comrade’s arm and stared directly into his wild eyes. Samzar’s broken face was straining with convulsions that threatened to take over his entire body. Lukosz silently willed Samzar to fight the Nails. They were close to consuming him. He only tore his gaze away when Khâr spoke.

‘Khorne has brought these Hounds of Abaddon to us. We will find out why.’

Lukosz took a step back from Samzar, whose eyes were red with fury. He watched Khârn nod once to the communications officer, and the bridge's transmitters crackled back into life.

'I am Khârn. I will speak with you, messenger of the Black Legion. But you shall not set foot on this vessel if you want to keep your head.'

Lukosz could sense the Black Legion commander's blood boiling. The bridge crew listened to static for long seconds before Khârn spoke again.

'Nor will I travel to yours. Whatever you have to say, say it now or leave before I obliterate you, your ship and your men.'

More alarms triggered on the bridge, coming from several different stations above and below the main walkway. Lukosz turned to Roderbar, whose bloated fingers were gracefully moving over the controls set into his command throne's reinforced arms.

'The Black Legion ship has opened its torpedo hatches and brought itself to bear. Shall we respond?'

Lukosz was about to give the order as Khârn barked a sharp laugh. His voice became thick with mockery.

'I take it you are not willing to communicate over vox. Very well. We shall meet face-to-face. Our shipmasters will find a suitable location. We will bring fifty warriors apiece. Agreed?'

Lukosz had no idea what the Black Legion wanted. Unlike Khârn and Samzar however, he did care. But a feeling he had thought lost rekindled in his breast. Perhaps this *was* part of the Red Path.

The humming from the speakers continued for long seconds, then a voice struggling with the effort of self-control responded curtly.

'Your terms are acceptable.'



Chapter Master Solucious Gaul marched across the gantry towards the towering cylindrical chamber, helmet tucked under one arm and hand resting on the pommel of his blessed relic blade, Acritus. Paderi Tentera was not blessed with the second sight of a psyker, nor could he see Gaul's approach towards his meditation chamber with the blast door sealed, but one did not approach a Chaplain Venerable Dreadnought with one's face hidden. It was the respect he commanded and deserved. The clanging from his boots resounded off the cavernous outer chamber walls as he strode towards the black riveted iron of the

inner sanctum. To some it might seem blasphemous that the Dreadnought was housed so deep in the bowels of the battlecruiser *Light of the Emperor*, away from the admiration he so richly deserved of every battle-brother of the Angels Eradicant. However, Tentera was a relic of the greatest sanctity who demanded the blessing of solitude. No one, Gaul least of all, would deny him that. But he required counsel, even if it was an unwelcome intrusion.

The circular hatch that served as the only entrance to the Chaplain's place of rest was over four metres in diameter, its curved outer profile sitting flush with its impenetrable surround. As was customary, Gaul hammered on the locking mechanism three times – once for the Emperor, once for the Chapter and once for himself – and took a few steps back. Within seconds, the locking wheel positioned at the centre of the door began to rotate anti-clockwise. The rumble of bolts withdrawing smoothly from their anchor points signalled the opening of the two-metre-thick slab. As the pressure seal was broken, a fine curtain of dust danced past Gaul, betraying the lack of visitors the Chaplain entertained.

Dim lights flickered into life, silhouetting the life-sustaining cables and tubes that snaked outwards from the massive Dreadnought frame. The squat legs stood wide apart, heavily armoured and braced so as to support the battle torso's huge weight atop the exposed hydraulics of the gimbaled pelvic section. A massive bolter took the place of the left arm, its twin barrels pointing downwards in its rest state. On the right, a three-fingered power fist flexed slightly as Tentera slowly returned to full consciousness. Gaul turned his gaze to the sarcophagus between the chest-mounted armour panels, the winged symbol of the Chapter emblazoned across it. With a hiss of equalising pressure, the protective shield slid back to reveal the pallid, skeletal features of the Chaplain himself.

The old warrior's eyes had failed long ago, but Gaul knew he was still being watched. Falling to one knee, he bowed his head and waited for Tentera to speak.

‘Rise, Chapter Master Solucious Gaul. It pleases me to see you again.’



Tentera gazed down on the figure before him, his electronically filtered vision swimming into clarity. He knew Gaul of old, having fought beside him before and after his holy interment. These days, the Chapter Master sought audiences only in times of crisis. While Tentera was often unsure of the passing of time, he knew Gaul had been here only weeks before. On that occasion it had been concerns over their honoured guest. Tentera was certain the reason for Gaul's

visit remained unchanged.

‘I am privileged to stand in your presence once again, venerable Chaplain.’

The lights within Tentera’s sanctuary grew brighter. The Chaplain knew there was little left that was recognisable from his fleshly form. While his voice was amplified and filtered by countless components, he hoped something of his old self could still be heard.

‘You flatter me with your words, Solucious. But I am sure you have not come here to exchange pleasantries. Speak.’

The Chapter Master took a couple of steps forwards towards Tentera and looked up at him with a serious expression. Gaul was clearly troubled by what he had to say.

‘I seek your guidance and wisdom, venerable Chaplain. I am uneasy at Lozepath’s decision to return to Salandraxis.’

Tentera sighed. Despite his experience, Gaul still did not seem to understand the huge importance of Lozepath’s choice. His return, triumphant from his victories around the Eye of Terror, would send a powerful message to friend and foe alike. Even in the jaws of Abaddon’s relentless campaign, the Emperor’s love for His people was such that He would jeopardise all to return one of His blessed sons to his rightful place.

‘Chapter Master, may I remind you that Lozepath is a Living Saint, and that he has proved victorious against the forces of Chaos in his most recent crusade?’

There was no malice or accusation in Tentera’s words. It was a statement of fact. As a Chaplain, Tentera was not a part of nor connected to the Adeptus Ministrorum, but when it came to the power of belief, they were undeniably kindred.

‘Venerable Chaplain, I am not calling his success into question. It is the risks handed to us with this convoy that concern me.’

The massive, tan-coloured hand of the Dreadnought flexed into a fist several times before whirring to a halt. The Chaplain’s subconscious moods could be revealed through his movements just as easily as any human’s. Tentera saw Gaul’s eyes slide over to the hand, which was now relaxed, then back up to the open sarcophagus.

‘Forgive me, venerable Chaplain. I meant no disrespect.’

The Chaplain watched Gaul’s expression carefully. He spoke with passion, but it was not clouding his judgement.

‘So you deny the honour Lozepath pays us as our guest? You feel unable to protect him with your fleet?’

Tentera saw anger flash over Gaul's features.

'Venerable Chaplain, I am of course honoured Lozepath transferred his flag to our vessel, but six ships are not enough protection for a target of such importance. The sheer number of enemy forces almost guarantees our detection.'

Gaul's voice was grave. His words deserved consideration, and Tentera pondered on them for long minutes. The Living Saint had barely returned to the safety of the Angels Eradicant's harbour when he had announced his return to Salandraxis. By the time Gaul had learned of his plan, Lozepath had already sent an astropathic transmission to the planet. Faced with the rapturous joy communicated back from that world, the Chapter Master had been left with little choice but to offer the *Light of the Emperor* to take him home.

Tentera looked to Gaul. The Chapter Master had come here for help, so he would give it.

'None of these facts change the situation we find ourselves in. I take it you anticipate an attack?'

Gaul nodded.

'In that case, Solucious, I recommend you employ this conviction to your advantage.'



The drop ships faced each other over a distance of less than four hundred metres, engines roaring and noses swaying as the Thunderhawks maintained their positions above the ground. Their dangerous proximity had been dictated by the only suitable clearing in a continent otherwise covered by an unbroken forest of massive trees that had grown on and through the ruins of some ancient civilisation. The ships' guns were aimed directly at each other, activated and ready to fire. Both parties knew it, and both parties expected it. At such a short range, the destruction would be near-total on both sides so, under the comforting stalemate offered by mutually assured destruction, one hundred servants of Khorne faced each other.

To Khârn, none of this mattered. His focus was on the upstart walking towards him, pistol and blade drawn, resplendent in the ornate armour of the Hounds of Abaddon. Lined up in their neat rows, brass highlights glinting in the sun, the Hounds made a mockery of the glory of Khorne. Anger flared in Khârn's chest but he resisted the temptation to draw Gorechild and charge into them before a word had been spoken, cutting them down and serving their skulls as a gift to the

Blood God. He still did not know which way the Red Path was turning, so he would have to be patient for a few moments longer.

Locq came to a stop a few paces away from Khârn and waited for his two lieutenants to flank him. He holstered his weapons, removed his battle-scarred helmet and, reaching sideways, gave it to one of his followers without turning. After studying the wide, flat face of Locq for a few long seconds, Khârn accepted the gesture and did the same, tossing his helmet to Lukosz.

‘I bring a message from the great Warmaster Abaddon.’

Locq shouted the words so that everyone could hear them. His voice echoed off the enormous trunks surrounding the impenetrable foundations on which they stood, worn smooth by aeons of rain and wind. Khârn’s contempt turned to loathing. Was he supposed to fall to his knees in terror at the name of Abaddon? To gibber and weep like a child? If this herald was expecting a reaction from Khârn, he would receive none, other than a sneer of derision.

Khârn folded his arms and waited. Whatever Locq had to say, he had travelled a long way to do it. The trouble Locq had gone to and the fact he had not attacked them on first sight meant it had to be Khorne’s will that they were now facing each other. Khârn stared at the so-called captain. Finally, Locq spoke again.

‘He commands you to his presence, and you must heed the call.’

The words hung in the cool forest air. Khârn continued to stare, impassive. Locq raised his head slightly and looked down his nose at the Chosen of Khorne as if to demand his acknowledgement. Such posturing only served to aggravate Khârn. Lukosz clearly shared the feeling, muttering an oath and reaching for his chainsword. The resulting rattle of gauntlets from Locq’s forces came immediately, swiftly followed by the readying of bolters and chainswords from Khârn’s warband behind him. Locq dropped his chin and went for his own chainsword, but Khârn raised his right arm, slowly, into the air. There was a telling pause but, eventually, Khârn heard weapons lowered. All throughout, Khârn kept his gaze on Locq, looking for something more in his eyes.

‘Why?’

Locq shook his head slightly at Khârn’s question. Locq’s warriors shifted slightly. It was obvious they were just as interested in the answer. Intriguing.

‘I do not question my master’s command, berzerker. Neither should you.’

Khârn snorted and took a step forward. Locq’s seconds responded by moving closer to their captain, weapons raised. Khârn ignored them.

‘You cannot answer my question because you do not know, do you?’

He had seen the faces of opponents at close quarters on countless occasions,

and he could read the battle raging inside Locq for control of his anger. Locq lost.

‘You will accompany me back to the *Malevolent Shade* without further hesitation. Abaddon—’

‘Abaddon!’

The ferocity with which Khârn roared the name back at Locq was a perfect match for the look of absolute contempt on his face. Spittle landed on Locq’s face, and as he wiped it off with one hand, Khârn noticed his other had gone to the hilt of his chainsword. Khârn looked up and over the head of the captain, and raised his voice even louder.

‘Who is this so-called “Warmaster” compared to the Blood God? Why do you give your allegiance to him?’

Khârn looked from one end of the line of Hounds to the other, staring at each and every one of them in turn. He could not read their faces, but he could tell from the way they moved that his words had found their mark. Khârn opened his arms and turned around in a slow circle as he continued, encompassing everything that surrounded him from the centre of the clearing.

‘We fight to honour Khorne, and Khorne alone. You claim to do the same, but ask yourself this – what glory has Abaddon sent you to here? How are you serving the Blood God? You are not. You are in the thrall of one who thinks himself a god, but is a pretender.’

Khârn had turned full circle, past his own impatient warband, past Lukosz and then back to Locq who, by now, was trembling with rage.

‘You and your entire Legion are nothing more than inferior, dishonourable filth.’

Khârn could hear the muttering of oaths from the Black Legion ranks. His gaze settled on Locq’s left pauldron. On it was displayed the eight-pointed star of Chaos, the brass symbol in stark relief to the red inlay. Khârn returned to his vision, of the skulls with the same symbol etched into them. They had not urged him down the flowing river of blood, not shown him the way in which to go. No. They had been swarming all around him, swooping and threatening him, targets to be broken and smashed.

That was the Red Path.



Locq had not even got his chainsword raised halfway before Khârn’s boot landed

squarely in his chest. Caught completely by surprise and off balance, the force of the kick hurled the Hound backwards, and Lukosz saw him smash into the armoured bodies of his own warriors before dropping to the hard ground. Right in front of him, Khârn was charging forwards to claim his skull, but Locq's seconds were up on their feet and meeting Khârn from both sides. The first raised a brace of bolt pistols and started firing, but Khârn turned and ducked, bringing Gorechild down in a blur and carving through the gauntlets of the Hound. The pistols fell to the floor, still clutched by their dismembered hands.

Lukosz burst into action with a roar, heading for the Black Legion line that was now storming forwards to meet him. Behind the line of black-and-brass figures, their two Thunderhawks rose higher into the light-blue sky, noses dipping ominously towards the field of battle. Lukosz looked over again to Khârn. The Hound who had taken Locq's helmet was almost upon him, so Lukosz changed course, ramming his chainsword into the Hound's neck with such force it emerged shuddering out of the other side. Lukosz pulled it back with a vicious twist, goring an even wider hole on the way out, and the Hound spun around, firing wildly with one hand while trying to staunch the blood gushing from the fatal wound. Lukosz swiped down at the bolt pistol, carving it in half, then barged the Hound out of the way. He fell backwards, dead before he hit the ground.

Khârn was making a direct path for Locq, swinging his chainaxe above his head in fury. Lukosz's fellow berzerkers stormed past on the left and right, firing bolt pistols and brandishing their close-quarter weapons towards the line of Hounds only metres away. In seconds the centre of the clearing was a furious battle zone, and as Lukosz readied his gore-splattered chainsword once more, he spotted two Hounds running to support Locq, who had managed to scramble to his feet and activate his own chainsword. One of them blocked Khârn's approach and took the blow intended for the captain. Gorechild cleaved the Hound's helmet in half, leaving Khârn suddenly exposed to attack from the other Hound and Locq as he worked the chainaxe free from his twitching victim's skull. Lukosz cried out a warning, but it was drowned out by the thunderous roar of heavy bolter fire from above and behind.

Huge chunks of stone flew into the air as the fire gouged its way forwards through the ruins. Lukosz threw himself out of its path, and as he hit the ground he saw that Khârn had done the same. The second Hound that had split off to attack Khârn was not so lucky; he was torn asunder by the maelstrom, pieces of his armour spinning ropes of blood into the air as they blew apart. The line of

fire moved upwards towards one of the Black Legion Thunderhawks. The gunship opened fire with its weapons, but a fraction too late to save itself. Bolts tore through the canopy, decimating the nose of the ship and shredding its crew. Losing control, it tipped forwards and exploded in mid-air, throwing Hounds and berzerkers to the floor with the force of the blast. Lukosz waited a few seconds before getting to his feet, only to see the second Black Legion drop ship unleash a withering salvo as it lurched out of the path of rockets fired from his Thunderhawks somewhere behind him.

Another tremendous explosion hit Lukosz in the back. Glancing behind, he could see that one of his transports had also been hit. Lukosz spat a curse. Samzar was in one of those ships. A bolter round glanced off the side of Lukosz's helmet and careened into the nearby forest. Turning to the direction from which the shell had been fired, he saw a Hound running towards him, loading a fresh magazine as he closed in. Fury suddenly raged through Lukosz. Gunning his chainsword, he threw himself at the black-clad warrior with a roar. He gave himself totally to his Butcher's Nails. He hacked and slashed with his chainsword, glorying in his bloodlust.



‘Destroy it! Fire!’

Samzar was screaming at the Warpsmith pilot. They had managed to destroy one of the enemy ships relatively easily, but it was clear the pilot of the vessel now banking steeply to avoid their fire was much more skilled. A brilliant flash of light came from the right, and the Warpsmith pulled the stick sharply over to port, shouting to the gunner to keep up his barrage. The hull shuddered with the sudden movement, and through the cockpit window Samzar saw the second berzerker Thunderhawk power into the bleached brick and stone of the ruins, exploding on impact and lighting up the trees all around with burning fuel. Several of the warband were caught in the blast, thrown backwards in a wide arc. Hounds of Abaddon made for their prone figures, and Samzar roared at the scene unfolding before him. He wanted – *needed* – to be down there. Gunfire thundered from his drop ship's weapons as the gunner laid down a curtain of fire at the last remaining Black Legion ship. Part of its starboard wing disappeared, but as it pitched and dropped to just above the treeline, it unleashed a salvo of missiles straight at them.

Controls flicked to red all around the cockpit and warning sirens blared. The

pilot threw the controls to one side and increased thrust, but was a fraction too slow. A blossom of flame erupted from the right, shooting across the nose of the Thunderhawk and into the cockpit. Samzar heard the navigator scream as he was enveloped in flame. The ship immediately began to drop off, away from the clearing and towards the trees below them.

‘We have been hit! Starboard engine gone! We are going to—’

The dials and readouts before the pilot exploded in a shower of sparks. Samzar grabbed a hold of the seat’s headrest to steady himself, but the angle was becoming too steep to maintain footing. Turning, he threw himself back towards the transport bay below the Thunderhawk’s cockpit deck, abandoning the surviving crew members to their fate. A series of loud thudding impacts came from beneath, and Samzar’s blood boiled with fury. He should never have listened to Lukosz. His place was by Khârn’s side. At the time his battle-brother’s words had seemed to make sense, but now the Butcher’s Nails were in control once again, and they were demanding blood. He should have been there. The battle would now be all but over and he would have taken great trophies for the Blood God. Damn Lukosz and his tactics.

Samzar heard the pilot frantically voxing orders to his crew, but he knew it was too late for them. The entire cargo section was shaking from impacts on all sides as it ploughed its way into the trees, the outer hull squealing as it dragged past the enormous trunks now surrounding it. Samzar tipped over and crashed onto the inner wall as the Thunderhawk lost its left wing. The impact wrenched open the exit hatch before him and, with a crunch, the ship finally hit the ground, tossing Samzar around like a poorly secured piece of equipment. With the rear engine still screaming above him at full throttle, Samzar clawed his way up the inside of the transport and threw himself free of the broken ship. His fall was cushioned by smashed and broken trunks, and as he thumped to the soft earth the ship’s fuel tanks ignited, sending metal and wood spinning overhead in a lethal shower. Samzar did not wait to check for survivors. Somewhere very close there was a battle raging, and he needed to be a part of it.



Lukosz could see that Khârn was trying to carve his way towards the Black Legion leader, but his remaining forces had reformed and were providing an excellent defence for their captain. They had given him enough time to retrieve his helmet, which, given the ferocity of the fighting on the ground and in the air,

again reminded Lukosz of what his warband lacked. The ferocity, however, with which his berzerkers were attacking the Hounds was unparalleled. A brilliant flash came from the side and Lukosz looked up to see the second – and last – of their drop ships take a direct hit on its starboard wing. If Samzar hadn't been in the first Thunderhawk, he had to be in that one. Tipping onto its side, it accelerated into the ground, disappearing between the dense trees and exploding a few seconds later. To Lukosz, the plume of thick black smoke symbolised two things – the loss of his comrade, and air superiority for Locq's forces.

The ground erupted all around him as the remaining enemy drop ship thundered overhead. Locq's forces began to move towards the trees, closing ranks around the captain. A small group of around half a dozen broke away and ran straight towards Khârn, who threw himself at them with Gorechild. Lukosz ducked and weaved through another barrage of fire, narrowly avoiding the fate of a berzerker who disappeared in a hail of heavy bolter shells. Most of his warband ignored the swooping drop ship's withering fire, intent on claiming new trophies for the Blood God.

'Roderbar! Dispatch air support immediately!'

Static hissed back at Lukosz and he cursed. If the enemy cruiser had engaged the *Skulltaker*, it was likely Roderbar was out of range or unable to launch more drop ships. The Thunderhawk made another pass, but this time it did not open fire. Most of the berzerkers had closed in on the Hounds, making it impossible for the Black Legion ship to fire without hitting their own warriors. Some metres away, Khârn was busy engaging three of the original six that had challenged him. Two bodies lay at his feet, their heads separated from their bodies. A third was getting up slowly behind, watching the attack and readying his curved chainsword to drive it into Khârn's back.

Lukosz threw himself at the Hound, thrusting his own weapon forwards to deflect the attack. Overstretched, he lost his balance and stumbled, the side of his head taking the full impact of his opponent's knee as it came crashing in. Countless years of combat experience took over. Despite his blurred vision, Lukosz found himself back-to-back with Khârn, parrying the blows with elegant, practised moves in direct contrast to the flamboyant uncontrolled onslaught Khârn was unleashing with Gorechild. Catching the curve of his opponent's blade, Lukosz turned and barged, shoulder first, into the chest of his opponent, sending him staggering back on the worn rocky surface. Something spun past Lukosz, spraying blood in all directions. Khârn's opponents were now down to two. Galvanized by the sight, Lukosz's attacker lunged forwards towards

Lukosz's throat. Lukosz ducked quickly and slashed outwards in a turn, the tip of his chainsword slicing into the right knee of his opponent. Continuing his turn, Lukosz brought his weapon up and then across his chest, but the Hound saw the strike coming and blocked it with his left arm, sacrificing the armour as a shield while he brought his own chainsword down onto Lukosz's helmet.

Then Lukosz felt himself spinning through the air. He saw snapshots of the Hound being blown in the opposite direction before everything went dark. Something hit him in the back with tremendous force, and he felt himself drop to soft ground. His ears sang and his head spun. All he could hear was the scream of his Butcher's Nails. Lukosz rolled onto his side and hauled himself to his feet. He had been blown into the forest by an explosion. The Black Legion Thunderhawk roared overhead, triple turbofans making the air behind it shimmer. Recovering his wits, Lukosz started to pick his way back through the trees towards the clearing. With only a few metres to go, the Hound who had nearly claimed his skull stood waiting for him. He was now carrying Lukosz's weapon as well as his own.

Lukosz began to run forward. The Hound did the same, barging his way into the thick forest, but suddenly he stopped and looked back into the clearing. Turning back again, the Hound seemed unsure what to do. Finally, with a shake of his head and a pointed gesture with Lukosz's chainsword as if to say 'next time', he ran out of Lukosz's sight. By the time Lukosz stomped back into the smoke-filled clearing, Locq and his forces were nowhere to be seen, giving the drop ship free rein to strafe the opening.

Lukosz could see Khârn and the rest of the surviving warband firing wildly into the sky, but they all dived for cover as the ship descended on another murderous run. Chunks of armour, flesh and stone spun through the air, hurtling into the forest and clanging off the burning remains of the crashed drop ships. A pair of berzerkers were too slow to escape the maelstrom from the marauding Thunderhawk and were cut down before they could get to safety. Suddenly, a figure carrying two bolters sprinted into the opening. He was bellowing with rage, pumping shell after shell into the sky. The drop ship rose and then turned but he stood his ground, screaming in apoplectic fury. When both magazines were emptied he threw the bolters to the ground and drew his pistol, not stopping until that too had been exhausted.

Lukosz smiled to himself. It was Samzar.

The pitch of the transport's engines changed. Luckily for Samzar, it began to head away. Within seconds Khârn and the rest of the berzerkers returned to the

clearing and began to fire after the ship, but it quickly moved out of range. Lukosz picked his way through the bodies of the Hounds scattered around the clearing. At least forty of them lay dead, but Locq was not amongst them. Lukosz still had no idea why Khârn had attacked and initiated the combat, but with the blood only just calming in his veins Lukosz had to admit it did not matter. Looking at the carnage in the clearing, this was a good harvest for the Blood God. Lukosz felt elated; Khârn was indeed meeting his promise. The fifty that had arrived on this moon had shared in the glory, and Lukosz knew now there was more to come. Much of the ruined plaza on which they stood was slick with the blood of their kills. They were all walking on the Red Path.

Lukosz shifted the body of a fallen Hound with his boot to reveal a particularly fine power sword. Stooping to pick it up, he flicked the gore of his fallen brothers away and felt its weight and balance. He did not recognise the symbols inscribed into its blade, but he knew it to be a weapon he could put to excellent use if any of the warband chose to doubt Khârn after this battle. Some kilometres away, the unmistakable bray of bolter fire drifted on the acrid, burning air. Lukosz walked to the side of Khârn, as did the remaining berzerkers. As one, they looked up to the Black Legion Thunderhawk circling slowly in the distance. It was laying down a ferocious barrage onto the forest below it.

‘They are creating a landing area. Do not let a single one of them leave this planet.’

Khârn did not need to give any more direction. The berzerkers rampaged into the woodland, blasting and carving a path through the densely packed trees with bolter and chainsword.

Khârn stopped next to Lukosz and removed his helmet. Lukosz could see fresh lacerations over the raw red scars covering his bare skin, blood running freely down his forearm onto Gorechild’s shaft.

‘Where is our air cover, Lukosz?’

Lukosz turned to watch as branches, trunks and leaves flew into the air in a whirlwind of destruction. He was wondering the very same thing himself.



‘I don’t care if we’ve lost the shields to the starboard landing bay. Target their engines again, then go to heading nine-five-six to protect our flank. And get the long-range vox back up!’

Roderbar was purple with the effort of screaming at his bridge crew, who were

frantically assessing the damage the *Skulltaker* had taken from the *Malevolent Shade* on its last salvo. He knew his ship was a match for its weapons, but his defensive systems left a lot to be desired. All that time away from port was beginning to tell. New damage was compounding the old, and it was getting to the point where he would have to appeal to Khârn himself for essential repairs. Roderbar was loath to do this, because it involved the very real risk of the Chosen of Khorne simply taking another vessel, should he perceive that the *Skulltaker* had lost its value to him. Despite his great experience, Roderbar knew full well he would not feature in any transfer of personnel.

A groan shuddered through the outer hull, and several consoles on the lower deck burst into flames, the line of servitors burning silently with the cogitators they had operated. Fire-control systems activated to prevent the damage from spreading, and satisfied it was not anything he would miss, Roderbar turned his attention back to unleashing as much punishment on the *Malevolent Shade* as he had received.

‘Shipmaster, communication with the planet is restored.’

Roderbar established a connection. When, three seconds later, he received Khârn’s blistering reply, he wished he hadn’t.



‘Captain, transmission coming in from the *Malevolent Shade*. Shipmaster *Odervirk* is asking to speak with you directly.’

Locq looked to the six survivors of his warband tending to their wounds in quiet contemplation. Six. That meant he had lost forty-four Hounds to Khârn and his band of scum, along with a gunship and its crew. Adding that to the deaths from the White Scars’ attack, he was now down to well under half his original number.

‘Shipmaster. Report.’

The interior speaker crackled into life, betraying panic on the cruiser’s command bridge.

‘Captain, we are continuing to engage the *Skulltaker* but it has disabled our drive systems. We are attempting repair, but it will take time due to our reduced complement.’

Locq spoke through gritted teeth. The pain from his broken arm was ferocious, and he did not need reminding of his decision to salvage the *Wings of the Eagle*.

‘Do what you can. We are en route to the *Malevolent Shade*, approaching at

battle velocity. Ready a hangar for our arrival.’

The sound of an explosion rattled out of the speaker, cutting Odervirk off.

‘Lord, there is another transmission coming in.’

The pilot paused before continuing.

‘It is from the Skulltaker. Shall I respond?’

The six Hounds stopped what they were doing and looked over to Locq. Sitting upright as best he could, he gave the command. After a crackle of white noise, a new voice rasped through the speakers.

‘And so you see, Locq, it is as I said. Khorne favours those who are faithful to him – and him alone.’

It was the voice of Khârn. Locq drew in a furious breath to respond, but was cut off before he had opportunity to speak.

‘I shall leave your vessel to drift in space. With luck, you may find some safe haven for what remains of your idolatrous pack of dogs to cower in. We continue to follow the Red Path, to further the glory of Khorne. Tell that to your “Warmaster”.’

Khârn began to laugh. At first it was his voice alone, but it was quickly joined by two, then three, then dozens. The mockery rang around the hold of the Thunderhawk, and Locq bellowed at the pilot to cut the transmission. Other than the rumbling of the engines and the rattle of equipment, a sullen, dangerous silence filled the hold.



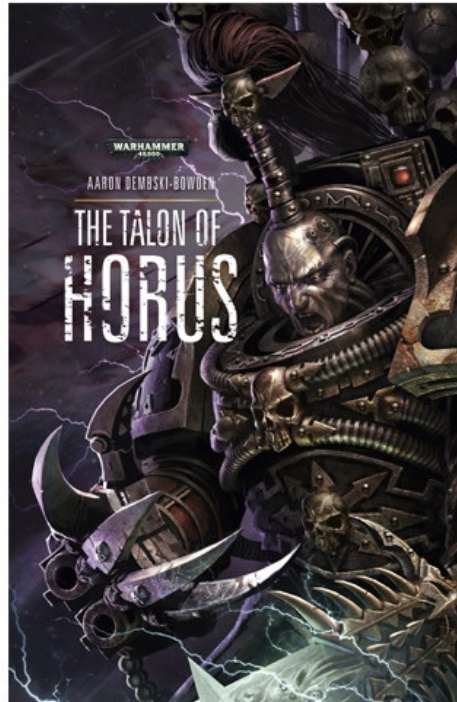
Khârn sat cross-legged in his chamber, the smoke from burning incense and a dozen pit fires swirling around his naked form. The heat was intense, but he cared not. The blade with which he flensed the skin from the Hound of Abaddon’s skull moved like an extension of his hand, deftly peeling away the layers of flesh and muscle to expose gleaming, unmarked bone beneath. The battle on the moon had satisfied his bloodlust for the moment and given him many trophies, but more importantly it had given him certainty. Murmuring an incantation with every breath, he stripped away the remaining tissue from the head and held the skull before him. Shadows danced within the nose and eye sockets, and Khârn felt rage suddenly course through his body. His hand tightened on the jawbone and snapped it like a dry twig, throwing splinters of bone into his exposed flesh. His victory had not been complete. It should be the head of Locq he was preparing for the Blood God’s glory.

Khârn took in a deep breath and concentrated on slowing his quickening pulse. Closing his eyes, he called up the vision he had experienced on Haeleon. Confidence in its truth usurped his anger. The Red Path would lead him once again to the Black Legion cur, of that he was certain. Khorne demanded it. Shifting his weight, Khârn opened his eyes and glanced over to Gorechild. He let the skull roll from his grip, clattering as it landed on the pile mounting next to him. Khârn exhaled slowly and began chanting a battle oath in a dark language. He could feel power coursing into his still-healing wounds. Whatever challenges were yet to present themselves, wherever the Blood God deigned to send him, Khârn would be ready.

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