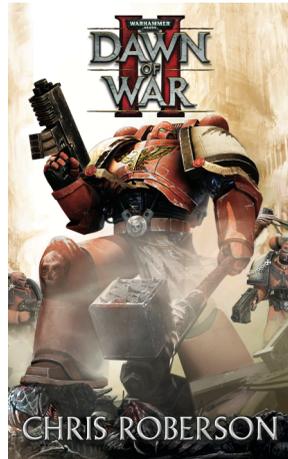


DAWN OF WAR II

A Warhammer 40,000 novel

By Chris Roberson

Led by a newly promoted sergeant who is determined to prove himself, Blood Ravens Space Marines arrive on a desert world to recruit additional warriors to their Chapter only to find it overrun with alien orks. After blunting the main ork assault, the Blood Ravens launch a series of raids into the enemy's territory only to discover that at the root of the attacks there waits a much deadlier horror...



About the Author

Chris Roberson's novels include *Set the Seas on Fire, Here, There & Everywhere, The Voyage of Night Shining White* and *Paragaea: A Planetary Romance*, and he is the editor of the anthology *Adventure Vol. 1*. Roberson 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. *Dawn of War II* is his first title for the Black Library.

•DAWN OF WAR•

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The following is an excerpt from *Dawn of War II* by Chris Roberson. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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The sun rose above the towering mountains to the east, sending shadows stretching out a hundred kilometres across the wind-sculpted desert sands. The relative cool of night clung to the shadows, like pools left behind by a retreating tide, but wherever the sunlight touched was already heating up, and quickly. By midday, the sun would beat down on the deserts like a hammer, hot enough to suck all the life and moisture from a man in a matter of hours.

Captain Davian Thule had little reason to concern himself over the heat of the midday sun, any more than he had reason to worry over the chill of the moonless desert night. Even without his blood-red power armour, his superhuman body was more than capable of handling even greater extremes of temperature and environment, but wearing his armour, as he'd done since first setting foot on Calderis a month before, he could survive everything from the cold of space to the heat of a close approach on a star's photosphere.

Thule regarded the mountains to the east, which marked the outer boundaries of human settlement on the

desert world of Calderis, and the limits of his current search. Somewhere far beyond those towering peaks, past the globe's curve, lay the western hemisphere of the world, where dwelt tribes of feral orks. On this side stretched the eastern deserts, home to dozens of nomadic tribes of humans, descendants of Imperial colonists who claimed these lands in the name of the Imperium and the God-Emperor millennia before.

Few ever ventured to the Aurelia sub-sector, and fewer still came as far as Calderis, but the world had been for generations a recruiting world for the Blood Ravens, and the time had come once again for the Blood Trials.

‘Any sign of it, sergeant?’

Thule turned to the Space Marine at his side. Though he wore only the gear of a Scout, not the full battle armour of an Astartes, Sergeant Cyrus was a full battle-brother of the Blood Ravens. For more than a century, Cyrus had trained the neophytes of the Chapter, doing his best to burn from them any hunger for glory, and instead to impart to them the skills and training necessary to survive life as a Space Marine in a hostile galaxy.

‘No, sir,’ Cyrus answered, looking up from the auspex in his hands. ‘But I’m picking up movement to the north. It’s inconclusive, but if I had to guess, I’d say it might be the souq we’re after.’

On other worlds from which the Blood Ravens recruited, there were outpost-monasteries, and the

populace was well familiar with the recruiting traditions of the Chapter. When it came time to perform the Blood Trials on such worlds, during which aspirants would compete for the honour of entering the Chapter as neophytes, a recruitment delegation would be sent from the Omnis Arcanum, the battle-barge that served as Chapter Fortress of the Blood Ravens, to conduct the trials. In many cases, it required nothing more than a Librarian to scan for any taint and a Chaplain to oversee the rites.

On a world like Calderis, that lacked an outpost-monastery, the Trials could be a more time-consuming prospect. But taking into consideration the fact that the majority of the population of Calderis was nomadic, never staying in the same place for more than a few months at a stretch, the time involved could often seem interminable. There were a few permanent settlements on the planet, like Argus Township at the desert's centre, but aside from those few spots on the map, the rest of the population could be found in small travelling groups of families spread out across the entire eastern hemisphere of the planet.

The recruiting mission to Calderis had been scheduled for this time of year because it was in this season that the nomadic tribes traditionally gathered in souqs, temporary settlements where anywhere from a handful of tribes to dozens of groups would gather together to barter and trade for goods, arrange marriages

between families, and gather in worship of the God-Emperor on distant Holy Terra.

Nearly a week after setting out from Argus Township, though, the recruiting party had failed to find this region's souq, and aside from a few errant tribes they had encountered, had yet to screen for likely aspirants. They had intended to conduct the Blood Trials in another month in Argus Township, bringing with them all of the candidates culled from the desert tribes, but at the rate things were going, they'd hardly have enough aspirants for a decent-sized melee, much less enough to guarantee at least a few initiates to help bolster the depleted numbers of the Blood Ravens.

'Gather your scouts, sergeant,' Thule told Cyrus, turning to head back to the pair of Rhino transports that had brought the recruiting party into the desert. 'We shall track north, and hope that your guess is correct.'

As Thule crossed the rapidly heating sands to the Rhinos, he mused over the path that had brought him to this dry, desolate place. There had been a time when such a low priority undertaking would have been beneath his notice. For long years Thule had lead the Fifth Company – 'The Fated,' as they were called – with distinction and honour, claiming victory after victory, with never anything more than acceptable losses. Just under a year ago, though, Thule had found himself embroiled in the purge of Kronus, forced by circumstance to stand against fellow humans, servants of the Imperium who were not heretical, merely misguided.

Though the Kronus undertaking had ended in victory for the Blood Ravens, it had left a stain on the Chapter, and on Captain Thule in particular. That stain, and other aspects of the undertaking which even at this late date remained obscured and hidden from many, Thule included, had led to Thule's fall from grace. Once a favourite of the Secret Masters of the Blood Ravens, in the year since the Kronus undertaking he had fallen from favour. Though never censured or openly criticized for his handling of the purge, still Thule had found himself and his company assigned increasingly minor, less vital missions. This recruiting foray to the Aurelia sub-sector, surely, was his nadir.

From the glories of planet-wide combat and wars against a half-dozen armies' worth of enemies at once, to picking across a dried husk of a world for weeks and months at a time in search of a bare handful of aspirants – how much farther could Thule fall?

There would come a time, in the not too distant future, when Thule would curse himself for even thinking such a question – but only after realizing that it is always possible to fall farther.

As Sergeant Cyrus gathered his squad of Scouts, who he had deployed in a wide net around the area to search for any signs of recent human passage, Thule rejoined the rest of the party at the pair of Rhinos. A team of servitors was busy performing routine maintenance on the transports, overseen by a Chapter-

serf, and standing between the two vehicles facing the rising sun was Chaplain Palmarius.

The sunlight glinted off the silver death's-head mask which obscured the face of the Fifth Company's spiritual leader, and glinted from the swept wings of the Imperial eagle that surmounted his crozius arcanum, the staff of office upon which the Chaplain leaned. Ribbons and scrolls fluttered in the dry wind from the purity seals which dotted his coal-black armour, and around his neck hung a pendant depicting a midnight-black raven with a teardrop of blood at its heart – the symbol of the Blood Ravens worked into a rosarius, the Chaplain's 'soul armour,' a symbol of the Ecclesiarchy and emblem of the bond between the Chapter and the Ministorum.

'The Emperor's blessings on you, captain,' the Chaplain intoned as Thule approached. Palmarius tilted his crozius arcanum in the captain's direction, dipping the staff's head only fractionally in a cursory benediction.

'Chaplain,' Captain Thule answered simply with a curt nod of his head. 'I trust the day finds you well?'

Palmarius merely turned one hand palm upwards, a gesture of indifference. 'Well enough, though I am eager to proceed with the Blood Trials. Our Chapter has suffered heavy losses, these last years, and none more so than the Fifth Company.'

Thule acknowledged the Chaplain's impatience with a knowing nod, then gestured to the collection of boys huddled in the shade of the nearest Rhino, being

watched over by one of the Chapter serfs. ‘Having only netted a bare handful of aspirants thus far, Chaplain, I’m sure you’ll agree that we must continue our search for potential candidates, or risk returning to the Chapter with nothing but the desert sand which grinds our teeth.’

‘And the shame of failure,’ put in a third voice from behind the captain.

Thule turned to see Librarian Niven approaching, his lean features shaded by the curve of the psychic hood upon his head, his force staff in hand. ‘Just so, Librarian.’

‘As you say,’ the Chaplain allowed. ‘But pray excuse me, as there are liturgies which must be attended to before we depart.’

As the Chaplain moved off to oversee the spiritual wellbeing of the party, and of Cyrus’s neophyte Scouts in particular, Thule turned his attention to the Librarian.

‘Librarian Niven.’ Thule inclined his head, a brief but sincere token of respect. The captain had never been entirely comfortable around servants of the Librarium, and now was no exception.

‘Captain, I wished to report…’ Niven began, then paused, as though searching for the words.

‘Yes, Librarian?’ Thule leaned forward with interest. The ability of Librarians to peer through the veil of time was well-known, and well-trusted, in the Blood Ravens, for all that those in the Fifth Company had less

experience with it than others. ‘Something over tomorrow’s horizon?’

Niven shook his head. ‘I have no foreknowledge of future events, captain, not in this instance. Still I can’t help feeling a sense of… foreboding.’

Thule narrowed his eyes, regarding the Librarian closely. The captain and the Librarian were never openly adversarial, both faithful to the Emperor and to the Chapter, but their very different personalities often seemed to put them at odds. But perhaps it was more than just their conflicting personalities that set Thule’s nerves on edge. Since the days of Lucius in M.38, when the loss of the entire Fifth Company had led to their successors forever after being named ‘The Fated,’ the Secret Masters of the Chapter had seen to it that the Fifth had fewer Librarians than other Companies. So while the other Blood Ravens Companies had a far greater percentage of Librarians than any other Chapter – in the First Company, in fact, there were two entire combat squads of Librarians, which would have been unthinkable in any other Codex Chapter – in The Fated there were a bare handful, Niven among them.

‘Foreboding, Librarian?’ Thule asked, raising an eyebrow, causing the pair of golden studs affixed above the brow to dance and glitter in the bright sun.

The Librarian took a breath, appearing to centre himself, before answering. ‘As you know, captain, I have only lately recovered from the injuries I sustained on

Kronus, and while my body has mended, I sometimes feel that my spirit has yet to recover.’

Thule’s lips tightened to a line. ‘Are you suggesting, Niven,’ he asked, his tone perched between outrage and disbelief, ‘that I should be concerned about your soundness of mind?’ The captain could not help recalling the names of other Librarians of the Blood Ravens, sorely tested in the battlefield, who went on to infamy – Phraius, Akios, Nox...

The Librarian drew himself up, anger fleeting briefly across his features, as though the mere suggestion was an offensive outrage. He regained his composure in the next instant, though, and shook his head, answering in measured tones.

‘No, captain. There is no cause for concern on my account. It has been only weeks since I was last examined by the Chief Librarian himself, and deemed free from taint and perfectly able to serve.’ Like all Librarians in the Blood Ravens, Thule knew, Niven was extensively monitored by the Chapter’s Librarium for signs of corruption, to ensure that he had not fallen to the insidious lure of the Ruinous Powers or else succumbed to any of the other strains to which psykers were prone. ‘Still, I cannot escape the sense that there is something... lurking at the edge of my awareness, some malevolent presence I can’t yet identify. It brushes my thoughts but lightly, and yet it is there, nonetheless.’

Thule was thoughtful for a moment, considering Niven’s words. There were four golden studs affixed to

the captain's forehead, a pair over each brow, each of them reflecting a century of faithful service to the Blood Ravens. Thule might not have been comfortable around servants of the Librarium, principally because there were so few of them in the Fifth Company and his experience with them perforce was comparatively limited, but he had not survived long enough to earn four service-studs by ignoring the advice of Librarians. If he was to survive long enough to wear a fifth, it would be by making use of all information at his disposal. Thule knew too well that, just as the Blood Ravens' battle-cry held, 'Knowledge is power.'

'I will take your words under advisement, Brother-Librarian,' Captain Thule said at length. 'And if the nature of your lurking presence should make itself known to you, I trust you will not remain silent.'

Niven straightened, his expression hardening. If the admission of the Librarian's uncertainty about his premonition had served to hint, in part, of any weakness of character on his part, Niven was clearly not in any mood to allow any lingering questions about his fitness to serve. 'I shall, of course, do my duty, captain, as a Blood Raven.'

Thule nodded. 'I would expect nothing else, Librarian.'

A day and a night passed before the party finally located the souq, a collection of a few dozen tents around a desert oasis. Transports like the Rhinos were rare on a

world where most travelled by foot or by horseback, and so as the party approached, the locals gathered at the souq's southern edge, waiting with a mixture of fear and wonder. The anxiety and awe of the inhabitants only increased when Thule climbed down onto the desert sands, towering over even the tallest of the locals.

'The Blood Ravens come seeking aspirants for the Blood Trials,' Thule announced, without preamble.

It had been more than a generation since last the Blood Ravens came recruiting to Calderis, but the oldest among the souq's inhabitants still remembered the Blood Trials, and the youngest of them had been raised on stories of the God-Emperor upon his Golden Throne on distant Terra, and of the fabled Space Marines, giants among men, who protected the Imperium of Man from its innumerable foes out in the vast blackness of space.

The elders of the ad hoc community greeted Thule and the others in heavily-accented Low Gothic, singing songs of praise, and invited the Blood Ravens to join in a ceremonial sharing of water. In a land in which the desert might swallow any unwary traveller whole, never to be seen again, customs of hospitality had been codified millennia before, and no Calderian would ever dream of withholding water from a visitor to their camp.

Thule accepted the water with the Chapter's thanks, and in the name of the Emperor. Like the other Space Marines, the captain had no need to take in liquid sustenance, but drank in recognition of the rituals importance to the Calderians. It was just as well that he

had no need to quench his thirst. Pulled from the wells around which the souq had been clustered, the water was brackish and saline; potable, but only just. Thule's oolitic kidney, one of the implants which had transformed him into an Astartes, was of course capable of filtering any toxins that entered his system, rendering them harmless, but still did nothing to affect the foul taste of the stuff on the tongue.

'Now,' Thule said, handing back the empty vessel to the elders, 'gather all of the young men and boys together for evaluation.'

Behind the elders, the parents of the souq exchanged guarded glances, but seeing the looks of stern warning on the Space Marines' faces, none raised a voice in question or objection.

It was an incomparable honour to be selected as an initiate into an Astartes Chapter, to be given the chance to be transformed into a superhuman machine of war, to serve the Imperium as no mundane man ever could. But while Thule knew the honour that the merest chance of surviving the initiation would proffer upon the shoulders of the young aspirants, it was clear that many of the boys themselves were less clear on the matter.

'No,' the Librarian said, shaking his head and waving a hand in a dismissive gesture at the boy who stood snuffling on the dry ground before him. 'This one has a weak mind. He will not serve.'

‘Agreed,’ Chaplain Palmarius said, features hidden behind his silver death’s-head. He had only recently finished judging the boy’s intelligence with questions regarding his childish understanding of the Emperor, the Imperium, and Man’s place in the universe. ‘Unsuitable.’

The boy, eyes wide and nose running, looked from one to the other for a moment, uncomprehending, and then when he finally realized he had been dismissed scurried away back to his parents’ side, sobbing with gratitude and relief. The pathetic boy acted as if he were a mouse allowed to climb back out of the snake’s mouth after being swallowed.

Sergeant Cyrus, at a glance from Thule, motioned to one of his Scouts, who went and selected the next boy from the shuffling ranks at the souq’s centre. There’d been more than a dozen in all when they’d started the examinations, and now only a handful remained, but so far none had passed muster and been chosen to join the recruiting party on their return to Argus Township for the Blood Trials.

As the resisting boy was dragged to stand before the Chaplain and Librarian, the winds shifted, carrying with them the stench of the livestock pens at the western edge of the souq. It was the smell of unwashed animals, of offal and sweat; the aroma of beasts of burden who would work until they dropped from the desert heat, and of others who lived near lives of luxury, for the moment

at least, fattened and pampered but destined for the dinner table.

Thule considered putting on the helmet that he carried under his arm, if only to breathe for a moment the familiar recycled air of his own power armour, rather than the heat and stench of the pens. But as the wind shifted again, coming now from the north, it carried with it another unpleasant odour, if perhaps a tantalizingly familiar one.

‘Sergeant Cyrus,’ Thule said in a low voice, calling the Scout sergeant to his side as the Chaplain and Librarian began their examination of the new candidate.

‘Yes, captain?’ Unlike most Blood Ravens, who wore their hair close-cropped, Cyrus let his grow long and unkempt, so that it now whipped around his face like an errant halo in the hot desert winds.

‘Have you yet found a source for those movement traces you picked up en route?’

Cyrus narrowed his eyes, lips pursed, and shook his head. It was clear that the sergeant felt it a personal failing that his auspex had registered movement past the horizon that he’d subsequently been unable to locate.

‘No, sir.’ He paused, considering. ‘It could have been a sensor shadow, signals bouncing off a sandstorm, maybe even mirroring our own movements back at us.’ He left off, gauging the captain’s response.

‘But you don’t believe that’s the case?’

‘No, sir,’ Cyrus answered after a moment’s pause. ‘I think there’s something out there – whether

another caravan, or a string of horses that's run off from their masters, or something – but I don't know yet what it is.'

Thule considered, sniffing the air. 'I'm inclined to agree.' Thule glanced over at the examinations, which by the looks of displeasure on the Librarian's face were going no better than the previous had done. 'Sergeant, I want you to establish a picket, and send some of your Scouts out on a–'

Before Thule could complete his instructions, cries of alarm sounded from the far side of the souq. One of the elders rushed into the space set aside for the examinations, mouth open in a wide 'O' of terror, the whites showing all around the edges of his obsidian-dark eyes.

'Ifriti!' the old man yelled, rushing towards Thule and waving his arms as though he were attempting to take flight. 'Ifriti!'

Cryus, who had already unslung the sniper rifle he always carried over his shoulder, shot Thule a questioning glance. 'Sir? What's he saying?'

The captain was already fitting his helmet into place and taking long strides in the direction from which the locals were fleeing.

'It's a word in the native dialect,' Thule said, referring to the language into which the old man had lapsed. He drew and racked his bolter. He finally knew what the familiar stench on the wind had been, and the

movements in the desert distances that Cyrus had been unable to identify. ‘It means “monster” .’

Thule reached the far side of the cluster of tents. The skies to the north were blackened by a massive cloud of dust and sand, as though a storm were rushing down upon them. And across the deserts rang out a booming noise almost like thunder. But it was not thunder, and this was no storm. Or rather it was, but not one of wind, rain, or sand. The keen eyes of the Space Marines showed them what the Calderians could not yet see, but what the desert traditions had taught them that such a sandstorm meant. The dust-cloud was being kicked up in the wake of hundreds upon hundreds of tramping feet. And the thunderous booms were in fact shouts of animal rage, war cries issuing from the advancing horde.

‘Blood Ravens!’ Thule voxed over the comms, raising his bolter and taking aim. ‘Defensive posture, severe threat.’

The examinations would have to wait. And in fact it remained to be seen whether the Blood Trials would be held or not. As it stood, Captain Thule and his party had more pressing concerns.

The feral orks thundered towards them, a ragtag motley of savage giants, primitive and barbaric, the weapons they wielded crudely made but no less deadly.

Thule fired his bolter into the advancing ranks, with his third shot managing to bring down one of the feral orks in the lead. He didn’t allow himself to feel any

sense of accomplishment. With one of the green-skinned monsters down, there were still hundreds upon hundreds more in the stampeding horde.

‘Knowledge is power!’ Thule called out the Blood Ravens’ battle cry, drawing his power sword and hacking into the closest ork at hand. ‘Guard it well!’

The greenskin tide closed around them, and the storm of sand engulfed the souq.

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Price £6.99 (UK) / \$7.99 (US) / \$9.50 (CAN)

ISBN 13: 978 1 84416 687 9 (UK)

ISBN 13: 978 1 84416 686 2 (US)

- Bookshops: Distributed in the UK and the US by Simon & Schuster Books.
- Games & hobby stores: Distributed in UK and US by Games Workshop.
- UK mail order: 0115-91 40 000 US mail order: 1-800-394-GAME
- Online: Buy direct care of Games Workshop’s web store by going to www.blacklibrary.com or www.games-workshop.com
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