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THE RED PATH 6

DISCIPLES
OF KHÂRN

A KHÂRN THE BETRAYER STORY
by CHRIS DOWS

The background of the cover is a dark, textured illustration in shades of red and black, depicting Khârn the Betrayer and his warriors. At the top center, the 'WARHAMMER 40,000' logo is displayed in a metallic, jagged font. Below the logo is a large, white, stylized Khârn symbol, which is a crown-like shape with multiple sharp points. The text is centered and arranged vertically below the symbol.

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THE RED PATH 6: DISCIPLES OF KHÂRN

Chris Dows



It was difficult for Locq not to smile. He was about to succeed in his mission, and would use it to press home his value to Abaddon, to present himself a worthy equal – or even successor – to Urkanthos. When the two additional ships sent by the Lord Purgator to join the *Malevolent Shade* had arrived alongside the captured and desecrated *Wings of the Eagle*, Locq had seen it as a clear reminder of Urkanthos' superiority. He had not gone so far as to have him replaced as commander, which was perhaps surprising given Locq's heavy losses during the White Scars attack and the costly encounter on the abandoned moon. Urkanthos' reasons were not known to Locq and he knew there was nothing to be gained in trying to divine them. The Chaos Lord had been right to say any failure on Locq's part would end his own service to Abaddon. What Locq had to do was make sure that the glory of victory reflected solely on *him*.

And so, as Locq stood on the blackened hangar deck of the *Skulltaker*, he felt supremely confident. Of course, it would have been easy for Khârn to raise that enormous chainaxe of his and charge at the boarding party, but with the numerical superiority Locq held both out in space and here on this wrecked ship, the berzerker would be doomed to failure. With his helmet removed, it was clear to Locq that Khârn was struggling to contain himself, but given the number of guns currently trained on the Chosen of Khorne, the captain felt sure he would be far more willing to listen to his terms this time around.

'Once again, Khârn, I bring a message from the great Warmaster Abaddon.'

Khârn did nothing more than glower at him. To his left, a berzerker growled something. Locq recognised him from the battle on the moon or, at least, the helmet with the broken horn he rested on one arm. A dozen of his motley

warband stood in a ragged line behind their leader, but all had the good sense to keep their weapons trained towards the deck. Locq knew there were scores more throughout the smashed vessel, but he had informed the *Skulltaker's* shipmaster that if any more than a dozen turned up to greet them, their ship would be annihilated. Locq had selected fifty Hounds to accompany him; he wanted odds of at least four-to-one just in case Khârn decided to sacrifice himself and everyone else to the Blood God. Growling over the whirring chainswords behind him, Locq continued, relishing every word.

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

Khârn shifted his weight slightly and looked past Locq to his contingent. His face remained impassive, which was more than could be said of his second. The champion with the half-horned helmet was twitching as if he had been hit with a bolt of energy.

‘We both know, captain, that if you do not... persuade me, you will die for your miserable failure,’ Khârn snarled.

Locq had lost control the first time he had faced Khârn. This time, he was not allowing the berzerker’s words to affect him. Locq had the upper hand in every way.

‘Your words neither impress nor cow me, Khârn. I am tasked with bringing you to the Warmaster, that is true. But it is a great honour to be charged with such a responsibility, although I must confess I do not understand why Abaddon would take even the smallest interest in a wretch like you.’

Locq revelled in the fire burning in Khârn’s eyes. Locq’s gaze flicked to the blood-soaked bandages covering Khârn’s left arm, which were tightening as the cable-thick muscles beneath them tensed. When Khârn replied, his voice was low and threatening.

‘I fight for no one other than the Blood God. I follow nothing but the Red Path.’

Locq had hoped Khârn would resort to his absolute devotion to Khorne. He had heard whispers of this ‘Red Path’ amongst the Hounds. Locq wanted to make Khârn pay with his head for the dishonour he had heaped upon him, but it might just be satisfaction enough to see him acquiesce to Locq’s demands in front of his own warriors. He, too, should taste the bitterness of degradation.

‘What if I were to tell you that Abaddon is showing you this Red Path, Khârn?’

Locq did not understand how Khârn’s hand had clasped around his throat so quickly. He felt his boots leave the floor and he suddenly found he could not breathe or speak. Furious warnings were shouted. Bolter muzzles and chainswords appeared from all directions in his peripheral vision, but right in the

middle of his focus snarled the face of Khârn, spitting words at him.

‘You dare suggest Abaddon is in charge of my fate? You know nothing of the Red Path. Nothing!’

Locq took hold of Khârn’s wrist and tried to pull it away. It would not move. Four gun barrels were hastily pressed into Khârn’s skull. Locq’s world was going dark when Khârn’s hand at last withdrew. Locq fell to the floor and, as he recovered, Khârn spat at his feet. The Hounds kept their weapons mere inches away from the Chosen of Khorne, but Locq could see that he did not even notice them. Khârn’s reaction proved that his words had provoked just the turmoil he had hoped for. Now was the time to press home his advantage.

‘If this path of yours exists, you are stumbling along it like a blind fool. Do you know why the Angels Eradicant were attacking you?’

Locq rasped and panted as he rose to his feet. Behind Khârn, berzerkers looked to each other over their raised weapons. Locq held his hands up and then lowered them. At first nothing happened, but when he turned and stared at his guard, they reluctantly stood down. Turning back, Locq could see that he finally had Khârn’s attention.

‘I intercepted the same astropathic transmission you did. But unlike you, I know exactly who it was sent to. The three Imperial vessels were protecting another ship, the *Light of the Emperor*, buying it time to reach its destination.’

As Locq’s voice returned to full strength, so did his resolve. Khârn continued to eye him dangerously.

‘A destination it has since reached. So you see, Khârn, perhaps the Warmaster *is* defining the Red Path for you after all.’

Khârn’s reply was full of dangerous intent, but there was something else Locq thought he could hear beneath it. Curiosity.

‘Where is this destination, Locq? Speak, before I take your skull.’

Locq rubbed at his neck and raised his chin. His mouth split to show a predator’s grin.

‘Salandraxis.’



Chapter Master Gaul slammed the hatch to the astropathic chamber on the *Light of the Emperor*, frustrated by his loss of temper but unable to forestall his fury. For several long seconds he stared into space, ignoring the whirring servitors that scudded and wheeled past him and the rumble of the ship as it idled in orbit

around Salandraxis. It was not unusual for those who had communed directly with psykers to be affected by their auras, but what occupied his mind had nothing to do with the unnatural surroundings he had just endured, nor the unsettling spectacle of the astropath delivering his interpretation. It was the content of the message that had flooded his bloodstream with adrenaline.

Three ships had been lost. Three captains. That was half of his strike fleet. The psyker had very few details, so he did not know if they had been destroyed outright or boarded and taken over by the forces of the enemy. When he had laid out the strategy with his commanders, they had agreed it was very risky to split the fleet but recognised that it gave them the best chance of surprising and destroying any threat. The geography of an expansive natural barrier in the void had given them a great advantage – the Phelbic asteroid belt was a navigational point at which any ship traversing the sub-sector had to leave the immaterium to take new bearings. The archenemy had detected the *Light of the Emperor's* transmission and taken the bait. Just thinking about Lozepath's hubris angered him. Gaul had clearly underestimated the strength of the enemy's forces – and their desire to capture the Living Saint. For all of his professed wisdom, Lozepath had to take the blame for this catastrophe. If the Saint had done what had been asked of him and maintained communication silence, they would not be in this position. But now they were, and Gaul had to take action.

It only took minutes to reach his private chambers, and by then the balance in Gaul's humours had returned. Despite the enormous and unexpected cost of his rearguard, he still had three ships in orbit, which in itself was a formidable force.

Gaul felt a hatred for his unknown enemy burn in his breast. So many of his warriors were lost to the void. Gaul sent an urgent message to a captain on one of his remaining vessels, then contacted the shipmaster and requested a scrambled long-range vox-channel to Chaplain Tentera. As the various channels switched to their required frequencies and the hail was sent out, Gaul paced the deck, hands clasped behind his back. A signal winked on the communications console set into the wall, and Gaul punched a button on the panel.

'Chapter Master Gaul. I trust all is well?'

Gaul could tell from the remnants of humanity in Tentera's distorted voice that he knew it was anything but. As Gaul rubbed his hand over the iron-grey stubble of his beard, he inhaled and replied in as measured a tone as he could muster.

'I regret to inform you, venerable Chaplain, all is far from well. I have just received an emergency transmission from the rearguard. They are lost.'

Tentera did not reply for some seconds. When he did, his voice was without

recrimination or alarm.

‘Your strategy was not without merit, Chapter Master. Lozepath arrived here safely, and we still have three cruisers and a considerable strike force to protect Salandraxis. I assume you will be securing reinforcements as a matter of urgency?’

Tentera understood that Salandraxis presented the next logical target. If the forces of Chaos were intent on destroying Lozepath, they would have to come here to do it.

‘Captain Tercada of the Second Company is communing with the astropaths as we speak. Our request to the Knights Unyielding will carry my personal seal. It may take weeks for them to mobilise a suitable force and transit here. They are spread across the Cadian Gate and fighting the forces of Abaddon in several systems.’

Tentera’s growl was distorted by the vox emitter that served as his voice, but it nevertheless conveyed his understanding of their position.

‘With your permission, I shall convene a council of war.’

Gaul nodded. There was no need to vocalise his agreement to this inevitable requirement. He would have to speak with Rendaj Mahal, the master of the *Light of the Emperor*, and the rest of his ships’ commanders to discuss the situation they now faced.

‘I shall be there in one hour.’



‘Salandraxis?’

Khârn’s patience was just about exhausted. He longed to throw himself at Locq and rip that grin from his face before carving up the rest of his so-called Hounds and taking their skulls for the Blood God. Unfortunately, given the condition the *Skulltaker* was in and his current situation, that would not help him reach this planet, wherever it might be. Khârn looked over to Samzar, who had said the name as if he had heard it before. Clearly, the Butcher’s Nails had not quite destroyed all of his memory. Khârn turned to Samzar and grabbed his arm with his bandaged left hand.

‘What do you know of this world? Speak.’

Khârn could see Samzar struggling to form words. His face was clouded by uncertainty, and Khârn could see Locq smiling out of the corner of his vision. Doubtless his time in the Black Legion had shown him the inevitable results of

his old Legion's destructive combat implants.

'It is... a place of great purity and holiness. Lukosz told me of it. Lukosz...'

Samzar's brows furrowed, and he looked around the hangar deck in sudden confusion. After a few seconds, Samzar seemed to return to his senses, although he stared into space as he spoke. The loss of his comrade had clearly unbalanced him.

'There is a High Temple, which—'

'Is the seat of Lozepath, one of the Emperor's Living Saints. It was his ship that broadcast the transmission you were moving to intercept – before you fell into the Imperial trap like the fools you are.'

Khârn did not react to the mocking tone in Locq's voice as he cut off Samzar. Instead his thoughts flew back to the encounter with the *Skulltaker's* astropath. It had babbled of a holy voice, its splendour passing through the warp with a dreadful radiance. Khârn ran his bloody left hand over the inactive teeth of Gorechild. As they caught the soaking bandages and tore away the suppurating flesh beneath, the burning pain barely kept his towering rage in check. He could almost see the Red Path forming before him.

'A shining pearl... gold in the darkness... gold in the darkness...'

Khârn wheeled back to face Samzar. The half-horned champion's words had trailed off into a mumble. Khârn's primary heart was thumping in his chest. Salandraxis was the golden planet from his vision, the same shimmering orb that had risen from the scarlet river sweeping him along the Red Path and then drowned in blood at his feet. Everything fell into place. Khârn could see his destiny so clearly now. Somehow, he had to get to Salandraxis.

With bitter realisation, Khârn also concluded that he would be unable to achieve this on his own. His mind raced as Locq stared past him to Samzar, lips curled in derision.

'Gold in the darkness... He speaks like a cowering dolt. It is time you abandoned this weak-minded, ill-disciplined rabble, Khârn. This is the last time I will repeat myself. Abaddon demands your presence.'

Khârn looked past Locq at his fifty-strong contingent and wondered how many of them had been with him during the fight on the abandoned moon. Not many, if the number of skulls Khârn's warband had harvested in their wake were any indication. And still, Khârn had felt something stir in their ranks when he had challenged their allegiance to the Blood God. If Khorne wanted his chosen warrior to take Salandraxis, he would surely give him the means to do so. Perhaps the solution had, indeed, been presented to him. He just needed to take

it.

‘Would Abaddon deny his warriors a glory such as Salandraxis? Would he order them to scuttle back to him with the Chosen of Khorne himself as a prisoner, rather than appease the Blood Father and take the head of a Living Saint?’

Locq’s mouth straightened at Khârn’s question and his eyes narrowed. Khârn ignored him and pressed on, addressing the warriors behind the captain.

‘Lozepath’s head is a trophy of great honour, a skull so pure and rare that its taking would bring glory not seen since the days when our fathers walked the stars. Think of the rewards Khorne would bestow upon you.’

Locq’s face was dark with rage. Khârn could see the upstart understood the sudden danger of his position. If he had judged Locq correctly, his next actions would only hurt his own cause further.

‘Prepare the transports for departure. Take Khârn. If he or any of his band resist, kill them. I will deliver him to the Warmaster, dead or alive.’

Khârn could hear the fury in Locq’s voice. Two dozen of the Hounds broke ranks and moved to seize him, bolters and blades raised. The rest of them did not.

‘You have your orders! Do as I command or I will have you executed as the cowards you are!’

For several long seconds, Locq’s Hounds looked to one another. Weapons began to turn towards each other. Khârn gave a booming laugh.

‘True followers of the Blood Father! You know what you have to do.’

A look of incredulity came over Locq’s face.

‘Kill! Maim! Burn!’

The hangar deck erupted in a volley of fire and the revving of chainswords. Khârn started up Gorechild.

‘If Abaddon wants to meet me, then he will go where I go – not send some snivelling dog in his place.’

Within seconds the cavernous drop-ship hangar was a writhing melee of armoured bodies. Despite the searing pain from his left arm, Khârn gloried in the confusion of battle. Three Hounds charged at him, but Samzar appeared from nowhere, throwing himself into their path and slashing furiously with his chainsword. Khârn spat an oath at the berzerker, but it gave him a split second of room to locate Locq. He was firing wildly towards Khârn, his bolts smashing into Hounds and berzerkers alike. Some of those still loyal to Locq had clearly realised the battle was over before it had even begun, and were fighting a

rearguard action as they ushered their captain back towards the Black Legion transports in which they had arrived. The rest of those warriors loyal to Locq blasted and sliced into anything that approached them, lost in their own bloodlust.

Khârn felt a salvo of explosive shells hit him in the back and he turned to see two Hounds adjusting their bolters straight at his unprotected head. With a roar Khârn swept outwards with Gorechild, catching the tip of one weapon and knocking the other hard enough for the exiting bolt to sail past his ear. Khârn whirled around on his injured leg to kick the closest assailant, but received a shoulder charge to the chest before his foot could connect. Crashing to the floor, Khârn rolled onto his side, barely avoiding the slice of a chainsword. A boot rushed towards his head, and he threw out his left hand to block the blow. Pain roared through his arm, the bandages soaking up fresh blood from his punctured flesh. Still he took hold of the attacker's ankle and pulled hard. There was a tremendous thumping sound, so loud it made the decking on which he lay shudder. Blood and gore splattered onto his face and he looked up to see that his assailant had disappeared in an explosion of heavy bolter rounds. The unmistakable whine of a Thunderhawk's engines filled the hangar deck and a decompression alarm began to blare. Khârn's urge to slaughter Locq and anyone who might get in his way would have to wait. He could not serve Khorne floating lifelessly in space.

Blast shields began sliding shut along the interior of the massive landing bay. Khârn caught sight of Samzar running towards the nearest, which was grinding down slower than the others on broken rails. Scrambling to his feet, Khârn felt the pull intensify from the opening outer shield. Perhaps Locq had ordered it breached after he had opened fire on the deck, perhaps one of his minions had activated the mechanism. Either way, Khârn knew he had seconds to get out of the chamber before everyone and everything not chained down was sucked into the vacuum.

Khârn staggered forwards towards the closing pressure door, ducking low to avoid the fire from Locq's ship as it departed. Rolling underneath the thick bulkhead with only a minuscule clearance, Khârn did not take the hand offered to him by a relieved-looking Samzar who loomed into view over him. As he rose he ignored the cries of victory from the handful of berzerkers and the Hounds of Abaddon that had heard the truth of his words and joined his warband. Ignoring his wounds, he began running towards the bridge of the *Skulltaker*. He only had minutes to complete what he had started and secure his fate.



Gaul arrived at the massive gates to the Astra Militarum barracks at the head of four 1st Company veterans clad in heavy crimson cloaks. Marching into the shadows cast by the uniform lines of towering rockcrete barracks and hangars, he looked over to the sprawling landing fields, fighters and troop transports arrayed in precise lines. The spire-mounted turrets that overlooked them bristled with weapons, and the wall that contained the base must have been twenty yards high. He had seen hundreds of such bases in his time. Unlike the Masters of many other Chapters, Gaul respected the place of the mortal soldiers of the Emperor and acknowledged the sacrifices they made in the never-ending fight against the forces of darkness. Unfortunately, if their approaching enemy included Traitor Space Marines – and he was certain it did – all of these machines would be swept aside like insects and the buildings levelled by the very same ships that had destroyed half of his fleet.

Turning into a spotlessly neat parade ground, he spotted two adjutants walking briskly towards him from the single-storey reinforced bunker that served as Colonel Balacet's headquarters and strategium. One carried a bulky field-issue datapad under his arm. The other bore only a look of sheer terror on his face. Luckily, it was the datapad-carrying aide who approached him first, voice low and eyes cast down as he bowed deeply to show his respect. His comrade did the same in a feeble attempt to hide his fear.

'Chapter Master Gaul. Colonel Balacet sends his apologies but we must hold the council in the vehicle maintenance hangar. It is the only structure that can accommodate Chaplain Tentera.'

Gaul did not break his stride. The second he had seen Balacet's headquarters, he had known that there was one member of the council that would not be able to fit inside the building without taking the doors off. In his heavily armoured tomb, Tentera would have had difficulty navigating the interior without causing significant damage.

'I trust this hangar is close by, adjutant. I am in no mood for delay.'

Gaul's speech rumbled from his helmet transmitter. To his credit, the officer did not appear cowed by his words and simply extended his arm towards a towering rectangular building with dozens of military vehicles lined before it. The other adjutant, however, looked as if all the blood had drained from his body. Gaul hoped he was not typical of the steel Balacet's troops possessed.

Striding past a series of Leman Russ tanks in various states of repair, Gaul

entered the high-ceilinged hangar through a pair of towering double doors. His retinue of veterans took position outside of the heavy shutter doors without a word, their helmeted heads betraying no emotion. Directly in the middle of the oil-stained floor, three battered metal workbenches had been dragged together to form a rectangular table. A hololithic projector base stood inactive on its top, and four chairs had been arranged around the outer edges. Gaul snorted to himself at the absurdity of him being offered a seat, but appreciated the respectful gesture from the lead adjutant nonetheless. Gaul ignored the dismissive look the canoness preceptor gave him as she stood talking to one of her seconds, arms folded, out of Balacet's earshot. The colonel was tapping on a hololithic cogitator, looking down and scratching his forehead underneath the polished peak of his cap, the display casting his face in pallid light. Tentera stood motionless to one side, steam issuing gently from the pipes connecting to his upper section.

Balacet looked up from his cogitator and nodded to the adjutants flanking Gaul. The one carrying the datapad strode forwards and placed it on the briefing table, while the other scuttled out of Gaul's sight and activated the closing mechanism on the doors. By the time Gaul had walked over to Tentera, the canoness had taken her place at the table and Balacet was seated, ready to begin proceedings.

'Where is Cardinal Astral Pradillo?'

Tentera's voice echoed off the thick rockcrete walls of the maintenance hangar. Gaul looked to the now-closed doors and frowned. As the representative of the Living Saint, they could make no decisions without him.

'The cardinal is on his way. You may not be aware but he met with an... accident recently. I am sure he will be here as soon as he can.'

Balacet's voice was hiding something, of that Gaul was certain. The Sister of Battle, Alecia, was trying not to look uncomfortable at the colonel's words but failing. If Tentera knew something of this 'accident', he had not informed his Chapter Master of it.

'Colonel, canoness preceptor, time is of the essence. We do not yet know the strength or nature of the threat, but we do know when it will likely arrive. The venerable Chaplain will have told you that while I have ordered reinforcements, they will not reach us before the enemy does. I note with satisfaction that the colonel's Thirty-Fifth Vodorian Grenadiers have mobilised, and assume the Order of the Divine Perfection are doing the same.'

Gaul looked to Alecia, who nodded in irritation at his questioning. He knew she would be. Gaul looked over to Tentera, who inclined his sarcophagus with a hiss

of pneumatics. The next subject for discussion was a delicate one, and Gaul was gratified that the Chaplain had agreed to broach the subject. He had been a gifted orator before his interment, and retained his sharp sense for diplomacy in his deathly state.

‘Given the facts so clearly outlined by Chapter Master Gaul, the Angels Eradicant motion to evacuate the Living Saint and take him to a place of safety.’

Gaul watched Balacet and Alecia’s reaction to Tentera’s words carefully. It was evident from their behaviour since his arrival at Salandraxis that they felt themselves more than capable of protecting the planet and its newly returned saviour. This particularly applied to the Adepta Sororitas, so Alecia’s angry reply did not surprise him.

‘The Sisters of Battle have fought and died with His Holiness and kept him safe for the past five years. We have no intention of relinquishing this honour now, particularly to the Angels Eradicant.’

Alecia’s nostrils flared as she snarled the last few words. Balacet cleared his throat and looked intently at the cogitator hologram in front of him in the silence that followed. Gaul’s reply was cool and focussed.

‘The best way to protect the Living Saint would be to take him from harm’s way, there is no doubt. I am not suggesting we abandon Salandraxis to its fate, but Lozepath represents a unique opportunity for the forces of Chaos.’

Balacet nodded at Gaul’s words and turned to look at Alecia. Her fingers were interlaced on the makeshift table, her hands trembling and her knuckles white with the strength of her grip. Gaul pressed on, sanguine now that his argument had got her attention.

‘Perhaps it is time the Sisters of Battle put the protection of their charge before their own desire for glory.’

Alecia was on her feet in seconds, sword drawn and moving angrily towards Gaul. Balacet jumped to his feet and shouted a warning, but her sword was swinging down towards Gaul’s head in the blink of an eye. The Chapter Master did not move as the canoness preceptor’s weapon was intercepted by the huge metallic claw of Tentera. Alecia went for a dagger at her belt, but Gaul reached forwards and enveloped her wrist in one huge gauntlet. Her face was barely an inch away from his as she growled her words at him.

‘How dare you question the devotion of my order? Wait until His Holiness hears of this outrage. He will banish you from this planet and disgrace the name of your Chapter forever!’

‘The Living Saint will do no such thing, because he shall not hear of this

nonsense.’

Gaul turned towards the doorway to the hangar. Framed in the tall, narrow rectangle of light was Cardinal Astral Pradillo, flanked by two junior clerics. Shuffling forwards, they guided the hooded figure by the elbows towards the table. Gaul released his grip on Alecia’s hand, as did Tentera on her sword, and she sheathed her weapons with practised grace. Returning to her position next to Balacet, she continued to glare at the Chapter Master as Pradillo was helped into a chair by his aides.

‘Cardinal, Chapter Master Gaul has requested His Holiness be taken from Salandraxis and moved to a safer location.’

Gaul nodded once to Balacet, and ignored the hiss of contempt from Alecia. All eyes turned to Pradillo, whose head bowed down slightly beneath his shroud in contemplation. After several moments, Balacet leaned over the table in anticipation of a reply. Gaul’s patience also began to wear thin. Perhaps the old cleric had not heard him.

‘Cardinal Pradillo, we urge you to forward this appeal to His Holiness as soon as possible.’

Pradillo moved his head slightly towards Gaul. Placing his trembling hands on the cold metal surface of the bench before him, he began to rise. His helpers moved to attend him immediately, but he waved them back. Balacet and Alecia looked up to his hidden face as Pradillo stared down at the plans and map holographs before him.

‘His Holiness will not leave this planet, and neither you nor I will ask him to do so. You will combine your efforts to formulate an insurmountable defence without further argument or discord. Any intelligence you receive in relation to the enemy’s strength and disposition, you will relay to me without delay.’

The old man’s voice might have been hoarse, but there was a strength to it that surprised Gaul. Regardless of the tone, he shared the indignation of Balacet and Alecia, who stared at Pradillo with undisguised fury at being chastised in such a way. Tentera had moved to Gaul’s shoulder in a gesture equally of support and restraint. Under normal circumstances the Chapter Master would have made it quite clear who was in command of his battle companies, but in the interest of mounting a successful defence, he was willing to accede to the Saint’s terms. He would hold his tongue, for now. Pradillo took a step back from the table and reached up to his hood as he spoke.

‘I shall give you this warning only once. Do not underestimate the enormous power His Holiness commands. The weapons you wield are formidable, but

Lozepath carries in him the might of the Emperor.’

At that, Pradillo pushed his hood back to reveal a skinless, blood-raw face with empty sockets where his eyes had once been. Only now did his voice falter.

‘And his wrath.’



The bridge of the *Malevolent Shade* boomed with yet another impact from a massive chunk of rock. Locq turned to vent his fury on Odervirk, but the shipmaster was too busy looking to his readouts to notice him. Calmly adjusting an array of dials on his command throne, he barked an order to rotate the cruiser a few degrees to starboard. Locq knew the *Malevolent Shade* was taking heavy damage, but it was infinitely preferable to the barrage three ships could inflict on them in open space, even if one of them was crippled. Given the situation he now faced, Locq wondered darkly if it might have been better to meet his fate on the transport retreating back to his flagship.

Khârn’s transmission to Locq’s fleet had come only minutes after his landing party had blasted its way from the *Skulltaker*. At first, Locq could not believe that the berzerker’s rallying cry to join him for the glory of the Blood God would have any effect, but within minutes reports were coming through that fighting had broken out on all four vessels under his command. Locq’s rage consumed him. To have so many Hounds of Abaddon desert his command was stupefying. Over the centuries, many warriors had sworn themselves to new allegiances, to other warbands and causes, but he had lost half of his fleet to Khârn and his berzerkers.

‘The enemy ships have moved out of range, Captain Locq. I would strongly suggest we exit this asteroid field to prevent further damage to ourselves and the *Eater of Souls*.’

Locq had ordered the retreat of the *Malevolent Shade* and his only other loyal vessel into the dubious protection of the Phelbic Belt as the last transport carrying Hounds loyal to Abaddon had landed on the hangar deck. He could not risk Khârn turning on his two remaining ships, destroying or disabling them with his superior firepower before continuing on his glorious Red Path. Noticing Odervirk was awaiting his answer, Locq nodded his assent and turned to leave the bridge.

The corridors of the *Malevolent Shade* were heaving with warriors. As he marched to his quarters, they nodded and grunted at him, clearly outraged at the

betrayal to their Warmaster and spoiling for revenge. Their anger was his anger, and Locq took solace in the fact that he now had a warband he could rely on to stay loyal. Stopping at a viewing portal, he looked out into space. Two of the destroyed Angels Eradicant vessels were still on fire in the far distance, and the third had broken into several large pieces. On any other day, he could have claimed this as a glorious victory. A loyalist fleet destroyed, their crews lost to the vacuum of space. And yet he faced the ignominy of presenting another failure to Urkanthos, if he did not already know from his spies amongst the ranks.

But then, had Locq caused this failure? Should he be blamed for a traitorous lack of faith to Abaddon? The Lord Purgator had clearly sent him weaklings and traitors. In that moment, Locq decided what his next course of action would be. He would not send a communication to Urkanthos, but to Abaddon himself. He would confess to the loss of his ships and warriors, and expose the Lord Purgator for choosing the cohort so poorly. Locq would proudly declare his intention to fulfil his oath – to take Khârn captive as he attacked Salandraxis. If he could not prevent him from going to the planet, Locq would ensure he did not leave.

And if that resulted in the berzerker's head being delivered to Abaddon separated from his body, so much the better.



Gaul needed to see the enemy with his own eyes. Standing on the bridge of the *Light of the Emperor*, he stared unblinking at the single cruiser approaching his flotilla at flank speed. From the second it had entered weapons range from the Mandeville point some distance from Salandraxis, the vessel had been bombarded by every weapon available to his diminished fleet. Shipmaster Rendaj Mahal had informed Gaul that it showed signs of heavy battle damage before their relentless attack had begun, presumably inflicted by his three destroyed ships. Gaul did not waste his time hoping that this was the last surviving enemy vessel. Optimism was for the deluded.

‘The ship is travelling so fast, it must be unable to resolve an accurate firing solution, Chapter Master. In fact...’

Mahal squinted at a screen and checked several other readouts before she continued talking from her command chair.

‘It appears to not be firing at all.’

Gaul gripped onto the burnt, distorted vambrace covering his forearm. There

had been no attempt to engage the *Light of the Emperor* or either of the two cruisers flanking the battle-barge. This was as unusual as it was suspicious.

‘Chapter Master, it is increasing speed directly towards us.’

The bridge fell silent as the officers and crew awaited commands. Gaul looked to Mahal. She responded with a single nod.

‘All ships. Concentrate all batteries on the bow of the enemy vessel. Destroy it!’

The *Light of the Emperor* shuddered under the power of its own guns, the very fabric of the huge ship shaking under the strain of constant firing. An alarm went off on the arm of the command throne. Mahal punched it silent without looking down and turned to the lower deck, shouting an order in her clear, deep voice to bring the ship about so the profile they offered to the attacker was as narrow as possible.

‘My lord, attitude change in the target vessel. It is increasing acceleration further and heading between us and the *Eradicant Ascending*.’

The commander threw herself back in front of her main screen. Something passed over her face that Gaul could not read, and then the entire bridge tilted to one side. As he took hold of a support rail to steady himself, an enormous booming resonated throughout the ship. A dozen alarms cried for attention and steam hissed from overloaded conduits. Another explosion followed, and the lights inside the bridge flickered. Gaul had the advantage of his armour to anchor him to the deck. The ship’s mortal crew were not so fortunate, and many of them lay broken and bleeding around the command centre.

‘Report!’

Gaul knew they had been hit, but not by what. The shipmaster looked dazed, and shook her head to clear her thoughts.

‘The enemy ship... detonated its engines, Chapter Master. We are badly damaged along the port side. The *Eradicant Ascending* is...’

Gaul leaned forwards and slammed his fist onto the commander’s chair in fury.

‘What? What of it?’

‘Gone, Chapter Master. It has been destroyed.’

Sirens blared and warning lights flashed. The *Light of the Emperor* was mortally wounded. Gaul knew it, and the shipmaster knew it. She looked up at him, blood trickling down her face from a cut somewhere beneath her short black hair.

‘I suggest you evacuate the vessel with your battle-brothers immediately, Chapter Master. Two more ships have just emerged through the transit point.’



The drop-ship bucked and rocked as it hit the thin air of Salandraxis' upper atmosphere, but Khârn was too engrossed in cleaning Gorechild to notice. Mica-dragon teeth needed no sharpening, so he concentrated on ensuring the track through which they spun was free of obstruction and damage. It was almost a religious ritual to Khârn, and it was the closest to relaxation he ever came.

A low growling filtered into his ears, and he looked up from the curved span of Gorechild's rust-red blade to see Samzar staring down at the deck. Khârn could hear him whispering to himself, and noticed that both his hands kept clenching and unclenching involuntarily. Since taking Lukosz's skull, Samzar's descent into the grip of his Butcher's Nails had worsened. Lukosz had been a fine warrior and an asset. Samzar, on the other hand, would soon cease to be of any use. Not that it mattered. As soon as he touched down on Salandraxis, Khârn would leave the berzerkers to fight their own battles. He had but one objective in mind – the skull of the Living Saint.

Khârn felt the transport drop and heard its engines scream in protest as the Warpsmith pilot ducked and slid around the flak exploding all around them. He was a Hound of the Black Legion, and proving to be as good as his claims.

The plan to cripple the loyalist vessels protecting Salandraxis had worked better than Khârn had expected. Roderbar had insisted that the *Skulltaker* could still serve a useful function in battle, despite its severe damage, and had been proven right. Roderbar had oathed the *Skulltaker's* machine priests to destruct the engine core and set her course to slide between the Angels Eradicant vessels. For his part, Khârn would have preferred Roderbar to have steered the ship himself, but the shipmaster had pointed out with forceful indignation how he had played no small part in keeping Khârn on the Red Path, and could continue to do so given the chance. Even Samzar had come to his aid in a moment of lucidity. So, Khârn's flag had been transferred to the White Scars vessel, allowing the Hounds of Abaddon to retain their ship. Even now, both were engaging the last intact Angels Eradicant vessel and raining down destruction onto Salandraxis in support of the ground attack.

'Approaching the outer perimeter of the main citadel. I cannot get any closer, Lord Khârn. The air cover is too heavy.'

As if to prove the pilot's point, a shockwave hit the outside of the Thunderhawk and the transport rocked with the impact. The augur readings of the planet's surface had shown just how well defended it was, and with a singularly powerful

energy signal coming from the High Temple overlooking the citadel, Khârn's target had revealed itself. In time the Astra Militarum and Adeptus Astartes would reinforce Salandraxis Municipalis from other parts of the planet, but by then it would be too late. This so-called golden pearl would be bathed in blood. Khârn gripped the flesh bindings of Gorechild's haft and tested his left hand. The swelling had finally receded on his arm but the skin was a mass of open sores. Even so, most of his strength and flexibility had returned. He was ready.

'Approaching the landing zone. Ready yourselves.'

Khârn relaxed his body as much as he could for the inevitable hard landing. All but one of the power-armoured figures around him did the same.

'Lukosz? Report! Lukosz...'

Samzar was looking around the interior like a caged animal, the broken horn on his helmet only adding to the illusion. Khârn knew once the red mist descended upon him that his focus would be on carrying out his mission, but until then his mounting confusion was making him unpredictable. Khârn kept Gorechild at the ready in case Samzar decided to start his killing before they landed.

The drop-ship crashed to the ground, its weapons booming in a constant protective barrage as the frontal assault ramp fell open. Buckles were unhooked and weapons drawn in the blink of an eye, and Khârn stormed down the ramp at the head of two dozen berzerkers. Before him, huge smoking craters revealed the bombardment that had been visited upon a smashed and broken avenue. A few hundred yards ahead, a line of Astra Militarum troops had dug a long trench into the rockcrete expanse. Tanks and personnel carriers fired at him from irregular intervals, the line peppered with gaps where the orbital attack had torn the ground asunder. To his left and right, Khârn felt the roar of further transports landing and disgorging their raging cargoes, swelling his numbers with a sea of scarlet-and-black armoured figures. An approaching Thunderhawk exploded in a fireball, showering flaming debris and bodies in all directions. Khârn ducked a spinning chunk of metal and bridged the remaining distance towards the line of troops, their ordnance sailing wide or ricocheting off his armour. The ground exploded just before him, and he ducked towards the remains of a building. Scaling its collapsed roof, he used the angle to throw himself into the air, landing on top of an advancing Leman Russ and driving Gorechild into its astonished commander. Within seconds the khaki line was consumed by a wave of power-armoured figures, and the cries of terror filled Khârn with joy.

In the near distance, Khârn could see the high wall that surrounded Salandraxis Municipalis. With its huge metal gates, the city truly did shine with a golden

light, but with Khorne's blessing he would extinguish it before the day was out. Under the bright sunlight, Khârn could see the unmistakable glint of sun on power armour. Figures emerged from the decorative battlements, spreading out equidistantly across its expansive length. Khârn did not need any of the filters or amplifiers in his helmet to confirm who they were. The Angels Eradicant awaited him.



The canoness watched the landing pattern of the enemy's drop-ships and gritted her teeth with fury. In the courtyard below, her Sisters of Battle were checking weapons and attending to their prayers, readying themselves for an all-out assault. Alecia's desire to slaughter the heretic was raging through her, and the sight of the Chaos ships descending from the clear blue sky like a plague of insects had stirred her blood. She knew her order would have to fight for the life of the Living Saint today like they never had before.

From her position on the ramparts, she could see the main force of Angels Eradicant readying themselves to her right. Below her, just less than half of her Preceptory were marshalled in the huge courtyard, boarding Immolator and Rhino tanks. Within the next few minutes, the ornately decorated portcullis beneath her feet would open and she would be at the head of a counter-attack. It would not be a moment too soon. The bombardment had already reduced much of Salandraxis Municipalis to rubble and had broken Balacet's 'line of steel' – deployed to ring the entire city – into a fractured mess. What was left was currently being hammered out of existence. Balacet's plan had been simple and quite bold, but there were limits to what a static line of defence could achieve against these superhuman heretics. Their air cover had done as much as it could to reduce the number of enemy drop-ships that had landed, but the few Navy wings that had been stationed on the planet had been decimated. She had warned Balacet that the enemy would not spread out their attack across the planet, and that they would thrust straight for Municipalis. Still, he had refused to commit all of his troops and aircraft to defending the citadel. They would return here now that the enemy was committed, but exactly what might be left to defend by the time they arrived only the Emperor knew. Gripping her power sword, she angrily dismissed such negative thoughts. If the enemy managed to get through the Angels Eradicant, which was highly unlikely, they still had to deal with her faithful Sisters.

A series of explosions lit up the district ahead, throwing chunks of machines and bodies into the air. Even from this distance, the ground shook beneath Alecia's feet with the destruction being unleashed on the ruined avenue before her. Salandraxis was such a beautiful planet, a real shining pearl of the Imperium. By the day's end, it would be ugly and scarred, but she would never let it be corrupted by the forces of Chaos. Turning around, she looked to the High Temple, its magnificent columns and glass dome shining in the sunlight. For a second she considered going back on her commitment to Balacet and Gaul. She had sworn to face the enemy before they arrived at the citadel, but the temptation to take command of her cohort on its sacred ground was great. His Holiness had to be protected. If the heretics got inside the temple, the havoc they could wreak would be unthinkable.

No. It would not come to that. There was a significant garrison of Sisters left within and around its golden walls, and she had seen the power Lozepath could wield from his throne. Any attack would be short-lived. She must stay true to her word.

Alecia's eye was drawn to a breakaway group of berzerkers moving swiftly to the left of her view. The group was relatively small, around forty armoured bodies, but they were moving fast and with purpose around the craters and between the burning buildings. They were approaching the main entrance to the city, at the end of the grand avenue. It was, of course, heavily defended, but based on the way the spearhead currently driving towards the Angels Eradicant had slashed through Balacet's ranks, they needed to be cut off before they got there.

Alecia descended the open stone stairs leading to the courtyard and signalled for the portcullis to be opened. Raising her power sword, she scaled the angled forward section of her Immolator, took her place in the command seat and swung the blade forwards to signal their exit from the compound. Within five seconds she had rumbled through the columns supporting the broad canopy that ran the entire length of the wall, and within ten the break-off group of berzerkers had spotted them. Alecia ordered the lead vehicles to open fire, but with the road narrowing before them, they could only advance three abreast. A shadow flashed overhead, then another. The Rhino to her left exploded in a fireball, a wing of Thunderhawks booming across the ruined city in a wide turn. The attack force would be torn apart if they stayed in the open.

Alecia screamed into her vox for the column to break formation and all Sisters to get out of their transports. The rear of her Immolator was hit, and she pitched

forwards onto her stomach with a sickening impact. Fire belched from the back of the machine and she heard frantic shouts from within. Jumping out, she hit the ground hard and turned to help free those Sisters trapped inside. At that moment, the berzerkers appeared, running at full speed towards the vehicles.

Turning from the Immolator and breaking into a sprint, Alecia headed straight for the nearest of her foes, a lumbering champion with a broken horn on his helmet. With a cry of praise to the Living Saint, Alecia leapt into the air as more Sisters swarmed past her to join the melee.

The blow from her sword should have taken the berzerker's arm off at the shoulder, but despite his laboured gait, he angled his body just in time to deflect most of its power. Alecia kept on following the arc of her attack, the tip of her sword jarring across the rockcrete ground. Bringing her weapon in, she threw herself forwards just as the berzerker's chainsword swept past the top of her head. Alecia felt the fur on her cloak tear away. Roaring in fury at the desecration, she raised her inferno pistol and pumped two super-heated blasts into the back of the attacker. The first dissipated on the surface of the armour, but the second penetrated the ceramite and created a satisfyingly large hole towards the base of his spine.

Alecia heard a howl of pain and flanked the abhorrence as it turned to attack her. She needed to move fast in order to finish the creature, and had just drawn the angle to fire another salvo when she felt a tearing sensation in her abdomen. Confusion overwhelmed her. The berzerker had turned before she could pull the trigger, that was obvious, but he was just standing there, watching her, without his weapon. Alecia tried to raise her sword, but something got in the way. Looking down, she saw the hilt and handle of a chainsword sticking out of her stomach. The chain was still spinning, throwing out gouts of flesh and innards as it chewed away at her body. With the realisation of what had happened came the pain, and with a bellow of rage she dropped her own sword and tried to remove the churning weapon from her body. As blood gushed from the gaping wound, she fell to her knees. The berzerker with the broken horn bore down on her, and she raised her pistol to fire. Whether she hit her target or not, she would never know.



Shells exploded and energy beams lanced around Khârn's head from all directions. The Astra Militarum had been overrun, and thanks to the narrow

swathe of destruction he had singlehandedly carved, berzerkers and defected Hounds of Abaddon were streaming through their broken ranks behind him. The Imperial forces still had some positions on their flanks, and Khârn heard several of the warband fall to shots in the back, but that did not stop their relentless charge towards the walls of the citadel and the towering gate set into the middle of the high fortification.

He had promised those who would follow him glory beyond measure, and they would start with taking the skulls of the Angels Eradicant on the ornate battlements. Several berzerkers had joined him on either side, firing their weapons wildly at the statue-like figures on the wall. Khârn knew they would not hold their position for much longer, such would be their desire to avenge their fallen battle-brothers.

To the extreme left and right of his vision, Khârn saw the loyalist defenders begin to drop from the wall in a wave of plunging bodies, leaping clear of the supports and decorative columns. Twenty, thirty, forty Space Marines fell to the smashed avenue and began running towards him, creating a pincer movement. Supporting fire erupted from the remaining Angels Eradicant, bringing down several exposed berzerkers with careful aim as they rushed to join combat with the charging Imperial forces. In seconds, half a dozen Space Marines were nearly upon Khârn, bolters blazing and chainswords raised high. Two were intercepted by berzerkers keen to claim their first major trophies of the day, and one was leapt upon by one of the Hounds of Abaddon, the impact of his attack smashing the Angel Eradicant into the hard ground. This left three for Khârn – not enough. A bolt hit his right vambrace and he rolled with the impact, whirling into a crouch and bringing Gorechild across in a wide, arcing blow. Its blade caught the greave of the closest Angel Eradicant's left leg and cut through the armour to the bone, sending him crashing down. Khârn rolled out of the way to avoid the bolter fire from the second and third assailants, which thudded into the ground, sending chunks of rockcrete flying in all directions.

Khârn swept his left arm wide and threw Gorechild at the furthest attacker. Carving its way through the Space Marine's bolter, the head of the chainaxe ate into his lower abdomen and kept on chewing until it became stuck in the groove it had carved for itself. Khârn threw out the chains attached to his arm, catching the closest Angel Eradicant's bolter, and his shot buzzed past Khârn's helmet. Khârn yanked on the chains, pulling himself to his feet and firing his plasma pistol point-blank into the warrior's faceplate. Ducking to retrieve Gorechild from the fallen Space Marine, he avoided the volley of fire from the third and

brought the chainaxe into the last Angel Eradicant's flank. Two shots into his throat yielded a third trophy for the Blood God.

All around him, the battle raged. As Khârn turned to find more skulls to harvest, he felt a low rumble through his feet. Thinking it was additional Angels Eradicant dropping to the ground for another assault, he took several steps back and levelled Gorechild, ready to strike whoever might approach. The vibration came again, this time much stronger. On some unseen signal, the Angels Eradicant withdrew from their close-quarters combat on the killing field. Some of the berzerkers followed their combatants, only to be met by a hail of fire from the ramparts. Something was not—

The world spun, then Khârn found himself lying on his side. His left arm was bleeding profusely, and his head was singing with concussion. Something had hit him so hard that he had been thrown away from his position at the foot of the gate. Dragging himself to his feet, he could see many of the warband trying to recover through the thick cloud of dust that was swirling around them. Their armour was dented and battered by the huge chunks of rock and masonry that now lay between them. Something had hit them in a devastating wave, smashing them to the ground in a barrage of blasts. The rumbling in the ground came once again, this time a rhythmic pounding, increasing in magnitude with every thump. Khârn turned to the gate.

It was open.

A thick blanket of dust was drifting out from it, and a shape formed through the cloud as it moved forwards into the daylight. It was a Dreadnought in the sand-and-black of the Angels Eradicant, stomping onto the avenue with holy parchments fluttering in the heat wash. Behind, outlines of heavy armoured vehicles flanked the lumbering figure, their guns trained on the gateway through which the machine had just marched. Anyone who tried to bypass it would be eviscerated in their defensive fire.

As the air cleared, Khârn saw the Dreadnought was tracking left to right in search of targets, its twin-linked heavy bolter following the path of its targeting reticules. Multiple flashes came from behind it, and Khârn threw himself to the ground as tank shells screamed overhead. The ground erupted behind him and showered him in stone and dismembered parts of bodies from those of the warband who had not moved quite fast enough to avoid the salvo. A heartbeat later, more explosions rocked the ground, galvanizing Khârn into action. Covering fire rained down from the Angels Eradicant on the top of the wall, laying down a deadly hail of shells, cutting down the berzerkers still in open

space. Khârn knew he could not hope to match the Imperial firepower from such a range, and with his flanks cut off he was left with only one option.

Khârn charged towards the wall on his left, hoping the Dreadnought would not be fast enough to track his rapid progress in time to fire. Bolts from the Angels Eradicant exploded all around him, and the roar of the Dreadnought's heavy bolter was matched by the oaths of his berzerkers as they returned fire. There were still enough of them on the field to pose a threat to the machine, and this gave Khârn just enough time to get behind a thick column and shelter from the withering fire. Throwing himself flat against the cylindrical stone support, he looked up to the decorative buttress above him. What little cover it promised was soon torn apart in concentrated fire from above, and debris rained down on Khârn. Without warning, he was lifted from the ground and crashed into the wall, bouncing off its unforgiving surface and crunching to the ground. A dark shadow fell over him as the Dreadnought stopped before him, gun arm trained directly at his head. Sharp hisses of steam escaped from its short, powerful legs, then a deep electronic voice scratched its way through the dusty air.

‘You dare to challenge the might of the Emperor, heretic? You dare to sully this hallowed world with your corruption and depravity?’

Khârn heard a series of clunks as fresh ammunition was chambered into the bolter hovering before his face.

‘For this, you will die.’

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