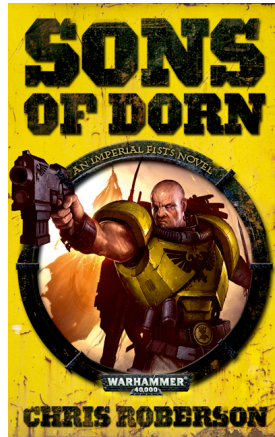


SONS OF DORN

A Warhammer 40,000 novel

By Chris Roberson

Having survived the Imperial Fists brutal recruitment regime, rivals Zatori, du Queste and Taloc advance to the ranks of Scouts. When they join the Imperial Fists in their action on Vernalis, a planet blighted by Chaos, their loyalty to the Emperor and their fortitude in battle will be sorely tested. They must overcome the power of the Roaring Blades Traitor Guard in order to ensure victory.



About the Author

Chris Roberson is a prolific and highly respected SF author. He has been a finalist for the World Fantasy Award for Short Fiction, twice for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and twice for the Sidewise Award for Best Alternate History Short Form (winning in 2004 with his story "O One"). He runs the independent press Monkeybrain Books with his partner.

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Zatori Zan knew that if he wanted to avenge the shameful murder of his master he could not hesitate an instant. The question as to whether these were the holy warriors of legend, and if so whether the legends might not have presented the full story of their nature, would have to wait for another time... if there was to be any other time.

He'd already lost sight of the young Caritaigne who had murdered Father Nei even before the arrival of the armoured giants, when the horde of barbaric islanders had rushed onto the scene. Now one of the older islanders, face and arms shadowed by the ink of ancient tattoos, stood before Zatori with a simply forged iron sword in hand, teeth bared and fearsome. Zatori raised his tachina in a defensive posture, taking calming breaths in through his nostrils and out through his teeth, finding his still centre and waiting for the proper time for action.

The older islander, who from the relative finery of the ornaments at his neck and wrists was a figure of some stature in island society, did not utter a word. He seemed hardly to notice the golden giants who were striding towards the centre of the battlefield. Instead, the islander rushed forwards with his iron sword swinging in a deadly arc at Zatori's bare head

Zatori shifted his weight to one foot, raising his tachina with the blade parallel to the horizon in a blocking motion. The islander's iron sword slid with a shower of sparks off the tip of the tachina. As Zatori repositioned, swinging his sword's blade in an overhand arc aimed at the islander's right shoulder, the islander danced back a few paces, out of range of the tachina's point. Then, lightning-fast, the islander lunged forwards, driving the point of his iron blade directly at Zatori's midsection, and only by leaning to one side like a

tree in a high wind and whipping his tachina around in a blocking manoeuvre was he able to avoid being skewered on the end of the islander's sword. As it was, the shock of the impact of the tachina against the iron sword was so strong that it reverberated up Zatori's arms, buzzing his teeth in his skull.

Though the islander was easily three times as old as Zatori, he had the strength and speed of a much younger man. It would be no easy thing for Zatori to defeat him, and each moment that passed only increased the possibility that the young Caritaigne would move too far away too quick for Zatori ever to locate him again. Even assuming that Zatori's skill with the blade was equal to the task of overcoming the islander – which at this point was far from a certainty – the delay could mean that Father Nei would be left unavenged.

Zatori was already forming a silent prayer to the Sacred Duality in his thoughts when the solution to his problem presented itself, in the form of assistance from an unexpected quarter. Before the islander was able to renew his attack, there came from a short distance off to Zatori's right a sound like distant thunder or the crump of a mortar round, then another, then another.

Chancing a quick glance to his right, Zatori saw that one of the armoured giants was walking past, the sounds he had heard the thunderous impact of each mighty footfall. The armoured giant seemed to have taken no notice of Zatori and his islander opponent, his attention on another corner of the melee, but his path was carrying him near enough to where the two combatants stood that they could see the full glory of the giant's size. Towering over all of the other combatants, in gleaming yellow-gold and jet-black, the strange figure was like a living engine of war, face completely hidden behind an inexpressive helmet.

Zatori immediately pulled his gaze back from the giant to the older islander before him, resolving to find time to dwell on the strangeness of the armoured giants only after his fire for vengeance had been quenched. But as he turned his attention back to the islander, Zatori saw that his opponent was not so quick to look away from the giant. For just that brief instant, the islander seemed finally to take notice of the golden giants, and stood transfixed by the sight of the huge armoured figure stomping by, eyes wide in bewilderment or disbelief or simple shock. In another instant, Zatori knew, the islander might well recover himself and renew the attack,

so if Zatori was to use the momentary distraction to his advantage he would have to act now.

Without pausing an instant to reflect, Zatori speared the blade of his tachina forwards into the islander's chest, the razor-sharp point sliding between ribs as easily as an oar through water. Zatori did not stop until the tip of the tachina extended a full handspan out the islander's back.

As Zatori drew out the blade, the islander looked at the blood freely flowing from the cut in his chest with a slightly puzzled expression on his face. Then he lifted his head and looked Zatori in the eye.

Zatori's face was as inexpressive and unreadable as the armoured giants' helmets when he met the islander's shocked gaze. There was nothing of pride or glory in this act for the young Sipangish squire, only duty and obligation. He did not exult in the islander's death and defeat, and why would he? The islander was an obstacle on Zatori's path, one to be swept away in the observance of responsibility. Zatori did not hate his opponent, but was cool, methodical and calculating, just as his master had taught him to be. Detachment and duty, the two pillars of the Sipangish warrior-elite.

But when he finally faced the young Caritaigne who had murdered Father Nei? Then, perhaps, Zatori might not remain so impassive and detached...

Taloc s'Tonan stood rooted to the spot, watching the metal giants make their way through the confusion.

He could not help but remember the story of the two great warriors who had led the People to this world from the stars, loyal servants of the Great Father in the Sky who ruled over all. In the stories, one of the two great warriors had turned against his brother, and his betrayal had brought evil into the world. Were the Eokaroean legends true, and did such great warriors still sail between the stars? Had the successors of those two great brothers finally come to this world to finish the work begun in time out of memory? Would the faithless be brushed aside, and the Eokaroeans who had retained the true faith of the Great Father in the Sky finally be restored to their proper place of glory?

Taloc still puzzled over the nature of the giant invaders as he turned to look behind him, just in time to see his father Tonan in close combat with a young warrior who Taloc took to be Sipangish.

Tonan appeared ready to spit the young Sipangish on the tip of the ironbrand Lightning when one of the armoured giants passed less than a half-dozen paces away. Taloc watched as his father and the Sipangish followed the giant's movements with their eyes, but while Tonan was still distracted by the giant glittering figure, the Sipangish suddenly and without warning drove his long curved blade into Tonan's chest halfway to the hilt.

'Father!' Taloc screamed, knowing that even if his father could hear him, no shout of warning or support would do any good.

Taloc raised his nameless ironbrand high overhead, and cried vengeance on the Sipangish faithless. The Sipangish didn't look in Taloc's direction, but suddenly looked with eyes narrowed in a steely gaze at something out of Taloc's line of sight and then took off running in pursuit.

As for the armoured giants, they continued on through the crowd, seeming to take no notice.

Jean-Robur du Queste suddenly wanted to be anywhere but on this blasted island, and his chances of winning his spurs be damned. What did it matter if he never earned the privileges of a fully blooded son of Caritaigne if in earning those privileges he died here on this godforsaken island? And as overwhelmed as he'd been by the tumult and confusion of the melee only a short while before, the arrival of the strange armoured figures in their flying craft had pushed him into whole new realms of disorientation and disbelief.

To Jean-Robur's surprise, though, he found that the mysterious giants did not particularly frighten him. The other combatants – Caritaigne, Sipangish and islanders alike – were mostly running in confusion from the giants, or else frozen to the spot and watching their thunderous advance across the field like terrified rabbits making like statues in the underbrush in the hope that a passing wolf will not notice them. Jean-Robur was somewhat bewildered by the new arrivals, to be sure – his conception of the world was simply not big enough to allow for the existence of such beings, and their appearance was forcing him to reconsider what he believed to be possible – but there was nothing of fear in his reactions. Rather, he was annoyed, since the armoured giants had made a royal mess of the battle, and the chances of a Caritaigne victory seemed suddenly more remote than ever.

At this point, it seemed like the whole trip was hardly worth the effort, and he'd have been better off staying home in the first place. At least then he'd have been able to sleep in his own bed by night, and would have his choice of the finest vintages to drink by day.

The armoured giants moved through the melee as though they were searching for something, but just what it was Jean-Robur wasn't sure. He'd caught sight of one of the giants some distance off stopping in front of a young Caritaigne infantryman, pointing some sort of small object – or device? – at the soldier. The infantryman, with more courage than sense, raised his musket and aimed its barrel at the giant's head, defiantly. The giant did not lash out, but bent and regarded the infantryman. With the distance that separated him from the scene, Jean-Robur could not make out what the armoured giant said as it addressed the infantryman, but he could feel the reverberations of the giant's voice in the bones of his chest.

The infantryman seemed to consider something for a moment, and then bowed his head and threw down his musket.

Amazingly, the armoured giant turned and stalked away, with the infantryman following close behind!

Had the soldier been bewitched? What had the giant said that caused the infantryman to throw down his weapon and follow him?

From behind him, Jean-Robur could hear an angry voice shouting, and glanced over his shoulder to see a young Sipangish warrior rushing towards him and waving a long curved sword in the air. For the briefest moment, Jean-Robur thought that his question about the armoured giant's intentions would remain unanswered, and then he turned back to see that an answer might be at hand, and much sooner than he would like.

One of the armoured giants was walking directly towards Jean-Robur.

Zatori raced towards the place where the young Caritaigne who had murdered Father Nei stood. His throat was raw from shouting out his cries for vengeance, but Zatori didn't let that silence him. He continued on, jinking left and right as other combatants blundered into his path in their frenzied attempt to escape the giant warriors, or to fell at least one more enemy before the strange visitors from the sky seized them.

More than a few were clearly not above using the distraction of the giant warriors to their own advantage, just as Zatori had done.

Still, he was secure in the knowledge that at least he had stabbed the barbaric islander while standing face-to-face, and not struck like a coward from behind. There was no shame in taking advantage if an opponent glanced away in the middle of a contest. At least, that was what Zatori kept telling himself, though a small voice he tried to ignore kept whispering in the back of his thoughts that perhaps he was not so different from the Caritaigne murderer, after all.

The Caritaigne had turned at the sound of Zatori's cry of vengeance, but was now turning back towards the armoured giant making right for him. Zatori poured on speed, not wanting to arrive too late to kill the Caritaigne himself. What if the armoured giant were to strike the murderer down himself? Then Father Nei's death would not be properly avenged, the sullied honour of Zatori's master not properly restored. And that Zatori would not allow.

Taloc coursed after the Sipangish faithless who had killed his father, as if he was pursuing a boar through the island's forests with blade in hand. As they had on countless hunts before, his senses had narrowed to a tunnel centred on his prey, his attentions completely focused on the task at hand, everything else not only ignored but for the moment all but nonexistent.

But this was no ordinary hunt, and this was no boar that Taloc pursued. The quarry that now raced ahead of him, seeming not even to notice Taloc's pursuit, had the blood of Tonan on his hands. And while the Eokaroeans did not fight for privilege like the Caritaigne, or fight for honour like the Sipangish, they understood too well the concept of blood-debt, and the value of a life for a life.

The life of Taloc's father had been ended by this Sipangish faithless, and so the task of ending the killer's life fell to Taloc. It was no different than the burden that would be Taloc's had it been an errant boar who had felled Tonan in the hunt. It was a debt of blood, plain and simple. Eokaroeans measured the glory of a clan by the deeds of its warriors, and were a blood-debt to go unanswered it would besmirch the clan's reputation.

Taloc's attentions were not so focused, though, that he was able completely to disregard the giant devils that had fallen from the sky. But what did it matter why the devils had come to the island, whether to bless them all or to kill them? Taloc would die easily, and with a clear conscience, if he first repaid his father's blood-debt by killing the Sipangish faithless. And then, even if no one living

ever knew it, Taloc's unnamed ironbrand would have earned a name for itself, and he would die with the newly christened Thunderbolt in his hands.

Jean-Robur watched the inexorable approach of the armoured giant, the huge sword in its massive gauntleted hand crackling with energy. His fist tightening around the handle of his own falchion, Jean-Robur's thoughts raced, trying to devise a way out.

But there was no way out. There was nowhere to run. With madness and confusion on all sides, it was unlikely Jean-Robur could get very far even if he did try to escape, and despite their massive size and heavy armour the giants were able to move surprisingly quickly, so the giant stalking towards him would likely catch up before Jean-Robur was able to take more than a dozen steps.

Jean-Robur's emotions were numb. He felt like an observer inside his own head, viewing his surroundings at a step removed. He found himself thinking briefly of the taste of a glass of vintage wine he'd sampled months before, and the whisper kiss of silk sheets against his bare skin, and all the other sundry pleasures he'd left behind in Caritaigne and that he would now never know again. He would meet his end, here on this distant and barbaric island, and would never enjoy the privilege and status that his spurs would have afforded.

But if he were to die, so be it. He would show the shade of his cousin Benoit and all the braying fools like him that Jean-Robur du Queste was every inch a man. He would give no enemy, whether Sipangish or islander or unknown giant come from the stars, the satisfaction of seeing a proud son of the house of du Queste unmanned by fear. He would not beg for his life, but would face his death bravely and without fear.

Jean-Robur raised the point of his falchion, squaring his feet in a ready stance. Once again he heard from behind him an angry voice shouting in the incomprehensible and guttural tones of Sipang, but he paid it no mind. He readied himself for a duel he knew he could not win.

But though his every rational impulse told Jean-Robur that he had not the slightest chance of defeating so large and powerful an opponent, nevertheless did his darting eyes seek out any possible

advantage. He might fall before the armoured giant, but Jean-Robur was not about to go down easily.

Zatori raised his master's tachina overhead, teeth bared, and shouted out once again his cry for vengeance.

'Murderer, prepare to taste vengeance! With this blade I shall restore the honour of the one slain by your cowardice and treachery! Your blood shall assuage the spirit of the dead!'

But this time the Caritaigne murderer did not even seem to notice Zatori's shouts of anger as he approached. Before, at least, the Caritaigne had glanced in his direction before turning dismissively away, but now the murderer just stood fast, facing the armoured giant that was now only a half-dozen steps away.

Zatori was almost within striking range of the Caritaigne's back, while the murderer focused his attention on the armoured giant.

'Turn, murderer, and face justice!' Zatori shouted, now only a few paces behind the Caritaigne. But the murderer did not turn, either not hearing Zatori or not caring.

Zatori knew he could strike the Caritaigne down in a single blow, before the murderer even knew the attack was coming. But even as hungry as Zatori was for vengeance, and to remove the stain from Father Nei's sullied honour, still Zatori found he couldn't bring himself to stab an opponent in the back. Not even one who had himself used such a cowardly attack. To defeat the Caritaigne dishonourably would do nothing to cleanse Father Nei's honour, but would only stain it further.

If the Caritaigne murderer would not turn and face Zatori, there was only one alternative, though it pained Zatori to consider it. He would help to defeat the murderer's opponent in honourable combat, and then demand that the Caritaigne face him.

Taking several long strides to the right, Zatori came abreast of the Caritaigne – well beyond the reach of the Caritaigne's blade, in case the murderer chose to launch a treacherous attack at him in these final moments – and raised his tachina towards the armoured giant. The Caritaigne did not acknowledge his arrival, but only glanced in his direction for the briefest of instants, with no more attention than he gave to casting his gaze on the ground underfoot, or the proximity of the nearest bodies and wreckage around them – Zatori was just another factor in the immediate environment, but the real enemy was the armoured giant.

The chances of the two young swordsmen defeating the massive figure seemed remote to say the least, whether or not it was a holy warrior they faced. But if Zatori died, it would be with his own honour intact. And if he were unable to restore the sullied honour of Father Nei, then he would have to attempt some redress from the land of spirits. Zatori hoped that his master's spirit would understand.

Taloc watched as the Sipangish halted a few paces behind a Caritaigne swordsman, shouting a challenge whose words Taloc could not comprehend but whose general meaning was unmistakable. But when the Caritaigne refused to turn, the Sipangish bafflingly refrained from attacking, and instead took up a position to the Caritaigne's right, evidently intending to fight against the giant at his enemy's side.

Taloc did not believe for an instant that any mortal could stand against one the massive sky-devils, even two mortals fighting side-by-side. But while his father's blood-debt demanded to be paid, Taloc could not help but admire the courage the two enemies displayed in standing against so unstoppable a foe. These two faithless were exhibiting the kind of bravery that Eokaroceans sang about in song, the kind of heart that earned untold glory for a warrior's clan and a name for a nameless ironbrand. Cutting down the Sipangish who had killed his father would pay Tonan's blood-debt, to be sure, but how much greater the glory Taloc could bring to his clan and to his father's name if he were to stand bravely alongside these faithless against one of the unstoppable invaders from the sky?

And if the three should prevail, against all hope and reason, and defeat the sky-devil? Why, Taloc could simply take payment on his father's blood-debt then and there, and kill the Sipangish with his own ironbrand.

Taloc paced ahead, veering to the left of the Caritaigne, opposite his Sipangish quarry, and raising his ironbrand turned to face the sky-devil's approach.

It was possible they could defeat such a giant. It hardly seemed likely, though, so Taloc resolved not to let it worry him. More than likely they would all meet their ends at the point of the sky-devil's crackling blade, and then their respective blood-debts would fall on the shoulders of others to pay.

Captain Taelos of the Imperial Fists stopped a half-dozen paces away from the three Triandrians standing in a line. In his right fist he held the handle of his power sword, energy coruscating up and down the blade's edge like heat lightning. In his left hand he held an auspex, that pinged faintly like the sound of raindrops hitting the still surface of a pond. The giant raised the device, pointing it first at the Eokaroean warrior, then the Caritaigne duellist, then the Sipangish squire. Seemingly satisfied with what he found, the giant clipped the device to a hook at his waist, and regarded the three young men for a moment, his own expression hidden behind his armoured helm.

'Come on, what are you waiting for?' shouted Jean-Robur du Queste in the liquid sounds of Caritaigne, waving his falchion impatiently.

'Hurry if you would please, stranger,' Zatori Zan said calmly in the language of Sipang. 'I have a matter of honour that must be addressed.'

'For the glory of the clan of Tonan!' called Taloc s'Tonan in the strident tone of Eokaroe. 'And for the glory of the Great Father in the Sky!'

None of the three Triandrians could understand one another, but it hardly mattered. Captain Taelos was fully versed in all the languages of Triandr, thanks to linguistic implants via hypno-conditioning onboard the Imperial Fist strike cruiser Capulus while still en route to the planet.

But though he was conversant in all the planet's tongues, when he addressed the three young swordsmen before him, Captain Taelos first spoke Imperial Gothic, the common language of the Imperium of Man.

'I greet you in the name of the Emperor of Mankind, who sits in undying glory upon the Golden Throne on Holy Terra itself.'

The three Triandrians clearly did not understand the captain's words, but from their expressions it appeared that they found the sound of them hauntingly familiar.

'You have been examined, and found worthy of a signal honour.'

The three Triandrians exchanged glances, none of them able to puzzle out the captain's meaning. Then, without a word being exchanged, the three turned their attentions back to Captain Taelos and raised their blades defiantly against him.

Taelos laughed, a sound like the rumbling of distant thunder. 'I admire your spirit, and I salute you,' he said in the language of Eokaroe, then in the tongues of Caritaigne and Sipang.

The three Triandrian swordsmen seemed startled to hear the familiar sounds of their native languages rumbling from the captain's helmet.

'I come to your world seeking recruits, not vassals,' he said in each language in turn. 'I offer you the chance to join a noble brotherhood of warriors, and to live a life you cannot even dream is possible.' He raised his sword before him, point towards the heavens. 'You will travel beyond the stars, and see sights you can scarcely imagine.'

The three swordsmen slowly lowered their weapons. Captain Taelos knew what choice they would make. But it was important that it be their own decision.

'Come with me, and I will make you more than mere men. I will make you holy warriors – Sons of Dorn!'

Captain Taelos ushered the three swordsmen to the nearest Thunderhawk, taking the blade from each as they clambered tremulously onboard. Sergeant Hilts was already there, supervising the loading of the candidates.

'It would seem a successful cull,' Taelos said, his gaze scanning the battlefield, and his battle-brothers escorting young warriors in small groups to the gunships.

'Nearly two thousand, at last count,' Sergeant Hilts replied.

'Good,' Taelos answered. 'With luck, perhaps a few of them will survive the trials.'

Hilts nodded in reply. 'We should get a few neophytes out of this crop, I would expect. And maybe some of them will even make it to battle-brother.' He gestured to the three Triandrian blades the captain held in his fist. 'Starting a collection, sir?'

Taelos looked from the veteran-sergeant to the blades, thoughtfully, but didn't reply.

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