



WARHAMMER  
40,000



THE RED PATH 4

BLOOD  
VISION

A KHÂRN THE BETRAYER STORY  
*by* CHRIS DOWS



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# THE RED PATH 4: BLOOD VISION

Chris Dows



Chapter Master Solucious Gaul was not one to rush, but the speed with which he swept down the passageway of the *Light of the Emperor* was nearing a charge. Behind him, four of his longest-serving veterans matched the urgency of his pace, their heavily embroidered cloaks swaying in time with that of their leader. The reason for their presence had nothing to do with Gaul's protection. They were accompanying him in a show of the esteem in which they held their honoured guest, even if he was currently putting the lives of everyone on the ship and, for that matter, the entire fleet, in jeopardy. Passing a third triumvirate of Adepta Sororitas, Gaul clenched his back teeth together and ignored their burning stares. While he had nothing but admiration for their military prowess and appreciated the Living Saint had fought with them for the last five years on his crusade, they simply were not needed on an Angels Eradicant vessel.

Gaul had spent a long time on the *Light of the Emperor* and knew it nearly as well as the shipmaster, but even he had been surprised at just how different the approach to the chapel now looked. Gone were the tapestries and battle banners celebrating the victories over Chaos by his Chapter, replaced with those narrating the bloody trail of destruction waged by Lozepath during his holy war. The pennants and flags had been embellished with golden frames, an extravagance Gaul found hard to stomach in these times of hardship for the Imperium. Even so, he had to admit it was impressive, albeit typical of what he had come to expect from Lozepath. Those who imagined Living Saints to be humble souls dedicated to the spiritual nourishment and guidance of the Emperor's faithful servants had clearly not met him. The man, if that was the

right description, was anything but self-effacing. As he quick-marched through the corridor, Gaul suspected it was Lozepath's irrepressible temperament that had led to an emergency call coming through to the Chapter Master from the bridge only minutes before.

Turning a wide corner, Gaul spied the newly embossed doors to the chapel. His path was quickly blocked by yet another heavily armed contingent from the Order of the Divine Perfection. The most senior amongst them regarded the Chapter Master and his fully armed escort coolly, one delicate hand stroking the top of the bolter slung over her right shoulder, the other on a brass-bound tome suspended by a thick golden chain. A network of puckered scars ran across her elegant face, and there was a look of quiet determination that, under normal circumstances, Gaul might have given greater respect to. Right now, she was in his way, and he was in no mood to be delayed.

‘Who begs to enter the ministry of the Living Saint?’

Gaul knew the Sisters well enough to realise they would not expect a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes to beg for anything. The words were deliberately confrontational, but he knew how to conduct this particular dance of etiquette.

‘Chapter Master Solucious Gaul of the Angels Eradicant.’

The Sister Superior looked past Gaul and eyed his four veterans behind him with suspicion. The five other Sisters that fanned out and walked past Gaul to stand by their sides provoked no reaction whatsoever. The Sister Superior could clearly see she was hopelessly outgunned, but it did not cow her.

‘His Celestial Highness is at prayer. Come back later.’

Gaul looked down at the woman, took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Behind him he could hear her guard shifting in their elegant black armour, readying themselves for a violent response. Inside the Chapter Master's head, a clock was counting down. A firefight would solve the impasse, but it would also likely complicate and delay matters. There was a very large contingent of Adepta Sororitas on board, and they would mobilise within seconds of hearing combat. Clasp his hands in front of him, Gaul leaned forwards and dropped his voice.

‘Sister Superior, I understand your devotion to Lozepath. But let me put this as simply as I can. I need to talk with the Saint as a matter of extreme urgency. All attempts to communicate with him inside the chapel have been unsuccessful, and I believe him to be in considerable danger at this very moment.’

Gaul knew the Adepta Sororitas had supreme confidence in their ability to protect their holy charge, but a direct warning such as this from a Chapter Master was something that could not be ignored. Gaul straightened and waited for the

reaction he expected. Sure enough, the Sister Superior looked over the closest of her fellow guards, then back to Gaul. Something changed in her eyes.

‘Chapter Master, I have my orders. No one is to enter at this time.’

Her words were almost hissed. Gaul could see she was in a difficult position, but his patience was rapidly abandoning him. The time for diplomacy was over. He needed to take a more direct approach.

‘Sister Superior, this vessel currently houses over a hundred of my battle-brothers, all of whom have been in a state of combat readiness since we set off on this journey. Such is their desire to fight, they would relish the opportunity, regardless of who their opponents might be.’

To her credit, the Sister Superior did not so much as bat an eyelid in response. While the repercussions of her allowing him to pass might be severe, they would be nothing compared to the damage she and her sentinels would endure in a battle with his Space Marines. She kept her gaze locked onto Gaul, only flicking her eyes to his honour guard as she finished her sentence.

‘There is no need for threats, Chapter Master. You may pass – but you alone.’

Gaul looked back to his four veterans, then turned to the Sister Superior.

‘These warriors are here to honour his holiness. To enter without them would be an insult. Would you have that to answer for as well?’

The Sister Superior looked at Gaul for a long moment. Without blinking, she took one step to the side and nodded towards the entrance. As he marched past, Gaul noticed with grudging respect that her finger had been on the trigger of her bolter throughout their exchange. Raising both arms before him and letting his cloak fall behind his shoulders, he pushed against the two massive wooden arched doors of the sanctuary and leaned into them. They swung open with a deep, ancient creaking and he had to squint against the intense golden light flooding the chamber’s interior. Striding forwards, he held one hand high with fingers spread wide, both in greeting and to show he held no weapon, lest his sudden entrance be taken as a hostile act. As it was, voices were raised in protest the second he appeared. The high-pitched childlike wailing of Lozepath’s neutered clerical attendants mixed with violent oaths from the Sisters of Battle. Gaul’s eyes quickly adjusted to the dazzling surroundings, and he came to a halt yards before the raised dais on which Lozepath lounged. Black-armoured figures swarmed towards him, weapons readied to fire. In response, two of his veterans stepped forward, one on either flank, and drew their bolt pistols. Behind him, Gaul heard two chainswords buzz into life. Calls of ‘blasphemy’ and for them to immediately disarm went unheeded. Gaul would give no such order. Palatine

Serenaird strode towards him, power sword and bolter drawn, her face darkening with fury.

‘How dare you enter without my permission, Chapter Master! Do you realise the disgrace you bring upon yourself and your brothers?’

Serenaird swept past the veterans and stood inches away from Gaul. Her head only came up to the Chapter Master’s chest armour, and while she was effectively surrounded by the towering forms of Gaul and his honour guard, it was obvious from the righteous anger burning in her eyes that she was very far from being intimidated. As far as Gaul was concerned, this made what he had to say much easier. He had no more time for games.

‘May I remind you, Serenaird, this is *my* ship. I do not require permission from you or anybody else to do anything. And with regards to bringing disgrace upon my Chapter...’

Gaul’s gaze flashed down to her humming weapon, then back to her eyes.

‘The true dishonour is yours for drawing blades at the sight of those who provide shelter and protection to your Sisterhood and the Saint.’

A chorus of oaths erupted around the chamber. Four Sisters moved towards the veterans at his side, the muzzles of their weapons aimed directly at the Angels Eradicants’ heads. Gaul readied himself to restrain the Palatine. He would have to move fast to prevent her from getting off a shot.

‘Chapter Master Gaul. Were you not informed I was at prayer?’

Lozepath’s voice was like oil on water. It slid around the high-ceilinged chamber like silk, soft and strong in equal measure. Gaul kept his gaze fixed on the Sister’s eyes for a few more seconds, then turned and bowed towards the dais. As he did so, he caught the furious glares from various clerics and other minions standing at floor level and on the eight high steps leading to the altar. They were of no consequence. What was of the greatest importance was the distorted, twitching form of Lozepath’s personal sanctioned Astropath sitting to the Living Saint’s left. Anger flared brighter in Gaul’s chest. The creature’s head was attached to a series of cables snaking behind the wide, ornate throne on which Lozepath sat and directly into the main communications network of his ship. The psyker’s hood had fallen back from its ashen face and its eyes were glowing white. Gaul had seen enough of the creatures to know this one was still active. Emperor’s Throne, it had been transmitting its dream-message for far too long.

‘Forgive me, Your Holiness, but I am here on the gravest of business. Our shipmaster has detected an astropathic communication from your chambers, and

I must insist it be terminated immediately.’

There was a gasp from around the room at Gaul’s words. More Sisters of Battle stepped towards his honour guard, and Gaul could feel the hatred emanating from Serenaird. Beneath his cloak, Gaul clasped his unseen hand around the handle of his relic blade. His hopes of avoiding bloodshed were fading with every second, but the stakes were far too high for inactivity. Gaul knew if he drew Acritus, there would be no going back. Regardless of who he stood before, right at this moment he desired it more than anything.

‘Come forward, Chapter Master. I would speak with you.’

Lozepath’s command seemed to catch everyone by surprise. Gaul caught a dismissive wave from the seated figure, and heard the Sisters move warily around him and the honour guard. Gaul turned his back on Serenaird and, making sure both of his hands were visibly empty, mounted the steps. Lozepath gestured to the right side of his throne, a holy relic retrieved from his unsalvageable flagship. Every step Gaul took up to the wide platform was scrutinised by the Sisters of Battle, all of whom still had their weapons trained on him and his battle-brothers. As he reached Lozepath’s flank, the Living Saint’s Astropath issued a strangulated cry and fell from his seat to the floor. Several shaven-headed serfs tended to him, roughly disconnecting cables from his head before dragging the psyker away towards an antechamber at the back of the chapel.

Lozepath leaned on his right elbow and beckoned Gaul to within earshot. Such was the intensity of the energy that surrounded his body, Gaul found it difficult to look upon him at close proximity, even with the protection of his augmented vision. Underneath its shimmering field, Gaul got the impression of a simple white cloak and thick golden sash, around which was slung a jewel-encrusted sword belt. The weapon itself, a mighty blade taller than a man, rested tip-down in front of the throne’s left arm.

‘I take it you believe my communication with Salandraxis to be a deliberate breach of your orders and a dangerous mistake, Chapter Master.’

Lozepath did not turn to look at Gaul as he murmured the words. The Living Saint’s eyes burned with a ferocity equal to that of any daemon Gaul had faced in his countless battles with the forces of Chaos.

‘Highness, we cannot afford to give away our location so far from our destination. We may attract the attention of the Despoiler. I would not have your safety compromised.’

Gaul’s response was brutal in its simplicity. Had Tentera been present, he felt

sure the venerable Chaplain would not have approved of the accusation. However, it was a truth Gaul would not hide. Regardless of his inviolability, the Living Saint had put them in immediate, terrible danger.

Lozepath shifted his weight to the other side of his throne as he considered the Chapter Master's words, the glow from his body intensifying, then fading. Leaning back over to the right, he beckoned Gaul closer once again.

'There are three things you need to understand, Chapter Master. First, the needs of an entire planet outweigh our own. Salandraxis has not heard from me since we set off on our journey, and they had to know I was safe and nearing my return. Second, my righteous authority overrules anything you or any other warrior of the Adeptus Astartes might hold, regardless of how well intentioned your actions may be. And third...'

Lozepath grabbed hold of Gaul's left vambrace. The movement was unnaturally fast, and by the time Gaul had looked down to the action, he could see the ceramite beneath the Living Saint's hand glowing. At red he felt minor discomfort. At white, his forearm was crisping. He looked back up to see a flaming intensity in Lozepath's eyes, his soft, red lips transformed into a sneer.

'If you ever enter this chapel against my wishes again, I will have you executed.'

Lozepath released Gaul's arm, and the Chapter Master looked down to see a molten handprint smoking on the surface of his vambrace. For long seconds Gaul stared at the damage, waiting for the anger within his breast to subside. When he eventually flicked his eyes back to Lozepath's face, Gaul let his arm fall, his cloak shrouding the mark left upon him. Gaul dropped his voice to a low growl.

'If you continue in the delusion that I serve you before the Emperor and His realm, you will be the one to suffer. Heed these words – I will not repeat them.'

The sneer dropped a fraction on the Living Saint's lips, but before he had time to react any further, Gaul took a step back, bowed his head and then marched down the steps without looking to the Palatine. His fury was almost beyond control, but he had said what he needed to say. The blind faith of the Adepta Sororitas would not allow them to see the reality of the situation they had been led into, and Gaul would make no excuses for doing what he felt to be right. As he reached the opening doors, he heard his honour guard barge their way past the Sisters and take up formation behind him. Other than the sound of their marching boots, their departure was watched in absolute silence. Exiting the chamber, Gaul looked to the Sister Superior who had tried to stop him from

entering. Even though her skin was like porcelain, she looked ashen. Without a word she turned and walked back into the chapel, likely summoned to answer for her actions. He did not expect to see her again.

As Gaul marched away from the chapel, he finally allowed his fury to sweep through him. Lozpath's psyker would be detected by an Astropath of the enemy, of that he was certain. Despite the Living Saint's considerable power, they were an easy target, six ships or no. Looking down to his arm, he realised he would need attention for his ruined armour and flesh. And then, the words of the Chaplain Venerable Dreadnought came back to him. He should use his belief an attack would come to his advantage. Coming to a junction, Gaul stopped dead and, instead of heading to the medical facility, turned towards the bridge. He needed to speak with the fleet's shipmaster immediately.



Khârn heard Lukosz's hail come once again from outside his chamber. Anger flared in his breast and he sprang to his feet, instinctively picking up Gorechild as he strode to the hatch. He had made it very clear he wished to be left in solitude. The after-images of his vision were fading, and Khârn needed clarity of thought to see the Red Path's direction. So far, such a focus had eluded him and interruptions would not help bring the answers he desired. Activating the huge bulkhead door, he brought the chainaxe up to Lukosz's neck and snarled.

'Your explanation had better be a good one, or your head will be joining those on my trophy chains.'

Lukosz looked straight into Khârn's eyes, his face impassive as Gorechild's teeth whirled a hairsbreadth from his throat. As his rage subsided, Khârn lowered the huge weapon, giving Lukosz enough room to offer a small bow.

'My Lord, the ship's Astropath requests your presence as a matter of urgency.'

Khârn considered Lukosz's words as he felt the vibration from Gorechild idling in his hands. His response was good enough. Deactivating the chainaxe, Khârn allowed it to spin to a halt and lowered it.

'Very well. Are repairs to the ship complete?'

While Khârn had been seeking the direction in which they should be sailing, he had allowed Roderbar to halt the *Skulltaker* for repairs. Now that he had rediscovered the Red Path, he was not willing to risk straying away again. Khârn remained convinced the Blood Father would soon make his intentions known.

'Not to my knowledge, lord.'

Khârn raised Gorechild again to Lukosz's throat.

'Then I suggest you find out for certain while you still can.'



Somewhere in the far corner of the dimly lit chamber, Khârn could hear weeping. Ignoring the thousands of symbols and sigils scrawled onto the bare metal of the walls, he brushed past heaps of parchment lying in piles across the floor. Behind the dais on which the creature would send and receive its messages to the warp, what looked like a discarded collection of rags shook violently. The crying became softer as Khârn approached. He was in no mood to be patient.

'You requested my presence, sorcerer of the warp.'

Khârn folded his arms and watched as the shaking Astropath reached out with a claw-like hand and pulled itself up along the wall, avoiding his stare as it rose to its feet. Turning, it kept its head and face in shadow. Looking to the floor, it searched around for a few seconds until it found a long strip of parchment. As the creature held it to the low light, Khârn could see the length of creased vellum was covered in furiously scribbled imagery, much of it blurred together as the psyker had swept over the still-fresh ink with the sleeve of its cloak. It had been written in haste, the scrawled ramblings of a lunatic. It began whimpering as it looked down on them. Whatever the runes meant, Khârn recognised they held a connection with the Astropath's current distress.

'A place of gold and purity, so fierce the eyes that cannot see still burn with its glorious power. The message drives the darkness from within. My beautiful, beautiful sanctuary is exposed!'

The psyker began to cry again, and dropped the scroll to the floor as if it had become unbearable to look upon. Turning to the dais, it stumbled up its two high steps and fell onto a simple iron seat. Leaning forwards, it placed its unseen face in its hands. Khârn growled at the repugnant display of suffering before him.

'Where was this message sent to, sorcerer? Can you see?'

Bony fingers swept away from its shrouded face and balled into spindly fists as it spoke in a defeated sigh. Khârn looked down to the parchment, then up again as the creature continued in a hoarse whisper.

'The voice that speaks is holy. It passes through the warp with a dreadful radiance. I cannot listen to nor look upon it. The splendour overwhelms me.'

Khârn could control himself no longer. Lurching forwards, he grabbed the psyker and yanked it to its feet. The hood fell back to reveal a cadaverous head.

Despite it having completely empty eye sockets, tears were flooding down its cheeks. Khârn raged at the creature.

‘Enough of these mindless riddles. Construe what you have seen or I will crush your skull and end your ravings forever.’

The Astropath tried to recoil, but its struggle was pitiful in his grasp. After a few seconds, it stopped its bleating and seemed to regain some semblance of control. It stared past Khârn into space, its voice taking on a soft, lyrical tone. The murmurings of a dream half-remembered.

‘The Adeptus Astartes speak! I hear them whispering in the ether. But... their words are meaningless, their message veiled in shadow. I cannot see with whom they commune.’

Khârn stared at the creature. Its face was overrun with confusion and doubt. His hold on the psyker became a crushing grip, and the Astropath’s face contorted with pain.

‘Formless sounds. But getting louder. Yes. Louder still. So close I can touch them with my mind. So close—’

Khârn felt something snap beneath his left hand and the psyker wailed. Relaxing his grip, he allowed it to slump back into its seat, nursing its now broken shoulder. Turning, Khârn walked over to the discarded parchment and picked it up as he thought over the words he had heard. At the very edge was an angrily scrawled circle, and what appeared to be meaningless lines surrounding it suddenly resolved themselves into the shape of lightning bolts and wings. Khârn felt a rush of adrenaline. He had seen this symbol in his vision. His sudden turn made the Astropath flinch in its chair, but Khârn did not approach. Instead he pondered on what he had just heard. This time, it made sense.

‘You do not know who sent the message, its contents or destination?’

The psyker shook its head dumbly. Khârn let the unfurled scroll fall to the floor as he folded his arms.

‘But you do know from where it was sent?’

A single nod. Khârn’s heart raced.

‘Then that is where we shall go.’



Lukosz suspected something the second he saw the group clustered together on the flight deck. It was not unusual for allegiances to form for mutual protection, but they were typically short-lived and terminated by betrayal on the battlefield.

Mixing a former Blood Angel with a trio of World Eaters and an expelled brother of the Steel Brethren was a lethal accident waiting to happen. Four of them had supported Moreenna on Haeleon, and the way that they abruptly finished their discussion on spotting Lukosz was even more disconcerting. Lukosz gave them enough space to disband and chose Shobaris, a fellow legionary from the years before Angron had come to lead the World Eaters, to follow. The old War Hound hurried into the bowels of the ship and disappeared into an engineering chamber. Lukosz entered some seconds later, power sword in hand and ready for trouble.

Lukosz arrived just in time to see Samzar slamming into a bulkhead. There was a wheeze as the air was driven from his comrade's body by the impact, but Lukosz could see the pain meant nothing to him. His assailant lumbered into view. It was the World Eater Olpadra, the one remaining member of Moreenna's supporters who had not been talking some minutes previously. The brute waited to see which way Samzar would bounce off the wall, and Lukosz spotted the length of heavy gantry rail in his hand as he adjusted it accordingly. Rushing forwards, Olpadra swung the pole in a high arc, hoping to crack the side of Samzar's already misshapen skull, but the veteran was too fast for him and ducked. The resulting clang was lost in the cacophony of sounds from the massive drive generators which, while idling at station-keeping, were still deafening in volume. From below, Lukosz could hear the slave gangs toil under the shouts and lashes of their shift masters. Olpadra grimaced as the force of the vibration shot up his arms. It was clear to Lukosz that he had every intention of taking Samzar's head. This would be an honour duel to the death.

Lukosz looked to the jeering audience and his Butcher's Nails pounded in readiness. Among the hooting rabble was a glaring Shobaris, clearly furious he had allowed himself to be followed so easily. By his side stood the Blood Angel, Capderado, his twin-headed axe resting blade-down on the deck. A figure of impressive stature, how he had made his way into Khârn's warband was a mystery, the answer to which nobody cared to seek. Vadal and Malogot, the other World Eaters from the meeting, did not notice his arrival. Tiverdak, the only berzerker in their warband from the Steel Brethren, most certainly did. His eyes were fixed on Lukosz's power sword. Lukosz lowered it to one side but did not deactivate it, allowing its crackling discharges of energy to speak his intentions. With a snort of derision, Tiverdak turned back to the fight. Reluctantly, Shobaris followed suit. Lukosz flicked his eyes over to see Samzar kick out his left leg in an attempt to catch Olpadra's wrist, but the thick pole

slammed into his greave just above the ankle, spinning him off balance with the force. Lukosz was surprised his old comrade had not foreseen the attack. There had been a time when he would have timed his evasion to perfection.

Seizing his opportunity, Olpadra kicked out and sent Samzar crashing to the engine room's deck. The berzerkers roared their approval and began to shove each other in their increasing frenzy. Lukosz had feared the victory over the Hounds of Abaddon had not been quite enough for the restless group, and the bloodlust in their eyes did nothing to assuage his concerns. To make matters worse, Khâr'n's self-imposed exile had allowed rumour and despondency to spread like a disease throughout the ship. As if to punctuate the point, the berzerker standing next to Lukosz suddenly turned and smashed his fist into the face of the warrior on his other side. The two threw themselves at each other, trading vicious blows until they disappeared into a connecting chamber, taking their unknown argument with them.

Lukosz heard a loud crash and turned to see Olpadra on top of Samzar. There was a brief flash of white as he bared his teeth, then Samzar howled in pain and smashed his forehead into his opponent, knocking him away with the force. Lukosz saw that Olpadra's mouth was covered in blood. He always had been an animal, a brute even amongst this pack of wolves. As he fell and rolled to one side, Olpadra spat out a chunk of Samzar's ear. If the attack had been supposed to debilitate the veteran, it had not; Samzar was first to his feet and was hefting the metal rail in his hands.

Out the corner of his eye, Lukosz saw Shobaris start to move. Lukosz could not see what he was holding, but it made no difference. Leaping forwards, he thrust his power sword into the side of the berzerker's head. Bringing the blade down with a cry of rage, the weapon tore through Shobaris' cheek, slicing off the lower jaw and sending it spinning to the floor in a bloody mess. Lukosz stared into his victim's astonished eyes as he grasped for the missing part of his face, but a quick horizontal thrust across Shobaris' neck sent the old War Hound's head toppling to the deck. His body folded to the floor with a heavy clank of power armour, forcing the crowd to clear a space. Lukosz stood and glared at the closest berzerkers, gore sizzling on his arcing blade. Olpadra's bellow of rage snapped everyone's attention back to the duel. He was pushing forwards, hands outstretched to prevent Samzar from swinging the bar at him. In that instant, Lukosz knew the berzerker would be dead within seconds.

Samzar rotated the pole in his left hand and threw it to his right. Holding it like a spear, Samzar stabbed it towards Olpadra's face, pushing it through his left eye

and into the socket. Olpadra roared in pain and reached up to pull the bar from his head, but Samzar had both hands on the rail and was ramming it into the ruined orb. Blood and viscera spurted out of the gory hole, and Lukosz heard the crack of Olpadra's skull as Samzar's thrust smashed through the front of his eye socket and into his brain.

The crowd's cheers turned to hisses of barely contained bloodlust. Lukosz stepped forwards once again, and on noticing his warning posture, the chamber fell into a menacing silence. Samzar, however, had not finished. With Olpadra still twitching uncontrollably from the damage Samzar had wrought, he put even more pressure on the rod. Another cracking sound heralded the end of the rail smashing its way out of the back of Olpadra's skull. With a grunt, Samzar hefted his skewered opponent upwards and swung him towards the guard rail to their right. Olpadra burred insensibly, his hands clawing feebly at the object projecting from his head. Hitting the low barrier built onto the decking side-on, he toppled over and fell into a superheated machine vent. Steam belched upwards as he was consumed by its boiling liquid.

Samzar did not even look over to follow the fatal progress of his victory. Instead he turned, eyes wide and hands bloody, ready for the next challenger. None stepped forward. With muted threats and murmurs, the assembly disbanded, leaving Lukosz to stand before his old comrade. Samzar glowered at him, then felt the blood pouring down the side of his face. Lukosz picked up a rag sticking out from a piece of machinery as he spoke, and threw it towards his comrade.

'What was that – the third challenge since Haeleon?'

Samzar dabbed at the gory wound on his ear. It was still sizzling from the acid in Olpadra's bite.

'Fourth. And he didn't challenge me. I challenged him.'

Lukosz looked down at the berzerker he had killed, then over to the vent that had claimed the body of Olpadra and sighed.

'Our numbers are not large enough for you to kill them off on your whims.'

Samzar stared over at Lukosz's victim then back to him with a warning glance. Lukosz returned his gaze with a raised eyebrow.

'What, you would turn on me now, Samzar? I am the least of your concerns.'

Something changed in his comrade's face. For a second, a shadow of the officer Lukosz had once known returned, having slipped past the constant demands of his Butcher's Nails. Samzar's voice held genuine curiosity.

'What do you mean by that?'

Any thoughts of a response were driven from his mind as a sudden violent shudder filled the cavernous room. Servitors began to appear from the shadows in the metal walls, their programming having sent them scuttling away at the arrival of the combatants. The whines of turbines and machines built on top of one another, persuading the stubborn machine-spirits back into life after their time of slumber. Lukosz looked back to Samzar. With some dismay, he realised his old comrade had lost himself again.

‘The drive engines are starting up. We return to the Red Path at last!’

Samzar stalked away, discarding the blood-soaked rag on the floor. Lukosz looked around the titanic machines, gasses and fluids leaking out of them from a hundred places. He fervently hoped Samzar was correct.



By the time Lukosz reached the bridge, the *Skulltaker* was well under way. Roderbar sweated and heaved from one side of his command chair to the other, shouting an order here, demanding clarification of a read-out there. Samzar stood a couple of paces behind Khârn, standing to attention like he would have done in the old days. Khârn was scrutinising a flickering navigational display, and Lukosz caught a glimpse of the chart projected before him as he walked closer. Among dozens of moving, winking dots, one had been separated out for particular attention.

Flanking Khârn, Lukosz looked over to Samzar, who ignored his gaze. Khârn was leaning forwards, his massive frame blocking out much of the screen. Lukosz silently positioned himself so he also had an uninterrupted view. What he saw concerned him. Lukosz had dealt with psykers many times. Their words and thoughts were often a jumble of contradictions and half-truths. The Astropath’s message had clearly been of great importance, but the tactical display did not show a fully realised navigational plot.



Khârn looked closer at the shimmering image, then took a step back, his brow furrowed. Glancing over to Lukosz, he wondered what he was thinking. His tactical skills had been of great use in the many years they had fought together, but he clung to glories of the past. It did not sit well with Khârn at all. Detecting

the smell of blood, Khârn noted with disinterest the congealing wound on Samzar's ragged ear. Angry at these distractions, Khârn turned his back on the table and paced slowly around the deck. Yes, the Blood God had willed it they intercepted the transmission, but Khârn knew the data on the screen was incomplete. He needed more to be absolutely certain. Or maybe it was not so. What if it was the will of Khorne that the Red Path was never fully revealed to him? What if part of his challenge was to find the way himself?

Khârn came to a standstill near Roderbar, who shifted uneasily in his seat as Khârn stared out of the partially opened viewport into space. He tried to focus his feelings into thoughts but a conclusion eluded him. His frustration threatened to boil over, and he balled his fists in anger, pain shooting up his left arm in a reminder he was not yet fully recovered. He needed to come closer to the Blood God, to know his will once more. He needed to be certain he *was* following the Red Path, and not the ravings of a tormented psyker fool. Khârn returned to the table and leaned towards Lukosz, spreading his hands across its cold, metallic surface.

'I seek the purity of combat to show me the way. Have those who would honour the Blood Father on this day seek me out in the pits.'



Lukosz watched Khârn straighten and leave the bridge without another word. Looking around the command deck, he saw relief sweep over Roderbar, who returned to checking the final repairs to the *Skulltaker*. Samzar's eyes were glinting with the promise of a great spectacle. Lukosz noticed his fingertips were white with the grip he had on the tabletop.

'This would be an excellent opportunity to remove those who might challenge us.'

Lukosz nodded in agreement. Samzar's paranoia had substance. The time since Haeleon had been leading to this, and despite the numbers they were losing, a definitive victory by Khârn would send a clear reminder to the warband of the way of things – particularly those he had witnessed in collusion earlier. However, having seen the partial map in which Khârn was putting so much faith, Lukosz felt the duel held even greater importance. Turning to face Samzar, he looked into his crazed, hunted eyes.

'I doubt we will be short of volunteers.'



Locq knelt before the hololithic console in his chamber and tried to control the fury coursing through his body. As he dropped the last pieces of his armour to the floor, smoke from the brass-skull incense burners encircling him swirled around his body. Breathing in the thick, sweet vapour, he closed his eyes and presented his bare arms to the projector, palms forward and away from his body. His incantation was coming to a close. In seconds, Urkanthos' ship would be in range and the oathing ritual would begin. In the dancing shadows behind him, two serfs stood ready with the short ceremonial blades Locq had retrieved from the White Scars ship.

The device crackled into life and a series of indicator lights winked on in succession, their reds and greens casting ghostly colours through the smoke. An image began to coalesce above the projector dais, then the head and shoulders of Urkanthos appeared. After a few seconds, the Chaos Lord's voice boomed into the room.

*'Report.'*

Locq stared directly into the deep sockets of the Lord Purgator's eyes.

*'I have been unable to capture Khâr, my lord. My losses have been heavy.'*

The image flickered before him and did not move. The Lord Purgator's reply was as cold as the space between their ships.

*'This much I already know. You have failed, captain.'*

Locq raised his arms and the serfs stepped forward. Clenching his fists, Locq nodded once. In unison, the men positioned themselves and began to carve runic symbols into his arms, ancient oaths to the Blood God. All the time, Locq stared at Urkanthos.

*'I accept my fate, Lord Purgator, and shall carry the symbols of my failure for the rest of my life – no matter how short that might be. I am willing to face any challenge to make amends. But hear this.'*

Locq steeled himself before continuing.

*'I know where Khâr is, I know of his strength and numbers, and I know I can finish the task bestowed upon us by the great Warmaster. But I will need a greater force.'*

The Lord Purgator's image began to flicker as the extreme range of broadcast made its presence known. Finally, he spoke.

*'Your failure is my failure, Locq. It is I who will ultimately have to take responsibility for your ineptitude. In the same way, your revenge for our fallen*

*warriors is my revenge.'*

Locq felt the burning of the knives into his skin. They had reached his biceps, and were carving deep into his flesh and muscle. Urkanthos would see no weakness here, only determination and a renewal of his pledge.

*'You will have what you need. And I shall have my revenge for the Hounds that have fallen to Khârn and his rabble. I have dispatched reinforcements to ensure you do not fail again.'*

Urkanthos stared at the captain, and Locq felt the shadows from the edges of the chamber creep towards him, fingers of dark energy reaching out to grab and toss him into the abyss. Locq could smell the terror in the serfs. Their gory work now complete, they scuttled away into the background and cowered in the chamber's night-black corners, whimpering like frightened children.

*'You shall bring Khârn before the Warmaster, or your fate shall be far worse than death.'*

Locq bowed his head and waited for the transmission to fade away. For long moments he did not move. He knew Urkanthos' threats were not empty words. He had witnessed the punishment Chaos could bring, seen the mightiest beg for the release of death. Locq looked to the shapes cut into his skin. They would scar well.

A light winked for attention on the internal vox, and Locq pressed the receive button with a bloody finger.

*'This is Odervirk. We have two Black Legion vessels heading directly towards us at flank speed. What are your instructions?'*

Locq clenched his teeth. Urkanthos moved fast.

*'Hail their shipmasters and have them meet me on the bridge in one hour.'*



Khârn could smell the rage and anger in the stale, recycled air of the *Skulltaker's* lower decks. It was like the stench of concentrated fury, and it made his blood pump in anticipation. Entering the cavernous hangar, the shouts and calls that had echoed down the access corridors resolved themselves into a sea of noise. Under the glaring floodlights set into the high ceiling, score upon score of berzerkers crushed together in the middle of the enormous space, pushing and shoving each other for the best view. To his left, Khârn saw half a dozen warriors fighting each other. To his right, four bodies laid bleeding on the decks. Here, the Blood God reigned.

The milling crowd closed in behind Khârn as he strode into the great rectangular clearing surrounding the fighting pit. Right now they were keeping their distance, but he knew as soon as battle was joined, they would rush to the edge of the expansive steel-lined depression in the decking. The floor had been covered in sand, just like in the duelling pits of Angron's time, before Khârn had become a faithful follower of the Blood God. How he wished he could have harvested those skulls for Khorne.

Khârn nodded to Lukosz and Samzar who stood on the opposite side of the pit. Between them were seven warriors lined up. Khârn assessed their mettle within the blink of an eye. The Blood Angel Capderado and the Alpha Legion warrior Sonva Bael were the largest of the group, and both wielded axes, though of differing configurations. The three World Eaters he recognised as Vadal, Malogot and Rocez. Along with the anonymous berzerker who never removed his helmet, they all carried chainswords. That left Tiverdak of the Steel Brethren. He held power mauls in both of his huge hands. They had all forgone firearms to honour Khorne. For this alone, they promised to be worthy opponents.

Samzar stepped forward and lifted his pistol into the air. Reluctantly, the assembled berzerkers calmed themselves, and Khârn walked to the edge of the pit. Looking down, the harsh lights created shadows from the jagged projections and ledges jutting out of the thick walls on all sides, some deliberately bolted on, others caused by weapons damage over the years. The sand on the floor would soak up the blood once it started flowing, and provided a good surface on which to fight. Khârn looked up to Lukosz and nodded his head in approval. The roar from the crowd almost drowned out the deafening clangs as the seven berzerkers dropped effortlessly into the pit below. Weapons powered up within seconds, and Khârn listened to the feral shouts and curses from the warband. Lukosz was staring at him, clearly astonished he had not jumped into the pit at the same time as the others. Khârn knew they would be waiting for him to descend. It was not this that concerned him.

The expression on Lukosz's face changed and, without breaking Khârn's gaze, he held up his power sword to command silence.

'Would you dishonour the Blood Father? Would you dishonour Khârn?'

The crowd stared at Lukosz, unsure of the reason for the interruption. In the pit below, weapons hungry for blood revved and crackled. If the warband did not understand the accusation, Khârn did.

'Who amongst you will show their allegiance? Who will be the eighth contender?'

Understanding swept through the ranks. Despondent murmurs turned to a low rumble, then a chant, then roars of blood rage. One berzerker barged through to the front and brandished his scimitar-styled power sword.

‘More blood for the Red God!’

Khârn nodded once to him, and without further pause, the new opponent threw himself into the pit. Khârn immediately followed. Landing next to the warrior, he brought his leg up into his flank and sent him reeling into Vadal. Within seconds, Malogot and Rocez were rushing towards the new addition who had only just brought his weapon to bear when they started their attack. The Blood Angel Capderado swung at Khârn with a bellow of fury, and he ducked only to find Tiverdak was perfectly positioned to smash a power maul into his exposed left arm. Khârn ducked backwards, catching one of the razor-sharp projections on the wall. The second power maul slammed into the plating scant inches away from Khârn’s head. Spinning away, he swept outwards with Gorechild, but Tiverdak and Capderado anticipated the move and jumped backwards. The first anonymous berzerker stood some way behind, watching the proceedings. As the three World Eaters hacked and slashed at the eighth opponent, one thing became absolutely clear to Khârn. Six out of the original seven who had gone into the pit were working together.

Capderado swung high with his twin-bladed axe, coming at Khârn fast. Of them all, the Blood Angel was the closest match to Khârn’s speed and power. Khârn brought Gorechild up and deflected the weapon away, but again Tiverdak came in with his power mauls. Khârn kicked out with his right foot and sent the former Steel Brother back into the centre of the pit, where the anonymous berzerker moved at last, taking it upon himself to launch his own surprise attack on Tiverdak. Khârn had no time to watch the outcome of their fight. Smashing Gorechild into the haft of Capderado’s axe, he threw himself forwards away from the wall and drove the Blood Angel backwards. Khârn heard Malogot shout something to Vadal and Rocez. They increased the intensity of their attack on the eighth opponent, who disappeared under the buzz of chainswords while Malogot charged towards Khârn from his left. When the blow from Sonva Bael’s power axe smashed into his right pauldron, Khârn cursed himself for losing track of the Alpha Legionnaire, who had kept in his blind spot since Khârn’s landing. Shaking off the discharge as it danced over his armour, Khârn swept Gorechild over his head and rammed it into the arm of his new attacker. The chainaxe tore through his rerebrace, thick ropes of blood spurting from the wound as the arm fell away to the floor. Khârn felt the roar of approval through the steel plates of

the pit rather than hearing it from above. He had drawn first blood.

A blur of metal from his left sent Khârn dropping to the sand, swinging Gorechild backwards towards Malogot and making him jump away. Sonva Bael bellowed at the top of his voice and picked up his fizzling axe with his remaining hand, but Khârn was ready and kept Gorechild swinging, rotating in a crouch and slicing into the side of the Alpha Legionnaire's helmet. The chain tore through the top, cleaving the upper dome off. Bael fell backwards onto the sand-covered decking, his brain slopping out from his opened skull. Malogot screamed over at Vadal and Rocez to finish their work and ran at Khârn, his chainsword spinning at full speed. Capderado waited for him to join his flank, then the two of them approached Khârn. The Chosen of Khorne jumped to his feet and trampled over Bael's body, backing up towards Tiverdak and the anonymous warrior who were fighting their own furious battle.

Behind them, Vadal was lying on the ground, blood pumping freely from his inner thigh. Rocez was driving his chainsword into the neck of the eighth, pushing it up to the hilt with a roar.

'God of Blood and Bone, be my witness!' Rocez bellowed in rage.

The body dropped to the floor next to Vadal, twitching violently from the fatal attack. Vadal turned and started towards Khârn, taking up position behind his two companions. Khârn smiled to himself. Swapping Gorechild from his left hand to the right, he thrust the chainaxe forward in a feint towards Capderado but twisted the handle to flatten the blade horizontally. Seeing a gap, Malogot charged forwards, chainsword held high and ready to come down on Khârn's head. Khârn angled himself to the side and threw all of his weight into Capderado, taking the blow from his axe on his right shoulder. Malogot turned as Khârn passed him. Gorechild sliced into the bottom of his helmet, cutting through the grille and exposing the lower half of his face as the ceramite dropped away.

Khârn felt a sickening blow smash into the back of his neck. His vision shifted to red and he spun away, bringing Gorechild out and around in a wide arc to carve himself some space. Shaking his head to clear his distorted vision, he saw Capderado advancing on him again. A crash came from his side, and Khârn glanced behind to see where the anonymous attacker had fallen to the bloody floor under a hail of blows from Tiverdak's power mauls. His helmet was fracturing under the frenzied blows. Within seconds, the Steel Brother would join in the attack on him.

'Kill! Maim! Kill!'

Khârn roared the words as he swung Gorechild before him. Capderado dodged right while Malogot moved left, leaving Rocez in the middle. Khârn did not go for the ruse; if he advanced further, the two would attack from the sides. Instead, he suddenly lunged towards Malogot, swatting away the sweep of his chainsword with Gorechild. Capderado and Rocez moved in as one, so Khârn swung out with the ancient chainaxe in his right hand as he barged into Malogot's chest, pushing him against the pit's wall with a squeal of metal on metal. Capderado tried to disarm Khârn with a weighty chop of his great axe, but Khârn dodged the swing and pushed his hand into the side of Malogot's helmet. Twisting the World Eater's face towards the wall, Malogot's cry of fury was cut short as Khârn rammed his exposed throat into a protruding spike, impaling him through his mouth in an explosion of blood and tissue. Khârn left the body hanging face-forwards as he positioned himself to take on the remaining three, who were fanning out to encircle him. They were giving him more space now.

‘Glory to the Blood Father!’

Rocez charged a fraction before Tiverdak, screaming his vow as he raised his weapon. Khârn parried the chainsword, but as he turned to keep Capderado in view, Tiverdak hit him squarely in the chest with one power maul. Khârn reeled with the blow. Rocez moved in again with his chainsword, but Khârn ducked and brought Gorechild up in a vertical slice. Rocez's arm was carved off and he fell back, cradling the stump of his useless limb and screaming in rage. Tiverdak came forward again, barging Rocez out of the way in his bloodlust. Capderado whirled his axe around his head and ran in from the other side. Khârn turned and kicked Capderado in the chest as he brought Gorechild's handle up to block Tiverdak's assault. Capderado spun away, and while Khârn managed to deflect one of Tiverdak's mauls, the other smashed into the side of his head. Distracted by the blow, Khârn felt his right pauldron begin to shudder. Rocez had recovered, and was now holding the chainsword in his good hand.

Khârn felt the teeth start to carve into his flesh. Instead of grinding into the bone, the chain suddenly stopped, jammed in the brass of his armour. As Rocez struggled to release the sword, Capderado and Tiverdak were blocked by the World Eater. Khârn jabbed with Gorechild's haft, violently repelling Rocez along with his weapon. As he reeled, Khârn circled his relic axe around with lightning speed and buried it in Rocez's shoulder. The Chosen of Khorne did not stop pushing until Gorechild had chewed its way from neck to armpit. As the body slid to the floor, Khârn could feel blood pouring down his right arm. His entire face hurt when he moved his jaw. Capderado and Tiverdak weighed their

weapons in their hands, closing in on both sides. Khârn sensed movement some yards away. Vadal had recovered his senses and was rising to his feet, the lower half of his armour caked in congealed blood. Khârn felt a thrill run through his body. Looking up, all he could see were milling, seething silhouettes looking down on the spectacle. More weapons rained down into the pit, the audience eager for more blood. Khârn would grant their wish.

‘Rejoice, Blood Father! Rejoice in the slaughter I bring you!’

As the three challengers fanned out, the noise from the baying crowd swept over Khârn. Vadal had the power scimitar from the eighth opponent in one hand and a chainsword in the other. It was clear that he was eager to make up for time spent senseless on the floor. Capderado maintained his position directly in front, while Tiverdak skulked behind. Despite being down to three opponents, Khârn realised the danger of the situation. This was what he lived for.

Vadal made his move. Khârn brought his right arm up to smash away the World Eater’s chainsword and swung Gorechild down into Vadal’s pauldron, partially severing his arm at the shoulder. Khârn pulled back on his chainaxe and it came away cleanly, making him step back to regain his balance. A mighty blow landed on the back of his neck, and the colour in his peripheral vision flooded red.

Khârn’s head shook fiercely from Tiverdak’s blow. Moving backwards towards the blood-soaked wall of the pit, the view around him started to change. His three attackers moved like shadows, then resolved themselves into white, fractured spectres, as if they were misshapen bones connected by some force he could not see. Blood began to seep up through the sand on the floor, and the jagged steel surrounding him faded to darkness.

Looking up out of the pit, the jeering berzerkers had disappeared, as had the ceiling of the chamber, to be replaced by the swirling maelstrom that was the warp.

The three white creatures moved before him in a line. They had no difficulty navigating the flowing river of blood in which he now found himself, and seemed oblivious to the howling winds and lightning that crackled and spat above. Behind them, a path of deep red flowed into the distance towards a glowing pearlescent orb on the horizon.

They were blocking his way, and Khârn knew instinctively what he had to do.

One of the creatures surged forwards, and Khârn met it head on. He swung Gorechild with a roar, and the spectre broke apart into a thousand fractured shards of bone. The second creature then came at him, but this one’s body had changed. It now had wings, and the lightning lanced down upon it from above,

lighting it up in a brilliant display and burning its image into his retinas. Dazzled, Khârn tried to blink the images away and felt something hit him on his flank. He staggered back, but the power of the river pushed him upright and gave him momentum enough to swing Gorechild down onto the head of his phantom attacker. He followed the path of the lightning bolt from top to bottom and the abomination split in two, falling into the bubbling river as a pile of screaming skulls.

Khârn could not tell if he was really fighting or if he had been slain and was in the presence of the Blood God. If this was another vision, it had a visceral quality to it the other had not possessed. The searing pain in his shoulder was still there with every movement, and something told him the final creature hurtling towards him was real enough in its intent to do him harm. But then his view began to change once again: flashes of Capderado charging towards him, axe held in both hands, interspersed with his revelation. The red river receded and turned back into the floor of the pit, and the screaming winds became the howling snarls of the audience baying from above. Khârn bellowed in fury at the loss of his vision just as Tiverdak's power mauls smashed into the side of his helmet in a quick staccato.

Khârn's head spun with the impacts, and he stumbled back towards the wall, electricity arcing between the vanes of his helm. As he ducked out of the way of Capderado's mighty blow, he saw the two halves of Vadal's body on the floor. The blade of the Blood Angel's axe bit deep into the steel of the pit's side, and Khârn threw himself forwards, sending Capderado reeling to the blood-drenched sand.

Khârn heard the swoosh of Tiverdak's mauls as they passed over his head, and he rolled to the side, bringing Gorechild down into Capderado's neck as he did so. Such was the force of his blow, the chainaxe passed through his body and ate its way into the floor. A single heave did not free the weapon, so Khârn abandoned it with a curse. Springing to his feet, he grabbed a chainsword that had been thrown into the pit. It was no match for Tiverdak's power mauls. As the Steel Brother wheeled and spun them in a choreographed frenzy, the teeth were smashed away, rendering the weapon useless. Khârn threw himself towards the wall, seized the jutting handle of Capderado's axe and heaved, turning as it came away from the deep slash in the metal. Angling the blunted blade horizontally, he brought it under the side of Tiverdak's helmet. It did not have the dragon teeth of Gorechild to tear its way across his neck, but the power of the blow was enough to stun the Steel Brother. With a bellow of rage, Khârn pulled the axe free and

struck a second time.

The third hack resulted in the head being ripped away, and the body collapsed to the ground. As a hundred killers roared their approval from above, Khârn regarded the bodies before him. Eight skulls lay here for the Blood Father, yet his victory meant nothing. He still had no clarity, no further suggestion of destiny for him to follow.

A thick rusting chain appeared next to him, and Khârn looked up to see Samzar peering down, holding the other end. Angrily, he pushed it away and removed his ruined helmet. He would not be clambering out of this pit until he had claimed all of his trophies for the Blood God. The crowd surrounding the ledges had fallen silent. Khârn wiped his face with his bare left hand, and spat a bloody goblet onto the floor. He spread his chain-slung arms and raised Gorechild's still-hungry head.

‘Are there any more among you who wish to challenge me?’

Khârn turned in a slow circle, staring at the lines of berzerkers looking down at him.

‘Are there any more among you who feel they can serve the Blood God better than I?’

No one moved. Khârn felt his frustration turn to fresh anger.

‘I care not if you follow me or go your own way. But know this – only I can show you the Red Path. And why is this?’ Khârn bellowed at the mesmerized crowd.

‘Because I am the Chosen of Khorne!’

Roars and cheers erupted around the chamber, echoing off its iron walls.

‘Blood for the Blood God!’

Khârn lowered Gorechild.

Without warning, the walls of the pit shook violently and the lights set into the ceiling dimmed to near-darkness before flickering on again, now dark red. Khârn heard muted alarms in the decks above, then louder ones as they cascaded down into the depths of the *Skulltaker*. Donning his helmet, he grabbed the chain and pulled himself up. A series of explosions rocked him violently to the side and threatened to shake him loose. Samzar reached down and hauled him over the ledge. As Khârn got to his feet, Lukosz was shouting at the top of his voice to the warband.

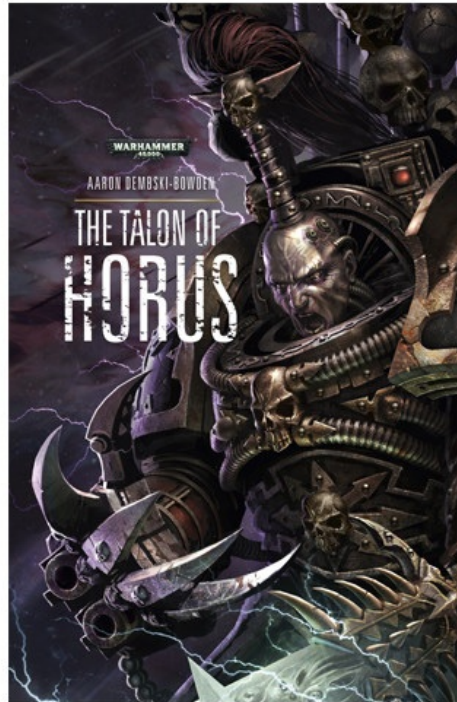
‘To your combat stations! Prepare to repel boarders!’

Despite the trial he had just endured, the blood pumped savagely through Khârn's veins. There would, indeed, be more blood for the Blood God.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Chris Dows** is a writer and educational advisor with over twenty years' experience in comic books, prose and non-fiction. His works for Black Library include the Warhammer 40,000 short stories 'In the Shadow of the Emperor', 'The Mouth of Chaos', 'Monolith' and 'Glory from Chaos'. He lives in Grimsby with his wife and two children.

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