

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**



THE RED PATH 7

THE SKULLS OF  
SALANDRAXIS

A KHÂRN THE BETRAYER STORY  
*by* CHRIS DOWS



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# THE RED PATH 7: THE SKULLS OF SALANDRAXIS

Chris Dows



Locq watched the tactical projection on the bridge of the *Malevolent Shade* with a deep sense of satisfaction. Some of the information flickering before him was incomplete or had a high degree of potential inaccuracy, but the picture was clear to see. Khârn was being overwhelmed and outmanoeuvred by the Imperial forces down on Salandraxis. The mortal defenders' losses had been considerable, but their sheer numbers compared to the Khornate berzerkers looked very likely to be in Locq's favour. The Sisters of Battle and Adeptus Astartes warriors were also directly engaged with Khârn's warband, and with dozens of Locq's Black Legion gunships speeding towards the planet's capital, he would finally have his revenge.

'Captain, we are receiving another warning from Khârn's flagship. Shall I order the attack and destroy them?'

Locq considered Odervirk's query. They had arrived to find the remains of the Angels Eradicant fleet and what was left of the *Skulltaker*, but Khârn's flotilla had paid a high price in their battle to reach Salandraxis. The Black Legion ship that had once sailed with Locq floated lifelessly in high orbit, its drive section a sea of flames. While still operational, the former White Scars vessel had sustained heavy damage to its starboard side. The *Malevolent Shade* had taken a pounding within the asteroid field despite Odervirk's best efforts, but it was in far better shape than the enemy – and his fleet outnumbered the *Wings of the Eagle* two to one. It would not take much effort to finish off the vessel and its treacherous crew. It was an appealing prospect; Locq would gladly see every one

of those who had deserted Abaddon for the Chosen of Khorne die. Unfortunately, destroying the ship would take too much time. Locq had not expected the situation on their arrival at Salandraxis to be so much in his favour, and after his previous experience of Khârn he was going to press home any advantage without delay.

‘Do they have the capability to prevent us from making planetfall?’

He could not afford to commit all of his Hounds of Abaddon to their transports only to take heavy casualties before they reached the ground. Locq had learned too many bitter lessons over the last few weeks, and now that the gods smiled upon him once more he was not going to jeopardise his return to favour in the eyes of his Warmaster. The communication he had sent Abaddon days past had been acknowledged without response, which he had found disappointing if not surprising. Nothing had come through to him from his master Urkanthos. That was as expected, because Locq had forbidden all external communication from the *Malevolent Shade* the second they had left the Phelbic asteroid belt. Locq was convinced that the overwhelming majority of those warriors left on board would remain loyal, but he could not discount the possibility that the Lord Purgator still had spies among them that would report back to their master that he had lost half of his force to Khârn.

‘No, my lord. The hangar bays on both ships are either empty or open to space. I believe the enemy have committed their entire force to the planet. In their present condition, they pose no threat.’

Locq stared at the projection and watched the various runes and symbols move around in a pattern that belied the slaughter taking place. Despite trying, the bridge crew had been unable to isolate Khârn as a discrete signal. It looked as if a breakaway group of berzerkers were heavily engaged with an armoured column that was blocking their way to the High Temple of Salandraxis Municipalis. It was a reasonable tactical deployment and they had good air support, but it was not the one that caught his eye. Judging by the concentration of fire on the city’s rear wall and the numbers of berzerkers and treacherous Hound forces committed to the engagement, Khârn was most likely to be in the middle of that battle. It would take approximately eighteen minutes to arrive on Salandraxis, and that spearhead group would be Locq’s target.

‘Very well. Ready the drop-ships. Once we are dispatched, you may do as you wish in relation to the enemy vessel. One more wreck floating in orbit will make no difference to me.’

Locq gripped the handle of his chainsword and marched off the bridge. The

time had finally come to bring Khâm before Abaddon – dead or alive.



Gaul stared down at the shimmering blade of Acritus, his reflection as distorted as his temperament. Around him, the transport shook and rattled at top speed. The last transmission to come from the *Light of the Emperor* had been fractured, but more than enough for him to realise the situation was grave. Shipmaster Mahal had eliminated one of the enemy vessels that had attacked in the wake of the *Eradicant Ascending's* destruction, but the appearance of two additional warships shortly before communication had ceased left little doubt about the fate of the battle-barge or their adversaries' identity.

They were facing an invasion force of one the original Traitor Legions, the blood-crazed World Eaters.

Outside of Municipalis, Colonel Balacet's main defensive line had been torn asunder, and Gaul had not heard from Canoness Preceptor Alecia since she joined battle against a spearhead group of berzerkers heading for the central avenue. With Tentera and the bulk of the 2nd Company engaged at the rear wall of the citadel and a second wave of invaders on their way, Gaul was free to support Alecia's counter-attack. They would also bolster the defences of the city and secure the biggest landing area close to its walls.

'We will be touching down in thirty seconds. Stand by for deployment.'

Gaul held his relic blade up before him and saw a number of his brothers bow their heads at its appearance. Fury coursed through his veins at the loss of his fleet. His Chapter had sustained enormous losses, and his hatred for the forces of Chaos knew no bounds. He would take this rage and loathing, form it into a cold, hard blade more powerful than Acritus itself and plunge it into the soulless heart of the enemy. They would know the might of the Angels Eradicant. He would cleanse this world in the name of the Emperor.

The Thunderhawk's weapons began hammering out a preparatory barrage, and the interior of the hold shook violently as the ship hit the ground. Within seconds the door was open and Gaul was on his feet, running out at the head of his phalanx. Behind him, two more gunships deployed in palls of smoke and fire.

The Chapter Master had not spent a lot of time on Salandraxis, but even he was struck by the carnage visited upon the planet in such a short time. The landing area was the very same spot at which he had arrived so triumphantly with Lozepath, but the avenue down which they had walked was a burning ruin.

Those buildings that had not disappeared into enormous gaping craters were ablaze, and every statue that lined the way to the High Temple had been destroyed. There was no sign of Canoness Alecia or her armoured column, and the plumes of thick black smoke behind the shattered buildings to his left suggested they had not made it this far. As he looked to the citadel, most of it was obscured by sheets of flame. He could not even see the approach to the High Temple through the acrid gloom. Chaos had rained down its darkness onto this shining pearl, and it was up to him and his brothers to save it from eternal damnation.

The ground erupted into chunks of stone and earth. Gaul looked up to see an enemy gunship approaching and signalled to Captain Maedinar of the 1st Company to address the threat. As the captain's Sternguard Veterans took aim at the closing Thunderhawk with a pair of lascannons, Gaul knew that it was already neutralised. Within five seconds Maedinar had deployed a handful of brothers to secure the massive landing field, and within ten Gaul was leading the remainder of the 1st Company at full charge up the avenue towards the citadel.

The explosion blew Gaul off his feet. Thumping into a still-smoking crater, he quickly scrambled upright only to find that Epileus, one of his best Vanguard Veterans, had been hit squarely in the chest by at least two missiles. Parts of his armour lay strewn around the broken walkway, his battle-brothers crouching and laying down a salvo in the direction of the fire. Somewhere behind, Gaul could hear his drop-ship lifting into the air at the head of the flight. He bellowed a warning to its commander but it was too late; a second wave of missiles streaked overhead and into it, catching the bottom of the cargo pod just as it cleared the ground. The underside disappeared in a dazzling white flash and the Thunderhawk pitched forwards, its nose smashing into the ground as the company scattered out of its way. Gaul threw himself into the belly of the crater, avoiding the blast wave that came a fraction of a second later. He felt the heat sear over him in a sheet of burning promethium, but the instant it had passed he was up on his feet. Signalling his squads to maintain their position, he advanced alone, staying low until he could fully ascertain the location and strength of the enemy.

Another salvo streaked towards him, and through the clearing smoke ahead Gaul could see about two dozen figures – squads of Havocs – armed with missile launchers and autocannons. Behind them, past their trophy-hung Rhino transports, the steps to the High Temple were consumed by a mass of swarming bodies. Some of them wore scarlet power armour, but most were clad in black.

The Sisters of Battle were fighting at suicidally close quarters with the berzerkers to protect the Living Saint's sanctuary and, from what Gaul could see, they were losing. Ducking around the side of the Thunderhawk's gutted shell, he ran wide and used the broken statues for cover, weaving out into the avenue only for rockets to sail past him and plough into the ruined gunship as his brothers laid down supporting fire behind him. Gaul faced a choice. He either charged the well-positioned Havoc squad and took the losses that would surely come, or he looked for a way to get around them. The wall of the citadel stretched into the distance to the left and right, explosions and plumes of smoke telling their own stories of deadly combat. The situation provided only one logical course of action.

'Sergeant Ordelon, take your squad down the left flank. Kodaalak, break right. Concentrate fire on the transports behind the heavy weapons strongpoint. Captain Maedinar, I will draw fire so you can target the traitors from your position.'

The acknowledgements came immediately. Gaul tightened his grip on Acritus and checked his bolter for ammunition.

'Keep low, move fast and do the Chapter honour.'

To the eternal credit of his brothers, a few of them actually chuckled at the parade-ground instruction.

'For the Emperor!'

The thunder of autocannon fire started the second Gaul broke cover. Missile contrails reached towards him, some shells exploding forwards to hinder his progress, others aimed directly at his brothers. Running at full speed, he fired in short bursts, keeping his aim as he advanced. A berzerker emerged from a Rhino's top hatch and opened fire with the combi-bolter over the heads of the Havoc squad. Gaul heard the strangled grunts of his brothers as they shrugged off explosive hits. In response, the forward armour of the vehicle disintegrated in a series of searing beams, and the head of one of the Havocs disappeared in a smear of blood as Maedinar's bolter found its first target. Gaul felt a thump in his chest that spun him to one side, but he recovered quickly and kept on running towards the line. Ordelon had caught up with him on the left with half a dozen of his warriors still with him. There was no sign of Kodaalak on the right. Enraged, Gaul shouted over the din of battle.

'Grenade the enemy position! Put them to the blade!'

Ordelon's veterans readied their frag grenades as they ran. After three more strides, a shock wave blew Gaul off his feet.

Chunks of metal clattered to the floor all around him, and while some of the warning runes on his visor display were flashing red, the majority of them indicated that he was largely unhurt. As he got to his feet, Gaul was gratified to see that this was more than could be said of the Havoc squads. Whatever munitions they had carried with them had left nothing but a deep, smoking hole and a path blasted for him between the mangled tanks. Gaul roared his encouragement to the remaining Angels Eradicant behind him, and they joined him at his flanks, chainswords, power mauls and axes out and ready for hand-to-hand combat with the berzerkers infesting the base of the High Temple.

Within seconds they were at the foot of the steps, although it was difficult to judge where the stone began because of the heap of dead Sisters of Battle piled at the bottom. Gaul raised Acritus to strike at the nearest enemy, and felt a crushing force hit him from the side. As he was smashed to the ground, a chainsword plunged towards his head and Gaul kicked violently upwards with his knee, dislodging his assailant and sending him out of his view. Gaul was up in a heartbeat, and saw that the berzerker's armour had been melted and burned at the base of the spine, inhibiting his movement. Turning with a roar of rage, the barbarian threw himself forwards with all of his might, his broken-horned helmet low. Gaul angled his relic blade down, allowing his attacker's weapon to grate its way down its length. Gaul spun and struck back, but his opponent had already adjusted his grip to deflect the blow. Regardless of his ungodly nature, his foe was very, very good. This would only add to the satisfaction of sending him back to the foul depths from whence he had crawled.

Bolter fire tore past Gaul's head, forcing him to separate from his opponent. The berzerker jumped up into a gap between two Sisters of Battle and swept down with his chainsword, making Gaul pitch backwards out of the way of the lethal arc. More fire came from the Sisters of Battle close to the doors to the High Temple, hitting the berzerker on his arm and sending his weapon spinning into the air. Gaul noticed it bore white and red honour markings, likely a trophy taken in some blasphemous attack. That the berzerker had dared to wield such a noble weapon enraged Gaul, and he thrust Acritus upwards towards the now disarmed figure. The berzerker angled to his side, the blade carving through the front of his chest armour. Bellowing some foul oath, his opponent kicked sideways, using his advantage of elevation to send Gaul crashing into Sergeant Ordalon at the very edge of the steps. Gaul recovered himself to see the berzerker pounding up towards the gates of the High Temple, his massive boots stomping over the fallen corpses of a dozen Sisters. Gaul could spare no more

thought for them than his enemy, and with a roar of fury at the desecration the Chaos warrior was committing, bounded after his foe.

Barging his way upwards through a seething mass of fighting, Gaul reached the top of the steps. Here, the melee was beginning to thin, with more bodies on the ground than upright and battling. It did not take long to spot the berzerker with the broken helmet pulling a newly acquired chainaxe from the mangled body of a Sister Superior. Gaul charged, rotating Acritus in a circle and raising the relic blade high to smite down the foul creature. The berzerker turned and blocked the blow with the shaft of his axe. Acritus cleaved the grip, but the force of his blow unbalanced Gaul and for a fraction of a second, his left flank was exposed. It was all the time the berzerker needed to spin and ram the head of the axe into Gaul's leg. The Chapter Master's world slid sideways as his knee gave way. Raising his relic blade instinctively, Gaul managed to fend off the next murderous swing, but as the berzerker raised his axe above his head for the third, Gaul knew he would not be able to deflect the final blow. This, then, was the price for his hubris.

Gaul thought the light flooding through his soul was the beginning of his journey to the Emperor's side. When the blast swept the berzerker before him away like an insect and the pain continued to scream from his leg, he realised his work was not yet done. Scarlet-armoured bodies flew past him, cartwheeling and twisting like dolls. A deep rumble shook the ground and Gaul craned over to the towering High Temple doors. They had opened, and between the fallen of the defenders and invaders stood a dazzling, beautiful sight – Lozepath, the Living Saint and holy protector of Salandraxis. In one hand he held a white-hot glowing blade and in the other an aquila-emblazoned shield. His entire body was pulsating with a golden aura, and through the shimmering energy field, Gaul could see a look of absolute malevolence on his face.



Khârn's visions had promised great trophies on Salandraxis. He had not realised the Red Path might be leading him to give his own skull as a prize for the Blood God. If that be the case, thought Khârn, then so be it. Even in this impossible situation however, his head would be hard-earned. The column against which Khârn was resting shifted with the weight of his body, causing more lumps of masonry and stone to clang onto the ceramite of his armour. In his hand, Gorechild purred in readiness. The Dreadnought shifted its aim in response, and

Khârn readied himself to strike. He had to put as much energy into the blow as possible, because in all likelihood he would not get to finish it. Khârn heard a series of clicks and whirrs. The machine warrior was readying itself to fire.

And then, the world went white.

Despite the coloured spots affecting his vision, it was all the distraction Khârn needed. With a roar, Khârn spun himself around and smashed Gorechild into the column. As he had anticipated, the fractures running up its length formed cracks and within a second, the entire section of the roof above him came smashing down. Khârn threw himself onto one knee and braced as great chunks of stone came raining down. The Dreadnought disappeared under a shower of dust and rubble, firing a withering salvo at the spot where Khârn had just been. Khârn leapt across the settling rubble, but the Dreadnought shook off the debris and whirled, unleashing a devastating burst of heavy bolter fire as it tracked around. The wall disintegrated behind Khârn, driving him towards the open gateway where the defensive line of tanks awaited him. A single column had survived the partial roof collapse, so Khârn threw himself behind it and to the ground. In seconds, it was reduced to rubble by the Dreadnought's withering fire. More of the balcony came crashing down, but the cloud of dust thrown up was enough to mask his run. Khârn saw the Dreadnought catch up with him, but then a series of explosions detonated on its back. His warband had recovered themselves enough to continue their attack, and the machine suddenly faced more than a single berzerker.

The Dreadnought tried to turn and advance on the warriors, but the steel mesh from inside the balcony's reinforced plascrete had wrapped itself around the lower part of one leg. Above, the Angels Eradicant had also spotted their battle-brother's plight. To Khârn's left and right, figures in sand-coloured armour thumped to the ground and charged the berzerkers in support of their venerable Chaplain. They streamed past and around Khârn, in front of the still open gate and into the defensive tank line's field of fire on the other side of the wall. Khârn faced a decision – to use this advantage and get inside the citadel's walls, or to take the head of the Dreadnought's pilot. He had already decided to pursue his trophy when two Angels Eradicant landed beside him.

Sweeping Gorechild in a wide arc, Khârn rained blows down on the two Space Marines in a blur of rage. Smashing the flat of the blade into the head of one, he sent him staggering to the right, directly into the path of the Dreadnought, who was close to freeing its leg from the obstruction. Khârn swung the ancient chainaxe into the neck of the other, grinding through the side of his helmet and

slicing the grille in two. Deactivating Gorechild's mica-dragon teeth, Khârn swung the lifeless body into the recovering Angel Eradicant by the end of his axe, sending him stumbling over the rubble towards the Dreadnought. By now the machine's leg was untangled, although several metal bars were still jammed between the exposed hydraulics running from its upper thighs into the lower abdomen. Khârn could see it trying to get a clear shot at him, so he pulled Gorechild out of the half-decapitated body and rammed the head of the chainaxe into the helmet of the surviving Angel Eradicant. As he fell backwards, Khârn bent down and threw himself into the abdomen of the Space Marine, lifting him up with the impact and carrying him towards the Dreadnought. It could not fire without eviscerating one of its battle-brothers, and by the time Khârn had thrown his shield away, he was sailing through the air towards the Dreadnought, Gorechild held high and ready to strike.

Khârn heard a roar of fury from somewhere inside the massive machine as it twisted upwards to bring its fist to bear. Feinting a strike at the thick frontal armour, he instead used Gorechild's momentum to strike under the rotating upper torso. The Dreadnought swivelled and lowered its bolters, but Khârn raised Gorechild and blocked the downward movement with the chainaxe's head. His body shook as the weapons fired, but the shells exploded some yards away. Raising its fist, the machine brought it crashing down towards Khârn's head. Again he blocked the blow with Gorechild, and Khârn heard the whine of servos and motors as the Dreadnought tried to overpower him. Khârn could feel the ceramite claw creeping down, his left arm giving in to the many injuries it had received in his recent battles.

Khârn suddenly dropped away from the parry and took hold of one of the pieces of metal sticking out of the machine's armour and rammed it into the cables dangling between its legs. Hydraulic fluid spurted out like blood from a severed artery, and the Dreadnought's left leg locked into position. Khârn threw himself back as the machine's gun arm swept at him again. This time it connected with the top of his helmet, knocking him to the floor.

Weapons fire erupted all around. The Angels Eradicant had seen Khârn's success, and were turning from their fights with the berzerkers to rally around their icon. Khârn threw himself between the legs of the frantically whirring machine and sliced again, this time with Gorechild. More cables came away, and both legs stopped moving. The Dreadnought tried to angle its weapon down to fire at Khârn but it could not achieve a solution. Khârn felt the ground erupt around his feet. Pushing himself forwards slightly, he presented his head just in

front of the Dreadnought's forward casing. It fell for the ruse and rotated, firing its bolters as it moved. Shell casings rained down onto Khârn's exposed left arm and burned his flesh, but he paid them no heed. Pushing backwards, he was on his feet just as the Dreadnought realised its mistake. Gorechild chewed into the thick armour at the base of its spine, ripping it open and exposing a network of conduits and gears.

Khârn rammed his chainaxe further into the workings of the Dreadnought, then pulled it back towards him. He knew that somewhere inside, there were the festering remains of the hero that had been given the dubious honour of a living death, and when he found that crippled bag of flesh the machine would die. Its occupant realised the danger and began rotating left and right, but Khârn kept a tight grip on Gorechild. Angels Eradicant streamed towards him, but the berzerkers were right behind, attacking them as they advanced on the wall.

Khârn pushed and twisted Gorechild deeper into the Dreadnought and as something suddenly gave in, the machine shivered violently. With a triumphant cry, Khârn realised he had reached the Dreadnought's core. Now the melee surrounded them, scarlet and sand-white armoured bodies spilling towards the open gateway before the defenders had time to close it. Khârn twisted again, and the gun arm dropped lifelessly to one side. One final scream of anger came from within the metal coffin, and he pulled back on Gorechild with a roar to release it from the now-burning innards of the machine. Khârn staggered backwards and revved Gorechild hard, spinning its mica-dragon teeth to the full. There was something he had to retrieve from the body of this Dreadnought.



‘Hold the gate! Fire!’

Balacet screamed into the handset of his vox. He did not have the best view of the battlefield through the gateway, but he did not need his field glasses to see the engagement was funnelling into the citadel. Somewhere out there, the remains of his infantry needed to regroup and launch a counter-attack. They could have the enemy outflanked, caught between their surviving armour and his defensive line in the assembly yard, if only they moved now. Apart from losing air superiority earlier than he had expected, so far Balacet felt his plan had worked well. He had allowed the berzerkers to get through his line relatively unscathed, and while the break-off group had admittedly made it to the High Temple far faster than he had anticipated, Gaul and his Angels Eradicant had

gone to the aid of the Sisters of Battle to redress the balance of power. That, of course, had been before the spectacular entrance of the Living Saint. The colonel did not have to worry about what was happening behind, only to contain and destroy the threat moving towards him.

Balacet raised his glasses. Sure enough, past the milling power-armoured bodies, he saw tanks and infantry streaming from the left and the right towards the gateway. A number of scarlet-clad shapes ran to meet them, but their numbers were greatly reduced thanks to the efforts of the Angels Eradicant. Balacet put his glasses down and looked up to the smashed battlements. Where there had been a line of Space Marines only a few minutes before, now there were none. He assumed they were continuing their fight with the berzerkers, although he found it strange that the Dreadnought had stopped firing.

*‘Colonel. Lieutenant Rokej reporting. We are engaging the enemy. Chaplain Venerable Tentera is out of action, sir. As are many of the Angels Eradicant.’*

Balacet pushed the earpiece of his vox caster closer to his head. What had he just said?

*‘Repeat, Rokej.’*

*‘We are engaging, sir. The Dreadnought has been knocked out by one of the berzerkers. He has dispatched the Angels Eradicant not fighting the warband with us and is moving towards your location. He appears to be carrying—’*

The transmission ended in a fizzle of static, leaving Balacet’s mind reeling. He had to salvage this situation and prevent the enemy from getting past his position, or the High Temple would be threatened on two fronts. In his mind, he could see the fury on Alecia’s face and the frustration on Gaul’s during their tactical council. They had insisted that the only target would be Salandraxis Municipalis and that he should commit all of his forces to defending it, but he had disagreed. He had counted on the Angels Eradicant being more than a match for the enemy, and on them being able to send down reinforcements from their orbiting ships if required. The ships were gone, and it sounded as if the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes were faring little better. Now it was up to him to prevent anyone – anything – getting past his tanks.

*‘Order all tank commanders to close up. I don’t want any gaps for these scum to get through. Train all weapons on the gateway. Once you have a clear shot past our forces, blow anything apart that shows its face. We advance in thirty seconds.’*

Acknowledgements came in fast. Something nagged at Balacet, and he clicked his vox to the long-range regimental channel.

‘To all Vodorian Grenadiers outside Salandraxis Municipalis. This is Colonel Balacet. Return to Salandraxis Municipalis. We require urgent reinforcement. All previous mission directives are cancelled.’

A series of explosions tore into the gateway, bringing a part of the wall down and the gate itself crashing to the ground. Balacet activated the vox once again.

‘Get here as quickly as you can. The Emperor protects.’

Engines roared and exhausts belched with thick black fumes. The ground of the assembly yard shook with the grinding of tracks, and Balacet steadied himself against his Leman Russ’ turret ring. His tank was right in the centre of the wide line of war machines, just as it should be. He would lead the advance through the gateway, and he was going to destroy every creature from the warp that still drew breath. And then he would turn back to the High Temple, although he strongly suspected his efforts would no longer be required now that the Living Saint had joined the fray.

Balacet jolted backwards as the Leman Russ advanced. He felt comfortable in the open turret, at home, like he had been as a tank commander earlier in his career. Space Marines were extremely hard to kill, he knew that, but nothing withstood the weight of a tank running over its head or the explosive force of massed battle cannons. Twenty of them would be more than a match for ceramite armour. The battling Adeptus Astartes warriors loomed closer. He hoped the remaining Angels Eradicant would get out of his way and allow him to do his duty. Balacet gave the order for battle speed.

At the top of the smashed battlements, a shape appeared above the gateway. For a second Balacet could not understand where the berzerker had come from, but then realised it must be the one that Lieutenant Rokej had reported. The berzerker raised a giant axe to the sky and lingered for a moment. Then, he slowly lowered the grizzly weapon towards the armoured reserve and his gaze came to rest right on Balacet. Above, the darkening clouds parted to give way to a cluster of falling stars.

Orbital strike.

‘Open—’

A sheet of flame roared in front of Balacet’s face. His ears were ringing and he could feel the tank grinding to a halt beneath him. He tried to open his eyes but all he could see was a red haze. Another huge blast of air hit him from the left, and he felt the Leman Russ rise on one side before crashing back down. Balacet reached over to the vox transmitter, but when he looked down he could not see his fingers. Instead there were ragged stumps of bone with blood pumping

around them. The pain cascaded through him as he touched his face with his good hand. Instead of flesh, he felt wet bone. The realisation of what had happened swept over him in a panicked wave. He could not hear his own voice, only the hammering of blood inside his head.

Balacet tried to get himself out of the burning machine, but he could not move. Another shock wave rocked him from the opposite side and he blinked furiously. There was just enough time for him to see two tanks running into each other and the front of a third bursting into flame.

A shadow moved on his right, and he turned back to face the gateway which was now only yards ahead. His left eye stopped working altogether, and the world changed to a series of scarlet blurs streaming towards him. And then, there was something standing on his burning tank, blocking his view completely. Shaking his head, he stared through a crimson mist. An object resolved itself, huge and flat, racing towards him. It looked like the blade of some enormous chainaxe.



Samzar opened his eyes and tried to blink the throbbing after-image from his sight. It was made all the more pronounced by the fact that he was staring up into the sky, so he moved his head down to see just how far the blast had thrown him. He was many yards away from the foot of the body-strewn steps to the High Temple where the glowing figure still stood. Samzar realised he was looking upon the form of a Living Saint, and the blood started racing within his veins. What a prize his skull would make for the Blood God! He would be elevated above all others, perhaps even Khârn himself, were he to claim him as a trophy.

Samzar tried to right himself and the base of his spine exploded in a cauldron of heat. He had experienced pain before, but nothing on this scale. Reaching down and behind, his fingers traced the melted hole blown in the ceramite of his armour by the Sister of Battle during the encounter with the armoured column. He felt the slick, warm sensation of blood running freely down his legs from the gaping wound she had created. That did not bother him in the least. Something else was making him feel strange, as if a great veil had been taken from his thoughts. He felt focussed, able to think and plan. He realised it was a moment of lucidity, that the Butcher's Nails had receded to a whisper at the back of his mind for a moment.

His thoughts turned to Lukosz. How he would have revelled in this battle.

Something moved towards the golden being at the top of the steps. It was the Chapter Master he had fought so savagely. Samzar's rage began to boil over. All thoughts of tactics fled into the bloody shadows cast by the Nails, consumed in hatred and loathing. He made no attempt to resist. Samzar had but a single reason to live – kill all that stood before him, and do it before anyone else claimed their heads for their own glory.

Clambering to his feet over the corpses on which he had landed, Samzar became aware of movement all around. The blast might have cleared the entranceway to the High Temple and swept all that stood before it down the steps, but it had not killed many of his warriors. At least a dozen of the warband were rising, weapons drawn and raging at the Angels Eradicant assembling in front of their Living Saint. All Samzar felt now was the favour of the Blood Father upon him. He did not care if the other berzerkers fought with him or against him. Bellowing an oath to Khorne, he began running back towards the steps, the searing pain in his back completely masked by his Butcher's Nails. In seconds he was nearing the top, having rammed his way past other berzerkers in his bloodlust. The Angels Eradicant Chapter Master stood only yards away, shoulder to shoulder with his battle-brothers to form a wall between the attackers and the golden figure who had stepped back into the open doorway of the High Temple, his own weapon and shield still raised. Without warning, the Angels Eradicant charged forwards in a line filling the width of the steps, sweeping down with chainswords and power axes. Something at the back of Samzar's mind tried to tell him they had the higher ground, but the thought was fleeting and held no interest. Samzar threw himself at the nearest Space Marine, swiping his half-chainaxe outwards and ramming into the Angel Eradicant's exposed chest armour with his left pauldron. His attacker pivoted around on one foot and stepped downwards to save himself from falling. This was exactly what Samzar had hoped for, and he sliced down into the thigh armour, ripping through it and into the flesh and bone within.

The Space Marine collapsed forwards, taking Samzar's embedded weapon with him. Samzar had to relinquish his grip on it to avoid following his victim down to the bottom of the steps. Looking to the bodies before him, he spotted a fallen berzerker holding his weapon in a death grip. Turning to retrieve it, he felt a fresh burning sensation across the top of his right shoulder, and his arm went numb. The Angels Eradicant Chapter Master was upon him, and Samzar was astonished to see his weapon had cut its way through most of his arm and deep

into his chest. Samzar punched forwards with his good hand, hitting the Space Marine squarely in the upper chest and pushing him upwards and away. Samzar staggered backwards, unbalanced by the sudden limpness of his right arm, and scrambled towards the weapon of the dead berzerker even as the Chapter Master bore down on him again. His relic blade came up high. If this was to be his fate, then so be it. But he would not go before Khorne without a weapon in his hand.

The Chapter Master flew backwards in a cloud of blood and ceramite fragments, crashing onto his back and rolling to one side. To his left and right, his battle-brothers were struck by a volley of bolter shells and las-fire, some of them dropping instantly, others turning to look past Samzar to the bottom of the steps behind him. Realising they had a new enemy, the Angels Eradicant surged past the kneeling Samzar, pushing the berzerkers into the advancing line. Samzar heard the clash of bodies in close-quarters fighting around him. Despite his dreadful injury, his Butcher's Nails were howling at him to fight. His legs still worked, he could still grip a weapon.

*Get up, Samzar.*

'Kill!'

*Take up that weapon.*

'Maim!'

*Turn and face your enemy.*

'Destroy!'

Samzar turned. The approach to the bottom of the steps was a sea of black and brass armour flecked with red, smashing against the few remaining Angels Eradicant in an unstoppable tide of destruction. Jumping down behind the loyalist forces, Samzar plunged his new chainsword into the back of an Angel Eradicant, pushing and screaming until it could go no further into his body. A handful of berzerkers who had survived the Angels' charge followed his lead, hacking and slashing at the dwindling line of black-and-sand-coloured armour. Such was the ferocity of Samzar's attack that the body of his victim would not relinquish his weapon. Samzar had to raise his foot and push to withdraw the gore-flicking chainsword. Through the gap came several black-armoured figures, and all but one of them rushed towards the top of the steps in their own murderous charge. The brilliant light filled Samzar's head again but this time he ducked, the bodies that had thundered past him tossed back into the main force from which they had come. The light receded and Samzar struggled to his feet, using the chainsword to push himself upright. Looking up the steps, he could see the doors to the High Temple were now firmly closed, a line of Sisters of Battle

and a smattering of Angels Eradicant forming a last line of defence. His blood boiled with the strength of his need to claim their skulls, and he took a step towards them, his chainsword spinning up to full speed.

‘Samzar.’

He stopped. The voice was familiar, but from where he was unsure. Samzar wanted to charge back up the steps and get to the Living Saint, but something told him to turn. Before him stood a Hound of Abaddon. He had his hand raised, signalling the Black Legion warband behind him to await his command. Samzar saw the remaining berzerkers shift warily, unsure what to do. The figure took off his helmet slowly, and stared impassively at Samzar. What was his name? Locq. That was it. Captain Locq. Realisation lifted the scarlet veil from his mind.

‘Does Khârn live?’

Samzar could not quite understand the question. He had not seen Khârn since battle had commenced.

‘Of course he lives. He is the Chosen of Khorne. What business is it of yours?’ Samzar gasped the words, struggling to breathe. Had this upstart come to take their glory from them, after all the blood that had been shed by his warband? Samzar’s hand tightened on the chainsword. His would be an excellent skull to take. Locq looked past Samzar and up towards the High Temple, then over to the few remaining berzerkers. He began to smile, raised his hand and made a fist. Samzar’s Nails screamed for him to act. He thrust his chainsword towards Locq’s throat, but his wounds made him slow. As the Hounds of Abaddon surged over the fallen bodies of the Angels Eradicant and into the handful of berzerkers on the steps, Samzar felt a terrible vibration run through his abdomen. Locq’s face was pressed up against his helmet, a sneer playing on his lips. He did not have to look down to witness the fatal wound Locq had struck. This time, he knew without a doubt he was going to die. An extraordinary silence filled his head, and as he felt himself fall, he realised the Butcher’s Nails were no longer screaming at him. Through his fading vision, he saw Locq staring down at him, readying his weapon to take his skull. Samzar cared not.

If dying meant silence, he embraced it.



The second flash of light came just as Khârn was taking the head of the last Angel Eradicant from the wall. Behind him, the explosions from the orbital bombardment were still tearing the remains of the defensive armoured column

apart as the berzerkers ran amok between the tanks, slaughtering the Imperial troops in a sea of blood.

‘Roderbar, cease fire and proceed as you will. I am inside the shrine city.’

Khârn cut the vox-link before Roderbar could reply. Whatever happened to the shipmaster and his captured White Scars cruiser after this battle, he had proven his worth to Khârn and their god.

As the light flooded over the rooftops of the city from the top of the hill, Khârn was again reminded of his vision, of a golden corona destined to be extinguished by the Blood God’s will. Salandraxis had already provided an offering of considerable power to Khorne in the shape of the Dreadnought pilot’s skull, but far greater trophies awaited him. This was a beacon, yet another sign calling him to the Red Path. Hefting Gorechild before him, Khârn ran through the narrow alleyways of Municipalis, sweeping between the tall buildings that still burned from the orbital bombardment. The citadel was blackened and charred, its gleaming white stone smothered by the hand of Chaos. Khârn gloried in the desecration.

Through the smoke and flames Khârn could see the end of a deserted passageway. Beyond it stood a golden statue to the Emperor, arms raised out as if to welcome Khârn to the once ornate square in which it stood. Further ahead still, a wide avenue swept up the hill to the rear of the High Temple, and while he could see fighting going on around the curved walls he was surprised that the Imperial forces had not set up a roadblock in such an obvious approach. The curiosity was still lingering in his mind when the roar of jump packs thundered in the air. Fire exploded all around, thumping into his armour and shattering the cobblestones underfoot. Khârn looked up to see the air filled with Seraphim, their twin bolt pistols pouring down projectiles as they swooped and flitted towards their target. Khârn swept upwards with Gorechild, but the Sisters were far too experienced to be caught out so easily. More fire cannoned down, and Khârn threw himself against the ruined stone wall of a burning building, bringing up his plasma pistol and firing into the black-clad shapes. Such was the density of their attack between the narrow confines of the passageway that his first shot brought down two Seraphim at the same time. The second hit a third Sister in the jump pack, blowing her up and taking two others with her in the inferno. The remaining combatants broke to avoid the same fate, before rapidly reforming and descending on him from all directions.

The first to land were quickly dispatched by Gorechild, but with screams to the glory of the Emperor they kept on coming. To his left, Khârn saw more

Seraphim landing and running across the square to join the attack, and spotted some of them heading for the raised pillar of the statue where they could aim with care and fire over the heads of their fellow Sisters.

Khârn crouched down just as they opened fire on him. The stone exploded directly above his head, chunks of masonry clattering off his helmet. Khârn thrust outwards with a roar, sweeping Gorechild in an arc from left to right. Several Seraphim were hit by shrapnel, but still they pushed forwards, firing their braces of pistols while chanting oaths. A stream of ignited promethium from a hand flamer enveloped the ceramite on his pauldron and a warning rune blinked red. Shots rang out from Seraphim who had jumped into the air to hover above the melee, hitting Khârn on the back of the neck and glancing off his shoulders. Their tactic might have been effective against a normal opponent, but not Khârn. He span himself around with Gorechild in both hands, three more falling to his mighty chainaxe. Enraged, the airborne Seraphim swooped down, but Khârn shot them at point-black range and let them fall onto the lifeless bodies of their comrades. The Sisters at the base of the statue kept on firing, but Khârn moved too fast for them to get a killing shot. Three of them took flight before he was on their position. Those who had stayed on the ground he carved into pieces.

Fire rained down on him from the survivors. Laughably, the defenders were trying to avoid hitting the statue behind which he stood. Jumping behind the base, he used its cover to protect him and picked the first one off with a perfectly aimed headshot. The second powered down, firing constantly with both weapons. Khârn leapt onto the side of the statue's base and into the air, swiping down with Gorechild. The chainaxe ripped through the Seraphim's skull, cutting it in half and continuing down the line of her torso. When Khârn finally landed, the cleaved halves of the Sister fell wetly on either side, entrails spattering onto the cobbled square. Without pause, Khârn raced towards the High Temple.



Had it not been for the decades Pradillo had spent in near-darkness within the High Temple's confines, he would have found it difficult to know where he was or from which direction the screams and cries of battle were coming. He had pieced together much of what had happened since the dark forces had descended upon the planet from the communications sent to the Sisters of Battle inside the temple, and when His Holiness had furiously demanded the doors be opened so

he could visit the wrath of the Emperor upon the heretics, Pradillo had assumed that the battle was reaching its zenith. The arrival of the black gunships had changed all that, and now he stood in his chambers at the back of the temple, feeling the ground shake and breathing in the smell of burning flesh and buildings. He had not wanted to retreat to this sanctuary, but blinded as he was, he would have been more hindrance than help to the Sisters. They had asked him to pray for their success, and then his clerics had spirited him away from Lozepath's throne. They had even given him a sword, which hung uselessly in its scabbard.

The ground shook again, rattling the hundreds of bookcases and cabinets that followed the curve of the temple's interior wall. Many had shattered during the orbital bombardment, but there were still enough intact that Pradillo heard several objects crash to the floor. He moved towards the sounds, groping downwards until his fingers brushed over a large book. Shards of glass pierced his parchment-like skin, but the pain was welcome. It was all part of his continued punishment for losing his faith in the Living Saint. When the enemy came, which they now surely would, at least he would be able to give his life in Lozepath's service. He hoped it would be enough to redeem his soul.

A massive explosion rocked the temple, and the thick single door that sealed him from the rest of the building shook on its hinges. Bolter fire erupted in the distance, the sounds muted by the thick wall that separated him from the temple proper. Pradillo heard familiar voices shouting unfamiliar things, barking orders, calling for more ammunition, demanding reinforcements. Several loud bangs came from the door, impacts of some description, and bolters chattered on the other side. Whatever was attacking, it had made its way to the interior of the temple. Pradillo clutched the heavy tome in his arms. If only he could see, he could take up arms and stand side-by-side with His Holiness. It was at that point that there was a tremendous shrieking sound, of metal being rent apart, and the noise of battle dropped to nothing.

Lozepath must have retaliated.

Pradillo breathed in deeply. The day might yet be saved, because no Chaos force could withstand the might of the Emperor, regardless of what evil pit they emerged from. For long seconds, he could hear little more than moaning and shuffling, but then the bolter fire began again, this time more insistent, and the cries changed from ones of victory to ones of pain and despair.

He could take it no longer. Reaching out, he felt for the edge of the grand meeting table around which he had run the Ministorum's affairs for countless

years. Tracing the table's edges, polished smooth by thousands of councils, he followed it to the end where his elaborate chair sat, then turned to the right. His hands grasped at free air until, finally, he felt the long, smooth barrel of his inferno pistol, gifted to him by the predecessor of Canoness Preceptor Alecia. Following its engraved barrel past the firing mechanism and down its ornately carved grip, Pradillo took it from its ceremonial mounting. Once, it had felt like a feather in his hand, but now it weighed heavily and his grip shook with the effort of raising it. No matter. He could still reach the trigger and had the strength to pull it.

The cacophony outside increased and he could smell smoke. The fighting had reached the rear of the temple. Pradillo felt his way back towards the door, reached out for its rough surface then took six paces back. He was directly before it, and felt his confidence grow. He might not have been able to fight by the side of Lozepath, but he would still make his stand.

A loud crash came, followed by the sound of something heavy hitting the ground amongst a shower of broken glass. Pradillo turned in confusion from the door and for a split second could not understand what had happened. Then the whirring of a chain weapon, a large one by the sound of it, started up and he heard the crunch of booted footsteps approach. Something had come through the glass ceiling of the High Temple's dome. Pradillo pulled the trigger on his inferno pistol and it bucked slightly in his hand. He felt the flash of its superheated blast on his hands and face, and heard a loud hiss as it impacted with his target. Turning slightly, he fired again, then again, trying to create an arc of destruction before him.

‘Cardinal.’

The voice came from directly behind him, a low, guttural growl filtered by the speakers of a Space Marine's helmet. Pradillo rounded on the noise and fired, but his shot hit the wall. Throaty laughter came from somewhere to his side, and Pradillo turned in panic. There was the scream of the chainblade spinning up to full speed and he felt a burning sensation in his wrist. He tried to fire, but realised there were no fingers for him to control any more. He barely heard the clatter of his inferno pistol on the stone floor. His ancient heart thumped in his chest, fear replaced by righteous fury. He would not be mocked by this perpetrator.

‘You may think I am blind and helpless, but I still see you for what you are.’

Pradillo heard the chain weapon throttle down, and the footsteps approach still closer.

‘And what is that, you deluded fool?’

The cardinal straightened as well as he could, forcing calm into his voice. He knew that very soon he would be standing with the Emperor, the reward for his service a place by His Golden Throne.

‘You are a coward. You hide in the shadows, skulk and crawl at the commands of your perverted gods. But be warned. Those who walk the dark path will find it wanes in the approaching light.’

Pradillo could hear the creature breathing with powerful lungs. He could smell the stench of blood, old and fresh, on its power armour. Even so, he was no longer afraid. The love of the Emperor flooded through him, buoying up his spirits and giving him strength. Reaching for the sword at his belt with his remaining hand, he unsheathed it with a roar of defiance.

‘In the name of His Glorious Holiness the Emperor of Mankind, I denounce you!’

Pradillo lurched forwards, hacking and slashing with the weapon before him. If the Emperor did not give him strength enough to defeat this unbeliever, he would at least welcome him as a warrior to His side. His fight was that of the Living Saint, of everything that was good and holy. The righteous love of the Emperor of Mankind would guide his hand.

Pradillo felt his ribs crack as an armoured fist smashed into his side. His feet left the ground and his shoulder blade shattered as it hit the wall, and he fell to the floor at the same time as his broken sword. He could barely draw breath, such was the agony. As the giant stamped closer towards him, he hoped his death would be a quick one. To his shame, he could not bear the pain much longer. The footsteps stopped, and he heard the creature bend over him, the stink of death filling his nostrils.

‘I shall not take your skull, cardinal. You are not a worthy sacrifice for the Blood Father.’

Pradillo began to weep. In that moment, he would have welcomed any release from this purgatory. The creature straightened and moved towards the door to the High Temple, but then stopped and turned.

‘And as for walking in the shadows, you are mistaken, cardinal. I do not follow a dark path, but a red one.’



Khârn smashed his way through the door, slicing the black-clad cleric to his left

in half and crushing the one on his right into the wall with his armoured hand. He ran deeper into the smoking interior of the High Temple, seeking out the Living Saint. Here, Sisters of Battle were everywhere, firing at Black Legion warriors in well-organised squads. Several turned to face him, but he swept them away, throwing them into the pitted, fractured statues that filled the interior. A bolt struck him on the thigh from close quarters, and he turned to see a young man, head shaven and clutching a bolt pistol he could hardly aim, shaking before him. Gorechild's teeth did not even slow as they cut him in half above the waist, his torso and arms folding over and dropping to the floor in a lake of blood.

More Sisters of Battle appeared, their shots far better judged than his previous assailant's, and Khârn charged them through an alley of marble saints. This time the sacredness of the effigies was overlooked, and they were soon reduced to spinning fragments of stone and plaster. Armoured figures moved on the Sisters from behind, and with the smoke clearing Khârn could see that they were all Hounds of Abaddon. Perhaps they had reached the High Temple before the berserkers, perhaps they had killed them and decided to launch an attack for their own glory. It mattered not to Khârn. The blood was flowing, and Khorne would be exulted.

Khârn felt the floor shake, as if the very temple were beginning to move. Those pillars and statues still standing splintered and cracked, the glass in the dome high above shattering and falling to the ground, slicing into Khârn's exposed left arm and adding to the network of cuts and abrasions already there. Light erupted, so brilliant it burned into the darkest core of Khârn's being. Turning away, he heard the crash of armoured bodies screeching across stone and brick. Something hit him hard, sending him reeling to the ground and he rolled blindly, sweeping outwards with Gorechild to stop his tumble. Shaking his head, Khârn tried to clear his vision as he got back to his feet. Slowly it returned, but there was still a golden aura to everything he saw. A number of Sisters of Battle rose, shaking and battered, a few yards in front of him. Instead of charging, they withdrew in a dazed line, weapons pointed at him in wary readiness. Khârn was just about to attack them when he saw his own shadow thrown into stark relief before him. Even through his power armour, he could feel the crackling discharge of an energy field at his back.

Khârn turned. Directly in front stood a vision of holiness and purity. It made him sick to look upon it, but he stood his ground. Lozepath, the Living Saint, stared down at Gorechild and then back up to him. Despite the shimmer caused by the power dancing and crackling around the holy avatar's white-robed body,

Khârn could still see the burning intensity of his white eyes, the mocking smile on his thin lips. The massive, glowing sword came up towards Khârn's throat, and he tightened his grip on Gorechild, readying himself for the attack.

The Living Saint spoke, his voice booming around the destroyed interior of the High Temple. The smile had gone. In its place was a look of absolute hatred.

‘You will go no further, heretic. The march of the Blood God stops here.’

## 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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