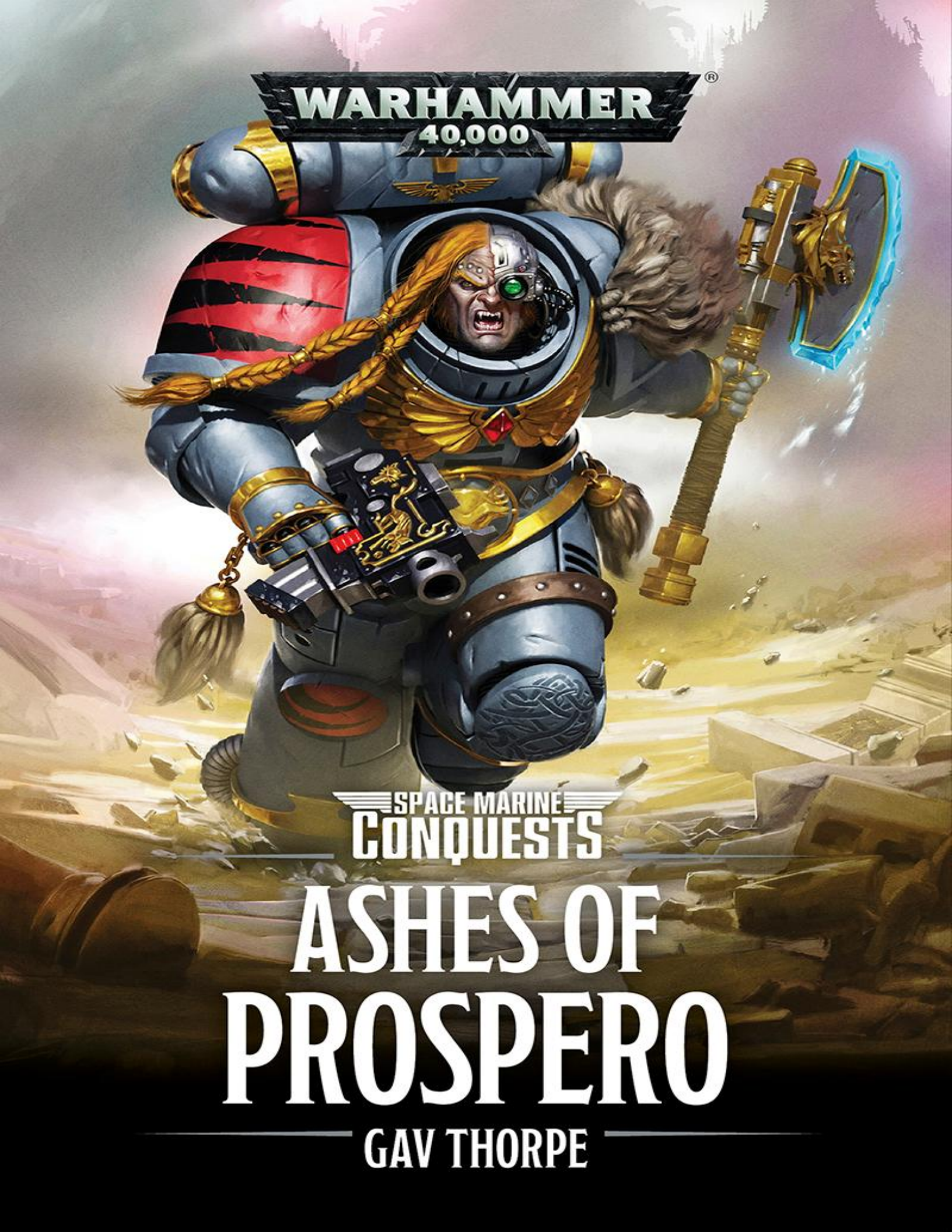
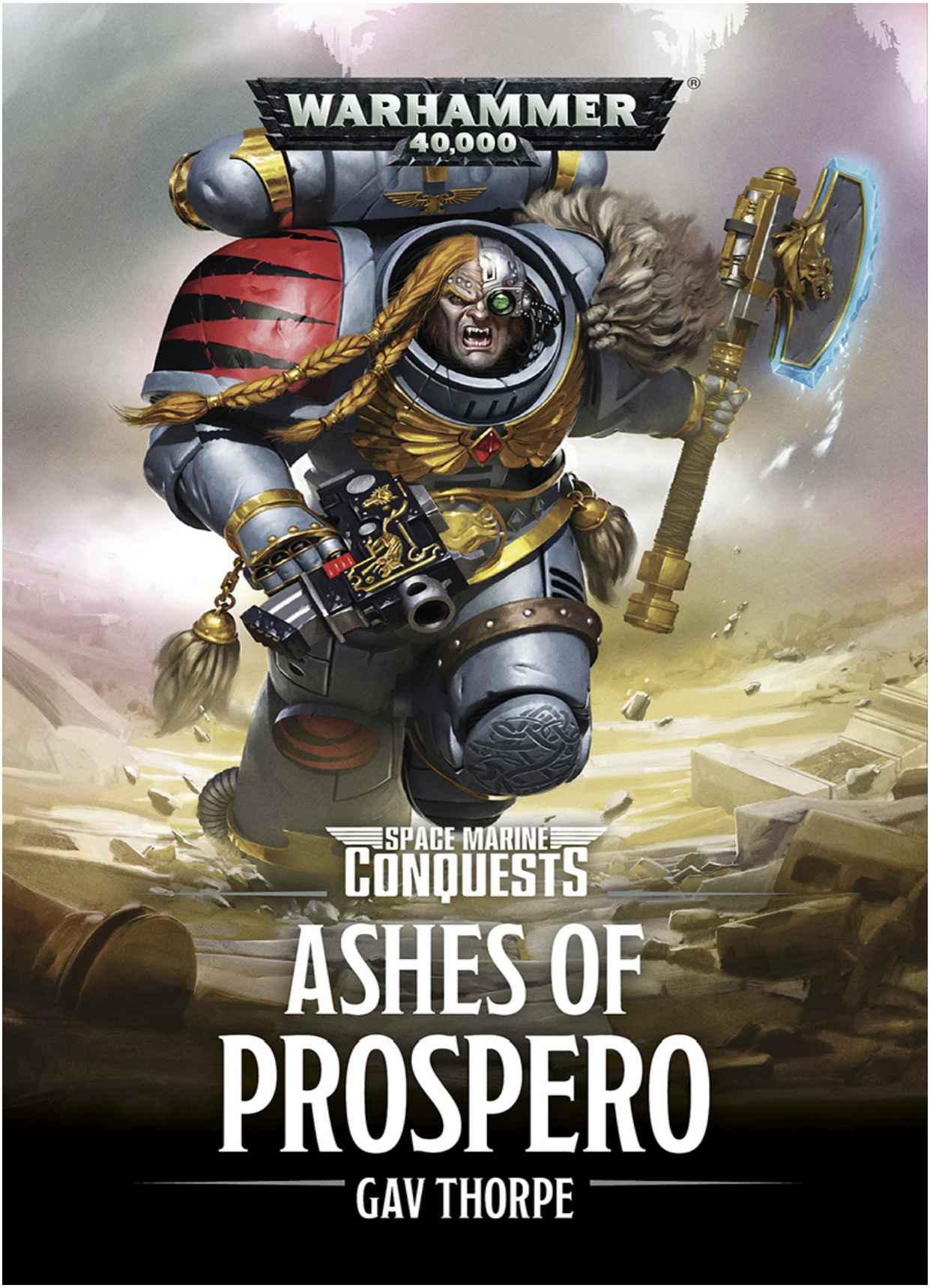

WARHAMMER
40,000
SPACE MARINE
CONQUESTS
ASHES OF
PROSPERO
GAV THORPE


WARHAMMER
40,000
SPACE MARINE
CONQUESTS
ASHES OF
PROSPERO
GAV THORPE

More Space Marine Conquests stories from Black Library

• Space Marine Conquests •

THE DEVASTATION OF BAAL

More tales of the Space Wolves from Black Library

LUKAS THE TRICKSTER

BLOOD OF ASAHEIM

STORMCALLER

WOLVES OF FENRIS

A Space Wolves short story anthology

WAR OF THE FANG

A Space Marine Battles book, containing the novella *The Hunt for Magnus* and the novel *Battle of the Fang*

LEMAN RUSS: THE GREAT WOLF

RAGNAR BLACKMANE

ARJAC ROCKFIST

THE ART OF PROVOCATION

A Space Wolves audio drama

SAGAS OF THE WOLF

An audio drama omnibus containing
Thunder From Fenris*, *Doomseeker* and *Deathwolf

More Warhammer 40,000 stories from Black Library

• The Beast Arises •

1: I AM SLAUGHTER

2: PREDATOR, PREY

3: THE EMPEROR EXPECTS

4: THE LAST WALL

5: THRONEWORLD

6: ECHOES OF THE LONG WAR

7: THE HUNT FOR VULKAN

8: THE BEAST MUST DIE

9: WATCHERS IN DEATH

10: THE LAST SON OF DORN
11: SHADOW OF ULLANOR
12: THE BEHEADING

• Space Marine Battles •

THE WORLD ENGINE
An Astral Knights novel
DAMNOS
An Ultramarines collection
DAMOCLES
Contains the White Scars, Raven Guard and Ultramarines novellas *Blood Oath*, *Broken Sword*, *Black Leviathan* and *Hunter's Snare*
OVERFIEND
Contains the White Scars, Raven Guard and Salamanders novellas *Stormseer*, *Shadow Captain* and *Forge Master*
ARMAGEDDON
Contains the Black Templars novel *Helsreach* and novella *Blood and Fire*

• Legends of the Dark Millennium •

ASTRA MILITARUM
An Astra Militarum collection
ULTRAMARINES
An Ultramarines collection
FARSIGHT
A Tau Empire novella
SONS OF CORAX
A Raven Guard collection
SPACE WOLVES
A Space Wolves collection

Visit blacklibrary.com for the full range of novels, novellas, audio dramas and Quick Reads, along with many other exclusive products

CONTENTS

Cover
Backlist
Title Page
Warhammer 40,000
Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
About the Author
An Extract from ‘Lukas the Trickster’
A Black Library Publication
eBook license

WARHAMMER 40,000

ASHES OF PROSPERO

GAV THORPE

BLACK LIBRARY

WARHAMMER 40,000

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

PROLOGUE

Fenris howled, wordless and agonised, the world's spirit tortured by the presence of diabolic invaders.

Pain throbbed along the nerves of Njal Stormcaller. The hurt of his home world became an ache in his chest, its unfamiliar dread a pounding in his skull. Still, he held tight to the *wyrd* that swelled through him, channelled into his thoughts by brother Rune Priests; power teased from the tormented psyche of a world rebelling to the tread of countless daemons and traitors.

'*Damget!'* snarled Aedir the Rod-Breaker as psychic power snaked away from his immaterial grasp, enlivened and made treacherous by the conjurations of the Thousand Sons.

'Fight it,' said Njal, his eyes fixed upon the grotesque apparition before them, swelling above a sea of half-bird mutants and cackle-mouthed madfolk.

The Crimson King. Cyclops. Magnus the Red. Daemon Primarch of the Thousand Sons.

The daemon prince manifested as a towering azure-skinned sorcerer with wings of multicoloured flame-feathers. Energy crackled around a horn-crown, each lightning spark leaving an after-image of pure nightmare upon the sight of those that looked upon the immortal being. Clad in gilded armour forged from dead stars and broken dreams, Magnus stood upon a barren pinnacle, arm raised to the raging heavens while rivers of lava boiled from the fractured earth about him, incinerating Fenrisian, Tzaangor and cultists without discrimination. The followers of Fate's

Architect hailed their lord, screaming prayers and thanks to the Master of Chance that spared them.

The handful of Space Wolves battle-psykers that held against the insane horde unleashed a torrent of icy blasts and wreathing fire-balls. Flares of pure power and razor-edged shards leapt from fingers and staves. The mobs that hurled themselves across the rocky plates of the Wolf's Gullet split upon the ire of the Rune Priests like a wave parted by a sharp promontory, their assault slashed through at its heart.

'Onwards,' urged Njal, stepping into the hurricane of psychic power that flowed from the Crimson King. 'This chaff will drain us till our sweat runs dry. Our rage must fall upon Magnus.'

But his earnest plea was in vain. The coruscating hemisphere of warp power that swirled about the Thousand Sons' primarch – a psychic might that had shrugged aside the firepower of orbiting starships – did not merely shield Magnus from attack, it clouded the *wyrdsenses* of those nearby. Even Njal, highest-ranking lord of the *wyrdhalle,* could not find the Cyclops' reflection in the warp. Though his soul burned sun-like where simple mortals were brief sparks, the Crimson King's warp presence was hidden by a thousand dark shadowfolds of ancient pacts.

Njal watched helplessly as the primarch ascended, outstretched wings ornamental and dramatic, his levitation enacted by the smallest expulsion of telekinetic will. With one cruel eye, Magnus looked down at the world about to fall to his reign, and his scarlet gaze seemed to meet that of the Stormcaller.

'The Sons of Russ will never forget,' snarled Njal, though he did not expect his oath to be heard. 'One of us will be the end of you, damned one!'

The laughter of a demigod shook the Firepeaks. To Njal's shock a calm, cultured voice appeared in his head, easily bypassing layers of wyrd defences and the protective cage of his psychic hood.

+Perhaps. But not you.+

The words came with a look of utter disdain; contempt reserved for the most irritating of gnats that persist despite vigorous swatting. Njal realised that for all his power – a power that had thwarted a greater daemon and earned him the name Stormcaller – he was nothing in the eye of the Crimson King.

And in that moment, for just an instant, he knew despair and feared for his world.

CHAPTER 1
WOES OF FENRIS

The ring of a staff on stone floors echoed through the still corridors of the Fang. Each impact resounded like a siege hammer, filling the emptiness with a sharp noise. A fastness fashioned from the bedrock of a mountain, the fortress-monastery had housed tens of thousands of Space Wolves in its past. Now it was home to relatively few. Feast-halls that had rung to thunderous voices raised in celebration of victory, and the occasional low laments of defeat, swallowed the noise with their vastness. Hundreds of banners were hung from the high rafters and friezes adorned the walls, deadening the sound of metal on rock. Trenchers and tables, each a hundred metres long, awaited banqueters that would never return. Benches and the high chairs of the Wolf Lords, polished by ten millennia of accommodating the greatest heroes of the Imperium, now sat unused.

The arrival passed now-empty dorm chambers where the Sons of Russ had rested in preparation for battle for ten thousand years. The only testament to their previous occupation was the scratched runes on cot posts and bare walls: boasts of achievements past and yet-to-be; lines of sagas not completed; jokes both subtle and crude, of foes and masters alike; dedications to the Allfather, God-Emperor of Mankind, and to Russ, and the Great Wolves that had succeeded him. All carved in angular Fenrisian runes, marking each chamber as a predator marks its territory.

Not only the interior was near-empty. His mind's eye lifted to unseen deserted ramparts where icewinds howled across naked stone, eating away at defences that had not been breached since they had been laid down at

the dawning of the Imperium of Man. Gun turrets growled and whirred, moving to the neural impulses of half-sentient servitors slaved to their cannons, unthinking soul-carcasses oblivious to the desolation around them. Kilometres-long walls scarred the towering slopes of the Fang's outer skin, cutting dark lines across the snow-wreathed flanks of the hollow mountain.

The crash of the staff was accompanied by the tread of soft-booted feet – a step surprisingly light given the size of the man that took them. He was broad-shouldered, as were all Space Marines, and a head and a half taller than any normal man. His calves were bound tight with thongs about leggings of tanned hide. His furred coat and the shaggy auburn beard hanging lank from his chin and cheeks steamed, the ice rime slowly fading as he made his way along processionals and galleries, leaving a course of drips and wet footprints in his wake.

His face was square-jawed, the nose large, nostrils flared like a bull's. Eyes the colour of slate speckled with green stared directly ahead from beneath thick brows, knotted together in concern. The tips of his upper incisors protruded into his bottom lip, the length of his fangs an indication of his extended years.

The staff was black, carved with runework that glowed like forgefire. Its head was the polished skull of a blizzard-wolf, his personal totem. On his shoulder sat a black-feathered bird. One eye glittered with augmetics, and wires protruded from its flesh in testament to its altered nature. Nightwing – the Rune Priest's psyber-familiar, oracle and extension of his senses and thoughts. The lumen-light glittered in its normal eye, reflected from the beady ebon surface like shooting stars against a black sky.

His solitary progress brought him to the great doors of the King's Hall. They were barred – the huge barriers of high mountain ash were bound with gilded plasteel, reinforced with rivets each the size of a man's clenched fist. Silver runes had been hammered into the wood, with a simple challenge:

Friends welcomed for ever. Foes cursed for eternity.

Two guards stood by the ornate iron handles – a pair of broad rings, each fashioned in the likeness of the world drake swallowing its tail. The door wardens were clad in the monstrously bulky plate of Tactical Dreadnought armour, two warriors from the Great Wolf's own guard. The armour was

painted in the blue-grey of the Chapter, marked by icons of their Great Company, squad and personal adornments. Each wore several talismans and wolf tails; some were signatures of their past deeds, others awards and trophies of their victories.

They were veterans famed among the Chapter and the returning Rune Priest knew them well. To the right, Alrik Doomseeker, his paired claws raised but not active, expression hidden within his helm. On the other side was Sven Halfhelm, thunder hammer lifted to bar further passage, a cruciform storm shield held across his body. He wore no helm, and an old scar that ran across his right eye from cheek to forehead was pale against tanned skin.

'I request audience with the Great Wolf,' said the visitor. His voice was quiet but powerful, spoken with assured authority.

'Then speak the ally-words and you shall pass,' replied Alrik.

'*Aett-skald*.' He whispered the code, gaze moving from one guardian to the other. 'Such knowledge could easily be plucked from the mind of another. Logan needs better security if he thinks a simple password could prevent a foe from entering his inner halls.'

'An issue we have raised with the Great Wolf, for sure,' said Sven, withdrawing his hammer with a wheeze of armour servos. 'But who save for the Rune Priests could guard against the daemons again? We have missed you, Lord of Runes. I hope your journey into the ice was fruitful.'

Alrik turned and signalled to a cluster of lenses that stared down from the lintel above the gate. The sentry devices clicked and whirred as the servitor bound within the gateway accessed its protocols and studied the new arrival for its own clarification. Several seconds passed before the heavy clank of locks turning announced that all had been found in order.

The doors swung inwards with a grinding of gears, revealing the King's Hall in all its glory. The visitor watched Alrik step within and announce his arrival through the amplifier of his war-plate.

'A Lord of the Fang returns, Great Wolf. The Tempest that Walks. Njal Stormcaller!'

A blizzard raged along the slopes of the fjord, the snow flurries almost horizontal as gales drove them into the valley. Unheeding of the storm, Arjac, known as Rockfist to his brothers, forged through the drifts. His

already considerable frame had been grown into the superhuman physique of a Space Marine by the Canis Helix gene-seed. Clad in a suit of Tactical Dreadnought armour – bulky war-plate designed to withstand plasma blasts and the freezing void of space – he did not even notice the driving ice and wind that would have swept away the strongest of normal men.

He followed a near-invisible track down towards the northern shoreline, winding his way between snow-covered boulders, picking past ice crevasses that could devour battle tanks. Lumpen shapes marred the snow to either side. Here and there, a rictus face or outstretched hand broke the pale blanket. He passed dead by the score, frozen where they had fallen. Some of them had been slain by exposure to the elements as they crawled homewards, but most had been killed by violence. Their guts hung open and arteries had spilled the last of their life into the uncaring snow.

Fitful gusts of smoke drifted up from the fjord and Arjac saw charred timbers jutting from the ice that had trapped the waters: remnants of pyreships, several dozen of them. Those that still gave off a smog could not have been lit long before the storm had hit, their flames tamped by the blizzard. He could see them not far from the vague boundary between land and water, held on giant sleds because no keel could break the ice. Bodies had been stacked like firewood on the decks, young and old, men and women.

A large settlement of longhouses clustered along the banks of the river at the fjord's head, but only a few dozen fur-wrapped figures waited at the harbour, the last inhabitants of Elsinholm.

The snows had relented by the time Arjac had descended to the town. He passed empty longhalls, their roofs made of kraken skin, their walls frozen daub and stones between bones of the gigantic beasts of the deep. Signs of the kraken hunt were everywhere, from the discarded flensing pikes frozen to racks by the quaysides, to the huge dragway into the centre of the town where a monstrous catch would be taken and divided up between the townsfolk.

A call signalled that one of the mourners at the iceside had spotted him and seconds later the people from the harbour surged up the frozen mud of the street, calling thanks to the gods and the Sky Warriors.

Decorum returned as they neared Arjac. The crowd slowed, their enthusiasm suddenly curtailed, most stopping some distance away while a

handful dared approach closer. The people looked haggard – most of them were in their old age, though there were a few younger men and women scattered throughout. Their faces were pinched from cold and hunger. They eyed the Space Wolves Terminator with a mixture of hope and desperation.

One of them – obviously the town elder, whom he had been told by the Great Wolf was called Rangvaldr – broke from the group and approached, making signs of welcome with a three-fingered hand. The top of the *aettjarl*'s head barely reached the wolf symbol on Arjac's plastron, but he raised his chin to meet the gigantic warrior eye to eye. There was no lack of spirit in his gaze.

'Bless the Sons of the Wolf King. Our message was heard,' said the chieftain.

'The Great Wolf hears and sees all that happens in his domain.' Arjac tilted his head towards the pyreboats and then glanced back to the path of corpses above the town. 'How many?'

'Three hundred and four,' Rangvaldr said with a mournful look. 'From the invasion. We had not even found them all before this latest calamity, which has taken forty-two more.'

'Your message spoke of a beast from the highlands descending to attack your people.'

'Aye, a drake of ice and fury. It comes upon us at night. We have few enough to fight as it is, and none to crew a ship when the thaw comes. The light is its only dread, but the long nights draw closer. If this beast takes any more of us…'

'Where are the others?' an older woman called out from the crowd. Her scrawny fingers gripped a ragged shawl about head and shoulders.

'Why do you not ride a metal sky-chariot?' asked another, perhaps a daughter by their similar features. Auburn curls hung out of her fur-lined hood and a fresh cut marred her tanned cheek.

'Hush now, Magnhild,' said Rangvaldr, glaring at the older woman. He turned his annoyance on the younger of the pair. 'Stow your questions, Tyra.'

'No,' said the daughter. She strode up the street, but her gaze did not fall upon Arjac. When she addressed him, her eyes seemed locked to the bearclaw icon upon his left greave. 'Warrior, we are grateful that you have come, but we need protection. When will the Great Wolf send the others?'

‘There are no others,’ said Arjac. The townsfolk greeted this statement with deepening frowns and sharp intakes of breath but raised no spoken complaint. ‘The Sons of Russ are sorely beset and the Allfather’s servants call us from across the heavenly bridge.’

‘We gave our sons and daughters to the war against the *wyrdkine* and the *felhird*, and a beast of that battle plagues us still,’ called Magnhild. ‘All we asked is that the Great Wolf send us warriors to guard us from this long shadow of war.’

‘This is *Foehammer*,’ said Arjac, presenting his oversized thunder hammer. Crackling power engulfed the head as his thumb touched the activation stud. ‘Its lightest touch shatters fortresses.’ He lifted his similarly massive storm shield. Its boss, wrought as a cruciform Terminator honour with a skull at its centre, shimmered with a blue sheen. ‘This is the anvil shield. It wards away blasts that can cleave mountains.’

He took a step forward, towering over Tyra.

‘Look at me, child,’ he said quietly.

His confidence was like a stoked hearth that thawed the bone-chill. Tyra’s timidity evaporated like the ice in his beard. Hesitantly, she raised her head, her eyes a startling green like bright emeralds in her sun-kissed face. Arjac smiled, his elongated incisors denting his bottom lip.

‘You need to slay a beast,’ he said, turning his attention to the rest of them. ‘So the Great Wolf sent me.’

The Imperium had many heroes, alive and dead. Some were deserving of such a title; some were later manufactured to be so. Any histiographer, Priest, Imperial Commander or common citizen that met Logan Grimnar was in no doubt that they were in the presence of a true Hero of the Imperium. The Great Wolf radiated calm assurance and strength. His movements were fulsome, possessed of vigour and purpose. His gaze always held a measure of respect, his countenance one of intelligence and contemplation, while those that witnessed him in battle saw a savage warrior, brutal and unflinching in his violence.

As he stepped inside, Njal saw that Logan wore his Terminator armour, bound with rune-torqs and wolf totems. Atop the back hung the head and pelt of Fellclaw – the Wolf Priests often sung the tale of how the Great Wolf had tracked and slain the massive thunderwolf as part of his trials to

become one of the Wolf King's most lauded heirs. A few steps behind, a thrall in thick jerkin and grey leggings held the Chapter Master's helm, absent-mindedly stroking the revered artefact as though it was a living thing, soothing its spirit. Logan's face was a mask of studied interest in his companions, framed by hair increasingly more grey than black.

Another retainer close at hand bore the Axe Morkai, a symbol of Logan's victories over the darkness on the world of Armageddon. To the ungifted observer the weapon looked like a double-headed axe with silver-red blades, clasped to the haft by bindings fashioned in the likeness of the deathwolf Morkai.

To Njal's *wyrdsight,* the runic wards that had been placed upon the weapon shone like brazier-fire. The axe's bloodlust writhed and coiled inside the blade, kept at bay with anointments of water drawn from the polar glaciers of Fenris and the rune-craft of the Stormcaller, so that it now served the warriors of the Allfather as it had once slain His servants.

Njal saw a companion of many decades – the pillar upon which the Space Wolves had relied for these last centuries. He needed no wyrdsight to see the weight upon the shoulders of his feal-lord, despite Logan's attempts to appear unburdened by the woes and disasters of recent years. He stood beside the throne of the hall, upright and as unyielding as the Fang itself while he spoke to a small gathering of Space Marines and unaugmented humans. Those with whom he conversed would know nothing amiss, but to Njal the extra depth to the occasional frown, the slightest lag in gesture and answer, and the half-seen grimace behind Logan's replies all betrayed the toll it had taken.

The role of the Great Wolf was not an easy task for even the strongest and most courageous Son of Fenris. Being such when Magnus the Red had brought spiteful war to the home world was a test few would pass. To hold such rank, when the invasions of the Dark Powers had opened the Great Rift and the Legion of the Despoiler roamed free, was to lead in a time of peril not seen since the cataclysm of the Nightwinter when Horus had risen against the Allfather. The Imperium was upon the verge of desolation, as was Fenris itself. Its fighting forces were stretched to breaking. Its alliances, millennia-old pacts and decrees broken by the machinations of daemons and traitors.

Yes, Logan had reason indeed to be fatigued, but he would be the last to admit any such drain.

The Great Wolf did not look around as Njal entered, his attention devoted to those around him. Two of the Space Marines Njal knew well, for they were Space Wolves, of Logan's personal Wolf Guard.

There was a third, clad in the primary-blue plate and icons of the Ultramarines Chapter. The outsider – or *utlander* as the Fenrisians would say – was a giant among giants. Logan Grimnar in full battleplate was no meagre sight, but the Son of Macragge that stood next to him was even larger.

He was called Lieutenant Arlandus Castallor and was one of a new breed of warriors: the Primaris Space Marines. He was clad in ornate battleplate to fit his stature; like his modified gene-seed, it was a marvel of ten thousand years of secretive development. Castallor had been despatched across the tumultuous tides of the warp by none other than Roboute Guilliman himself, the primarch returned from the jaws of death. It had been Castallor's arrival with news of Guilliman's return that had prompted Njal's sojourn into the ice to seek the guidance of a vision quest.

Yet for all his bulk and officer rank Castallor lacked the presence of the Great Wolf. Sheer size could not replace centuries of experience, and wargear was no match for charisma and gravitas. The Ultramarines Lieutenant deferred to Grimnar in his expression and pose, and though he would be counted a veteran among warriors of normal lifespan there was something naive and untoward in his countenance.

Logan had welcomed the emissary as he would any other, as he had several packs of Primaris brothers that had been despatched with Castallor to bolster the numbers of the Space Wolves.

There was something about these new warriors that did not sit easily with Njal and the other senior warriors of the Chapter. The recruits were another step removed from those they protected and Grimnar had, in privacy, voiced his concerns that it might again fall to the Space Wolves to police the ambitions of their Brother-Chapters.

The humans Njal did not know. They were arrivals from after he had left the Fang. By their uniforms and robes, he could deduce that they were a high-ranking officer of the Astra Militarum, a tithe-warden of the Departmento Munitorum and an Astropath attached to the Imperial Navy.

‘…orks have sought the opportunity to overrun three star systems while we are beset at Gathalamor,’ explained the Imperial Guard commander.

‘Orks are opportunists,’ replied the Great Wolf. ‘There is no plan behind their conquests, only the lust for battle. The Space Wolves cannot stifle every xenos threat that raises its ugly head. In the end, there will be justice. One war at a time. Gathalamor must be held first.’

‘A forge world is under threat,’ added the Departmento Munitorum official, fidgeting with a data-slate. ‘Vital war supplies…’

‘I am sure the Adeptus Mechanicus have a Titan Legion or two that can deal with the greenskins,’ Logan said patiently.

Njal paid them little heed. He did not need to know the details of their conversation. He could tell from the small instances of regret in Logan’s expression that they continued to petition him for aid of one kind or another; aid the Space Wolves were in no position to provide given that they were already stretched far beyond their normal duties and campaigns.

As he watched Logan, the Rune Priest also studied his surroundings through the augmented gaze of Nightwing. Upon his shoulder the psyber-raven turned to and fro, taking in the vastness of the King’s Hall. It was not the largest space within the Fang, smaller than the Hall of the Great Wolf where the whole Chapter could assemble with much room to spare, and dwarfed by some of the kilometres-long subterranean gunnery ranges used by the Long Fangs to carry out anti-tank combat drills. Even so it was an impressive space, modelled by tradition on the longhall where Russ himself had been raised, but on a far grander scale.

It was longer than broad, nearly five hundred metres by two hundred, the roof thirty metres above his head held up by three dozen pillars modelled as great ironoak trees that were much prized by Fenrisian carpenters. Carved ravens and ice owls looked down from the branches, and winterfurs clung to the heavily ridged trunks and peered from knotholes. The trees themselves had the semblance of faces, rendered as the *ygdras* giants of Fenrisian legend. They gazed down upon the proceedings beneath them with a mixture of expressions; benign, mischievous and hostile. Between the spread of their chiselled canopies glittered a roof moulded in stone with the effect of bound thatch, each meticulously rendered blade of straw covered in gold leaf. Even here dwelt sculpted creatures both real and mythic – tuft-eared cats prowled through

the thatch after mice and rats while *aelfkid* wove strands into protective *wyrdleif* and runes of hospitality.

The floor was cast ferrocrete, but shaped as thousands of irregular flagstones, the expanse between the columns broken by three great firepits. The pits were dormant, light provided by the hundreds of lumens hung from the boughs of the fake trees, masquerading as storm lanterns used on the prows of Fenrisian wolfships.

Clusters of benches and chairs were placed strategically throughout the hall, creating the illusion of secluded nooks for quiet conversation despite the overall size of the room. It was a place for discussion and conjecture, cooperation and sharing, not the theatre of grandeur and command that was the Hall of the Great Wolf.

The hall was built so that despite its magnitude it left one with a sense of humble means, the careful artifice of the architect and craftsmen aligning to create an illusion of a primal world and its primitive inhabitants, but rendered with all of the cunning and technology of the vast Imperium. It was, like so much of the Space Wolves, a veneer of barbarity and ignorance that served to mask a far more sophisticated mindset than most outsiders would credit. A charming glamour like that cast by the *wyrdmidons* in legend to lure sailors to their doom, hiding the lethal rocks within the guise of softly shoaling coastline.

It was no surprise that Logan chose to meet his petitioners here, away from the overbearing sparsity of the Hall of the Great Wolf, with nothing of the military nor Imperium in sight. It veiled the power of the Space Wolves, tempering both the fears and expectations of his visitors.

The Stormcaller stopped a short distance away and waited patiently for Logan to conclude his discussion. The Great Wolf did so with an indication that the matter would be continued later, and with reassuring words and expression sent the others away, escorted by Alrik and Sven. When the last of them had passed from the King's Hall Logan finally turned his eye to Njal.

'You look cold,' said the Great Wolf.

Njal smiled at the joke, his concerns about Logan's health and state of mind dismissed in one simple moment of jest. Whatever grief the Great Wolf held in his heart, his mind and body were as active and sharp as ever.

Logan's expression turned serious. 'Was your vision quest successful? Did you find what you sought?'

'I found a great many things, but none of which I sought,' replied Njal. 'The frost was late this year and the ice bears hid in their caves. The kraken have sunk to the blackest depths and the carrion-fangs roost only in the highest forests. Trolls roam in packs, in numbers unseen before. Their galling cacophony rings through the valleys where the noise of honest labour and life once echoed. The taint of Magnus and his followers still stains the snows, and perhaps we will not see it cleansed in our lifetime.'

'We knew this already,' said Logan. 'You set out looking for guidance from the Allfather, to find answers in the spirit of Fenris. I have learned much from our ambassador from Macragge, concerning the ordering of this broken galaxy and the plans of his primarch.'

'Did he desire you swear an oath?' Njal asked, sharply. 'Does Lord Guilliman wish our fealty?'

'He was wise enough not to ask,' said Logan. 'Though I do not doubt that the primarch thinks himself our commander. It was claimed that he went before the Allfather himself and was blessed with an audience.'

'The portents have not changed.' Njal said the words quietly. 'The storm breaks everywhere. This much you already know. The return of the Thirteenth, the wrath of Magnus, the Great Rift… All were part of the same design. A blood moon, the reddened maw. War, Logan. War the likes of which the Imperium has not seen for millennia. A war that may never end, such is the desire of the Dark Powers.'

'But what else?' demanded Logan, stepping closer, his insistence rolling from him like waves of heat. 'The Eye has opened. What of the Wolf King?'

Njal did not answer at first, dismayed by what he saw as desperation in the stare of his feal-lord. The Great Wolf's brow furrowed at his silence, extracting meaning from the wordless response.

'No sign?'

'None, my lord. There are stirrings, tempests through which even I cannot gaze. Even so, I saw a sleeper entombed in rock, and a white storm that rode upon a chariot of lightning. A shadow rises to the call of the Allfather's messengers, a darkness that strikes from within. The benighted ones turn their supernal gazes upon our worlds – the Eater of Worlds, the

Corpse-King and the Misbegotten Child move once more. The Cyclopean Fiend, we have already seen. Even the Golden One has broken his gaze from the Empyrean again. I felt its glare like a fire in my soul.

'But nothing pertaining to the Sons of Fenris. Though the Thirteenth have come back and the Eye has opened, I saw nothing of Leman Russ' return.'

Logan seemed to sag, if such a thing was possible in Terminator armour. His eyes turned to the stone floor, a sigh heavy from his chest.

'We should be thankful, Logan,' Njal continued. 'Our father-king vowed to return for the Wolftime, when the world is ending. He will come for the final battle, it was told. That he has not returned means there is still hope. Slim, but hope all the same. If we hear the howl of the Wolf King ere we die, it will be to the lament of the Allfather and all that follow Him.'

'I suppose you are right,' said Logan. 'Perhaps it was just vanity to hope that where one returned… It matters nothing. He has not come, but we are still here and that is what counts.'

'It seems that most are not here…' Njal looked pointedly around the hall, though it was clear his remarks encompassed all of the Fang. 'These halls are rarely filled, and only ghosts walk these chambers at the moment.'

'There is scarce a warrior remaining,' answered Logan. 'Some recovering from injuries, Blood Claws in their initial training, the venerable fighters that slumber. A few squads from the Great Companies since returned after their Wolf Lords departed. There is not a long day that passes without the astropaths relating some fresh call for help.'

'Recruitment?'

'Continues. But we cannot drag blood from the rocks. Dozens of tribes were lost to Magnus' spite, and Grand Master Aurikon's purgings curtailed their numbers further. It is of no benefit to take those who will not pass the tests, nor to lower our standards. We are recovering, but it is a slow process, Njal.'

'What of the newcomers?'

'The Primaris Marines?' Logan pursed his lips, giving genuine consideration to the question. 'Exemplary. They fight as you might think they would. We have campaigns that would have ended poorly but for their presence.'

‘But…’

‘Who can say what Cawl’s tampering with the gene-seed has done to the Canis Helix?’ Grimnar dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. ‘The *wulfen*-curse is still there, but are the Primaris Marines stronger against it, or weaker?’

The Stormcaller nodded.

‘And when strife is upon us, how is it that the Great Wolf remains throne-bound?’

‘Not for long,’ Logan replied grimly. ‘You saw my new guests. Adjutant-colonel Mastroshka and her companions are on their way to the Gasai sector. Orks. As if the Infernal Powers and their followers were not enough of a tragedy. The greenskins feel empowered to move against the realms of the Allfather.’

‘And you will answer the call?’

‘My absent Nightwolves return from victorious conflict at Gehenna as we speak. I am taking a ship in a few days to rendezvous at the system boundary.’

‘Not even time to take on supplies and victuals?’

‘No. I will take what I can with me, but the armoury works at capacity and still the arsenal is near empty. If our foes think to bleed us dry, they are canny.’

Njal absorbed this without comment, while Logan levelled an expectant stare at him. It took several seconds for the Stormcaller to realise what his lord would not ask. Not for lack of authority, but from respect for Njal’s own status as a leader.

‘Of course, I will fight by the side of the Great Wolf,’ the Rune Priest said.

Logan nodded, pleased by this, the care lines softened slightly on his brow.

‘There are others that would speak with me, Njal,’ he said, glancing past. The Stormcaller turned his head slightly and saw a congregation of men and women in the traditional garb of the Fenrisian tribes, eyes roaming their surrounds with fear and awe. Their gazes fixed upon the two lords of the Fang, the fingers of the petitioners clasping nervously at amulets and fetishes as they did so. Njal could feel the hope that washed from them; hope that could only come from those caught in the grip of

deepest need. He did not like its scent. It was a cloying presence on his thoughts, so unfamiliar on Fenris.

The tribal elders shrank back, quivering and muttering. Njal realised he had bared his fangs, not at the Fenrisians, but the dread that maligned them. He adjusted his expression to something he hoped was a little more reassuring. They did not seem convinced and he turned away, shielding them from his unnatural features.

'I shall leave the pleasantries to you, Logan. Keep them strong. Their people, their heart and continued courage, are our future. If they lose faith in our purpose…'

'I know.' Logan's eyes betrayed his concern though he kept his face neutral. He probably did not even realise he was doing it, a natural ambassador as much as he was a war leader.

The Great Wolf laid a hand on Njal's arm. It was a gesture of solidarity, offering strength but also drawing it. The bond between Space Wolf and Space Wolf, brother and brother, Fenrisian and Fenrisian, ran deeper than any oath to the Imperium. Only their duty to the Allfather outweighed their dedication to each other.

Dusk was swiftly approaching and with it died the light that the *Elsinholma* claimed was the only defence against the ice drake. Determined to be rid of the creature or die in the attempt, the townsfolk had taken up arms and accompanied Arjac in his trek up into the peaks above the fjord, following a trail of broken trees and strangely swirled drifts that Tyra said would lead to the drake's lair.

'Has anyone seen the beast?' Arjac asked as they rounded a ridge overlooking the head of the fjord. A few metres ahead Tyra pointed east with her leaf-headed spear, towards a forbidding cliff face.

'It comes in a mist,' said Thorda, her breath an imitation of this feat. 'Ice flows in its veins, I tell you, Sky Warrior.'

'I heard the creak of its skin,' said another of the locals. He looked away quickly, shamed. 'Its breath was a whisper against the walls and the panes frosted with its passing. I dared not go out to confront it.'

The group carried an assortment of weapons, some designed for war, others improvised from the tools of the kraken hunt. Despite her apparent frailty, Magnhild held a long flensing pike, its curved head catching the

last rays of the sun above the far mounts. Others had taken barbed harpoons from the harbourside. Those not so confident in their limb-strength any longer, pragmatism overcoming pride, had fashioned pavises from the timbers of their ships' remains. What these wooden shields were meant to do against the supposed ice breath of the drake Arjac was not sure, but it gave the party confidence to bring them along.

'So, no,' said Rockfist. 'None of you have seen this creature.'

'That is why we are still alive,' muttered Rangvaldr.

Arjac could not disagree.

Tyra's directions led them across a flat glacier field, the cliff face some half a kilometre away, rent with broad, dark fissures. A vapour seeped from a large crevasse near to the centre of the sheer ice wall. It hung low to the ground, and was no more than waist-high to the Space Marine.

While they picked their way closer, the Elsinholma were content for him to take the lead. Arjac wondered what manner of foe he was about to face. The invasion of Magnus and his Thousand Sons had brought foes mortal and immortal to Fenris, though the traitor primarch's departure had, as far as the Great Wolf could assess, taken such threats with him. What had not been immediately obvious was the damage done to the fabric of Fenris itself and the competing forces that controlled its unique ecosystem.

Losses among the tribe folk had meant the thaw season hunts had not slain anywhere near their usual count of trolls, ice bears and other fierce predators. In turn, vermin and lower creatures had fled their territories, infesting the food stores, taking what little had survived the devastation. The most gigantic monsters – drakes and krakens, *fyr-ent* and leviathans – rampaged at will, taking nearly as many folk as the war and the brutal purges of the Grey Knights. Whole communities had been lost and the Great Wolf had despaired even as he had sent more and more of his warriors off-world to combat the burgeoning threats across the stars.

It had been something of a miracle that Elsinholm's messenger had survived the journey to the Fang, and the Great Wolf had been loath to ignore the plea. While others had simply abandoned their ancestral lands – such as existed amongst the tectonic anarchy of Fenris' lively orbital cycle – these people had stayed to defend their homes and way of life. An

example to others, the Great Wolf had said, and undoubtedly the sires of future Space Wolves.

And from this last concern, Arjac had divined Logan Grimnar's greatest fear. The Space Wolves were of their people. If the people died, so too did the Chapter. The Canis Helix and Fenrisian blood were inextricably linked. If the Chapter was to replace its losses, if there was to be a new generation of Space Wolves, every town, tribe and village was as precious as gemstones.

Which was why Arjac was ploughing through the snow on a glacier field in the northern wastes to confront a snow drake.

'Wait here,' he told the townspeople, lifting his hammer to halt them.

'We fight at your side,' insisted Tyra, brandishing her spear.

'My hammer-swing is wide,' Arjac said with forced humour. He really did not want them risking themselves only to hamper his fighting space. 'By my side is a dangerous place to stand.'

Their honour satisfied by the justified refusal, the Elsinholma contented themselves with following a dozen metres behind, their expressions growing more fearful as they waded into the mist.

The fog glistened, and not from suspended ice crystals as Arjac had first thought. He was no *wyrdjarl,* but he could smell something amiss on the cold breeze. On any planet other than Fenris it might have been called unnatural, but in the frozen wastes of his home world, the wyrd was as much part of nature as trees and fish and birds.

There was something definitely off about the mist, more than the sparkle. A residue of sorcery.

That was perhaps the worst. The battles, the monsters, the devastated fields and hunting grounds were extreme but, in time, nothing that Fenris could not heal. But in scattered places where the *wyrdsturm* had broken, where sorcery had been unleashed and the tread of Magnus had passed, the spirit of Fenris had been corrupted.

Arjac hoped fervently that it was just a wyrd-touched monster. If it was something else… Oaths had been made to the Grand Master of the Grey Knights to keep secret the knowledge held so tightly by the lords of Titan.

He glanced back at Rangvaldr, Magnhild and the others. His gaze settled on fiery-haired Tyra. He really did not want to have to slay them for the unwitting crime of meeting a daemon.

CHAPTER 2
LEGENDS

Leaving by one of the side doors, Njal headed for his chamber. When he had spoken to Logan of the Fang being haunted by ghosts, he had not simply been using skald-words. Through his wyrd the fortress-monastery was alive with all sorts of exceptional activity. Since Magnus the Red's incursion, the boundaries between the material world and the warp around Fenris had been substantially thinned, and the Fang thrummed with nascent power on the edge of sensation.

The world of the Space Wolves had always occupied a space closer than usual to the immaterium. It was this proximity to the realm of dreams and nightmares that was the source of their runelore, and perhaps the secret to the Canis Helix bound within the Space Wolves' gene-seed, a gift from the Allfather to keep at bay the temptations of the dark gods. Njal had learned many views of the universe over his centuries with the Sons of Russ; from Librarians of other Chapters, the Psychomancers of the Adeptus Mechanicus with their warp algorithms, and from facing the denizens and servants of the Abyss. But in his heart was the wyrd of his upbringing, the innate bind with the fabric of the universe that formed the foundations of his powers. Others spoke of breaches between dimensions, or tapping into a distant reservoir of energy. To Njal and others raised as *wyrdfulk* on Fenris, their abilities did not come from another place but were part of the substance around them.

Such was the way he viewed the Fang now, the permeability between the realm of mortals and godspawn stretched near to breaking. He heard the

whispers of dead thralls lamenting their failure to serve the Allfather, not their deaths during the trials to become a Space Marine. The unfulfilled oaths of fallen brothers sang along the walls and echoed down from the towers. Battle cries or death-snarls shouted on the other side of the galaxy reverberated through the chambers of the citadel.

He had seen them too, occasionally, when the moons were full above the Fang and Fenris was lit by stars not of the mortal universe. Glimpses in shadows, of the haggard dead, and the honoured lost; those that had died in dishonour and those that had given their lives bravely.

And not only Space Wolves.

Fenris had known invasion several times in its long history, from the Thousand Sons of Magnus to the frothing zealots of Cardinal Bucharis, and numerous other traitors and alien foes. Thousands of years had passed since they had besieged the fortress-monastery, but the spirits of demented Frateris continued to shriek and holler their praises to a false god-emperor. Blasphemous canticles from the sons of Prospero were etched in the walls, the faces of the chanters formed in the cracks between stones and the blemishes of turning millennia.

It was nothing new. The first time Njal had set foot inside the *aett* of the Space Wolves he had felt the presence of the ancient dead, as though the entire structure was built not just as a fortress but also a conductor for the spirits of the departed. Beneath the dancing polar lights, the Fang had swarmed with otherlight also, drawing down the power of demigods and immortal princes.

As of late, the intensity and frequency of these intrusions had increased. Magnus had sought more than simply vengeance in his latest assault. His legion and daemonic allies might have been driven from the surface of Fenris, but neither Njal, Logan, or any other with the wisdom to see would call the conclusion of the battle a victory.

In part, it had been to escape these distractions that Njal had ventured into the wilderness. He had sought clarity in the frozen peaks, the toil of his trek to clear the fog of doubt Magnus had left in his thoughts.

Njal had sought purging, returning to the state of natural grace that had gifted him his wyrd.

And it had worked. His wyrdsight was keener than ever, but his mind was stronger also, so that the apparitions that haunted the Fang no longer

intruded upon his waking thoughts. Sleep was another matter, but here his Allfather-gifted physiology was a boon, allowing him complete rest in the space of just fifteen minutes. Even that respite he had not allowed himself during his quest. It had been a considerable time since he had known even the half-sleep of his catalepsean node.

So it was that he came to his room, tired in muscle and bone but invigorated in thought.

Arjac's breath came in long, steaming draughts, matching the vapour that issued from the cave mouth. A hundred metres from the cave he raised his hammer and shield and advanced with deliberate steps, eyes fixed on the cleft ahead.

He was painfully aware of the shadow behind him lengthening as the sun set behind the far side of the fjord. The creeping darkness overtook him when he was just fifty metres from the ragged crack. He broke into a slow run, trying to catch the wavering line but he was still thirty metres from the monster's lair when the mountainshade reached the entrance. The reflective ice was engulfed by the fall of night, plunging the glacier field into twilight.

'*Balka,*' swore Arjac.

A frozen blast raged from the cave, coating Arjac's armour and face with frost. He blinked, cracking whiteness, in time to see a serpentine shape issuing from the cavern. Twenty metres of the wyrm had slithered out onto the ice field and still its tail was not in sight. Its head was ringed by a barbed frill, splayed in aggression, while its mouth opened to reveal icicle fangs.

Behind him, the townsfolk shouted in panic, but relief flooded through Arjac as the monstrous wyrm snaked towards him across the glacier.

Not a daemon.

'It's fine,' he called, glancing back at the retreating Elsinholma. 'It's just a wyrd-touched *sturmwyrm*!'

Arjac returned his attention to the creature as it reared up, ten metres above him. The Great Wolf's champion raised his shield, hammer swinging back in his other hand. Mist billowed from the serpent's maw, enveloping him again, crusting over skin and ceramite. From the cloud, the beast lunged, slamming its head towards him.

Its blunt nose smashed into the anvil shield. The impact threw Arjac backwards while sparks cascaded from the power field. He landed hard, his heavy plate breaking the ice in a plume of white. Head swaying, the gargantuan serpent approached.

With a fierce yell, Tyra dashed past, snow churning from her stride. Others from the devastated town followed, the names of their fallen loved ones shouted as curses, the titles of the Allfather called out as invocations of protection.

'No, no, no,' Arjac grumbled to himself, rolling sideways and pushing himself to one knee. 'You'll just get in the way.'

The corridors around the chambers of the Runeworkers were hung with *wyrdwards* – sigils in iron, stone and gold, and barrier-runes of flint. It looked crude, like the barbaric offerings of the uninitiated to the Dark Powers, but Njal knew better than to judge the protective talismans by appearance. All things had a presence in the warp. The scholars of the Imperium called it many things – the soul, the shadow, the spirit. To the rune-skalds, it was a reflection, hence their poetic names for the warp – the Othersea, the Waters Within the Ice, the Frozen Beyond. Like a reflection on a rippled glacier wall, the projection of material into the warp was incomplete, asymmetric even. The tufts of bloody hair and inscribed bone, the metalworked icons of runes older than the Fang, were the opposite – imperfect mortal interpretations of immaculate warp-concepts. They were the language of gods writ in base human form, only readable on the periphery – the deeper language known only to the dark gods and the Allfather. It was a grunting translation, like the attempts of visitors to speak the tongue of Fenris, hearing and speaking only the harsh verbal syllables while they missed all intonation and breath beneath that softened the words.

In the warp, the thrice-twisted nail was not simply a fastening, it was a lock on the mind. The Knot of Ever, wrought in seemingly infinitely intertwining silver bands, was a gatherer, pooling power, syphoning the energy away from those that would snare it for foul use. The pelts, fangs and claws were all incarnations of the Fenrisian spirit, the primal and unstoppable power of the world itself. To the eye of Njal as he approached

his chamber the walls were a rainbow of vibrant colour, streamered with hate and hope, love and anger.

The door was no different to the many mechanical portals throughout the Fang, save for the dagger-carved mark upon it: the Stormcaller. His rune burned golden, recognising its maker, the blood that had been used to seal its creation a link that could not be severed or faked by mortal means. With a thought, Njal unsealed the bonds upon the portal and the door slid open with a hiss.

The chamber within was larger than might be expected given the unremarkable appearance of its door. Njal gave no thought to the spiralling rune-shapes and octagonal intersections carved into the naked rock, but for the non-gifted the sight would have been disconcerting if not migraine-inducing. Above stretched a crystal ceiling, almost invisible but for slender vertices that glittered in the starlight of Fenris' upper atmosphere. Prismatic light danced across the chamber, fractured along lines of *wyrdic* spatial geometry.

Near the centre of the room in a corona of dancing wyrd-halo stood an ornate suit of Tactical Dreadnought armour hung on a bulky dummy of articulated wood, its blue-grey ceramite set with metallic sigils. Wolf pelt and tails, talismans and *wyrdlodes* augmented these psychic protections. Upon the head of the dummy was set a tracery of thin wire and crystal junctions – a psychic hood.

Nightwing left Njal's shoulder as the door slid shut behind him, alighting on the back of the chair that faced the Stormcaller's war-plate. The throne – for it was of such size that the term chair did not do it justice – was carved from a single piece of wood. Millennia of varnish and patina obscured most of the fine detail that its creator had obviously spent many days labouring upon. More prominent were the pale bones set into the dark timber. They followed, roughly, the outline of the occupier when seated, the legs at the front set with thigh and shinbone, the arms with similar decoration, and vertebrae running up the long, narrow back. A vulpine skull sat atop the structure, just above the position of the occupant's head, like a crown or saintly halo.

When Njal had first seen it, he had thought the skeleton embedded in the frame of the throne had been that of a Thunderwolf, but on closer examination a more grotesque truth had been revealed. The skull betrayed

human likeness, the phalanges with an opposable thumb, not the paw of a wolf. The bones had belonged to a human, or something like one, tainted by the wulfen curse. Njal did not know to whom the skeleton had belonged in life, and his predecessor as High Rune Priest had not furnished him with such education before his demise. Yet he sensed the psychic potential stored within the ancient bones and knew on instinct that they were likely older even than the throne into which they had been bound with gilded bands and hex-headed iron nails. A great *wyrdthegn* of the tribes, that much seemed obvious. Perhaps even the fabled Ighest Baldrkin, much-lauded in the chronicles of Gnauril the Elder.

Whoever had once laid claim to that body, its purpose now served as a lodepoint for the configuration of the rune chamber. Situated on its own pinnacle of the Fang, the room of the High Rune Priest was removed from the physical bulk and psychic clutter of the citadel, like the wyrd towers of old outside the great settlements of the kings. All was wrought to focus the energies of the polar cascade into this chamber, and more specifically into the mind of one that sat in the runethrone.

Njal guided Nightwing to the stand of his armour as he sat down. He momentarily saw himself lower into the macabre chair through the eyes of his familiar before he sent it into dormant mode. He laid his hands upon the skeletal arms of the throne and leaned back, feeling the presence of the spinal column against his own, though it had to be imagined, for his furs were thick between his back and the chair.

Closing his eyes, he thought of meditation rather than sleep. Yet even his physique was so fatigued by his self-inflicted ordeals in the wilds that not a minute had passed before unconsciousness took him. The rune chamber was configured to both protect and extend the thoughts of the throne's occupier – indeed, it almost existed for that purpose. To sleep within the embrace of the bone chair was to let one's mind wander the waves of the Othersea, guided by subconscious whim and free of the concerns of waking thought. Njal had used it many, many times in his role as High Rune Priest, but it was unfortunate, and some might say ill-considered, for him to do so in his near-exhausted state that night.

As the last vestiges of consciousness slipped away from the Stormcaller his parting consideration was of Logan's desire to see the Wolf King return, rendered in his thoughts through the symbol of the Wolf that Stalks

Between Stars, known by the adepts as the *lupus rampant*. His mind filtered into the array of psychically charged materials around him, diffusing and amplifying at the same time, casting him adrift on the Othersea.

He saw the Baleful Eye. The vortex of despair and terror where the Legions that had turned on the Allfather hid. It had once been both the dominion and prison of Magnus and his fellow daemon primarchs, but now they had broken free to bring fresh ruin to the Imperium.

A wolf howl split the galaxy. Not a howl of grief, but of rage. It grew louder and louder until it burned worlds and extinguished stars. From it streamed blue flame and riotous plague, rivers of blood and a storm of golden blades. Njal saw that the galaxy was wracked by wounds. Each was a fissure through reality. A tear in the fabric of what-is and what-should-not-be. It was called the Great Rift in the lexicon of the Adeptus Terra, but to the Space Wolves, this galaxy-wide catastrophe had another name: Everdusk. The dying light of hope. The twilight of the gods.

The Eye became a fanged maw, devouring all that was nearby, growing and growing until Terra itself, a shining orb of silver, lay within its jaws.

But his mind did not venture closer to the Throneworld. It was drawn by another current, swayed to wander by a passing thought. His dreaming eye moved further afield, towards a bright swirl at the galactic core. Against the brightness, he saw a speck of darkness, even blacker than the void between stars. Njal needed no prompting to identify it. The position was known well in the lore of his Chapter and, in particular, the sagas of the Rune Priests.

Prospero.

A dead world. A benighted world. A world executed by the Wolf King for its transgressions against the Allfather.

Home world to Magnus the Red and the Thousand Sons.

The moment his mind-ship alighted upon Prospero, he felt an instant connection. It was a world that had been steeped in the wyrd of the Thousand Sons and even across time it sang still through the Othersea waves. The death cries of billions echoed on; the past ten thousand years had not diminished the anguish of their demise.

Had Njal been awake, he might then have turned his mind's gaze elsewhere, for to dwell too long on a lode-world like Prospero was to

invite fascination and disaster. But it was not to be and Njal lingered there a while longer, mesmerised by the rune-memories of destruction.

In the crash of falling cities, he heard a single voice clearer than the others. A plea, wordless and plaintive at first. Not unlike the dismayed calls of the countless victims of Prospero's execution, but for the nearness of it. An impossibility, for Prospero had been dead for ten millennia and its corpse picked clean. Yet a mind reached back to the Rune Priest.

Foolishly, half-fevered, he made contact.

Arjac regained his feet when Tyra was just a few metres from the monster. He saw her reflected in facets of its coal-black eyes, the image diminishing as it rose for another strike. As clearly as if he was gifted with the wyrdsight, he envisaged the monstrous jaw snapping shut to cleave the warrior-woman in half.

He took a step and hurled Foehammer. Powered by prodigious strength augmented by the thick fibre bundles of his Terminator suit, the weapon flashed as straight and true as a laser blast. The blazing head slammed into the side of the sturmwyrm's skull, scattering thick scales like a broken shield wall.

Foehammer whirled away into the miasma of ice beyond the monster.

The serpent flopped sideways, thrashing into the snow-drifts. A torrent of ice shards drove the Fenrisians back. Blood streaming from the gash above its eye, the mutant beast rose again, its jaw opening wide to pour forth more wintry vapours. Three Elsinholma fled from the mist, crying and moaning as ice crackled through their veins. They collapsed with choking coughs, their lungs and hearts stilled by the wyrd-tainted breath.

'Get back,' roared Arjac. He waved the townsfolk away with his now-empty hand when they crowded forward to attend to their frost-stricken companions.

'You have no weapon,' Tyra called back, defiantly raising her spear as she advanced.

'I am a Sky Warrior,' Arjac told her, lumbering forward. 'My weapons are the artifice of the gods.'

He held out his hand and activated the miniature linked teleport homer in his palm. Something flashed in the gloom of the ice wyrm's fog and an instant later Foehammer materialised in his grasp. Tyra looked on, mouth

agape, as he charged past, powering in front of her as the wyrm drove down once more.

This time he met the attack with hammer not shield, swinging the storm-wreathed head upwards. Jags of molecule-disrupting energy exploded, tearing through the lower jaw and part of the snout. Fragments of spark-flecked bone and crystallising blood arced over Rockfist and rained down upon the awestruck townsfolk.

The dying wyrm flopped forward, forcing Arjac to turn it aside with the anvil shield, saving Tyra a second time. The almost headless corpse twitched across the ice to leave bloody furrows while a disgusting oily substance leaked from wyrd-engorged venom glands.

Njal's eyes snapped open and he woke with a half-stifled cry of alarm. His breath fogged the air of the chamber, chilled by the psychic current that dissipated through the network around him. The lines of power and runic devices were frosted over, courses of ice that criss-crossed the walls and floor. A thin rime covered his skin, melting and cracking as he sat forward, his post-human physique aching at the bitter cold.

All warmth had been drawn from the room, leaving it as frozen as the mountaintops. Njal's eyes ached as he rubbed them with cracking knuckles.

Standing, icicles fell from his beard and furs, shattering on the hard floor. In the sound of their destruction he heard the tiniest echo of something familiar; the cry for help that had concluded his dreamwalk. He shook his head, thinking it a trick of the acoustics, or a consequence of his tired state. He had slept for barely two minutes, and was not the least bit refreshed.

Help.

The cry was unmistakable this time, now that it was not joined or masked by any other sound. Njal's acute hearing told him that its faintness was from distance rather than intervening obstacles.

Help me.

Njal turned sharply left then right, convinced that there was another presence in the chamber. He saw nothing. The flow of psychic power was gone and the ice had started to melt.

Help me.

The voice carried on no sound wave, Njal realised. His brain translated it as a faraway call but the message actually originated inside his head. He remembered the instant of connection at the end of his psychic sojourn. Unease slipped into his thoughts. The Rune Priest swallowed hard.

'Fool,' he muttered. 'What have you done?'

He closed his eyes and hardened his thoughts, armouring his mind in layers of psychic steel to cut off any external intrusion. He felt dislocated and alone, but once he was severed from the warp entirely, there was no way the thing that was trying to contact him could break through.

+Help me.+

Njal staggered, putting a hand on the back of the bonechair to steady himself. The words were the same but the intonation had changed. It was no longer begging, the speaker was insistent.

+Yes. That is it. Think, Son of Russ. Concentrate!+

The insistence in the voice immediately triggered a rebellious irritation in Njal, an instinctive desire to reject this assumed authority. But despite his Fenrisian maverick tendencies, the Stormcaller knew that he had to comply and so focused his attention inwards rather than outwards. With the defensive wall still intact he started to probe his own consciousness, as though retreating into a citadel and lowering the portcullis and closing gates as he went.

He found the intrusion.

It seemed like a spark or splinter, the smallest particle of something else lodged in his mind. A fragment, broken off when he had wrenched himself out of the dreamwalk at the moment of connection.

Njal tried to purge the invasive sliver but it resisted all attempts to move or expunge it. Like a barb, it was hooked into his psychic presence, his own power enveloping it as a tree might grow around a stone. The harder he attempted to drag it free, the more it became wedged.

'What are you? Daemon?' The Stormcaller grunted. 'You are not the first to try such trickery.'

+Your sins returned, Son of Russ.+

Njal accepted this without reply, knowing well that to respond to the goading of daemons simply gave them more power. He thought a little longer, straightening as he recovered his equilibrium.

'A sorcerer of the Thousand Sons.'

He felt a dislocated instant of surprise.

‘You think that just because I wear a hide I have fur between my ears?’ he said. ‘It was that kind of arrogance that sealed your fate.’

+You seem remarkably calm considering this predicament.+

‘I have yet to encounter a situation where panic was the best option, sorcerer. I will destroy you shortly.’

+I am trapped.+

‘Good.’

+That is not good. I am trapped here, in your head.+

Njal’s heartbeats quickened.

‘How is that possible?’

An inaudible sigh floated through Njal’s thoughts, a fleeting sensation of resignation and regret.

+What do you know of the Portal Maze of Prospero?+

‘Little. But more now that some of our brothers from the Lost Company who were trapped there have returned. It was a warp-way, delved between worlds and realms, that allowed Magnus’ Legion to travel through their enclaves and dominions without starships. We destroyed it along with its creators.’

+That is indeed little, and what little you know is wrong. The Portal Maze cannot be destroyed by bombardment or inferno. It exists outside reality. But the invasion of your companies shattered many of the links, and fractured the bridges between destinations. Your runecasters sealed what they could find, but that is all.+

‘I still do not understand what makes you think this assault will succeed, cursed son of Magnus. How is it that you dare be in my thoughts?’

There was a frustrated hesitation.

+I died.+

‘What?’

+I am dead. One of your predecessors killed me inside the Portal Maze. But his blundering meant that my energy could not dissipate to the warp. My body lies preserved within the network and my spirit trapped with it, incorporeal.+

‘That does not explain how you arrived inside my head.’

+I am not sure. I was incoherent until your thoughts touched mine. You were a conduit, perhaps finding a gap in the barrier that kept the Portal Maze secure. I sense that there has been some upheaval between warp and reality. All is not as it was when I was slain, and I gather some time has passed.+

'Some time?' Njal shook his head, incredulous. 'You have no idea how long has passed since you were slain?'

+None. All is jumbled and sundered. Time is broken here as much as the temporal links.+

'Ten thousand years, sorcerer. Ten thousand years since the wolves burned Prospero.'

+*I…*+

The immediacy of the presence faded, though Njal could still feel its pinprick in his consciousness. Confusion ebbed from the psychic thorn, leaking into his thoughts, to be replaced by sadness and loss.

+Ten thousand years…? I knew it was more than moments, but so long? All I know is now dust.+

Njal laughed, not kindly. 'More than you fear, sorcerer. I am going to enjoy telling you what has happened to your Legion while I work out how to rid myself of your intrusion.'

+That is simplicity, if you have the courage. All you need do is enter the Portal Maze and this fragment will be reunited with the rest of my spirit.+

'Enter the Portal Maze? You mean I must travel to Prospero?'

+To Tizca, to be precise. The city where I, and your brothers, last entered.+

'Your world was razed. Nothing remains.'

+This will get tedious if I must repeat myself. I can still feel parts of Tizca. Now that I focus I see that it is but a tomb, but it is still there in part, and the dead gateways remain.+

'This has the trappings of a lure, sorcerer. Think me ignorant of your wiles?'

+Then you must consider this the bait also, for it is in your own interest to come.+

'The Fang's archives are deep and our wisdom old, Prosperine. I will find a way to remove your sting without crossing the galaxy to do it.'

+But what of your lost brothers? The scent of Fenris brought your dreaming thoughts sniffing, son of Russ. Would you ignore the opportunity to set them free also?+

Njal took a deep breath and opened his eyes, the room seeming oddly unfamiliar now that he looked upon it with another's eyes also. He stepped towards the door.

'I'm sure it will be a simple enough task to incinerate what remains of your soul. I need only some assistance and equipment from the wyrdhalle.'

+I thought little time had passed because they are still here. Ten thousand years! I'm sure your brothers do not mind waiting a few more. They are trapped with me, the one called Bulveye and his companions.+

The Rune Priest stopped a short distance from the door.

'Bulveye?' The name was instantly known to Njal. For the past several years, more and more of the lost 13th Company had reappeared, each warrior and squad bringing with them their own tales of being trapped in the warp and breaking free from the Eye of Terror. In that time, Njal had studied the oldest records, gathering names of those that had been lost. The names of all those still missing were forged hard in his memory. 'The Old Wolf.'

+A savage that doomed himself rather than see reason. He chose exile and entrapment rather than the common cause.+

'You know a name. It means nothing.'

+He slew me with a plasma pistol and wields a power axe. Do you want me to describe his gloating face as he threw away his chance for freedom in pig-headed pride? I can lead you directly to them.+

Could it be possible? The ramifications of the sorcerer's words went beyond any immediate inconvenience to the Stormcaller. If others of the 13th Company could be freed, the possibility had to be raised with the Great Wolf. He sensed little threat from the sorcerer. Disembodied, the tiniest fragment of soul, there was little he could do to harm Njal or his brothers.

It was too much to consider alone.

'There may be some merit to what you suggest,' Njal conceded. A note of triumph crept into his mind, emanating from the sorcerous splinter. 'Do not count victories before they are won, cursed of Prospero. I will not let you profit from my stumble.'

+I think we both seek the same end, dog of Russ, and until then our fates are bound.+

Njal had to concede this point, for the time being only. He cleared his throat to suppress a snarl of frustration.

‘By what name were you known in life, sorcerer?’

+I am Izzakar Orr.+

CHAPTER 3
HARD TRUTHS

The sorcerer was thankfully silent while Njal traversed the Fang's conveyors, corridors and longhalls. The Rune Priest wondered how much Izzakar was aware of what transpired, what the shard of his consciousness could sense from his host. Was he gazing in wonder at a sight no warrior of the Thousand Sons had ever seen, nor was ever likely to look upon again? Did he see the knotwork reliefs on the walls and feel the rune-scribed ferrocrete slabs beneath Njal's feet? Could he smell the crisp, recycled air or hear the murmuring of distant engines and the thrum of electrical systems? What of the breath that entered the Stormcaller's lungs? Did the sorcerer feel it as if his own?

It was reassuring that no reply was forthcoming at these silent enquiries. It meant that Njal's thoughts were still his own, despite the intrusion. Izzakar could not read his mind despite being within it, only hearing what was vocalised.

Or it might mean the sorcerer was content to keep such knowledge secret for some advantageous use later.

Chasing his own thoughts, Njal grimaced, frustrated by his error in allowing this uncertainty when he had been so clear of purpose only minutes earlier.

Nightwing flew ahead like a scout, landing now and then at his willing, before setting off once more. The Stormcaller's connection to his familiar did not seem affected by Izzakar's presence, at least as far as he could tell. There was no way to know if his other abilities might be affected – or

sabotaged – until he had need to call upon them. The thought that his mind might be turned against him, or perhaps already had been, was sobering. As Rune Priest, and a Librarian of the Adeptus Astartes, his thoughts were his greatest gift and his greatest weakness. It was his duty above all else to preserve the sanctity of his mind, and it was only incredible force of will that had seen him accepted into the brotherhood of Russ' sons. Any lesser fortitude would have seen him slain or, possibly worse still, carried away on a Black Ship of the Inquisition.

That his defences had been breached was galling. Worse. It had been no assault that had prised open the fortress of his mind, but his own negligence. He had left the gates unbarred and unguarded for a moment. After so long, he had become complacent.

It seemed small comfort that the incident with the sorcerer was the worst that had happened. He detected a simmering hostility from the splinter of consciousness that nagged at the base of his thoughts. As irritating as it was, the Thousand Sons legionary's hatred was not a direct menace. Had a daemon or warp predator entered…

He fidgeted with a cluster of carved runebones as he walked, rubbing them and letting them clatter on their iron ring spun around a thick finger. The more he considered what had happened, the more agitated he became, though he carefully portrayed his customary appearance of gruff contemplation for those he came across. Even so, he feared meeting a battle-brother who knew him well, one of the Wolf Guard perhaps, who might spy something amiss and ask awkward questions. He was in no position to confess his predicament to all and sundry, yet he felt that concealment of it would be a grave error also.

He had little to worry about on that accord; so few of his brothers remained in the Fang. Njal passed only lesser thralls going about menial tasks as he made his way across the citadel of the Space Wolves. Clad in their tunics and breeches, some with small badges of affiliation to one of the Great Companies or tags of awards earned for dedication to their duties, they were unassuming figures. Many bore scars, physical reminders of the trials they had failed. Others had a vacant cast about their gaze, not without intelligence, but dulled by terrible experience, a near-catatonia that placed them only just above the machine-slaved servitors. They all recognised a Lord of Fenris and gave deference to the

Stormcaller, bowing heads and touching fingers to brow. Some of the youngest kneeled briefly as he passed, murmuring Fenrisian blessings.

His course took him to a long plastek-shrouded gallery that became a bridge over a deep gorge. The flanks of the ravine were dotted with caves, only visible in the gloom due to his enhanced sight. Gigantic bats swept to and from the openings, spiralling up through the beams from the lamps of the citadel, brief glimpses of fanged monsters that disappeared swiftly.

Njal stopped before stepping off the bridge, to look up at the bastion to which he had travelled. Like the Halls of the Runelords, it was set apart, an outer tower linked only by a bridge and a slender causeway of snow-covered rock. It stood upon a natural pilaster in the middle of the broad defile, surrounded on all other sides by the dark ravine. Defence turrets dotted the sheer walls of the square tower. The roof and upper storeys were fashioned into a majestic, immense wolf's head with an open mouth, a single landing apron like a lolling tongue between its fangs. A Stormwolf assault craft sat there, black instead of the customary grey of the Chapter, with wolfskull devices in gold upon the blunt prow and stubby wings. Its presence indicated that the tower's highest-ranking occupant was within, as Njal had known from wyrdsight before he had set out.

Jaw clenched, wary of what he had to say, Njal stepped up to the iron-banded door of the tower. Another wolfskull emblem marked the portal, surrounded by large iron rivets marked with the devices of the twelve Great Companies.

He lifted his staff and knocked thrice on the door, hard. The impacts rang back down the bridgeway and within the tower itself.

Surveyors clicked and whirred within the lintel and door frame. A red light buzzed into life, scanning him briefly before it shut off. Finally, a ratchet clanked and the door swung inwards to reveal a short hallway leading to a broad set of stairs up into the tower.

Readying himself for the hard conversation to come, Njal stepped across the threshold into the Citadel of the Slayer.

Njal's ascent up the stairwell was reluctant, his legs slowed not by physical weight but the burden that came from the confession he would shortly have to make. As much as the tower had ritual significance, it was also an integral part of the Fang's defences. Like much to do with Fenris, appearance and purpose were not always consistent. The spiralling steps

took the Rune Priest past corridors serving the gun batteries, past massively armoured doors of magazine stores and the openings into vox chambers and scanning control rooms. Pneumatic lifts and autoloading shafts lined the interior, ready to snarl into life at the thought impulses of the servitors locked within the gunnery systems. Badges of the Adeptus Mechanicus sealed access hatches alongside maintenance runes of the thralls, strange bedfellows that represented two vastly different cultures forced into mutual need.

There were no failed aspirants here. The occupant of the tower had been alone until Njal's arrival. The psyker could feel the pressure of the wolf cult filling the air, the raw power of Fenrisian spirit that permeated the walls, flowing from the single inhabitant. He hastened his step, knowing his arrival would have been noted, not wishing to keep the Slayer waiting.

The stairwell opened out into a broad hall that ran the space of the tower. The interior was a shrine to the duality of the Space Wolves – Imperial iconography mixed with Fenrisian runework. Banners that had once flown from the ramparts of the Imperial Palace now flew alongside ragged wolftails and dragon-headed standards modelled on the war effigies of the Fenrisian tribesfolk. An Imperial Aquila was gilded upon the floor, surrounded by four wolves carved in black granite, their heads thrown back in their howling, each taller than the Stormcaller.

'It is an ill wind that brings the Stormcaller alone to the Slayer.' The voice was hoarse with age but no less strong for it, the growling timbre earned through ten centuries of battle. Its owner could not be seen, but Njal sensed him. His spirit was the eager panting of a wolf at bay, emanating from one of the wood-panelled reliquaries that lined the far end of the hall. The columns holding the panels were carved in the likeness of stacked skulls, alternating wolf and human, and geometric knotwork criss-crossed the timbers between.

'Astute as always, Ulrik,' said the Rune Priest.

'I need no wyrd to know that only grave concern would force you here, rather than the neutral ground of Logan's halls. I am the guardian of the Chapter's spirit and lore, and you have not had need to call upon me in private since you ascended to your rank. That you do now… Well, I have lived a long time and by far these are the most troubling I have witnessed. I am not surprised it has come to this.'

The speaker emerged from the relic hoard with an alien skull in his hands: the elongated structure of an eldar, with rubies set into the eye sockets, and sigils of vengeance carved into the sharp bones of the cheeks and on the forehead. Njal could feel the wrath of the Space Wolf that had slain the xenos still beating within the artefact.

The hands that held the relic were thick, gnarled like old branches, with nails painted black and a wolf tattoo sat on the back of each. More markings decorated the forearms, some of them beautifully rendered wolf's heads, skulls and sigils, others crude scratches. The rest of Ulrik's flesh was hidden under a long, heavy black robe. Like the chamber, his outfit was a dichotomy; monkish habit and the garb of a Fenrisian loremaster. A rope bound it at the waist, hung with Imperial insignia and more wolf talismans, the cuffs and hem embroidered with silver thread in intertwined knotwork. He wore a necklace of fangs and animal skulls, but the pendant was a *Crux Terminatus* awarded to the greatest warriors of the Imperium.

At his waist hung another badge of Imperial office – the *crozius arcanum* of a Space Marine Chaplain. By such rank were the Wolf Priests viewed by others. In reality, a poor summary of their lauded position with the Space Wolves. With this label the Adeptus Terra pretended they understood, and so tolerated the Wolf Priests' existence and the creed they espoused. Though it contained a powerfield capable of disintegrating flesh and shattering bone, the crozius' real strength was as a symbol of unity between the Space Wolves and the Imperium.

Ulrik's face was as craggy as the mount upon which his tower sat, pocked and scarred in many places. Braided strands like pure hoarfrost hung from scalp and cheeks. His gaze was dark and sharp, and regarded Njal closely as Ulrik placed the skull trophy upon a podium at one side of the chamber.

'Speak,' he said, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

Njal was not sure where to start.

+Time to reveal yourself the fool, Fenrisian oaf. Tell him of your folly.+

Njal's grimace betrayed him and he spoke swiftly before Ulrik could react.

'I am hexed, Ulrik. I need your help.'

‘Hexed?’ Ulrik recoiled slightly, eyes narrowing. His fingers tightened on his arms, paling the skin where they clutched flesh.

‘You are in no danger, I swear.’

Ulrik’s tight-lipped, venomous expression silently argued that it was too late to make such a claim, but Njal pressed on.

‘I have erred. Badly.’

Ulrik listened without interruption, but his scowl deepened by the second as Njal’s tale continued. The Wolf Priest’s jaw worked, cheeks hollow as Njal then relayed Izzakar’s claim that Bulveye and the Old Guard were trapped with him. The Stormcaller finished with a half-shrug, part apology and part entreaty.

‘Purge it,’ said Ulrik. ‘You did not need to bring this taint here to discover this truth. There is no good that comes from any other course.’

‘But what of Bulveye and th–’

‘Purge it!’ Ulrik stepped closer, canines bared in a snarl of challenge, eyes fierce.

+You shall never enter the Portal Maze without my knowledge.+

‘I hope that I can use what it knows to free our brothers.’

Ulrik shook his head, his anger becoming sadness. *‘Hope*? Are those your words or his that spill so easily from your lips?’

Njal swallowed hard and the Slayer read guilt in the Rune Priest’s hesitancy to answer. The Slayer’s ire returned. ‘This sorcerer need not possess you to control your body and mind, to turn it to his dark cause.’

+Dark cause? I was a bringer of light to many worlds, the lantern of the Emperor’s wisdom. If anyone was a darkness it was the Sons of Russ.+

‘Shut up,’ said Njal.

‘What?’ Ulrik’s hand moved towards his crozius, the other bunching into a fist. ‘What did you say to me?’

‘Not you, brother,’ Njal said hurriedly, shaking his head as he retreated a step. He pointed to his temple in explanation. ‘Him.’

‘You know what I will tell you, and I will tell you it again and again,’ Ulrik said, his tone bitter. ‘You knew before you came, yet you test me with this defiance. What else did you seek? Justification? Forgiveness? You have neither. You compound your error by entertaining any thought of alliance with this creature.’

+Creature?+ Indignity flooded Njal's thoughts, the vehemence of the response making him wonder if it was his or Izzakar's. Its infection spurred his own frustration, which poisoned his following words.

'You are right. I do not know what I thought I would gain from you. I had hoped you might share a measure of wisdom, not the spouted rhetoric of defunct priests.'

The moment he closed his mouth, Njal regretted the outburst. Ulrik's eyes widened, his face flushed. The Stormcaller opened his mouth to temper his accusation, but Ulrik turned away, shoulders hunched, fists trembling. His next words came with much struggle.

'Leave. Now.'

The Slayer's wrath, though contained, burned in Njal's wyrdsight like a bright flame. As much as he hoped to make right the mistake he had made, any further words would only fuel Ulrik's anger, not quench it. He had insulted Ulrik's honour, an *ut-geld* that would be hard to restore. Njal certainly had no time for such reparations now, nor was Ulrik in the mood to receive them.

Silently, surrounded by a fume of self-loathing and embarrassment, the Stormcaller left.

Most of the Elsinholma headed back to their town to fetch rope and sleds to retrieve the carcass. Though the flesh was *wyrdrot* – poisonous to eat by its taint – the sinew, bone, liver oil and scales, and many other parts beside, would serve them well over the coming winter. Tyra and a few others remained to guard the corpse from scavengers. In the light of half a dozen burning brand-staves, Arjac used handfuls of snow to clean the worst of the filth from his armour, muttering thanks to the war-plate's spirit as he did so.

'I am sorry for doubting you,' said Tyra, again unable to look him in the eye. 'And for making you risk your life for me.'

'Not needed,' he said, meaning her apology. 'I live to protect the Allfather's realm, whether across the cosmic bridge or beside my own hearth. There is no debt.'

She nodded and dared a cautious glance.

'Thank you, Arjac Rockfist.'

‘Can you survive the ice season?’ he asked, uncomfortable with her gratitude.

‘It is the season of fire that worries Rangvaldr,’ Tyra replied. ‘The long cold is just that. What will the land’s convulsions bring though?’

Arjac had no easy answer for her, and any native of Fenris knew better than to expect one.

‘We have a saying,’ she said, the shadow of her hood dancing across her gaunt face in the torchlight. ‘The water that does not flow becomes ice.’

‘Why leave now, when you stayed through so much?’

‘That is not what it means. We must change, be the flow. Where there is one wyrm, there are others. We shall hunt them instead of the kraken.’

Arjac smiled. If he listened to the shamans and the Runelords the spirit of Fenris was an otherworldly force, but he knew better than that. He had put it into every blow of his hammer upon the runed steel of his anvil. It had been in the ice water that had quenched the hot blade. It was in the blood of every Fenrisian.

An indomitable spirit.

The utter refusal to bow down, to accept the harsh odds, to look for the slightest succour if it meant hardship for another.

‘The children of your town…?’ He asked the question with circumspection, knowing nothing of Tyra’s family circumstance.

‘Some remain,’ she replied and shrugged. ‘We will keep the cold of the ice nights at bay with their replenishment. What of the Sky Warriors? Your sagas of lament must grow by the season.’

‘Just give us strong, smart and brave lads and the Sons of Russ will endure.’

‘Just sons?’ said Tyra, her humour edged with a hard look. ‘Perhaps there is more water that must learn to flow.’

Arjac looked at this fierce woman, the sharp spear held easily in her hand, and recalled that she had overcome her fear not with psychodoctrination but raw courage. She had been the first to run to aid him against the wyrm, whether he needed her or not. The spirit of Fenris was in all of its people, elder and child, man and woman. He had seen first-hand that Roboute Guilliman had brought back miracle warriors from the time of the Allfather Abroad. Space Marines moulded from even

sharper steel. If that was possible, anything was. He laughed at the thought.

Tyra frowned at him, thinking he mocked her. He calmed his humour and bowed his head in apology, eyes never leaving hers.

‘Perhaps,’ he said.

The ensuing trek across the Fang was even more difficult for Njal, each stride an effort of will fought against his own reluctance. The confrontation with Ulrik ran in his veins, one heartsbeat a surge of hot anger and the next a cold trickle of humiliation. He made no attempt to mask his mood. The shadow of his spirit proceeded him with the ominous wingbeats of Nightwing, a metaphorical and literal dark cloud that swirled about the conflicted psyker. Ice crusted his runic talismans as they struggled to contain leaking emotions masquerading as psychic activity.

The thralls did not stop and greet him as before, but fled at his coming.

+However did your predecessors survive so long with such a temperamental nature?+

Njal was in no mind to debate the sorcerer, his only reply a snarl of annoyance.

The truth of Ulrik’s advice burned hotter the further he walked. It was foolish to countenance any bargain with Izzakar. Even if all that he claimed so far was true, there was no guarantee he would hold to any pact in the future.

Njal reached the Stair of the Worlds, one of the citadel’s main convergences of several conveyors, passages, stairways and halls. A trio of high columns held up the vaulted roof, a cavernous space that echoed with the footfalls of thralls, the buzz of hovering servo-familiars and the ever-present clank and whine of generators and machinery.

He could continue down towards the chambers of the Great Wolf, or ascend back to the Halls of the Runelords where he would drive the splinter of the sorcerer’s soul from his mind.

He stood transfixed between these two options, head turning between the conveyors that would take him up to the wyrdhalle or to the hallway towards Logan. Sensing his foul mood, the others traversing the grand hall gave him a wide berth. They shrank back into the shadows between the yellow pools of illumination from vast chain-hung lanterns above.

Nightwing circled a dozen metres away, flying without purpose while its master's thoughts whirled with an equal lack of direction.

+It is not your decision, runeslave. You answer to a lord, do you not? You must seek his will, his orders.+

Izzakar's urging almost forced the opposite reaction. The more the sorcerer argued for one course of action, the more Njal was suspicious. Yet he found himself moving towards the halls of the Great Wolf despite these misgivings. He could not allow contrariness to override the logic of what Izzakar suggested. There was an opportunity to rescue some of the 13th, weighed against the potential betrayal and loss of even more warriors.

And there was the part of Njal – a shameful part – that wanted to go to Logan. He could cloak it as the honourable Fenrisian thing to do – to seek the wisdom of his feal-lord. He could justify it according to the chain of command, as a Chief Librarian of the Adeptus Astartes answering to his Chapter Master. He might even convince himself he simply sought the advice of a friend.

Even so, Njal had spent a long life in self-examination, forever analysing his thoughts and motives for sign of corruption or external influence – an irony now – and he knew himself better than anyone. Starting down the corridor towards the chambers of the Great Wolf, the damning truth was that he was happy to defer such a terrible decision to another.

The passages here owed more to an aett of the Fenrisians than a Space Marine fortress-monastery. The high corridors were hung with shields in clan colours – a profusion of dragons, many-armed kraken, knotwork and serpents. Between them hung the *dracon* pennants of chieftains and champions.

Every item of tribute was kept, with the most ancient and valuable in stasis storage. The purpose of this was not lost on Njal as he advanced along the passages towards Logan's personal halls. Fenris was in the blood of every Space Wolf, figuratively and, through the Canis Helix of their gene-seed, literally. For the Space Wolves, the link was not just one of sentiment, custom and genetics, but symbolic of their bond to all of humanity.

To lose touch with one's origins, to believe oneself above the very people that made up the Imperium, was the gravest dishonour a Space

Wolf could suffer.

Duty, respect, brotherhood. All things he owed not just to Ulrik, but to the missing warriors of the 13th Company.

The Fenrisian trappings were not only a potential admonishment, they were also a comfort. They assured those that ventured into the domain of the Great Wolf that they were among allies, companions at the hearth.

The confrontation with Ulrik faded the closer Njal came to the chamber of the Great Wolf. He knew Logan was within not only by the wyrd spoor of his thoughts, even guarded as they were, but also by the presence of the customary pair of Wolf Guard at the large oak doors of the *wulfhalle*.

This time the duty had fallen to Odyn Foe-Ruin and Baldin of the Red-Sea. The two veteran warriors stepped aside even before Njal had announced himself.

'He's expecting you, Stormcaller,' said Baldin.

Odyn shook his head sombrely, expression hidden behind the fang-painted muzzle of his helm.

'You've been stalking the Fang like a wrath-badger with a thorn up its–'

'Go straight in.' Baldin cut across his companion, grabbing the ring upon one of the doors to thrust open the portal.

The interior was far smaller in scale than either the King's Hall or the Hall of the Great Wolf, but was nonetheless impressive. There was no mistaking that a King of Fenris occupied the chamber, its arrangement and contents all positioned to direct attention towards the occupant of the throne at the far end, whilst surrounding any visitor with trophies of his conquests and *geld*-honours from his allies.

Some Chapters recorded their battle honours in scrolls or on datachips, tried to encompass their achievements with heraldry and icons or raised great statues, monuments and commemorative palaces to their victories. The Space Wolves lived amongst the past of their personal and collective efforts. So great were the lives of their oldest warriors that, as with Logan's chambers, entire halls were required to contain their trophies. Their battles lived in the sagas too, written nowhere, but held on the tongues of the Rune Priests and Wolf Priests, sung by the squad-brothers from one generation to the next.

There were skulls in abundance, of heretics and aliens, and a profusion of their wargear also, artfully arranged so that the walls focused the eye on

the figure in the gigantic lord-chair. Banners from Imperial regiments presented as campaign awards lined the back wall. At their centre was an Imperial Aquila wrought in bronze, its outspread wings hung with medals and talismans earned across hundreds of warzones.

Every item in the chamber had been taken by or given to Logan Grimnar, his personal record of war. Each skull was a foe he had slain, each banner or medal awarded to him for his fighting, his leadership, or both.

And the owner of these many tributes and honours sat in his Terminator armour upon a throne of great stone engraved with the symbols of the companies under his command. He scowled at his visitor, in stark contrast to his manner at their last parting.

'Ulrik sent word.'

The short statement stopped Njal mid-stride, the thump of the door closing behind him suddenly like the sound of a trap closing.

'I could gather little from his inarticulate rage, other than that you have disgraced yourself and the Space Wolves,' Logan continued. 'Accursed Magnus was mentioned, and Prospero also, but all else verged on ceaseless ranting.'

'I will offer ut-geld when he has calmed,' said Njal. 'I was wrong many times in my dealing with the Slayer, but I will make right this error.'

Logan's expression softened a little and, as much as was possible clad in heavy armour, he relaxed. Njal took a breath and sank to one knee, earning a raised eyebrow in surprise.

'Not since you took your oaths of office have you bent fealty to me, Njal. That you do so now is worrying.'

'I made a terrible mistake, Great Wolf.'

And with those words he began again to explain his predicament. Unlike his confession to Ulrik, this time the events seemed to verge on the ridiculous. The telling of the tale made Njal feel even more foolish for his laxity, his mood that of a child before a grim but fair parent.

When he finished, Njal could not meet Logan's eye but left his gaze fixed to the glassy beads in the eye sockets of a bearskin rug beneath the Great Wolf's armoured boots. He knew there would be judgement in Logan's stare, as much as he might try to mask it, and it would be a reflection of the self-judgement Njal inflicted upon himself.

‘Look at me, Njal.’

‘I… cannot, my feal-lord.’

‘Then you are no use to me, Njal. Must I command you?’

The Stormcaller forced his gaze upwards, a physical effort to meet the icy eyes of his Wolf Lord. Logan’s face was stern, his hands fists upon the arms of the throne.

‘Is that all you have to say?’ said Logan.

‘I’m sorry?’ ventured Njal, though the word sounded so small and meaningless when held against the magnitude of his transgression.

‘I don’t give a damn for your apologies, I want answers!’ boomed the Great Wolf. ‘What is your plan? What can we do? Stand and act like the warrior you are meant to be.’

The chastisement cut to the core of Njal’s hesitation, unearthing the cause of his friction with Ulrik. ‘I *want* to go to Prospero, but I do not know if that is the best course of action. The risks are many and the rewards… uncertain.’

+We both know what you mean by that! I understand that you think I am a traitor and my word is worthless, but I consider you little more than a vagrant of history that lauds the warriors who destroyed the greatest collection of knowledge in the galaxy. Do not take it lightly when I say that upon my name, Izzakar Orr, I swear that I will aid you in the return of your lost brothers if you can free me from this psychic prison!+

‘And the alternative?’ asked Logan. ‘If I choose that you should rid yourself of this encumbrance? Can it be done?’

‘It can,’ Njal admitted, fingers stroking his beard as he stood. ‘There are wyrd-castings that can free a spirit of possession. I think they could be turned to my current predicament.’

‘And you have the resources for this? You are the only wyrd-brother not on campaign.’

‘The thralls of the wyrdhalle and my own powers would be sufficient.’

+Not if I choose to resist, I think.+

‘They all try to resist, none of them remain after.’

‘Your words are not for me, are they? Do you hear this sorcerer like a voice?’

‘Yes.’

‘And he hears what you hear?’

Njal waited, unable to answer the question himself.

+Yes.+ The admission was reluctantly made, but Njal was not sure if it was truthful. Only if he could catch the sorcerer out would he know for sure. +Your thoughts are hidden from me but words and sight, taste and touch are mine to share. Unfortunate, given that these furs reek of your recent labours and the fat of your barbarian cooking.+

'He can see and hear you.'

'Then answer me this, wyrdthegn of Prospero.' Logan stared as though he could see the spirit inside Njal's head. 'This maze of yours, the portal gates, they reach into the Eye of Terror?'

+The Portal Maze extends into many places, beyond time and space, and through the depths of the warp. The Eye of Terror is but a yawning chasm bridged by the great artifices of Prosperine knowledge.+

'He says they can,' said Njal.

+Wait! More than that, I feel there has been great disruption in the warp, and tumult not recorded since before the eldar fell and the Emperor rose upon Terra.+

'It has been called the Great Rift, a storm of such magnitude it has sundered the galaxy,' the Stormcaller explained to his psychic stowaway. 'Wyrd rituals and immense sacrifices broke the barriers that separate realms.'

'What does he say?' demanded Logan, hands clasping and unclasping in frustration. 'What is he telling you?'

+The maze is more fractured than ever. Prospero burns with power untrammelled by crystal or nodeway. And Magnus! I feel the burning bright sun of his mind close at hand.+

'Magnus has returned to Prospero?' asked Njal. The Great Wolf looked as though he would speak again, but the intense look on the Rune Priest's face dissuaded interruption.

+He is not upon our ancestral world, but close to it.+

'Rumour abounds that the Crimson King has dragged the Planet of Sorcerers free from the grip of the Othersea,' said Logan, guessing the content of the sorcerer's words. 'Is that so?'

+I understand your lord's words, but not the meaning. Of what planet does he speak?+

‘That is a conversation too long in the telling, sorcerer. For now at least.’ Njal fixed his gaze on the Great Wolf. ‘What is your command, feal-lord? Do we dare the labyrinth of Prospero or shall I seek to repel this intrusion?’

Logan rubbed his brow, deep in thought. His gaze fixed on the eyes of the Rune Priest as though trying to see inside his mind, to look upon the fragment of sorcery embedded there. His jaw worked slowly, as if he were chewing over the thoughts running through his head. When he spoke, his words were measured, kingly. Gone was the desperation and eagerness, replaced by wisdom and calm temperament.

‘You will go to Prospero. We vowed not to abandon one brother of the Thirteenth Company and we stand true to that oath. And also…’ The Great Wolf paused. His expression became almost apologetic. ‘And also, if there might be some means to use this maze to seek the Wolf King…’

+What does he mean by that? Where is Russ?+

‘I shall look and listen with full intent, Great Wolf,’ promised Njal. ‘But you speak as though I will travel alone. You won’t support me?’

‘You have my fullest support,’ said Logan, ‘but my might is stretched thin and I can spare little for this quest. I have sworn troops to another cause, such that remain, but if there are those that are willing to travel with you, I release them from other duties to do so.’

Njal sagged a little, but knew not to complain. Such small favours were more than he deserved. He nodded in thanks.

‘Then let it be known across the Fang that Njal Stormcaller desires company for a mission that will one day become legend,’ declared Logan Grimnar. ‘The Space Wolves return to the ashes of Prospero!’

CHAPTER 4
A COMPANY ASSEMBLES

The Great Wolf's intent was known across the Fang within the passing of the hour. As the long-standing Wolf King, Logan's word was bound by a code stronger than iron as was the duty set upon the shoulders of his companions. The same words that had left his lips echoed along the hallways, whispered from thrall to thrall and crackled over vox-casters in the distant watch posts. In the forges his command blared out over the din of beating hammers and the snap of arc welding.

The Space Wolves were always at war, somewhere in the vast galaxy, but each pronouncement of forthcoming engagement was met the same. Just as in the days when the tribes of Fenris had drummed spear on shield and unsheathed blade from scabbard, a single phrase passed the lips of all that heard Logan's call.

Bludhaer.

The Hour of Blood. War-time. A call to arms as old as the language from which the word came.

The message passed quicker than Njal, so that on returning to his rune chamber he found the Iron Priest Aldacrel waiting for him outside the doors, accompanied by a coterie of thralls and arming servitors. Njal and Aldacrel exchanged silent nods of greeting, decades of this same ritual eclipsing any need to speak. The Iron Priest affixed an eyeless helm to his armour, the war-plate stained red in honour of his bonds with the Adeptus Mechanicus of Mars. Likewise, the armoury bondsfolk obscured their sight with masked hoods. Aldacrel signalled his readiness and Njal opened

the runelock, stepping back to allow the Iron Priest and his assistants to enter. The servitors dumbly thudded after him, their senses already surgically inured to the psychic emanations that flowed through the room.

Njal sealed the door behind him after entering, while Aldacrel and the thralls made ready at the armour stand, moving effortlessly despite their obscured vision. By rote and touch, they knew every rivet, segment and seam of Njal's war-plate. A servitor moved behind him, taking his furs and hood as he disrobed, revealing scar-etched flesh bounded by thick muscle. Beneath waxy skin was the dark layer of his black carapace, the last of the surgical insertions that had turned him from a tribal warrior to a Space Marine worthy of the Adeptus Astartes. Sockets and interfaces for his armour broke the flesh in puckered rings, the glint of metal alien against the colour of his skin.

He hauled off his boots and left them. Striding to the war-plate, he turned about so he was facing the bone-chair where he had encountered the shard of Izzakar Orr. The sorcerer's presence flared. He seemed closer, clearer in this place. Flickers of golden energy sparked along the runeways, while the arming team continued, oblivious to the psychic activity around them.

+All that we endeavoured to expose now shrouds everything we built.+ Njal could feel the disgust welling up inside, though it did not originate from his thoughts. +Superstition and ritual has replaced studious practice and precise ceremony. You are as blinded to what you manipulate as these puppets that dress you.+

Njal said nothing, not wishing to speak in front of the Iron Priest's thrallfolk. The hiss of detaching plates behind him dragged his thoughts back to the present. He raised his arms to the sides and the cladding of the interior plates began, first sheathing abdomen, thighs and upper arms.

+You can armour your body but your mind remains vulnerable, you fatuous shaman. I heard the accusations of your predecessors, the hypocrisy in their criticism of our lore. Bone-rattlers and dream-mumblers, all of you. No better than the witchfolk of the orks.+

Njal continued to hold his tongue. He would not allow Izzakar the satisfaction of his anger. Thinking of the ruin that had been brought to Prospero for its transgressions made it easier to ignore the sorcerer's insults.

The main parts of the war-plate attached to his socket-punctured flesh. The sharp pinch of connectors sent a sting through his nerves. An ache simmered behind his eyes while his ears buzzed. Autosenses flared static through sight and hearing, not yet connected to the full sensory array of the powered armour, a confliction of artificial and natural senses. He bared his teeth as grating tinnitus rang in his ears.

'Auditory input is operational,' he whispered.

'Sorry, Stormcaller. It must not have been deactivated properly when we last removed your suit,' Aldacrel hurriedly apologised, his fingers manipulating a control within the open back of the war-plate. A second later, the piercing sound ceased.

+What is it like, to peer into the warp and see only hazy mysteries? To see nothing of the majestic warpscapes and worlds of possibility that the Crimson King unearthed? With Magnus as our guide, we crossed the rainbow bridge of your firelight fables and explored the nine realms and beyond. From Prospero, the Thousand Sons gazed into a universe of wonder while the sons of Fenris read entrails and cast bones. What you believed myth, we made reality.+

Yet you did not see us coming, Njal thought, lips tightly sealed against any word escaping them. Izzakar did not react to this damning slight. Proof, perhaps, that he could not see into the Rune Priest's thoughts. But the Stormcaller's distraction was evident, his timing with the attendants out of kilter. A servitor croaked in confusion, seeking a forearm to enclose with a vambrace but finding it out of position. Njal quickly raised his arm, not realising he had dropped it.

+You think you can shield your thoughts from the perils of the Empyrean, yet you barely have the discipline to armour your body. It is no wonder my soulself was drawn to the vacuum within your thoughts.+

The ritual was as much about connecting with himself as his armour and the interruptions of Izzakar disrupted that. Njal started to chant the battle-odes he had learned in his first days after coming to the Fang, bringing clarity and timing to his movements and thoughts.

His voice took on a bass tone, below the hearing of the thralls, though Aldacrel stiffened slightly in recognition. Njal subvocalised several verses, remembering himself back at the tiller of a drakeship, steering through the peaks and troughs of a heavy sea. The rhythm of the words

was the pounding of the waves on the hull. The Iron Priest added his voice, pitched slightly higher, like the keening of the wind against mast and rope.

+I cannot conceive the detrimental effect of combat on your mental acuity. If you…+

The memory drowned out the prattling of Izzakar and for the first time since discovering the sorcerer's invasive presence, Njal felt a moment of calm and solace.

'What ails the mind troubles the body,' said Aldacrel.

'That is true,' replied Njal, but offered nothing more, hiding his turmoil from further unexpected insight. The Iron Priest did not press the issue and continued the cladding process in customary silence, the room disturbed only by the squeal of ratchet guns, the creak of servos when Njal tested his accumulating plate, and the tread of the thralls' boots on the crystal-lined floor.

Finally Njal was enclosed toe to neck in the hulking mass of Tactical Dreadnought armour; layers of plasteel, adamantium and ceramite the equal of Logan's legendary plate. He took up his staff, gauntleted fingers curling around the haft as though gripping the wrist of a returning friend.

Njal turned and lifted the last component, a web-like tracery of fine crystalline thread hung with several thicker cables. He laid the psychic hood upon his scalp, letting it nestle into his hair, and then commanded Aldacrel to attach the interface. The Iron Priest's nimble fingers made short work of the connection and he stood back, still shielded from the sight, as etheric energy flickered about the Rune Priest.

Njal's spirit flowed into his staff and war-plate. Runes ignited with power, gleaming red and amber and gold with building potential. Against the drone of the suit's power, a subtle flow of psychic energy whispered across the plates. The Stormcaller flexed his mental attributes while he exercised the fibre bundles and actuators. Lightning crackled from fingertip to fingertip and a sheen of unearthly blue energy encased his form, turning the considerable defences of the Terminator suit into a near-impenetrable personal fortress. On the edge of hearing the wolf-spirits howled, guiding his mind into the warp.

With a mental flick, he called Nightwing to his raised arm. The psyber-raven settled there, feathers bristling with static.

‘Fight well, Stormcaller,’ Aldacrel intoned sincerely. ‘Bring honour to this wargear and victory to the Chapter.’

The psychic hood suppressed the insidious grating of Izzakar, leaving only a tremor in the depths of the Rune Priest’s thoughts. Energised by the calm, Njal Stormcaller strode from the wyrding halls to seek his fate.

The Fang had many great halls, and also many dormitories, medicae bays, armouries and gun batteries. It boasted numerous watch towers, depots, wolf lodges and wyrdwards, supplied by more than a dozen flight bays, forge-smithies and manufactories. To Njal, it seemed as if all of them had been emptied in response to the Great Wolf’s call to arms. His task force slowly assembled in the Hall of the Long Fangs, close to the eastern gates and the shuttle pens above them.

A conflicting mix of pride and sadness fought within the Rune Priest as the volunteers entered, some alone, others in small groups. An assortment of every imaginable inhabitant of the Space Wolves’ aett.

Firstly, there were the Space Marines that had been crippled, unable to fulfil a position in a regular battle pack. Most had at least one bionic prosthetic of some kind – wheezing, clumsy artifices of plasteel and wire, sheathed in ceramite and burnished bronze. They were the warriors that had been put back together in the midst of battle, their flesh and bone jury-rigged like a starship’s battle-scarred systems, repaired just well enough to fight on but consigned to non-combatant roles on their return.

They all carried themselves with pride, their eyes bright at the prospect of once more seeing battle. The minds were far more willing than the bodies were capable. They shuffled, lumbered and limped into rough lines as though for inspection. The gloom of the hall glittered with crude bionic eyes and thrummed with the buzz of hydraulics and hiss of bulky pneumatic actuators.

Hundreds of thralls had answered the call also, interpreting the Great Wolf’s summons as reason to leave their onerous duties in the Fang. Thralls of all ages and capabilities served the Chapter throughout the Great Companies and fleet, and it was not unusual for them to be close to the heart of battle.

Yet these thrallfolk were, like the veterans, those whose failure during their initiations had not slain them but had otherwise left them incapable

of serving in the combat zones, or simply those too young or old to be of use manning a strike cruiser's torpedo bays or working the gun decks of a battle barge. Dressed in their plain smocks and tunics, they mustered as well as they could, some of them as grey-haired as Ulrik, others barely of age to grow fluff on cheek and chin.

A few other Space Marines had dragged themselves from the treatments of the apothecarion assistants and servitors. The walking wounded. Some still with bloodied bandages on heads and limb stumps, others with internal injuries hidden inside armour hastily reclaimed from the forge halls. Njal caught the eye of one in particular, a swathe of dressing and plastek over the side of his face and head. His armour was marked as a Pack Leader of Grey Hunters from the Drakeslayers Great Company. Njal knew him. Indeed, he had been stood no more than three metres away when an ork rocket had blasted open his helm and shredded half of his face and skull.

'Valgarthr?' The Stormcaller stepped closer, a hand held out. 'I am honoured by the gesture, but you are in no fit state to fight again so soon.'

The pack leader met Njal with a stare of his one good eye, icy blue and intent.

'No gesture, Lord of the Runes,' said the sergeant. He looked at the others around him, indicating that he spoke the mind of all. 'We can fight. We *will* fight, as hard as any brother of Fenris.'

Njal hid his dismay, and considered returning to the Great Wolf to rescind his desire to travel to Prospero.

+These are the mighty Space Wolves? Fell must have been the blow dealt to your treacherous cousins for turning on Magnus and his followers.+

'Your world is ashes, your Legion is dust,' Njal whispered. 'I would think carefully before you brag of injury done.'

Even so, the sorcerer's barbs hardened Njal to the prospect of what was to come. If this was to be his command, so be it. They were all Space Wolves, and that was the most important thing. They would willingly lay down their lives for the Allfather and the Chapter and it was his duty – his right and privilege – to lead them.

Others joined the assortment, awaiting orders for embarkation: tech-priests sworn to alliance with the Space Wolves, with servitors made in

grotesque mockery of machine-men; three exhausted Wolf Scouts only just returned from a long patrol into the warp storms. Other miscellaneous leftovers of a departed Chapter.

The more he considered the task ahead, and the company he would keep, the better his mood, inversely proportionate to any objective assessment of his chances of victory.

The Stormcaller identified those among the contingent that had some leadership skills – by personal acquaintance or rank markings – and tasked them to begin organising into battle packs. Speeches were all well and good for morale and brotherhood, but Njal knew from long experience that organisation and dedication to the details won more battles.

Despite that truth, oratory was expected on such an occasion.

'The Great Wolf said we shall be legendary, and he was right. Any fool under the Allfather can win a battle with half a dozen Great Companies, starships and tanks. It takes heroes to win when all else has failed. Heroes, I see before me. Each one of you is moulded from the war-dreams of Russ himself. The Wolf King could not have asked for a greater assembly of courage, determination and warrior spirit. Sagas will be sung for long years in honour of this day and the next days to come.'

The Vaults of the Ancients buzzed with a rare blend of static and antiquity. To tread the hallowed halls was to approach one of the greatest warriors of Fenris, surrounded by the thrumming machinery that kept him and his less venerable companions bound to the mortal sphere. Njal could not help but turn his thoughts to the Allfather, enshrined upon the Golden Throne on Terra, sustained by similar yet impossibly grander technologies.

A broad corridor led to the main vault, a circular space several dozen metres across. In the centre stood the empty shells of the Dreadnoughts, armoured walkers twice as tall as the Rune Priest and equally broad. Their massive, slab-sided bodies were decked with emblems, runes and wolf-55pelt totems, painted in the colours they had worn as battle-brothers. At the centre one dreadnought stood slightly apart, the others placed in respect of its importance. Each had a void at the centre where disconnected cables and pipes hung like entrails.

Njal chose not to walk to the empty metal carcasses of the war machines, but instead turned to the metal-plated sarcophagi that lined the

wall. Like the war engines they were part of, they were also decorated in the Fenrisian manner, adorned with wolf skulls and fang-threaded hangings. Njal quickly found the one he sought. The main plate was set with a wolf skull over two crossed bones, the name of the incumbent written on a scroll beneath. A single name, yet so redolent for any that had passed through the Fang. The mere whisper of it conjured sagas of the greatest heroes and battles.

Bjorn.

Njal regarded the panel next to the sarcophagus. The lifesigns it showed were barely below wakefulness, the incumbent of the tomb not yet returned to deep stasis since the invasion of Magnus the Red. The Stormcaller hesitated, wondering if it was right to rouse Bjorn again, so soon after his recent battles.

Njal had no choice. There was no other that knew Prospero as Bjorn knew it, no other Space Wolf that had actually walked the fabled streets of Tizca.

He slowly drew up the adjacent lever, powering down the stasis field projected within Bjorn's chamber. Lights cycled through red and amber and into green, while within the tomb-shell Bjorn rose from slumber. Njal stepped back so he stood before the ocular device above the sarcophagus, showing himself to the ancient warrior.

A voice crackled from the speaker grille, slow and deliberate, tainted by artificial modulation but still enriched with a deep timbre.

'When the Lord of Runes comes to me, I know the situation is dire. Tell me, Stormcaller, why do you break my peace?'

'The Thousand Sons.'

'They have returned so soon?' Njal thought he detected a note of surprise in Bjorn's voice. 'The Cyclops?'

'Not this time, Fell-Handed. We go to them. To Prospero.'

'Nothing remains of Prospero, Stormcaller. We broke it upon our wrath.'

Njal hesitated, unsure what to say of his peculiar condition and the invasive presence of Izzakar.

'The Portal Maze survived. The Old Wolf has tasked me with assembling a force to return and break into the labyrinth, to free brothers trapped within.'

An odd noise emanated from the speaker. It sounded like grinding gears and Njal realised it was a chuckle.

‘When I hear “Old Wolf”, I think not of Logan, but another. The first that carried that name. Bulveye Greybeard, Jarl of drekk-tra when Prospero burned.’

‘It is Bulveye that we seek, Fell-Handed. He and his Old Guard have not returned with the others of the Thirteenth Company. They are bound within the Portal Maze and cannot escape it.’

Bjorn said nothing and Njal checked the bio-displays to ensure that the remnants of his physical body were still conscious within the sarcophagus. All read as normal and he reminded himself that the Fell-Handed had lived, after a fashion, for ten thousand years. He was not one to make hasty comment, though in battle he fought with the same fury the sagas claimed he had possessed as a young Blood Claw. He existed in a different time frame to mortal warriors, his thought processes of a more deliberate tempo.

The speaker crackled into life again, Bjorn’s tone quiet, almost wistful.

‘I remember pyramids of crystal shattering and a sky of falling fire. A screaming wind and lightning that snarled death. Across the Othersea we sailed, seeking the doom of another Legion, with the strength of the Allfather at our backs. Can you imagine the cataclysm of a Legion breaking like a storm upon the fortress of another, Stormcaller?’

‘I cannot. Such fury has not been seen for ten thousand years, Fell-Handed.’

‘No.’ Bjorn’s voice was subdued, saddened. ‘We broke the Thousand Sons and their world on that day, but something else fractured also. I fought blade to blade against warriors that I had once thought of as kin from a different father. We did the Allfather’s bidding, and gladly, but it is not right to disturb the ghosts we laid upon Prospero.’

+Is it true what he says? What became of Magnus and the Thousand Sons? All is obscured here, filtered through the fog of the veil.+

Njal ignored the sorcerer and sifted Bjorn’s words, finding an answer within.

‘You will not come?’

‘I will not return to Prospero, Stormcaller. The past is done.’

The Rune Priest knew better than to argue his case. No fresh appeal would sway the Fell-Handed, and would be disrespectful. Mindful of the argument that had erupted with Ulrik, Njal forced himself to accept the entombed Space Wolf's decision.

'Very well, Fell-Handed. Your claw shall be sorely missed.'

He moved towards the stasis controls but a mechanical grunt halted him.

'Leave me awake for a while, Stormcaller.' The speaker grille rattled in poor imitation of a sigh. 'I do not want to return to oblivion just yet. I will inform the forge priests when I wish to sleep.'

'Of course, honoured ancient.'

'One other thing,' said Bjorn even as Njal moved to turn away.

'Yes, Fell-Handed?'

'Do not let a rescue mission become a quest for vengeance, or a return to past battles. Find the Old Guard and bring them home. All else is vanity.'

Njal nodded his acceptance of this advice though he was unsure of its importance. Clearly Bjorn had a view on matters different to all except the Allfather, Wolf King and traitor Magnus. He took the words to heart and left, leaving the vault of the near-dead in silence.

The expedition's preparations continued as the masters of the forgeworks delved into their deepest stockpiles to equip the thrall host. Veterans trained with unblooded aspirants, while tech-priests ignited the machine-spirits of slumbering giant automata that were buried in the depths of the Fang's lowest levels. Forty-eight hours after the pronouncement of Logan Grimnar, the expedition was almost ready to depart.

The Great Wolf himself summoned the warriors to the Great Hall. Beneath the banners of generations past, staring wide-eyed at the trophies and heirlooms on display, the thralls were feted by the Chapter Master. Ale was brought from the cellars by centuries-old veterans, to acknowledge the bond with their new warrior-peers. The Space Marines each bore a full tankard or a goblet rendered from the skull or other remains of a defeated foe. For those who did not possess the digestive augmentation implants of a Space Marine, the ale had been watered down and poured into plain steel mugs.

Logan held up a horn frothing at the brim, the gold-chased vessel taken from the head of a monstrous ork beast he had single-handedly slain. The disparate assembly raised their drinking vessels in return.

'The Great Companies of the Space Wolves gather here,' Logan began, sweeping his other hand to indicate the tables and the Grand Annulus at the centre of the hall, inscribed onto massive stones with the symbols of the reigning Wolf Lords. 'You come from all places, yet none, to seek the lost. All voyages are into the unknown for the future is a fickle sea to sail. The waters into which you shall travel are shrouded in the thickest mists. Rocks and beasts await, no doubt, loitering in the darkness. And coming upon the strange shore within, you shall find yourselves in a land more remarkable still.'

He strode across the stones of the Grand Annulus to stand upon his symbol – the Champions of Fenris – a wolf's head howling against a dark moon. The circular stone at the centre was facing him, the symbol of the Wolf that Stalks Between Stars an indication of his rank as Great Wolf. His gaze passed over the symbols of the other company stones – Bloodmaws, Blackmanes, Iron Wolves, Sons of Morkai and others – and lingered on the black stone that represented the missing 13th Company.

'You are not represented here, nor is there place for you to be, but in heart you are a Great Company. As such, your leader is a Wolf Lord, among his other well-earned titles. The skalds must have a name for your saga, the singing of which shall fill these halls for many generations and pass out into the lands of our ancestors. It is not for me to give you this name, but for your lord to choose it.'

'I would not presume,' said Njal from his place at the high table.

'A mantle of modesty ill suits your shoulders,' chastened the Great Wolf. 'You know the legends of our people more than any other here. Choose your totem and name your company.'

'I have a name, the Stormcaller,' insisted Njal. 'I have been honoured by it ever since it was bestowed on me.'

Logan said nothing but a discontented murmuring and growling sounded from the assembled company. The pack leader, Valgarthr, rose to his feet and drew a long-bladed axe from his belt.

'We cannot set sail across the Othersea without a name, Lord of Runes,' he protested. There was much nodding and thumping of the tables from the

other veterans while the thralls looked on with bewilderment, not sure how to act. He pointed to the shoulder pad of his armour. Njal saw that it was blank, the symbol of the Drakeslayer painted over with the blue-grey of the Chapter. The others had also removed their former Great Company insignia. ‘I feel naked without my *aett-rune*.’

‘Very well,’ conceded Njal as the demands grew in frequency and volume. He cast his mind back, into the earliest memories of his time before the Sky Warriors had come for him. ‘There was a story my uncle told me, when I was a bairn on his knee the night after my father had been killed in battle. He said that my father’s spirit had been taken by the *valkyr* to ride on the storms between worlds, fighting the enemies of the Allfather for eternity. We shall go with our ancestors upon that tempest. We are the Stormriders.’

The Space Marines roared their approval and the higher pitch of the thralls joined it in praise of this decision. Logan Grimnar smiled broadly, drained his horn in one long draught and held up the empty horn to the assembly.

‘The Stormriders!’ he shouted.

The answering bellows, stamping of feet and tankards slammed on tables rivalled a company many times its size. When the resounding endorsement had died down, a lone voice called out from the direction of the great doors.

‘Legendary! Count me in!’

All eyes turned to the newcomer. He was dressed in the Space Wolves battleplate. Its markings were those of a Blood Claw, though the wearer was clearly of a greater age than would be expected of such a novice position. His hair was a violently auburn mane, with a short, narrow beard and flowing moustache of the same. His nose was pointed, his cheeks and brow craggy. Most prominent was the insincere grin smeared across his features.

‘Allfather help us,’ growled Njal. ‘Lukas.’

CHAPTER 5
THE ROGUE'S CALL

Stepping into the hall, Lukas gave a brief nod of respect to the roused veterans, and another for the Great Wolf. He walked towards the Stormcaller, who stared at the newcomer with a deeply creased brow, though whether in confusion or annoyance, Lukas could not guess.

'It seems this sort of endeavour… mission… quest needs every pair of capable hands.' Lukas turned, put fingers to his lips and whistled sharply, twice. The clump of boots resounded from the corridor beyond the great doors and several seconds later a cluster of seven young Space Wolves appeared. Their beards were short, hair worn in complex braids and spikes in honour of their adoptive pack leader's flamboyant style. The markings on the grey armour were of Blood Claws, the lowest rank of warrior after receiving their black carapaces to become full Space Marines. 'I have brought some friends, which should count in my favour, yes?'

'Where did you find these men?' demanded the Great Wolf. He thrust a finger towards the Blood Claws, indicating the Great Company symbols on their pauldrons. 'These warriors are of the Ironwolves! Does Egil know they are with you?'

'I have borrowed them,' Lukas replied with circumspection. 'Egil Iron Wolf probably hasn't yet noticed their absence. Besides, I fear we stray from the point of my timely intervention. My friends, *formerly* of the Ironwolves, and I find ourselves absent of an assignment. This jaunt to Prospero sounds ideal.'

'Jaunt?' growled Njal.

Lukas continued hurriedly, looking at Logan. ‘Unless you would prefer that we came with you to rendezvous with the Nightwolves, Great Wolf?’

The look of horror and then indignation that clouded Logan Grimnar’s face was reward enough, but the offer – or threat – had the desired effect.

‘The Trickster is right, Njal. All warriors are a boon to your cause.’

The Stormcaller had not broken his stare. He strode down the hall, strides measured. By some trick of acoustics or perhaps subtle wyrdplay his steps rang like thunderclaps, while it seemed the lumens and torches dimmed, casting long shadows from the approaching Rune Priest. When Njal stopped before Lukas, the Trickster felt a chill across his skin as though standing in the shadow of an eclipse. The Stormcaller’s eyes were lit with tiny pinpricks of fire as they bore down into Lukas’ skull.

‘I accept your offer, Jackalwolf.’ Njal’s words reverberated strangely around Lukas’ head. ‘Even if I forbade it, I think that you would come regardless. If you become the slightest vexation, if your presence disrupts our preparations or waylays our plans for your own devices, I will lay a doom upon you so dire that the Wolf King himself would pale at the thought of it.’

‘Of course,’ replied Lukas, forcing back another smile. He tried his best to look and sound sincere, but nature had gifted him a face and tone that lent itself to the sarcastic no matter how hard he tried. ‘I wish only to serve the Allfather in the way I know best.’

Njal quickly lifted a finger, causing Lukas to flinch. *Wyrdfyr* played about its tip, forming a tiny portrait of Lukas, features contorted in agony.

‘The gravest *wyrd-doom* mortal mind can devise, Jackalwolf. Am I clear?’

Lukas nodded, not trusting himself to speak. The Stormcaller turned his grave attention on the Blood Claws still clustered at the gates. Their high spirits dampened beneath his glowering eye.

‘You are young and enthusiastic, and that is to be expected,’ Njal told them. ‘But you carry the burden of duty the same as any warrior here. You are Space Wolves, Sons of Russ, Lords of Fenris. Your honour is the honour of our brotherhood. Stain it and we are all stained. I will not ask you to forsake this fool champion you have latched onto. I know his ways seem appealing to young and impressionable minds. I will warn you that

the geas I have laid upon him, you will share. Fight well and you shall be legends. Wrong me and I will be your ruin.'

Cowed by these words, the Blood Claws turned their eyes floorwards and shuffled their feet. Lukas could feel their spirits ebbing, and it wounded him to see their enthusiasm so cruelly curbed instead of harnessed. He sidled to the closest table and snatched a tankard from the nearest warrior, darting away as the scowling Space Wolf made a lunge for his ale.

'Let us praise this endeavour, and the newest members of the Stormriders!' Lukas declared, raising the tankard towards his Blood Claws. Their mood brightened as the other Stormriders, faced with dishonouring the toast if they did not echo it, lifted their own tankards with grunts and growls. Many regarded Lukas with the same tired patience he had become used to, but several stared at him with unabashed distaste, baring their fangs, while their eyes daggered threats every bit as dire as Njal's warning.

'We have preparations to make,' he told his pack, before downing the tankard's contents in one draught. He tossed the empty vessel back to its owner, who caught it with a rude glare. 'We need paint, and ammunition! To the armoury, my Blood Claw brothers!'

He ushered them out of the grand hall with sweeping hands, before anything amiss occurred. At the threshold he paused and turned, casting a low bow to the Great Company. His eyes roamed across their faces, seeing apathy and antipathy written there. Lukas' attention briefly caught Grimnar, who watched the Trickster with the expression of one monitoring the erratic passage of an invading swampfly. Lastly, he met the unblinking stare of the Stormcaller.

He wanted to return the look with sincerity, to assure him with a glance that he would not jeopardise the mission, and that the goal of the Stormriders was his goal also. Lukas wanted to do this as he knew it could be done, having seen others exchanging such looks, their wordless meaning known in an instant.

Instead, he winked, lip curled mischievously.

Lukas fixed his smile, despairing at his own behaviour, and left quickly, without daring to register the Rune Priest's reaction. He sped after his departing Blood Claws.

‘It’s a curse, I swear,’ he muttered to himself.

A ship was found, improving Njal’s mood considerably. The *Longclaw* was a rapid strike vessel that had been left in orbit over Fenris for a lack of suitable crew following the invasion by the Thousand Sons. It had a warp drive, drop pod cascade, a few weapons turrets and little else, but that was sufficient for the needs of the Stormriders.

Overseen by Valgarthr and the Stormcaller, embarkation by shuttle began to lift the squads into orbit. First was a small complement of void-experienced thralls sent to prepare the way for the others. Store barges took what could be spared to fill the magazines and hold, with the greater part of the space given over to weapons and ammunition rather than comforts or provisions.

Njal’s spirits were further lifted when he received a visitation from Aldacrel. The Iron Priest came to the Stormcaller as he watched another shuttle of veterans take off from the flight apron.

‘I’m coming with you,’ said the Iron Priest, in such a manner it was clear he had decided there would be no argument. ‘Someone’s got to maintain your wargear and settle the spirit of the ship.’

‘Three tech-priests journey with us,’ replied Njal. ‘You would serve better with the Great Wolf’s campaign.’

‘You need an Iron Priest, he doesn’t,’ said Aldacrel, and that was that. He marched away – the attendants and servitors set into motion by a silently transmitted order, while their master called out to commandeer the next drop-ship going into orbit.

The Iron Priest’s assertion reminded Njal of another individual he would need. He quit the dockside and headed back into the Fang, quickly making his way to the quarters set aside for members of the Navis Nobilite.

Across a wide bridge that spanned one of the Fang’s many internal gorges, a gate barred entry. The portal was guarded by a squad of soldiers loyal to the Navigators. They wore highly ornamented powered armour, wrought with gold in imitation of the auramite of the Emperor’s Custodians, though the occupants were normal men and women raised from the hive slums of Terra, their families bound to the dynasties of the Navis Nobilite by ancient pacts. They had been trained by battle-brothers

of the Chapter before being allowed to ship to Fenris, though their loyalty was first and foremost to House Belisarius.

Like the wyrd-halls and the pilaster of the Astropaths, the Navigators' quarters were heavily shielded against the warp. Njal could feel the oppressive force of the psychic wards built into the towers and chambers beyond the gatehouse, pressing down towards him like the weight of a mountain.

+I feel it also, an itch behind eyes I do not possess.+

The Navis guard raised power spears in salute to the approaching Space Wolf. Their officer stepped forward with a respectful bow, her face half-hidden behind the black visor of her tall helm. She swept a purple cloak before her as she lowered, her other hand on the pommel of the stabbing sword sheathed at her waist.

'Welcome, Lord of Fenris,' she said as she straightened. 'The precincts of the Navigators are closed to visitors at present.'

'Who resides within, Dorria?' asked Njal, pulling the officer's name from little-used memory.

'The Navigator Remeo and Navigator-elect Majula,' San Artis Dorria Lex Vinduleus replied. 'They are indisposed.'

'I require a Navigator. We leave at dusk.'

Dorria shifted her weight to her other foot, uncomfortable.

'Is there some problem with my request?'

'The Navigator Remeo made it known to me before you came that he would not assist in your journey to Prospero. You cannot demand that a member of the Navis Nobilite risk their life needlessly.'

'I see.' Njal held his temper. There was no benefit to getting angry at Dorria; she was merely the herald of this news, not its source. 'Convey to the Navigator Remeo my insistence that he holds to the terms of the agreements between House Belisarius and the Space Wolves. If he is unwilling to be my ship-guide, perhaps he has overstayed his welcome on Fenris.'

To her credit, Dorria did not react to the implicit threat, but merely nodded her head.

'I shall impress upon the Navigator Remeo your desire for his company on the voyage ahead.'

'Then I ask nothing else of you, Dorria. You do your duty well.'

And with nothing more to be said on the matter, Njal left, his mood much soured.

'The Great Wolf wants you, Arjac.'

There was nothing amiss in the words of Alrik Doomseeker as he stood at the threshold of the *thegnhalle,* his Terminator armour lit by the flickering of the immense hearthfire. He wore his helm and nothing of his face could be seen. Similarly, his Tactical Dreadnought war-plate masked anything but the most obvious body language.

Yet the terse summons – not request, as was usually Logan's choice when dealing with his champion – came at an ill time. Arjac had not returned more than an hour from his trek into the hinterlands and even now waited on the remaining, much-overworked armoury thralls to divest him of his war-plate.

'The Stormcaller has need,' Alrik added, explaining much with just four words.

'Aye, well I best go, then,' said Arjac, standing up from the reinforced bench and table where he had been picking clean a broad platter. He swilled down the last mug of ale and headed for the door.

'The wulfhalle,' Alrik corrected him as Arjac turned left out of the door towards the Hall of Kings.

'I see,' said Arjac. It was rare that Logan spoke to him in the privacy of his personal chambers. Arjac was his champion, and only rarely counsellor. His dealings with his feal-lord mostly took place in plain view at audience or open muster. To attend the Great Wolf alone spoke of something more personal than his duty as head of the Nightwolves' Wolf Guard.

By long stride and clanking conveyor, he traversed the storeys of the Fang, heading up from the halls of the Nightwolves. It was an inconvenience that the Great Wolf was quartered in what had once been the domain of the Wolf King, while his Great Company shared hearth in another part of the Fang. It made being a bodyguard difficult, but despite entreaties from Arjac, Logan refused to break tradition and lodge his veterans in the inner keep-halls.

Arjac saw Baldin of the Red-Sea and Odyn Foe-Ruin on duty. They wordlessly admitted their pack leader into the presence of the Chapter

Master.

Logan sat to one side at a great desk strewn with transparent plastek sheets and parchment sheafs. He scowled at the logistical reports and submissions from the Astropaths with a ferocity usually reserved for the most dire foes on the battlefield.

'How was Elsinholm?' he asked, standing up from his broad chair, his look one of relief at being freed for a moment from the more onerous duties of command.

'Cold,' replied Arjac. Everywhere on Fenris was freezing. An old joke, but one that allowed them to share a smile. Arjac's mood sobered. 'A mutant sturmwyrm, now deceased.'

'Good work.'

'Not really.' Arjac knew that he had permission to speak his mind at all times. As champion he was expected to speak truths only, to defend his feal-lord's honour as well as his person. 'Before Magnus… Before the invasion, the Elsinholma would have hunted it down without help, even though they were few in number. Everywhere, the people are hurting, not just in their losses but in their hearts. They have suffered so much. More even than Fenrisians can bear.'

'Then perhaps they need a fresh saga to bolster their flagging spirits. A story that shows that the Space Wolves and Fenris are not cowed.'

'You have news of victory?' It was typical of Logan Grimnar, seeing to the morale of his people as much as their physical need. 'Our expedition forces fare well?'

'Some,' said Logan. He moved across to the heavily leaded window and looked out at the whiteness, his form silhouetted against the pale light. 'But I'm not talking about that.'

'A vision from the Stormcaller?'

'Yes.' Logan seemed hesitant to answer, which was unusual. He was weighing his words as carefully as a storemaster counted ammunition issued to the companies. 'A development. An opportunity.'

'It is not common for you to mask your words, Great Wolf. Speak plainly.'

Logan turned around, his features screwed up with concern.

'What I tell you must be passed to no one else. It is for you alone to know.'

‘By my honour,’ agreed Arjac, though his heart sank. He disliked secrets. Rarely did any good come of them, though he knew that some knowledge – the threat of Chaos, for instance – was itself harmful.

‘I do not understand it fully, but Njal Stormcaller has snared a fragment of another being in his thoughts.’

Arjac’s next breath caught in his throat, his hands becoming fists at his side. Having so recently faced the prospect of daemonic activity, it was a shock to discover the threat in the heart of the Fang.

‘What manner of being?’ He could scarce believe he had to ask the question and his doubts voiced themselves. ‘What manner of creature could possess the Stormcaller?’

‘A sorcerer of the Thousand Sons.’ Logan rubbed his chin. ‘It was gross error by Njal that has led to this dire situation.’

Logan waited, gauging Arjac for a sign of understanding. Rockfist nodded for the Great Wolf to continue.

‘We might yet salvage good from bad. Njal is returning to Prospero, to the warp-crazed labyrinth that snared Bulveye and his Old Guard of the Thirteenth Company.’

‘More Wulfen?’

Logan shrugged. ‘We will have to wait and see. Njal thinks that he can open the maze and free our lost brothers with the aid of this wyrd passenger, and I have granted him leave to collect volunteers for the effort. You are going to volunteer, Arjac.’

‘I’m damned sure I’m not,’ argued Rockfist. ‘I am your champion, your *hearthegn*, and your bodyguard stays with you. You are rejoining the Nightwolves soon, so my place, the duty of my pack, is by your side.’

‘This is more important.’

‘I disagree.’

‘I didn’t ask,’ snapped the Great Wolf, losing his temper for the first time Arjac had seen in several decades, and never before with him. The champion stepped back as though assaulted, wounded by his feal-lord’s intemperate remark.

‘I am sorry,’ said Rockfist. He bent slightly, eyes to the floor in apology. ‘I overstep my duty, Great Wolf.’

‘Yes you do, Arjac,’ said Logan, his anger losing its edge. ‘I need Njal in these dark times. You must protect him as you would me.’

‘Of course.’ There was something else, a hint of an unfinished sentence in the Great Wolf’s manner. ‘If he is so important, why do you not command him to rid himself of this sorcerer?’

‘We need every warrior. If we can bring back more of the Thirteenth we can fight other battles.’

‘But you also hope for something more?’

Grimnar sighed.

‘It is a foolish hope,’ he admitted, moving back to his desk, fidgeting with the papers there. He lifted an ork skull paperweight, turning it in his thick fingers. ‘Perhaps… perhaps something of the Wolf King might be found. The warp has vomited forth daemons and released the Wulfen after ten thousand years. Is it madness to hope that the Wolftime is upon us and that Russ might return to lead again?’

‘Not madness,’ said Arjac. He approached to within a couple of paces. ‘But unnecessary. Self-doubt should be a stranger at your hearth, Logan. You are the greatest leader this Chapter has seen in millennia. If anybody can steer us through these dark times, it is you.’

‘I have a concern,’ continued the Great Wolf, dropping the skull back to the desk with a heavy thud. ‘The presence inside Njal’s thoughts, it may become more malignant. Njal’s judgement is affected, directly or indirectly. This sorcerer has an agenda, and we cannot assume the Stormcaller will act against it.’

‘You want me to watch for deviancy?’

‘If it looks as though Njal has succumbed, you must take action. We seek allies, not more foes. It seems to me this is as likely a trap as an opportunity but the risk must be taken. You are my axe if need be.’

‘I’ll remind the Stormcaller of his oaths and duties,’ said Arjac. ‘If he turns against the Chapter, or loses control, I shall end him.’

Logan nodded and turned away, uncomfortable with the conversation.

‘Anything else?’ asked Arjac.

The Great Wolf shook his head, dismissing Rockfist with his silence. The Wolf Guard was almost at the door before Logan spoke again.

‘Go with honour.’

‘I will,’ replied Arjac, but as he stepped outside and Baldin pulled the door closed, Arjac thought that honour would be in short supply in the coming days.

He smelt the blood before he saw the tell-tale crimson flecks in the snow. Padding softly through the drifts, his bare feet sinking into the welcoming chill of the packed whiteness, he knelt beside the droplets. The wind bit at his naked flesh, coming in fast and fresh from the hills to the north. Its gusts swayed the pines that clustered about the frozen river not far ahead.

The trail of the blood spatter continued in the direction of the forest. Turning his head, he saw the remains of indentations in the snow where the struggle had happened – covered by fresh fall but visible to his keen sight.

Lukas reached out his hands, taking a moment to examine his claw-like fingernails, and scooped up blood-spattered snow. He sniffed again, savouring the scent. Fire elk. Inhaling deeply, he crushed the ice into his face, relishing the coldness, his enhanced body inuring him to any threat of frostbite. He scraped his fingers through his hair, standing it in spikes like trapped flames, and rubbed handfuls across his scarred, tattooed body.

Standing, ice and water falling from him like a mountain giant of legend, Lukas turned his gaze towards the dark beneath the trees. He could track the prints now, the line of red molten droplets left for him to follow.

He set off in a loping run that crossed the snow-covered ground with ease. His breath made fog banks behind him, a miasma that caught the dying light of the sun and set the air sparkling red and orange.

Reaching the treeline, he slowed.

Tree limbs creaked with the weight of snow, broken occasionally by the thud of a drift dropping to the ground and the drip of rivulets running down the cracks of craggy silver bark. The trail snaked around several boles and disappeared into the gloom. The scent of blood was fresher now. He could hear the sluggish gurgle of the near-frozen river and the hiss of wind through reeds on the bank.

His enhanced sense of smell warned of something else.

A strong odour, of flesh and bad breath, of wet fur and urine. A Thunderwolf.

Picking his way carefully, stepping past fallen branches and jutting rocks, Lukas crept towards the river, the shadows enveloping him. He heard jaws working on bone, the tear of skin and rip of muscle. Its heavy panting infected him with energy, even more invigorating than the snowstorm.

He fell to all fours – his belly close to the ground, and muscles taut beneath his augmented skin. His head craned to catch sight and scent of his prey. Rounding a pine trunk, he came upon the riverside. A game trail wound between the rocks and patches of tall ice-grass. He crawled a little further, slinking along from downwind, over a rock close to the frozen water's edge.

Two yellow eyes stared at him from the hollow beyond, above rows of fangs inside a curled lip. With ears flat and hackles raised, the Thunderwolf did not blink as Lukas eased himself even closer, dropping quietly to the ground just a short distance away.

The hollow was littered with body parts from the stag. Blood and guts lay strewn alongside hide and antler on the trail and ice. The muzzle of the Thunderwolf was red with the labour, but he could see that its stomach was wasted thin, and recognised the hungry glare in its eyes.

Varg-ulf.

Wyrd-tainted, driven mad by the need to feed and its inability to do so, spurred on by insatiable appetite to wantonly kill. Hounded from its pack for attacking others, left to die a miserable, frenzied death.

Lukas crept closer, keeping his eyes firmly on the Thunderwolf. Its bulk was even greater than his – its shoulder at head height. The pelt was silver-black, streaked around muzzle, mane and tail with white hairs.

'You're an old one to get the blood madness, aren't you?' Lukas whispered, calm and reassuring, his movements a study in non-threatening behaviour. 'I can help you with that. Yes, I can help the madness go away.'

The Thunderwolf paced back and forth, not sure what to make of the stranger in its presence. Lukas understood its uncertainty. He never really knew how to act around others. Too rebellious for the pack, too gregarious to be a lone wolf.

Except that here, naked under the sky and snow, he was himself. The blood that coursed through his veins was the fluid of Fenris. The spirit that animated his mortal shell was the same that had brought the Wolf King here as an infant to be nurtured by the wolves. It was Lukas' favourite saga of Russ – his childhood among the pack, before he learnt to walk like a man.

Lukas picked up a haunch that the wolf had torn from the body and discarded. A loose flap of skin flicked blood as he lifted the meat to his

lips. Lukas' fangs sank into the raw flesh, spilling blood down his bearded chin and auburn-haired chest. He chewed briefly and swallowed a large piece before biting again, gulping the next hunk with barely a pause.

He let the bloodied meat fall from his fingers.

The Thunderwolf whined, seeing the beast that was inside Lukas, recognising the kindred varg-ulf. Two such monsters would usually fight but the approach of Lukas confused the animal. There was no challenge to answer, leaving the Thunderwolf at odds with itself.

Lukas' fingers wrapped around a splintered piece of antler as he moved in a crouch. His eyes remained on the beast but his head turned slightly to one side, low and subservient.

A growl, a bass rumble from deep in the Thunderwolf's throat, warned of doubts becoming defensiveness. Lukas halted, two metres from the creature, feet and shins coated with blood from the viscera through which he had shuffled. The monster inside of Lukas, the curse of the Canis Helix that lurked in the breast of all Space Wolves, howled silently in his head. It gnawed at his remaining heart, and yowled to be free of the human flesh that had been wrapped about it.

Lukas sprang forward.

The broken end of the antler slashed easily into the Thunderwolf's throat, ripping out gullet and windpipe with a single strike. Hot blood coursed from the wound as Lukas' momentum took him forward. He crashed into the falling monster, lifting its bulk sideways with the impact.

They fell into the snow amidst a plume of ice and ruddy life fluid. Lukas dragged free his makeshift weapon and plunged it again, penetrating ribs and heart.

Releasing the antler, Lukas slithered back, eyes searching the Thunderwolf for any sign of vitality. His throat felt dry, filled with thirsting for the blood that gushed from the wounds and ran down the slope between Lukas' legs.

He bowed his head and lapped once, then twice.

With a snarl, he pulled himself away. Turning, he slipped down the bank onto the hard ice of the river's edge. Padding across the unforgiving coldness brought some measure of clarity. Shaking his head, he pounded his fists against the ice. It cracked and he punched again, and again,

slamming his knuckles until he broke through into the chill waters beneath.

Lukas plunged head and chest into the broken hole, the sensation like running full speed into a wall. It numbed the senses, flushing out the unreasoning animism of his genetics. In the void, the human resurfaced through the cloying desire of blood hunger.

Gasping, Lukas flopped upon the ice, blood drying across his flesh while fresh snow fell. He stared up at the red creeping into the blue of failing night, a handful of stars still bright through gaps in the snow clouds.

'Allfather…' he whispered.

Lukas slept.

High above Asaheim, the polar region of Fenris, dusk was a strange time. Njal stood alone upon a jutting rock, eyes closed, the last warmth of the sun on his face. The sky shimmered with deep blue, the stars obscured by the dance of aurora. For a brief time, sunlight bathed the upper towers of the Fang, raw and harsh. Soon the rotation of Fenris would take the sun below the clouds again and the twilight would begin anew, fading to utter darkness.

Dawn and dusk were measured at the moments of unblemished sunlight falling upon the sigil of the Wolf King that topped the highest pinnacle of the citadel. At these times it seemed as though the fortress was a ship on a sea of fire, the billow of vapour like the swell of waves across the bow streaming past.

Sometimes warriors of the Chapter would lounge outside, the melanchromatic augmentation of their skin darkening quickly under the intense radiation while they drank ale and paid homage to the Skyfire. Not today, for Njal watched the dusk alone, sensing that he was about to be plunged into his own long night.

He remembered the Seasons of Fire, when volcanoes and earthquakes rent the lands and seas, birthing new valleys and mountains and swallowing the old. A time of destruction but also creation.

In the minds of the Fenrisians, there was little difference. Birth was but the start of the journey to death, to be savoured and celebrated every moment. The volatile world bred a people that believed only the reality of

the instant, and recognised their own physical impermanence. Only honour, only legacy remained unchanged.

Njal was aware more than most of the proud history of his Chapter, the sagas etched into his memory as surely as the runes were carved into his staff. Great heroes, from the Wolf King himself down the ages to Logan Grimnar, lauded for their skill in battle and their wisdom in counsel.

Alone on that promontory, Njal knew himself a fraud. Nothing had been said to the Stormriders of his predicament, only of the attempt to rescue Bulveye's Old Guard. He wondered which of the sagas he could recite by heart had similarly inauspicious catalysts.

But he could not dwell on his foolishness. The same culture that valued the moment also created opportunists. Njal's mistake was something he would have to bear, but the chance to break into the Portal Maze turned encumbrance to advantage.

The vox-bead in his ear buzzed, disturbing his thoughts. He opened his eyes in time to see the cloudfire at its peak, the passing from night to day. For several seconds, he stood alone upon an ocean of burning mists.

The bead buzzed again, like the attention of a marsh gnat, insistent and irritating.

'Yes?' he replied, the pick-up activating at the sound of his voice.

'*Our Navigator has arrived, Stormcaller*,' Valgarthr told him.

'Good.' Njal was not sure this news was sufficiently urgent for the sergeant to have contacted him. Something was amiss. 'Is there anything else?'

'*You had better come to the launch port*,' the pack leader continued, his tone conveying that all was not well.

Njal suppressed a sigh, wondering what fresh travails had beset the expedition.

'I'm coming,' he replied as the light began to dim.

When Lukas awoke, he sat up, tearing skin and hair that had frozen to the ice. He crouched over the pool he had made and dipped his hands into the water. Frost particles had already started to creep in from the edges to close the wound in the ice. He clawed off the gobbets of elk flesh and scraped at the Thunderwolf's blood, scouring his skin of all trace of his

indulgence. When he was clean, he stood up and waited for the disturbed waters to settle.

His reflection was that of a man.

A man moulded by the hand of an ancient, half-dead demigod, but a man all the same. Tall and lean, or judged as such beside his immense brethren, a puckered scar upon his breast was prominent among the many battle wounds and Fenrisian tattoos that marked his skin.

Lukas lifted a hand to the old injury, feeling the hard edges of the device implanted within.

'Not this time, wolf brother,' he said to his reflection. 'Sleep still.'

He studied his own face, trying to find a sign of the monster that hid behind his eyes. There was nothing, and his customary amused smirk returned.

CHAPTER 6
THE OTHERSEA

The hall of embarkation was quiet, feeling empty after the activity of the previous days. Hurrying into the bay, Njal's eye was drawn to a lone tech-priest marshalling a band of loading servitors up the ramp of a waiting drop-ship. The hiss of pistons and clank of feet reverberated across the metal-decked floor, almost lost in the grumble from the orbital launch's idling engines.

Valgarthr waited nearby with five fellow Space Wolves, their left shoulder guards gleaming with fresh paint, a wolf's head against crossed bolts of lightning – the symbol of the Stormriders. The same had been made into iron badges for the thralls, worn as talismans over their half-armour, and painted onto the few vehicles and gunships the armoury had been able to spare for the rough-and-ready company.

The pack leader's dressings had been replaced by a moulded ceramite plate so that it seemed that half his face and head was a skull. The eye socket shone green with a simple bionic, giving his strange appearance an even more unearthly aura.

Beside them stood a squad of the Navigator guard in two ranks. Dorria waited slightly to one side with a short figure draped in a dark red robe and voluminous hood. In the shadow of the cowl, Njal saw the face of a young woman, perhaps no more than eight Fenrisian Long Years – sixteen as was reckoned on Terra. Her eyes were bright in her dark skin, ringed with colour the same as her robe, copied also on the lips. The rune of House Belisarius was burned into her left cheek, the scar laced through

with silvery thread from which hung tiny ruby droplets like blood. The silver band across her forehead confirmed what his othersenses told him – a Navigator. Her powers were suppressed, the fabled third eye hidden behind the protective sleeve, but still it seemed to him that she gave off multicoloured vapours of curling energy.

One nostril was pierced with a silver stud. Njal glimpsed earrings as an occasional flicker of gold in the gloom of the hood when the Navigator looked around the launch deck, hanging from oddly small ears. The Navigators were heavily gene-spliced and inbred, and he wondered what other physical oddities were concealed beneath the robe.

'You are not Remeo,' said the Stormcaller, his frown directed equally between Valgarthr and the adolescent.

'I am the Navigator-elect Majula. I shall steer you across the undervoid on this voyage.'

Njal ground his teeth as he absorbed this announcement, and cocked his gaze towards Dorria with an eyebrow raised.

'You may address me directly, Lord of the Runes,' Majula said primly. Beside her, Dorria visibly winced behind her visor.

'I wasn't seeking permission,' said Njal. 'Why is Remeo not here?'

'I have volunteered for this task, Lord of the Runes,' Majula replied.

'Volunteered?'

A crack appeared in the young lady's facade of indifferent superiority, revealing agitation.

'The Navigator Remeo thought to forbid me from attending to the pact between House Belisarius and the Space Wolves. Nevertheless, I persisted.'

'You are only Navigator-elect. Have you steered a ship before?'

'Of course, Lord of the Runes.' She spoke the truth but Njal detected uncertainty and pressed further.

'Alone?'

Her hesitation was all the answer the Stormcaller needed, and he spoke again before Majula could reply.

'No, only as part of a Navis cabal,' Njal answered for her.

'I draw lineage direct from the most puissant members of House Belisarius,' the Navigator-elect insisted, hands forming fists within the broad sleeves of her robe. She matched Njal's doubtful look with a defiant

stare and he felt a burst of psychic power like a drumbeat in the back of his skull. Had she removed her headband, he would have been sorely tested to resist the crippling power of her third eye.

He nodded with a lopsided smile.

'Very well, Navigator Majula. You will be our ship-guide.'

A brief smile was quickly replaced by the measured veneer Majula had portrayed earlier. With assumed imperiousness, she turned and walked to the waiting shuttle. Dorria barked a command to her squad and they turned to follow.

'What is this?' Njal called out to the officer. She turned back, waving for the Navis Guard to continue after their mistress.

'Majula might be only Navigator-elect, but she is an interanovus of the Celestarch, by direct bloodline no less.'

'So she outranks Remeo?'

'It's complicated,' replied Dorria. 'In Household matters, she does. Majula has reached her age of parting, an adult in the law of the House, though she has yet to solo pilot her first ship and assume the role of full Navigator. That is why she is so eager, I think. We will protect her, as we are pledged, there are others that will guard Remeo.'

A thudding tread interrupted any reply, drawing the attention of Dorria, Njal and the other Space Wolves to the bulk conveyor at the far end of the boarding hall. The gate slid aside to reveal the broad form of a Dreadnought. Emerging into the light of the bay, it revealed a multi-barrelled assault cannon mounted from one arm and a long battle-claw upon the other – the unmistakable war machine of Bjorn the Fell-Handed.

He advanced with crashing step across the reinforced decking, and behind him from the conveyor came two more of the armoured walkers, sporting immense fists and heavy weapons.

'I changed my mind, Stormcaller,' announced Bjorn. His armoured torso twisted at the waist pivot and the massive claw rose to indicate the two other war engines. 'I brought old companions. Grímr Fellfist and Olaf the Thrice-Slain.'

'I know their sagas well,' said Njal. Indeed, Fellfist and the Thrice-Slain were revered nearly as much as Bjorn himself. The Stormcaller met the approaching Dreadnought and lowered his voice. 'I thought you would never return to Prospero?'

Bjorn's reply was an attempt at a conspiratorial whisper, though his external address system lacked the subtlety to do so, his words emanating at the volume of a man's normal speech so that they carried across the near-silent bay.

'You are travelling to the home world of our greatest enemies, to break into a warp-spawned labyrinth of dreams and nightmares, accompanied by a ragged company of thralls and greyhairs. And, if my auditory systems detected right the conversation just passed, you will do so by sailing the Othersea on a ship piloted by an untested adolescent.' The huge sarcophagus tipped closer and the speaker crackled as Bjorn tried to lower his voice even further. 'I think you need all the help you can get.'

The light of Fenris' star was nothing more than another cold glimmer in the darkness of the void. Eleven days out from orbit, the *Longclaw* finally reached the extent of the graviometric interference from the system's bodies. Called the Mandeville point among Imperial scholars, to the Space Wolves it was known as the Gulf of No Return.

From here, a ship would activate the warp drives, breaking open the barrier between reality and unreality. Slipping from the material to the immaterial sheathed in a Geller field – a bubble of mortal physics encased in a psychic skin – the *Longclaw* would fall into the Othersea to drift upon its strange currents and tides.

As preparations were made for the jump, Njal did a personal inspection of the ship. Though his contingent was not large, it exceeded the transport capacity of the rapid strike vessel by some margin, so that thralls and warriors made bed space in corridors and emptied storage bays. His Space Wolves were already in full battle mindset, using their catalepsean nodes to rest parts of their brain in sequence so that they needed no regular sleep. Those who were unaugmented among the company shared bunk space between heating exchanges and coolant pipes, atop vibrating Geller field generator casings and around thrumming plasma relays. They changed shift every six hours to make room for another, living in the embrace of each other's warmth and aroma.

As Njal made his way to the mid-decks the passages cleared before him. His huge armour almost filled the corridor – though built for the Adeptus Astartes, the *Longclaw* had never been intended to carry Terminators –

forcing all others to give way. Across the ship, movement from the eating halls to the shrine chambers and training ranges was carefully managed so that large bodies of warriors were not on the move at the same time. At such times, it seemed anarchic with floods of thralls moving aftwards into the spaces around the engine rooms, or flowing to the gunnery decks to make way for squads of Space Wolves on their way to conduct close-quarter drills in the main combat hall. Yet appearances were deceptive. Valgarthr and the other squad leaders had meticulously coordinated all activity, leaving nothing to chance and allowing no room for confusion.

Arjac met Njal not far from his quarters, waiting in a junction space between three corridors and two stairwells, sufficient room for them both.

'Everything is locked down in preparation for the jump, Lord of Runes,' reported the Wolf Guard veteran. 'Crew and transported warriors are mustering to their stations. Valgarthr has command on the *jarldek*.'

His nose wrinkled. The odour from so many people thrust together was already considerable, pushing the filtration systems to their limit. So too the ablution facilities, food preparation and water supplies. To the thralls and other regular crew, it was a mild distraction. For the augmented Space Marines, the stench was ever-present.

'The sooner we are out of here, the better. Some of the thralls are complaining of shortness of breath. Our warriors' performance will be affected if they must use their halfminds for too long. We are already running our armour recycling systems to augment the ship's capabilities.'

It was, in galactic terms, not a long journey between Fenris and Prospero. In normal conditions one might have covered the distance in two or three shorter jumps.

'I'm hoping that conditions permit us to make the journey to Prospero in a single jump, two if really necessary,' Njal told the other Space Wolf. 'The quicker, the better. The ruins of Tizca will provide little relief. The air is just about breathable but that is all. Within the Portal Maze? Who knows what we'll find. We drink and eat only what we take with us.'

'Just cross one chasm at a time, eh?' said Arjac, scratching his chin. 'Let's just get there first.'

'Await my command,' said the Stormcaller with a nod.

'Of course.'

Arjac stomped away towards the main bridge, leaving Njal to ascend in one of the conveyors, taking him to the uppermost decks of the patrol vessel. Disembarking the heavy lifting cage brought him out onto one of two galleries that flanked the chambers of the Navigator.

Ahead, through the high armourplas viewport, he could see the wolfshead prow of the ship against the backdrop of stars. To the stern the view was obscured by the glow of plasma discharge from the engines, while the row of windows beside him revealed nothing but the star-filled galaxy.

A quintet of golden figures stood guard at the entrance to Majula's quarters – a similar number of the Navis Nobilite troops stood sentry on the opposite gallery.

'Navigator-elect Majula is preparing for transition, Lord of Runes,' said Dorria, changing her stance ever so slightly to intercept his approach towards the closed archway that led up into the pilaster.

'I know,' Njal replied. 'That's why I'm here.'

The impasse continued in silence for several seconds before Dorria relented under the unmoving stare of the Stormcaller. He detected the slight buzz of a vox transmission and the gate slid open.

'Wise as well as diligent,' Njal told Dorria. 'Your mistress is fortunate to have you in her service.'

He ducked through the opening, his shoulders only barely fitting the gap. A broad, shallow-stepped staircase led up just a few paces in front. He looked up to see part of a large dome, the stars visible through the armourplas. He could see a vague reflection of red moving against the blackness as Majula paced to and fro, her passage quick with agitation.

'If that is so, it is credit to the lessons of our exchange trainer, Pack Leader Stevr,' Dorria called after Njal. 'He always told us to do what our superiors *needed*, even if their orders did not quite phrase that need properly…'

'A teaching worthy of the Wolf King himself,' agreed Njal.

As Nightwing swept over his shoulder, the gate clattered back into position behind him and he started up the steps.

The hall was circular, the transparent dome above far higher than the walls that held it, so one felt almost enclosed by the starfield. It was a large space for a Navigator compared to some ships he had seen,

considering the sparsity of room on the rest of the *Longclaw*. It was obvious why on brief inspection, for the hall was not just a viewing dome but also bed chambers, kitchen and recreation area. Once the warp was breached, the view below the armourplas would be of the naked warp – or as naked as such a thing could be through the interference of the Geller field. Only Majula, Njal and the handful of eyeless servitors would be capable of staying there without being driven insane by the sight. So the Navigator would remain, cared for by half-machine orderlies, her existence essentially solitary for the duration of the jump.

Majula was stood close to the wall and turned as Njal reached the top of the stairwell. She wore the same robes and hooded cloak as when he had first seen her, but a shawl of golden lace was draped over them, hung with sparkling rubies, emeralds and sapphires. Each flickered with psychic brightness as well as physical light. Njal had not seen one before and assumed it was an amplifier to aid inexperienced Navigators – something akin to his psychic hood.

A crease knotted Majula's brow behind the silver band of her oracle-guard, visible eyes narrowing.

'I gave word that I was not to be disturbed.'

'I can be quite insistent.' Njal moved closer, but not so near that his immense bulk would intimidate the young lady. Devoid of input from the Stormcaller, Nightwing landed upon the rail at the top of the stair and fell dormant. 'There is more at stake during this voyage than your elevation from Navigator-elect to Navigator. We will make the first transition together.'

'I did not know that the Librarians of the Adeptus Astartes could act as Navigators…' Majula's lips pursed in annoyance. 'I do not see why I needed to come at all, if that is the case.'

'I am powerful among the Rune Priests of the Space Wolves, but even I can only dimly sense the tides of the Othersea. The Allfather's light is a warmth in my mind, and if needed for a short distance, I could steer the ship. But that will not be enough. We must travel close to the Great Rift that tears the galaxy to the core if we are to reach Prospero.' Njal took another step and laid a hand on Majula's shoulder, as soft as settling snow despite the immensity of the gauntlet that enclosed his fingers and the

potential power of the suit he wore. ‘Just the transition. Together. After that, you alone shall be my Navigator.’

She relaxed and acceded with a nod.

‘I used to stand tiller on my uncle’s *jarlship* from my fifth season of fire and ice,’ Njal said, taking a step back. He looked up at the stars. ‘We rode mountainous waves and sailed shores fanged like a monstrous kraken. In foam and gale, we hunted *geldwhal* along the northern ocean coasts. Every Long Year, Fenris breaks itself. The Imperial orbologists call it stellar-induced seismic upheaval. To a fresh young sailhand, it is the wrath of the elements, let me tell you. The sky is wreathed in lightning and clouds. The thunder is the war-cries of vast gods warring. Such a youth might think the world is ending. And well it might be, with kraken and leviathans of the abyss waiting to swallow those that sail astray into the deep waters.’

‘How did you find your way?’ Majula asked quietly, her fingers fidgeting with a slender silver chain around her throat. ‘When nothing is permanent, how do you steer your way home?’

‘There are no maps of Fenris worthy of study. No charts remain true for more than one season. Islands rise and fall. Shallows, creeks, fjords and volcanoes are as substantial as snow melting between the fingers. So we learn to steer by instinct, by the smell of the wind, the taste of the salt and ice, and the ride of the planks beneath our feet.’

‘It does not sound so different from what the Navigators must do,’ said Majula. ‘The currents we steer are never stable. Their speed and direction shift and the tides rise and fall without warning. Only the Astronomican is immutable.’

Njal stood by her side. His gaze roved the stars above for a few seconds, until he found what was roughly galactic south-east.

‘Our fate lies out there,’ he said quietly. ‘The light of Prospero’s star, near eight thousand years old now, somewhere in that glow.’

‘Left a little, Lord of Runes,’ said Majula, her finger pointing as she spoke. ‘I have made the calculations and studied the charts. The Beacon of Terra is fixed in my thoughts even now, hot and bright and loving. Prospero is that way.’

‘I stand corrected, Navigator,’ he replied. A subvocal whisper activated his vox-link. ‘Valgarthr, send word to the tech-priests. Activate warp engines.’

‘Aye, Stormcaller, preparing for transition.’

Rune Priest and Navigator stood together in silence for several seconds, awaiting the moment when the power of the warp drive was activated.

First came the Geller field. In real space, its effect on the ungifted members of the company was negligible, but to the psychically aware it created a wyrd echo that crept from the stern to the prow. The reality within the field reflected back the physical space now enclosed, bringing with it an unnatural sense of claustrophobia.

Njal was conditioned physically and mentally to overcome all sense of fear or distress, but his Space Marine modifications and his Librarian training could do nothing to rid him completely of the sense of entrapment that shuddered through his soul.

He heard Majula’s heart pulsing fast, her breaths coming in short, shallow gasps.

‘Calm yourself, Navigator,’ he said, assuming a command tone that she could not ignore. Within moments her breathing and pulse slowed.

The Geller field sealed completely, vibrating slightly with the catatonic thoughts of the poor psyker enclosed in the bowels of the ship whose soul was being processed to create the protective shield. Njal kept his thoughts to himself, not wishing to touch upon whatever nightmarish experience the psychic battery underwent.

+We could have done away with all of this barbarity if we had been given more time.+

Njal’s anger spiked in response to the sudden intervention of the sorcerer. He had thought Izzakar’s presence curtailed by the psychic hood. Majula shifted nervously.

‘Did you feel that?’ she asked.

‘Concentrate on the task at hand, Navigator,’ said the Rune Priest. He could feel the burgeoning power of the warp engine growing, an alt-dimensional buzzing that started as a whine but grew in vehemence to a drone. The warp drive pushed against the shores of the Othersea. Pressure within the Geller sheath intensified as the warp attempted to surge back into reality.

Majula stood rigid, legs slightly apart, one hand holding the clasp of her cloak shaped in the badge of House Belisarius. With her free hand, she reached up and slipped away her headband, revealing her third eye.

Njal snapped his gaze away, turning his head so that he could not see her face even in reflection. Even so, a haunting sight of the whirling abyss within the Navigator's forehead swirled in his memory. He could feel her gaze upon him, probing and indelicate, its touch like the scrape of a ragged nail across his spirit.

'Look not to me but the void, Navigator,' he said to her, resisting the urge to reinforce his psychic shields. For this moment he needed to be open to the warp, to maintain contact through the medium of the Geller field – to trust in its integrity as much as his own personal defences.

The scraping sensation abated as Majula turned her eye away.

Flickers of gold static danced across the starfield beyond the dome. Tiny arcs of energy crawled over the red-veined marble floor, creeping from the walls towards the pair of psykers. Njal's armour systems trembled into action, internal heating veins activated to compensate for the drop in atmospheric temperature. The breath of both psykers became a fog.

Conflicting pressure fronts mounted against each other inside Njal's mind. Pushing, pushing, the thrust of the void-breaker against the repulsion of the un-space that lay across the divide. He could not help but think of some obscene birth. He felt compressed and manipulated by awakening forces, the plates of his Terminator armour useless against the mounting tide. He could not resist, but had to throw himself upon the ebb and flow.

Majula gasped, pained. Njal dared not look at her. His othersense reassured him that her discomfort was merely physical, her reaction that to the ice starting to form across armour and skin as the temperature plummeted even further.

The golden stars became a vortex dancing across the armourplas canopy, sketching screaming faces and burning eyes in the instances between neurons firing, existing in the gaps between consciousness and unconsciousness.

With a final pulse of psychic emanation, the warp drive exploded into full power, ripping shreds of reality from the void in front of the *Longclaw*. At that moment, the main engines fired full and the vessel creaked into violent life, stanchions squealing under the strain, bulkheads shuddering. Flares energy-slithered across the Geller field. Their touch

pulled at Njal's mind even as they dragged the *Longclaw* into the wound between worlds.

Nightwing let out a loud caw, agitated by the change. Majula whispered mantras, eyes fixed on the opening maw of the warp ahead of the rapid strike vessel. A multicolour vortex circled wider and wider, except the opening wasn't growing – they were approaching at increasing speed.

A jolt pulsed through the hull and set the dome singing with vibrations. The chorus rose in heavenly harmony for several seconds before discordancy shattered the melodies, half-heard screeching and wailing as the warp engulfed the *Longclaw*.

The Geller field thrummed through Njal's bones, increasing in strength. Unreality pressed down upon the barrier and he felt the mental equivalent of timbers protesting and rigging howling in a gale – memories dredged from his past to interpret the impossible sensations of warp interference.

The *Longclaw* bucked unexpectedly as a wave of warp power spewed from the breach. Majula moved effortlessly across the tilting floor, coming to stand behind a baroque set of instruments that looked like a cross between an ancient ship's compass, an orrery and a spider's web. She slid and rotated etched brass discs, and pulled a small lever to adjust the psychic trim of the Geller field. Njal felt it bulge towards the stern, acting like an immaterial rudder, pushing the craft back towards the slipstream rushing into the breach.

By this point, even the ungifted members of the company would be aware of the psychic turmoil spilling around them. A slight sense of vertigo. An itch inside the brain. Tremors along the nerves.

Njal wondered if the servitors detected anything of the unnatural transition taking place. They still had souls, after all; that was the point of having them. Did they know, somewhere deep and unreachable inside their machine-invaded brains, that they were leaving the universe of the mortal and sane and plunging into something that living creatures were never meant to know? As they burbled and slouched through their duties, was there a momentary pause at the boundary of real space and the warp, an instance of unease that no amount of cyberfication could erase?

His mind wandered for a purpose, to draw his attention away from the madness-inducing clash of realities playing out beyond the dome.

An active mind kept the more revealing questions of the soul at bay. One did not simply look into the abyss with a warp jump, one threw oneself willingly into its embrace. Introspection was not a good trait at such times.

'We have transition,' Majula announced calmly, a perfectly manicured finger on the vox transmission stud, the dark red of the nail like a blood drop on the golden sigil.

The warp engulfed them. Njal saw a stream of glittering shapes and little else. The delineation between the real and unreal was established again, and without mortal physics to break, the warp appeared as a moving but placid course of energy.

+What needless drama. Do you know that the Emperor found another way to travel the galaxy? One that would rid us of our dependence on these abominable mutants. The Portal Maze is but a reflection of that star-spanning majesty, a human delving where ancients had stepped before.+

'What is that?' Majula asked the question without turning, sparing Njal the sight of her exposed third eye. 'That muttering?'

'I heard nothing,' said Njal.

+How easily lies slip from your false tongue, dog of Russ.+

'There it is again.' Majula made a few adjustments to the controls on the panel before her, sending navigational instructions down to the bridge. She slipped on her headband and turned to face the Stormcaller. 'I felt another presence. We have to run a full diagnostic of the Geller field.'

'It is nothing,' said Njal, and the moment he spoke he knew he had already said too much.

'What is *nothing*?' demanded Majula, forgetting all station and decorum in her vexation. 'What is "it"?'

Njal gritted his teeth. He was not ready to share his damning tale with this youth.

'The reason we go to Prospero,' he admitted, choosing his words carefully. 'Something left over from Magnus and the Thousand Sons. It has to be returned. I have it in my mind.'

'You brought it onto my ship?'

'*My* ship, Navigator.'

'In this hall it is *my* ship, Lord of Runes. You stand on territory that belongs to House Belisarius of the Navis Nobilite.'

+She is feisty. In my time the Navigators were more… compliant. You seem to have let them run amok.+

‘I erred,’ said Njal, giving a slight bow of the head in apology. ‘It had not occurred to me that the presence would become known once we were in the warp.’

‘The error was in not informing me at all, Lord of Runes,’ Majula said haughtily.

+This sort of superiority is what comes of being dependent upon inbreeding and genetic manipulation.+

‘What is it saying now? It is like someone talking in a neighbouring chamber, not loud enough to tell distinct words but of sufficient volume to catch the ear. Can I see it?’

The questions took Njal by surprise, and Izzakar also.

+What an interesting thought. She is brighter than you, wolfson. Let her try! Let us find out what she sees with that third eye.+

‘I think not,’ said Njal, self-conscious. ‘It is buried deep within my psychic defences. I would not have you prying into them lest something goes amiss.’

+What was that?+

Njal ignored the sorcerer’s interjection, but he could not suppress a sudden sense of heightened awareness, a physical response to alarm. Majula flinched also and she turned quickly away, ripping her headband free, the silver arc discarded to the deck as she raked the view through the dome with her psychic sight.

+Can you not feel it, barbarian? Open your thoughts!+

Spurred by both the Navigator’s actions and Izzakar’s urgency Njal let free a modicum of his psychic talent. Nightwing set to wing from his shoulder, flapping a slow circuit about the domed hall as Njal’s thoughts probed the immaterium beyond.

‘I feel it,’ he whispered. ‘I can feel it.’

He thrust his thoughts further into the Othersea, as though peering into a murky pool. Something in the swirling energy looked back.

+They have found us.+

CHAPTER 7
INCURSION

Where there was one, soon there were more. Many more.

They were like eels and rays, shark-like predators and formless wisps that slithered along the shell of the Geller field. Insubstantial teeth gnawed at the sphere of reality, noiseless yet leaving a scratching sensation in the back of the head. Nightwing powered back to Njal's upraised hand as the Stormcaller drew his psychic focus behind the walls of his mental fortress.

The warp churned with activity, the daemonic shoal thicker than anything Njal had seen before. Made of the warpstuff that surrounded the *Longclaw*, the Chaotic entities manifested and disappeared at whim, becoming whole and dissipating in endless droves. Their thrashing became more desperate, a frenzy of activity to burrow into the Geller field and bring the nightmare realm crashing in with them.

+You pressed the ship into rapid service partway through a refit. How sure are you of its defences?+

Njal activated his vox and set a channel for Aldacrel.

'Priority command. Immediate inspection of all Geller field systems.'

'*A problem, Stormcaller*?' crackled the Iron Priest's response.

'Better to be wary than lost,' replied Njal, eyeing the disembodied shapes writhing across the transparent dome. 'If there is anything amiss, find it and fix it without delay.'

'So many…' muttered Majula. Her assertiveness returned. 'Their presence dulls the Astronomican and I cannot see the flow of the warp beyond their formless massing.'

‘You cannot steer us?’

+Amazing. Adrift in the undervoid without a pilot. We shall never set eyes upon Prospero.+

‘No, I cannot steer us. We are caught in a tempest of these creatures.’

Njal watched the swarm carefully, seeing eyes of black and gold peering back, trying to penetrate what to them would be the fog of reality, just as the warp was anathema to physical sight. They could smell the souls within, their hunger driving them to flash and crash against the boundary shield. Majula was not alone, he could see nothing of the raw warp beyond the teeming flow of fleeting apparitions.

‘Do the best you can, Navigator,’ he told Majula. ‘You have your charts.’

‘Charts that were created before the Cyclopean One returned,’ she sighed. ‘Before the Great Rift. All is in flux again. The invasion caused many ripples through the warp.’

+What does she mean? What invasion does she speak of?+

Njal stepped away from Majula to allow her to concentrate on her task. He kept his voice low, below her hearing but enough vocalisation that Izzakar would be aware of it.

‘Your primarch is not the creature you remember, sorcerer. He fell far after the Wolf King threw down his treacherous creations. He bargained away your Legion for blasphemous power and sought revenge upon those that had sought to halt his slide into damnation.’

+You lie! It cannot be so. Magnus was the greatest mind. The surest guide of all after the Emperor himself. What you speak of is weakness, a weakness far below the Crimson King.+

‘The Allfather had bidden you to stop and you did not. Where else did you think your delving would take you? Arrogance fuelled your quest for knowledge and you ignored the warnings of the greatest of us all. Your master has become a consort of daemons and Dark Powers and he brought that darkness to Fenris.’

There was nothing in return, a sullen silence that nagged in the heart of Njal’s mind. He did not know whether Izzakar believed him or not, though the sorcerer was well placed, in a sense, to know truth from falsehood.

A shudder ripped his thoughts to the daemonswarm. They had started to organise, to coalesce into something more focused. In groups they hurled

themselves at the Geller field. Fangs of crackling energy and immaterial barbs snapped and clawed at the defences while others smashed bodily into the barrier exploding into sparkling vapour that was torn away by the raging current of the Othersea.

'They are going to break in, Lord of Runes,' Majula said quietly.

'The Geller fields were designed to withstand such attack.'

'I speak not of baseless fear,' the Navigator argued.

She held out her hand, her intent for him to hold it. Njal laid a massive, gloved hand against hers, her slender fingers curling about two of his ceramite-clad digits. It was the act of acceptance, the proximity rather than the physical contact that allowed her thoughts to slide against his.

'Close your eyes,' she said.

He took her meaning and did as she asked. A second later, he felt the white heat of her third eye upon him. It did not burrow into his thoughts, instead it drew forth a little of his awareness, coaxing consciousness out into an investigating tendril. Majula released it and then gathered it like a tether, using his vastly greater mental strength as an anchor while she set loose her own thoughts into the void.

His mind followed hers, a spark against the raging torrent. They moved cautiously but swiftly, both shielding their presence as best they could, unwilling to attract the attention of the forces that besieged them. Spat cries and the scrape of lacerations set Njal's teeth on edge.

A momentary glow, no more than a split second, showed him what she had detected.

A crack.

Not so much a fissure but a disjoint in the layers of the Geller field. It was minute, but Njal knew that Majula's assessment was correct. Given time, the daemons would find the weakness and when they did all their strength would be bent to breaching it.

He let go and their minds snapped back from the excursion. Majula gasped in pain, the separation unexpected.

'Sorry,' Njal said, turning away before he opened his eyes.

'Can you fix the fracture?'

'I would not know how.'

+I do. It is not a complicated thing.+

'Aldacrel, concentrate your search on the aft starboard projectors.'

A hesitation before the Iron Priest's reply betrayed his uncertainty.

'*You have found something, Stormcaller*?'

Had he been dealing with a crew of normal men and women, Njal might have chosen to mask the truth for fear of creating panic, hampering efforts to address the threat. Aldacrel was incapable of such fear and he needed to know the truth.

'The Geller field's coverage is imperfect. I need you to investigate the starboard aft projectors immediately.'

'*Aye, I'll head there myself*.'

The vox crackled its disconnection.

+You know his errand is a waste of time. The weakness cannot be put right at a distance There is another way. You must seal the break yourself.+

'You're saying I have to go out there?' He waved a hand towards the slew of insubstantial half-seen monsters cascading across the field.

'What?' Majula turned at his outburst, only just remembering at the last instant to throw up a hand to obscure the full power of her oracle. Even so, Njal caught the wake of its power, a flutter of colour and static that buzzed through his senses for several seconds.

'The presence in my thoughts speaks to me,' he told her. 'It is a remnant of a mortal. He is suggesting I repair the Geller field myself.'

'Is that possible, Lord of Runes?'

+Your projectors are not aligning properly, causing the fault line. It might be damage within the system itself, a directional crystal scuffed or off-centre. A problem with the lattice core even. I do not think you have time to investigate all of the options. But it will not take long to telekinetically alter the overlap and seal the fracture.+

'You have done this before?' Njal said.

Silence replied.

'You have seen it done?'

+The Thousand Sons built a psychic network that spanned time and dimensions. Look upon our works not out of jealousy and fear but with objectivity, and then ask yourself if you think I am right.+

'This might be what you intended all along. Perhaps you have brought these creatures here to free you.'

+I am dead, rune-flinger.+

'Therefore you have nothing to lose.'

+If you die, my spirit will flee into the warp and be consumed by these monsters. If I can return to the Portal Maze I can resurrect my body. I can live again!+

Njal pondered this. It might all be a lie, but a terribly convenient one, iterated over and over since Izzakar had become locked in his thoughts. He could not trust the sorcerer, but he could also not fathom a motive for the Thousand Sons psyker to get him killed in such fashion. Arcane were the plots of Magnus and his ineffable patron, but it seemed very wasteful to set such an intricate and easily thwarted plot into motion. It was all the more unlikely given that the Crimson King had been given opportunity to kill the Stormcaller in person.

'Valgarthr, have Arjac and his Wolf Guard meet me at Void Gate Six.'

'*You're going outside, Stormcaller*?' The pack leader's tone verged on incredulous. '*Now*?'

Majula had her browguard on once again and looked at Njal, hearing the exchange.

'Bolts and power fists are no use against daemons in the warp, Lord of Runes.'

'If they get inside the Geller field, they will have to create semi-mortal forms. That makes them vulnerable to our weapons.'

'I will come also,' she said decisively.

'You won't,' Njal replied. 'If I fail, someone must remain to steer the ship.'

'If you fail, how will I steer?' She indicated the frothing of daemon-tossed energy that splashed and thrummed against the dome. 'Your warriors do not need me to activate the warp drives. We cannot be more than a few light years from Fenris. They can retreat back into real space. My eye can protect you.'

He looked down into her steady eyes and saw no sign of trepidation. She had been raised as special amongst a whole caste of the gifted. Certainty and confidence radiated like warmth from every part of her young body and soul.

'Very well. Find a void suit, and quickly.'

Njal gauged the strength of the daemonstorm. The *Longclaw* shook constantly, bucking underneath the pressure of so much warp activity. Larger entities slid through the roiling mass – guiding, directing and

testing. The daemons had started to methodically explore the ship's defences, moving to the will of the more powerful members of their pantheon. It could be hours or just seconds before they located the disjoint in the field.

There was no time to waste.

Void Gate Six was also known as the King's Gate, in keeping with the Fenrisian tradition for the main entrance to a settlement or fortification. It was located at the prow end of the main arterial transit-way, a pair of sealed gates ten metres high and twenty wide. Beyond lay a chamber just long enough to accommodate a gunship, which came to a set of field-sheathed void doors within the mouth of the wolfshead ram upon the *Longclaw*'s bow. Its main use was for victualling – the rapid strike vessel boasted only two flank launch bays, each almost filled with the bulk of a Thunderhawk gunship.

Arjac arrived with his squad. He had brought six of his brothers on the mission, leaving two behind as honour guard to Logan Grimnar. The Great Wolf had protested but Arjac had insisted that he was right to leave them to stand watch in absence of the hearthegn.

All wore fully enclosing Terminator plate decked in the totems of the Space Wolves. Through the link of their sensorium data-feed each was connected to the others, able to focus through the eyes of their brothers and sense what was all around them. When Arjac turned to face his squad, he saw himself as they did in sub-fields of his vision.

The dorsal corridor was wide enough for half a dozen Stormwolf and Stormfang assault craft, stowed along the port side of the broad thoroughfare, stubby wings almost touching. They looked out of place, like discarded weapons, but with the dedicated flight bays in use, the main conduit and the neighbouring King's Gate were the only other part of the ship large enough to store and launch them.

When the Stormcaller emerged from a conveyor door a few metres along the grand passage, Arjac lifted his hammer in salute. The sensorium crackled. Vision blurred for an instant as the spirit of the Rune Priest's armour communed with that of the squad, sending and receiving greetings from their war-plate systems.

‘Switch off your sensorium,’ Njal told them. He did not break his stride, forcing the squad to part to let him pass. ‘We have a potential Geller field breach. If one of you takes wyrd-taint it will spread into the other systems like a cancer. Stay close to one another and double-check everything because your perception may be skewed. I will do my best to shield you from the attentions of any warp denizen, but my focus must be on locating and repairing the damage.’

‘You can do that, Lord of Runes?’ said Ingvarr Thunderbrow.

‘Guard my back and each other, that is your only concern,’ said the Rune Priest, ignoring the question.

He stepped up to the control panel and pressed an armoured thumb against the activation rune. With a loud groan the bay doors opened to reveal the void chamber within. At the far end the outer doors were shut and triple-barred, the glimmer of an energy field across the surface of the portal. The walls were lined with emergency pneumatic rams and explosive bolts so that the entire void gate could be ejected in the case of intrusion, sealing the inner doors.

Pict-scryes stared down at them with their red-lensed gaze, whining as they tracked their progress across the ferrocrete floor. The vox crackled from the monitoring station on the command deck.

‘*I have you on visual. Detecting no readings outside the main doors. I’m sealing the inner doors on your command*.’

‘Wait,’ said Njal as Arjac was about to voice the order. ‘Another is coming.’

The light tread on the decking beyond the doors drew their attention. A diminutive figure in a thrall’s void suit, a little too big for the wearer, limbs crumpled, the round helm oddly bulky on the slender shoulders. Within the glassite dome was a dark-skinned face, a silver band about her forehead.

‘The Navigator,’ grumbled Berda Ironbreak. ‘Are we to protect her too?’

‘Majula, you will remain at the King’s Gate until I call for you,’ said Njal, once again ignoring the Wolf Guard. Arjac was not sure if the Stormcaller had heard at all. He seemed distracted, which worried Rockfist. He could not ignore the possibility that this was a ruse by the

thing inside the Stormcaller's head, to lead the others out into the Geller field where they would be weakened.

'Where is the breach, Stormcaller?' asked the pack leader.

'Somewhere on the starboard side, about three-quarters of the way towards the flight deck.'

'Then why are we leaving from here?' said Jorn the Tall. 'Why not from the flight deck?'

'So that I can see the breach before we come directly upon it,' growled Njal, making no attempt to hide his irritation. The Rune Priest turned towards them and though he wore his helm his tone carried his glare as easily as his eyes. 'Does anyone else want to interrogate the Lord of Runes?'

Their cowed silence was answer enough.

'Seal the gate,' Arjac signalled the command deck.

With a siren blare, the inner doors wheezed shut, leaving the gateway bathed in ruby light. The crash of lock anchors falling into place shook the chamber. Another warning sounded, two short blasts. Alert sigils in Arjac's armour warned of dropping pressure as air was siphoned from the void hall. It took two minutes for the chamber to cycle to full vacuum, to avoid explosive decompression when the outer doors were opened.

'Releasing outer gate on your command,' came the controller's voice.

'The Geller field will act as a layer between us and the naked warp, but close to the breach there may be psychic and physical disturbance. Do not – *do not* – look directly at the breach, even with your autosenses. I can shield your thoughts from intrusion but I can't stop you turning into gibbering maniacs if you look into the depths of the Othersea.'

'Understood, Stormcaller,' said Arjac. He looked at his companions. 'Yes?'

They voiced their affirmatives, their spirit cowed a little by the Rune Priest's warning.

'Open it,' Arjac told the portal controller.

The lumen strips turned off, leaving only the thermal spectrum of their autosenses, almost black in the absence of conductive air. Suit lamps responded an instant later, cutting the gloom with circles of pale yellow. Three rings of the alert siren announced the parting of the main gates,

revealing not a starfield but a swirling curtain of reds and greens about thirty metres from the opening.

'Follow me,' said Njal, setting off along the open bay. 'Wait here, Majula,' he reminded the Navigator, who stopped a few metres short of the outer doors.

They were still within the artificial gravity field of the vessel as they stepped out into the void, but it was much reduced as though on a satellite or moon. With a purposeful, rolling gait, they turned along the flank of the hull, heading after the Rune Priest.

Looking around, Arjac could see only the phantasmagorial boundary of the Geller field shifting like oil on water, a thousand colours and none as warp space and reality clashed. He had fought in the void many times but this was his first time doing so whilst in warp space. The thought was unsettling. Despite his training, experience and Terminator armour, if a mishap sent him crashing through the Geller field, he would be lost. Damned to uncertain death or worse within the grip of the Othersea.

Berda Ironbreak moved forward on the left, his assault cannon levelled to provide instant heavy fire. Red Ulfar and Jorn the Tall tracked their storm bolters to the right, guarding the opposite flank.

'Stay alert,' Arjac told the others, scanning with slow sweeps of his head, wargear held at the guard as he advanced with his brothers. On his left, Alrik Doomseeker's wolf claws left an actinic trail. Sven Halfhelm walked alongside with thunder hammer and storm shield – mighty weapons that seemed a child's imitations of Arjac's own. In a sub-display, Rockfist saw empty space – the feed from Ingvarr watching the rear.

Movement above drew the eye of everyone, a scant second before a flash of bright yellow seared towards them. A fanged maw formed out of the ball lightning. Behind it shimmered and flitted other shapes, shark-like predators that grew barbed wings and serrated tails, drawing physical form from the pocket of reality.

No command was needed. The Wolf Guard opened fire as one, a torrent of bolts and assault cannon shells spewing up to meet the materialising daemons. Arjac moved closer to Njal, Sven and Alrik staying close.

The fire of the Terminators turned the daemonic beasts to tattered ruin. Globules of daemonblood and hunks of broken *wyrdflesh* scattered through the void. Arjac did his best not to look directly at their point of origin,

remembering the warning of Njal. Instead, he kept his gaze slightly askance, using the periphery of his autosenses to detect the incoming manifestations.

He saw – or thought he saw – leering faces, formed of stardust and swirling motes. Flame-fingered hands clawed at the edges of the rift as the daemons forced their essence through. A miasma of energy coalesced in front of the advancing Wolf Guard, hinting at oddly blooming fungi with beaked visages.

Faced with the firepower of the Terminators and flares of lightning from the Stormcaller, the daemons changed tactics, spilling sideways rather than rushing directly onwards. Like flames creeping across a ceiling, the diaphanous power of the entities spread outwards, malignancy seeping into Arjac's thoughts like a stench.

Individual daemons formed out of the leaking warpstuff – creatures with stunted bodies and bandy legs. Their spark-pupilled eyes swirled like nebulae as they floated down towards the *Longclaw* amid the flicker of bolts and snap of psychic blasts. More and more dropped from the burgeoning psychic thunderhead, falling in ever greater numbers, their mouths open in silent shrieks. Hollow fingers trailed blue fire and barbed tails whipped to and fro.

'Split your fire. Force them to the centre,' commanded Arjac. He dared not throw his hammer, unsure whether the technology of its teleporter warp core would work in the confines of a Geller field. He stared impotently at the swelling effulgence of Chaos energy, Sven and Alrik equally powerless to intervene against their distant foes.

'*Follow me*,' said Njal, lifting his staff. Its tip burned with a scythe-like blade of white, a leap powering him away from the hull of the ship. Bunching real and fibre muscles, Arjac propelled himself after the Rune Priest with crackling thunder hammer, Alrik and Sven close behind. Like ascending stars, the Stormcaller and his companions lifted towards the mass of daemonic matter boiling through the Geller field.

'*We need your aid, Navigator,*' Njal voxed. *'I cannot hold them back whilst I seal the breach*.'

Drifting into the oncoming daemontide, Arjac swung his hammer, its lightning-wreathed head shattering daemonflesh as warpfire sprayed from his upraised shield. At his shoulder Sven's hammer took a similar toll,

snapping newly forged bones, splintering faux-bodies with each strike. Alrik moved past, his wolf claws carving ruin through his assailants.

The daemons melded and reformed, not quite individuals, splitting and coagulating as their presence manifested within the reality bubble. Tendrils with dozens of grasping hands and snaring claws flailed out from the mass, formed of many intelligences but guided by shared intent. The warp tentacles lashed about Arjac and the two Wolf Guard at his side, sparks cascading from raised weapons and shields.

A writhing pseudopod slashed a warphook into the chestplate of Alrik. He raked his claws across it, back and forth, shredding ribbons of soulstuff into gobbets of materialising flesh, but the tendril continued to reform around his blows, dragging him up, towards the breach.

'No!' Arjac activated the exhaust outlets of his armour, enough to send him after the stricken Wolf Guard. Just a few metres away, Alrik continued to fight as more and more barbed appendages hacked into him, piercing pauldron and gorget, greave and vambrace, turning him about like a fly caught in the silk-spin of a gigantic, loathsome spider.

More tentacles erupted from the maw of the breach, uncoiling shadows that boiled down towards the hearthegn.

Arjac drew his hammer back, ready to boost himself forward again to confront the descending mass. He stopped suddenly, something caught on his ankle. His trajectory reversed and his armour signalled something around his foot. Turning, he thought to sweep himself free with his hammer, but checked the blow just in time as he saw that he was in the grasp of the Runelord.

'*You'll be lost too*,' Njal snapped, the eyes of his helm blazing with golden energy as fronds of warp-wrath flailed and writhed against his armour, the runes set into the ceramite burning like bright embers. *'I need you to guard me or we all die*.'

Arjac bit back a retort and looked up. In an endlessly churning cloud of yellow and blue sparks, he saw glimpses of Alrik as though sinking into a mire. His claws flashed again, a last desperate attempt to cut free, and then he was gone, drawn into the damnable abyss of the Othersea.

Roaring their defiance, the Wolf Guard renewed their attacks, their fire converging around Njal and Arjac.

‘*Seal the rift, Stormcaller!*’ called out Berda, the barrels of his assault cannon aglow from the heat build-up, the thrum of its fire dimly heard across the vox-link. A ripple of missiles streaked past from Red Ulfar’s cyclone launcher, their detonations turned to coruscating blossoms of white arcs and scything sparks by the presence of so much warp power.

Arjac saw ahead that the combined fusillade had ripped a gash through the warpstuff flooding the breach.

‘I’m with you, Lord of Runes,’ he told Njal. ‘Do it now.’

As the fire from the Wolf Guard blazed around him, Njal pushed towards the breach. At the heart of a swirling storm of energy discharges and flaring power, he extended the shield of his mind to form a corona of scintillating blue that thrust into the daemons pouring into the reality pocket.

+Must you attempt everything with brute force? You wield your power like an axe to hew down a tree, when you should be creating a work of art with delicate chisel strokes.+

Njal ignored the sorcerer’s criticism and swept his scythe-staff in a brilliant arc that bisected flame-tongued horrors and slashed through skysharks that salivated burning sparks.

But for each entity thrashed into banishment by his blows, another swarmed the gap. The flare of bolts cut harmless rivulets through their insubstantial bodies, becoming bursts of lightning as they passed beyond the Geller field.

The daemons pressed in, their presence widening the breach, allowing more and more of their kind entry to the dwindling pocket of reality. Surrounded by the burning aura of his psychic shield, the Stormcaller drifted to a halt, all progress slowed to a stop by the thickening warpstuff that coagulated against the barrier of his thoughts.

+Think of a sword, not a hammer! Cut your way through, you dolt.+

The daemon aura stifled all thought and reason, cramming into senses both natural and psychic. To attempt to draw on more warp power was to be a drowning man taking in lungfuls of the suffocating sea, quickening his demise even as he attempted to avoid it.

Njal was on the verge of ordering a withdrawal into the ship. He was but a breath from voxing Valgarthr with the command to bring the warp

engines to full readiness in preparation for an emergency drop the moment the Space Wolves were back aboard.

He bit back the words. Failure at so early a stage in their expedition was unthinkable. This was the least of the obstacles to overcome and a fierce pride would not let him give the order.

'We are Stormriders!' he roared. 'This is our legend!'

A blinding shaft of white fire erupted past, slashing the daemons like a lascannon through flesh. Njal did not need to turn to know that Majula had arrived. With the beam came a harmonious chorus of energy that surged along his psychic senses, the power of the Astronomican redirected.

The fire of her third eye scoured in all directions, turning daemons to tatters of dispersing emotion. Drifting past in her voidsuit, the young Navigator seemed serene but for the pulses of warp energy searing from her gaze.

Njal activated the attitude outlets of his armour even as he felt Izzakar's urging in the heart of his thoughts.

+Now! Bind the edges of the breach!+

The task was far from simple, even with Majula at Njal's side ripping apart any daemon that appeared at the edge of the Geller field. The tear in reality was frayed, flapping away from the questing fingers of his mind as he sought to snare it.

+Focus, runewielder.+

Njal pushed aside the sorcerer's interruption and pictured himself upon the heaving deck of the *jarlship*, the sail splitting in a hurricane wind. With impossibly vast hands he pulled the canvas together, stitching the ripped material with thick cord conjured by his thoughts.

The visualisation worked. He latched onto the wayward barrier and gained some measure of control. With deft thought he manipulated the pulsing psychic energy, acting in lieu of the faulty projectors to redirect the shield and bring it together.

'Stop on my command, Navigator,' he told Majula. 'We cannot bind the breach while your third eye passes the veil.'

'On your command,' she promised.

Njal tightened his thoughts as though bunching muscles. The interface between warp and reality was softening, threatening to become a fog that would slip through his fingers.

‘Now!’ he snapped.

The beam of fire cut out, leaving blinding darkness in its place for a moment. Njal did not need to see to act. He slammed the edges of the Geller field together like the doors of a gatehouse, his thoughts like an arc welder sealing the broken pieces together.

‘It is done,’ he announced, teeth gritted with the strain of holding the bubble in place.

‘*Good, let’s get out of this hell*,’ declared Arjac.

‘Not yet,’ Njal told him. ‘Aldacrel, can you hear me?’

‘*I can, Stormcaller. We have found a broken transmission coil. The tech-priests are bringing up a replacement*.’

‘How long?’

‘*Thirty minutes*.’

‘*We should not remain here, Lord of Runes*,’ insisted Arjac.

‘I cannot leave,’ Njal replied slowly. ‘I must hold the breach shut until Aldacrel is finished.’

Silence greeted the declaration as the others realised the meaning of this, hearing the strain already evident.

‘*Very well, we shall remain at your side*,’ said Rockfist.

‘*I... I must guide the ship*,’ Majula said weakly, her face hidden within the reflective plate of her helm. After her insistence on coming, her reasoning sounded like an excuse, but that did not make it any less true.

‘Do not waste this time. If my strength falters, if I fail, crash-jump back to real space immediately. Do not wait for me.’

‘*I will not*,’ the Navigator assured him.

She floated past and out of sight. Njal fixed his gaze on the imaginary seam held together by his thoughts. Beyond the unseen veil, the Chaos energy started to coalesce. Though the Wolf Guard waited at his back, the Stormcaller felt alone as he stared into the formless energy.

+See? With my guidance you can achieve anything.+

Not quite alone, unfortunately.

CHAPTER 8
TO PROSPERO

Time passed. In the temporally mutable currents of the Othersea, it was impossible to know how much. To Njal and the others aboard the *Longclaw* cause and effect continued. Day followed day, rigorously catalogued by cogitators and chronothages, each quarter, half and full hour signalled through the ship by artificially modulated horn-blasts. The Stormcaller knew it to be an artifice. The warp had no such constraints and they might emerge into the greater timestream a hundred Long Years after they had departed. It was also possible, though thankfully not likely, they could come to Prospero before they had even left Fenris. Njal tried to avoid thinking about that too much, even his warp-gifted mind unable to encompass such matters in any sane manner.

The daemonswarm followed them, sometimes gathered about the Geller field, other times lost in the wake of unreality when Majula guided the vessel into the swifter streams of raw emotive energy.

They got caught in eddies, thrown back against their own course, redirected against the dominant currents by counter-flows and becalmed by motionless pools. Yet they made progress, inevitably and interminably headed towards Prospero.

Njal spent as much time as he could among his followers. With no Wolf Priests among his expedition to bolster their humour and sing the sagas that lifted their spirits, the task fell to him, Arjac and Valgarthr to maintain morale.

When he could spare himself from these tasks, he visited Majula in her dome, sometimes bringing her food – the gesture was more important than the fact the rations were nearly the same as those the servitors provided in her isolated kitchen.

Izzakar's mood was suppressed also. A dozen watches or more might pass without comment from the sorcerer, but he was always there, sometimes making remarks or asking questions at the most awkward times. He particularly fixated on making his presence known during Njal's forays into the Navigator quarters, knowing that Majula could also sense his presence there.

On his latest visit to the Navis dome, the sorcerer shared Njal's eyes as the Stormcaller looked out into the warp and saw a change in the ceaselessly roiling flows. In the depths – if such a thing could be imagined in a realm without physical dimension – a greater storm loomed, a darkness that impressed upon the mind like the yellowing of the sky before an almighty tempest.

+What is that?+

'The Great Rift,' replied Njal, striding closer to the clear wall. He gazed up at the immeasurably vast tear through reality.

'I've not seen it before, not this close,' admitted Majula. She was busy at her controls as usual, making small adjustments to keep them central to the swift energy flow that currently carried them along. She cleared her throat with discomfort. 'You were not addressing me, were you, Lord of Runes?'

'No,' the Stormcaller confessed. He studied the undulating wave front that pulsed and swelled on the edge of detection, striated with strange hints of the real universe. 'Magnus was, in part, responsible for this. And his traitor brothers also. Blood rituals and mass sacrifices tore open the realm of the Abyss for their hateful masters.'

+I cannot countenance it. The Magnus I knew was a master of study, of creation not destruction. If he does as you say, it is to build something grander than already exists.+

'He is master no more, sorcerer. He is a slave, though he would pretend otherwise. A figment of change for change's sake, caught in the unending ploys of the Great Architect – Tzeentch. I do not doubt that he deludes

himself that he strives for a cause, but any meaning behind his actions is only vanity.'

+Tell me, bone-reader, what happened to Prospero? I can feel it still, a dead place, the libraries silent, the great precincts hollow of life.+

'You know better than I what happened at Prospero. I have only read of the destruction. I am sure you witnessed it.'

+Only Tizca survived, protected by the kine shield of my order. Our greatest city, the largest repository of our knowledge, held safe by the wardship of our Raptorae's psychic might.+

'Tizca was purged also. It is a ruin now, the carcass picked clean over ten thousand years. Good riddance also.'

Izzakar remained silent, his usual belligerence suffocated by the scale of the Thousand Sons' loss. Njal felt nothing but contempt for the former Librarian, and knew well that all that had happened to his Legion had not only been deserved, it had been ordained by the Allfather. No other justification was required.

Even so… Izzakar had been locked in the Portal Maze since the Burning of Prospero. He knew nothing of what had happened after. The Siege of Terra and the mutation of Magnus' Legion were a mystery to him. The final act of Corruption, hinted at in the oldest sagas but never fully understood, had taken place after the sorcerer's demise.

'You said "sorcerer", Lord of Runes,' Majula said suddenly, jolting the Stormcaller from his reverie. 'What exactly do you carry inside your thoughts?'

'A remnant only,' Njal replied curtly. 'An echo of a dead man that has not yet faded.'

The Rune Priest expected some retort from Izzakar, as he had been goading him on purpose, but no comment was forthcoming. Instead, Njal felt a knot of confusion in the deepest recesses of his consciousness.

'I do not expect our transit into the Prospero system to be as fraught as our departure from Fenris,' he told Majula, turning to leave. 'We should be there within a few more ship-days. The system is empty, undefended. Magnus abandoned it long ago and has shown no interest since. Despite that, we will follow all normal precautions for entry into hostile space.'

+I would not be so certain that Prospero stands unguarded.+

'There is nothing left there to protect.'

+And still you head there. Do you think it is coincidence that your ship was beset by such opposition the moment it broke warp space?+

'Magnus bargained much with his infernal master and the daemonic hordes. Our system and many others were ravaged by armies of the warp-spawned. It is no surprise that they linger still on the boundaries of the Wolf King's realm.'

+Nonsense. You cannot possibly imagine the will required to sustain that kind of intense activity in one place. Such rapid manifestation, at the exact point and moment where you translated, is virtually impossible. Whatever the mass of corrupted energy around your world, the odds of encountering that kind of resistance purely by chance are astronomical.+

'You think they were waiting for us? That is even more impossible. Only a few days earlier I had no intent of leaving the system.'

+Days, years, yesterday, tomorrow, does any of that matter here? Prophecy is second nature to the Sons of Magnus. To those of us that truly mastered the warp and its ways the future, present and past are interchangeable.+

'That arrogance again. You mastered nothing, only self-delusion. The Prosperines were undone by their lack of humility, punished by fate and the warp for their overconfidence.'

+You dismiss me so easily and level accusations of overconfidence in a single breath. The hypocrisy of the Wolf King truly lives on in his misguided dog-sons.+

'Choose every word carefully, sorcerer. Each slur you level upon the Sons of the Wolf will be revisited on you ten-fold. Do not forget what happened at Prospero.'

'Stormcaller!' Majula's sharp tone of rebuke shocked Njal into attention. It had been an age, and a different life, since anyone had spoken to him that way. His angry retort died on his lips when he noticed the small arcs of energy that crackled between his splayed fingers.

+Control, reader-of-entrails. Control beats brute force every time.+

'I shall leave you,' Njal said stiffly, nodding his head in respect to the Navigator. 'Do you require my assistance for the next transition?'

'I think…' Majula shook her head. 'That will not be necessary, Lord of Runes.'

+You are fast becoming a liability. She knows it also.+

Njal said nothing and strode away with what little dignity he could muster.

Despite the assertions of Izzakar, the approaches to the Prospero system offered no great threat. They were, if anything, placid. This in itself was cause for Majula to ask Njal to join her again.

The growing presence of the Great Rift subtly churned the stomach, a dull throb in the gut only just discernible. Against the melange of storms, one area stood out. Prospero's locale was a glittering swirl centred on what had been the home world of Magnus.

+Our wards still work after all of this time,+ crowed Izzakar. +Even after our death our legacy lives on.+

'You are wrong,' Njal told him. 'Everything was dismantled, torn down by the warriors of the silent sisterhood. This is new.'

'The Planet of Sorcerers, Lord of Runes,' offered Majula. 'It is close at hand, dragged through from the othervoid into the real universe. This is only the wake of its passing – the vortex left by such massive transition. All energy has been drained from the zone in the aftermath of the trauma.'

+Intriguing. What is this world she speaks of?+

'When Magnus and his traitorous brothers fled justice at the hands of the loyal, they took up new domains in the Eye of Terror. The Crimson King crafted a world of darkest magic and vile daemomancy.'

+You throw around words whose meaning I think you do not fully understand.+

'It makes no difference to what we need to do,' said Njal, irritated by the sorcerer's constant distractions. 'Navigator, calculate the Mandeville point and prepare for transition.'

'There is no Mandeville point.' Majula slipped on her eyeguard and turned away from the control column. She looked exhausted, sagging from fatigue, a tic in her left eye. 'The warp-ripple has washed away any graviometric interference from real space.'

+Fool, why did you not realise that?+

'How close can we approach?'

'Virtually to orbit, Lord of Runes. If I time the jump properly, we can bleed off our speed as we break through.'

'And if you don't time it properly?'

‘We might overshoot by a few days.’ Majula looked away, a sign of guilt.

‘Or…?’

‘There is a very small, exceptionally minute chance that we could throw ourselves into the gravity well of Prospero itself, Lord of Runes.’

‘Crash. The word you are looking for is “crash”, Navigator.’

She nodded, still avoiding eye contact.

Njal was suspicious of anything that made his life easier and he considered ordering Majula to make the real space jump as normal. Against this, he weighed fourteen days or so, the time it would take to travel in-system by conventional means. Fourteen days fewer he would spend with Izzakar burrowed into his soul.

‘Do it,’ he told the Navigator. ‘Take us as far in as you dare.’

‘Only three?’ Arjac scowled at Aldacrel.

‘I can only get three of them to work.’ The Iron Priest’s reply was more accusation than apology, as though it was the hearthegn’s fault that the *Longclaw*’s already small drop pod cascade was compromised. He turned to Njal, who glowered at the line of drop pods that hung on their loading gantry like mechanical fruit. ‘What with the Geller field repairs, modifying the launch bays to re-arm the Thunderhawks and… I have lots of other things to fix. This is the best I can do.’

‘I’m sure you’ve done all that you can,’ said the Rune Priest.

Aldacrel’s servo-arm whined out from his backpack and affectionately patted one of the metal struts holding up the cascade roof.

‘It was meant to be going to Forstex Six for heavy refit when we took it. This ship’s got as much fight in it as those on board, I’ll give it that. But three drop pods are the best I can do if you want to launch now.’

‘What do you think?’ said Njal, cocking a glance towards Arjac.

The champion thought about it, recalling the number and disposition of thralls in the force, as well as the Stormriders under Valgarthr and his own Wolf Guard. He sucked a breath in through his teeth like a whaler about to haggle on the price of blubber.

‘We need to do it in two waves,’ he said eventually, rubbing his bearded chin. ‘I won’t assume the target is undefended, though this world’s been deserted for millennia. Not even scavengers bother coming now. But it is

hostile territory. We'll use gunships and drop pods for the brothers to make a concentrated strike into Tizca to create a forward zone. Then we'll send some thralls to add numbers for cordon duty. The secondary drop should be at the ruins of the starport, plenty of room to land more craft there. We can use saviour boats to deploy more thralls down quickly. From the port, they'll form a relief column into the city.'

'Timing?'

'The drop pods take half the time of a gunship to land, so we'll send the Thunderhawks first and make the drop about twenty minutes later. It should be near-simultaneous arrival over Tizca.'

'I will concentrate our efforts on boosting the augur array to have a closer look at the dead city,' offered Aldacrel. 'There's four torpedoes in the bays, though only one launch tube. Everything else is point defence or void-to-void, no bombardment cannon or lances.'

'No. No pre-bombardment,' said Arjac. 'Surprise and speed serve better than firepower. Anyone on the surface isn't going to be in one place to be hit, and a torpedo strike will just give them warning that we are coming.'

'I agree,' said Njal. His expression soured. 'I have tried to divine any presence on the surface but whatever force disturbed the Portal Maze is also blanketing the area with psychic static. There should be nobody there, but I would not swear to it. And there is always the hope that the Thirteenth are somewhere in the city. I'd rather not torpedo them if they are.'

The reminder was timely. Arjac had become so focused on the detail of the mission he had almost forgotten the objective. He was a far better bodyguard than force commander, that much he knew.

'Launch in one hour?' suggested Arjac.

'One hour for the gunships, second wave on your signal,' said Njal.

'I need to get working,' Aldacrel told them and headed down the gantry joined by his gaggle of thralls and servitors. Njal made to move the other way but Arjac stopped him with a hand on his arm.

'You will be in the second wave, Stormcaller.'

'Why so?' asked the psyker, eyes narrowing in displeasure.

Arjac did not wish to tell the Rune Priest that he could not be trusted during the most critical phase of the operation. Should his traitorous

passenger take control the whole expedition would be jeopardised. He could not lie though, so settled for sharing his secondary reasoning.

'There is no mission without you, Stormcaller. No entry to the Portal Maze, no recovering of our lost forebrothers. You are too important to place in that much danger.'

Njal watched Arjac for a few seconds, gauging his words, though there was no sign of argument from the Rune Priest. He just nodded and then walked away. When he was out of earshot – a considerable distance for a Space Marine – the hearthegn let out a shuddering sigh of irritation.

Secrets, he thought. *Secrets kill*.

Arjac checked his chronometer.

'Ninety seconds to touchdown,' he voxed to the other couple of Wolf Guard in their jury-rigged drop harnesses. Aldacrel had dared the wrath of the Machine-God by modifying a pair of drop pods so that each could accommodate a trio of the bulky Terminator suits, and in the third were ten Stormrider veterans. Somewhere beyond the shaking hull a duo of Thunderhawks plunged groundwards as well, to deploy more packs of veterans with Valgarthr in command, and a contingent from the thralls.

Rockfist looked across the ruddy interior and his gaze met Ingvarr's, who gave a reassuring nod. To the right, Red Ulfar dozed fitfully, his snores nearly lost in the rumble of the rapid descent.

'*No ground activity detected,*' came the voice of the augur officer aboard the *Longclaw*. *'Negative reports from gunship surveyors. The dropzone is uncontested.'*

'We'll see about that,' muttered Ingvarr. With a deft flick of his deactivated power fist, he slipped the magazine into his storm bolter with a loud click. The noise was like an alarm to Ulfar, who roused from his slumber with a wordless grumble.

'One minute to drop,' Arjac intoned, watching the declining countdown in the corner of the sensorium. The others could see it too, synchronised across the feedback band, but it concentrated the mind to hear it spoken. 'Final calibrations and checks.'

The pod was yawing a little in a crosswind, puffs of retro-adjusters steering them back towards the target zone. He knew this only from the reports scrolling across the screen just above his head – his armour

compensated for nearly all motion and pressure change, immunising him against any sensation of movement.

Arjac had picked a broad, walled area that might have been a garden space originally, but was now a flat area of lifeless earth. It was a broad enough space to accommodate the landing, an almost ideal target for orbital insertion just a kilometre from the centre of Tizca. Linking into the telemetry of the pod he saw that they were almost exactly over the centre of the target.

'Thirty seconds.'

He pressed the stud of Foehammer and the head glowed with potential destruction. A similar check of the anvil shield rewarded him with a glimmer of power field. Opposite, Ulfar and Ingvarr completed their weapons doctrine and signalled their readiness.

Even Terminator armour could not hide the near-instant increase in weight when the lander jets fired. The occupants underwent a retardation of velocity that would have crushed the spine of a normal human, the blood pressure changes putting them into immediate unconsciousness if it didn't kill them outright.

'For the Allfather,' whispered Ulfar, proffering his powerfist. Arjac and Ingvarr echoed the pledge, extending their own weapons in salute to one another.

Despite the aggressive braking blasts, they hit the ground at considerable speed, the hull shuddering, the screech of impact dampeners like the tear of tortured metal. Explosive releases fired, throwing down the disembarkation ramps, flooding the interior with harsh sunlight. The drop harnesses snapped upwards and outwards like splayed ribcages, slamming hard against the pod's roof and sides.

'Time to fight,' laughed Ingvarr, pushing himself out of his alcove.

The landing was anti-climactic. As the augurs had attested, Tizca was deserted. Thudding down the ramps of the drop pods and gunships, the Space Wolves found themselves amid a metropolis of broken crystal pyramids and toppled cloisters. A few creepers trailed from cracks between the flags underfoot. Spindly, thorny things clawed an existence out of the scant moisture in the air. When the kine shield had finally collapsed, the firestorm that had incinerated the rest of Prospero had

engulfed the city in its conflagration. Ten thousand years later the utter destruction unleashed still left a scar upon the world's ecosystem.

'Allfather's throne, it's quiet,' said Sven, approaching from the second drop pod a few dozen metres north of Arjac. Beyond them the Stormriders dispersed from the third while dust kicked up from attitude jets obscured the landing Thunderhawks a hundred metres to the west.

It was not just quiet, it was silent. There were no birds or animals, not even the buzz of flies or scurry of crawling insects. While the Wolf Guard pack formed on Arjac, the hum of war-plates seemed an intrusion into the sepulchral stillness.

A desultory breeze lifted a haze of dust across the white walls bounding the former park, and past them the high sun blazed from the reflective flanks of the pyramid-temples, broken in places by the dark wounds of ancient battle. Arjac could imagine how glorious the city must have been in its highest might – a glory that had not saved it from the Allfather's wrath as delivered by the Rout and their allies.

'*Augur scans negative,*' Valgarthr reported, emerging from another billowing cloud set into motion by the rising gunships. '*I've sent the Thunderhawks back to join the next wave*.'

Clad in blue-grey trousers and doublets under burnished copper armour, a platoon of thralls followed, several of their number carrying disassembled heavy weapons and tripods. Under the instructions of their *kaerls,* they set up a perimeter around the drop pods, their heavy weapons trained on the empty gateways that broke the line of the park's encircling wall.

'It is forty-five minutes to orbit and back again,' said Arjac. 'We should secure the route to the objective while we await the next wave.'

The others turned as he lifted his finger towards the highest artificial peak in the city, its fractured summit obscured by scudding wisps of cloud. The Pyramid of Photep. Once it had been the centre of the cult of Prospero. The site of the Space Wolves' greatest and most grievous victory.

'There,' said the hearthegn. 'Where the Wolf King shamed the Cyclops.'

Njal had not known quite what to expect of Tizca. The old sagas had painted a picture of utter devastation, a clash of such magnitude that it had

been worthy of the battles of Fenrisian myth.

The reality, as Njal looked out of the armourplas window of the descending Thunderhawk, seemed far more mundane.

The great capital of Magnus was most certainly a ruin, but bereft of all drama and conflict. The precisely laid streets and plazas were clear to see from this altitude, dappled by cloud cover across the pale sunlight. The pyramid temples that had once been polished to a pure reflection, now smoke-stained and broken, the gaping holes in their vertiginous flanks like windows into a dark dimension within. Craters marked the walls of the great canal, long emptied into the sea that had bounded the city to the east and north, itself now a waterless expanse.

A twist of bitterness knifed into the heart of Njal's soul, but it was not his hatred that burned.

+This is the source of your pride, dog of Fenris! Libraries that housed the wisdom of millennia, broken and empty. The knowledge of the Eleusis, the Pavoni and Anaximenes Cults scattered like ash. The archives of my own Raptorae lost in the inferno. In your ignorance you destroyed that which the Emperor sought, that which could have saved Mankind from a long demise.+

'It was the Allfather that ordered this. You know nothing of what came after, the further treacheries committed by your brothers against the Allfather and those that remained loyal to him.'

+I can infer much from what I have seen through your eyes. The Imperium is a shadow of the great edifice we built for the Emperor. The Legions? They are no more. You scrabble for weapons and armour when the might of the Mechanicum once laboured to supply the Emperor's armies. You have sunk even lower than your forefathers into mysticism and superstition, forgetting the Imperial Truth and the rule of Enlightenment. You say that the Space Wolves prevailed at Prospero, but I say that humanity lost.+

Njal did not reply as he watched the city grow larger through the port. He could imagine how impressive Tizca would have looked in its prime. The glittering ocean and pale cliffs, the bustle of orbital craft and surface vessels like trails of jewel-shelled beetles moving from the mass of white and silver. The sagas had spoken of magnificent illuminations that played

upon the skies – rainbow coruscations that danced from satellites and beacon fires lit from pinnacle towers.

Precincts that covered many square kilometres filled the spaces between the mountain-like edifices of the pyramids. Dead gardens linked by dusty boulevards cut through rubble-choked quadrangles and hexagonal cloisters.

+You do not even realise that you approach in virtually the same manner as the Wolf King did. You know so little of what transpired, blinded by history and prejudice.+

'Prospero burned for its crimes. Your continued survival is evidence of the outlawed forces that you bargained with.'

+Outlawed forces? Be careful where you cast your accusations, Librarian. You are an equal abomination under the Edict of the Emperor. How convenient that you forget the very law by which you claimed prosecution of my brothers when it becomes a far closer matter.+

'You dabbled in sorcery, nothing like the runelore of my people. That you think it the same explains much of your delusion.'

+One law for Prospero, another for Fenris. As much as this destruction is like sharp blades in my heart, it is the thought of the Emperor's betrayal that cuts me deepest. He took Magnus as his acolyte and then punished him when his learning surpassed the master. I held the Emperor to be our lord and guide, I never realised he could be so weak.+

'The Allfather saved humanity!' Though rage burned in him at Izzakar's assertions, Njal kept his voice low in consideration of Majula. 'All would be lost without his sacrifice.'

The jets of the Thunderhawk throttled back as it descended sharply towards the broad landing aprons of the Tizcan orbital transfer yards. Much here was left untouched by bombardment though the neighbouring precincts and works were reduced to broken walls and crevasse-slashed craters, a reminder of the fury of the Space Wolves and their allies before the massed landing ten thousand years earlier.

'Landing in four minutes, Stormcaller,' the pilot signalled, pulling the gunship into a tight turn that brought central Tizca back into view. The building-peaks about the centre still seemed distant, but the clouds that streamed at their summits betrayed the illusion. They were simply so vast that perspective played tricks on the eye. Only the Fang was greater in the

experience of the Stormcaller, though he had not laid eyes upon the Imperial Palace.

The Thunderhawk and its escorting pair of Stormwolf gunships did a last pass around the landing area, gunners and surveyors scouring the labyrinth of toppled columns and collapsed warehouses for any sign of a foe. Content that Arjac's offensive had cleared away any resistance, the pilot set the gunship down while his companions in each Stormwolf peeled away to deploy their own cargoes of warriors.

Njal called to Majula, who had been staring silently out of a window since they had dropped beneath the cloud layer. He pointed to the Rhino transport that filled the bulk of the modified transport compartment, its boarding hatch open. She unbuckled her drop harness and joined him at the armoured carrier.

'You know how to drive one of these, Lord of Runes?'

'Of course. I am a Space Marine first, a Librarian second. I wielded bolter and blade, steered Land Speeder and wore jump pack as did any other warrior of the Space Wolves.'

He clambered through the hatch. The interior had been hastily emptied of bracing and other impediments to his bulkier Terminator armour, and the whole divide between the driver's position and the crew compartment had been cut away. While Majula strapped herself into one of the few remaining seats, Njal crouched and shuffled up to the controls, his massive fists hovering over the steering columns and ignition runes as he re-acquainted himself with the layout.

'It's been a while,' he admitted. 'Probably a century since I had to do this myself.'

Through the driver's armoured vision slit he saw sunlight creep through a crack in the Thunderhawk's ramp, rapidly becoming bathing sunshine as the assault gate opened. He tapped a rune and the Rhino's engine grumbled into life. Setting the drive gears, he pushed the control levers forward. Jerkily the Rhino rumbled down the ramp, engine coughing as Njal shifted into combat mode. A hum from the secondary systems set the hull vibrating around him.

'Easy, just like old times,' he told the Navigator.

He turned across the ripped blacktop of the landing strip, while around him other dropships descended. The *Longclaw* was not a designated drop

craft – hence the improvisation with Arjac's landing – and it would take several hours to ferry the remaining thralls to the surface.

Humming an ancient skald-verse, he steered the transport onto the cracked remnants of a roadway that headed towards the towering pyramids.

A temporary command post had been erected beside the doors at Void Gate Six, to help accommodate the passage of gunships and transports through the loading dock. Aldacrel manned the station assisted by two of his thralls and a logistae servitor. Load-out data burbled from the half-machine's slack lips while the Iron Priest tapped runes on a cogitator plate he had wired into the main system via the void gate's command circuit. Behind him stood Axh-Atarz, robed in the red of Mars, monitoring this near-sacrilegious adaption with a censer and a scowl.

'Stop frowning, Martian,' the Iron Priest growled, not looking up from his work. 'The spirits are placated, nothing is amiss here.'

A buzz of verbal static might have been a grunt of derision but it was impossible to tell. Aldacrel ignored his tech-priest companion, attention drawn to the Stormfang that was still sat in the open void chamber. The Iron Priest activated the vox-hail.

'Fang-four, you had departure permission two minutes ago. Fang-two will be on landing course in three minutes. I am closing the inner gate. You need to go now.'

'Profound… Unexpected vox issues.' More crackling preceded a high-pitched whine in Aldacrel's ear. The channel cleared a few seconds later. *'Course locked in, preparing to leave. Close the doors whenever you're ready.'*

Aldacrel gave a nod to one of his thralls. The assistant turned and with deft metallic fingers – replacements for digits lost to a trauma during his induction – activated the inner gate, sealing the bay from the wall panel behind them. The bay cycled through the air evacuation procedure and then with a blare of alarms the outer doors parted.

'Fang-four you have…' Aldacrel didn't manage to finish the transmission. On a blaze of plasma, the small gunship pounced from the void chamber, one wing barely missing the edge of the outer gate.

‘At least he’s trying to get back on schedule,’ Aldacrel said to nobody in particular. He turned his attention to the next ream of reports scribbled by the logistae’s quill-fingers, but a shout from the main corridor broke his concentration. The Iron Priest looked up to see a Space Wolf running towards him, wolfshead helm in hand. He stopped at the window of the inner gate, peered into the chamber and then turned towards Aldacrel’s post.

‘Armour-master, where’s my gunship?’

As the Space Wolf came up to the armourplas window of the small command module, Aldacrel recognised Harkon Reaver-Born.

‘I…’ began the Iron Priest. He looked at the pilot, to the empty void bay, and back to Harkon. ‘You were meant to be aboard Fang-four.’

‘My armour recyclers were blocked somehow and I had to swap filters,’ explained the Space Marine. ‘When I came back, my helm had disappeared. I found it in the ablutions chamber.’

Aldacrel absorbed this without comment, and it fell to one of his thralls to ask the obvious question.

‘Master, if Harkon is here, then who is piloting Fang-four?’

‘Course overridden. Let’s go somewhere more interesting,’ Lukas said with a laugh, half turning in the pilot’s seat. He pulled a beacon transponder out from the console and crushed the device in his fist. ‘We won’t be needing that.’

At the co-pilot position, Gudbrand grinned.

The Trickster craned his head to look at the six Blood Claws strapped into the Stormfang’s main compartment. The space was cramped, filled by the bulk of the gunship’s massive helfrost destructor. They looked back at him, faces lit by sigils gleaming on the buzzing warp core beneath their feet. ‘Twenty minutes ‘til planetfall, let’s pass the time with some songs. Who knows the words to *She Was only a Hearthguard’s Daughter*?’

CHAPTER 9
TIZCA AWAKENS

The Wolf Guard led the way, fifty metres ahead of four power-armoured squads of Stormriders, who split into battle-packs to secure junctions and overpasses as the expedition ventured deeper into the city. In their wake came half of the thralls from the first wave, a three-dozen-strong platoon of soldiers, and with them the Navis Guard despatched on the insistence of Navigator Majula. The force advanced along deserted streets and over crumbling viaducts. The dust of their passage settled slowly in their wake, footprints left in the ash of a past age.

Arjac studied the schematics of the sensorium, vectoring data from his brothers as well as the last in-load from the *Longclaw* before the drop had been launched. The Pyramid of Photep was at the centre of the sprawling conurbation, its grand entrance opposite a ziggurat structure identified in the archives as the Great Library. Around were smaller four-sided and six-sided edifices that had housed the various cults and sects of Prosperine tradition, each laid to waste and looted over generations like the rest of the city.

According to the Stormcaller the recent psychic disturbances emanated from the main pyramid but there was nothing on the sensorium and no updates from the rapid strike vessel monitoring the city from orbit. Even so, Arjac did not relax. Not only did centuries of training and experience not allow such laxity, he could sense a pregnant tension permeating his surrounds. Nothing specific, perhaps simply the weight of history and

myth, imbued by Tizca's legendary status in the sagas of the Space Wolves.

They trod in the footsteps of the Wolf King, on ground that had been the battleground of heroes like Griegor Fellhand and Thorwal King's-Bane. The Great Wolf had been right. If they could return in victory from this expedition it would be a reminder of the Rout's power, a testament to the strength of Fenris even in these troubled times.

A few hundred metres from the Pyramid of Photep, as the squad crossed a bridge over an arid canal bed, a low-pitched hum alerted the hearthegn to a disturbance on the sensorium. The warning came from Berda's suit, a short distance to his left, his assault cannon trained on a crossroads at the bottom of a barren slope of ferrocrete. In a sub-view Arjac monitored Berda's visual feed while the other Wolf Guard tracked his gaze left and right, but there was nothing to be seen on the flat expanse of road.

'The spirit is likely bored,' complained Sven.

The pack paused nonetheless, the instinct of battle-drill taking them into a defensive semicircle even though there was no visible threat.

'What is it?' The female voice on the vox was unfamiliar until Arjac realised it was the commander of the Navis Guard, Dorria.

'Spirit glitch. Remain in position.'

'*A spirit glitch?'*

'Remain in position,' he said again, holding his temper in check. He sympathised a little with Dorria, for she was another guard sent to this desolate place by the one she was meant to protect. Despite that, he had objected, vocally, to the inclusion of the Navis Guard, uncertain exactly where they lay in the hierarchy of the expedition.

A thermal register pinged a warning from Ulfar on the right flank, detecting a small temperature build-up in a high glass pyramid about seventy metres from the junction.

'Not yours as we–'

Sven's complaint died as energy readings spiked all around the task force, thermal and motion-sensitive augur systems whining into life. It was not the suits alone that detected something amiss. A frisson of unease scurried across Arjac's skin and, judging by the mutters and whispers of his companions, he was not the only one whose battle instincts had been pricked.

‘Any spirit-guided defences would have been stripped away millennia ago,’ said Berda.

‘*Life signs!’* The barked report came from Valgarthr’s auspex bearer, Gardr. ‘*Multiple sources!*’

The Stormriders splintered into smaller packs without any need for a command, taking up watch stations just as the individual Wolf Guard had done, moving quickly to the rampart on the edge of the viaduct and onto the steps leading down to the roadways.

‘*Orders?’* Dorria’s tone was urgent, but not panicked. Her gold-clad squad formed a tight knot around their commander, but the dispersal of the Stormriders had left them exposed in the middle of a featureless ferrocrete plaza.

‘Locate cover,’ growled Arjac. Overlaying the city schematic with the sensorium data, it seemed that every temple-pyramid in the city centre had just erupted into activity yet he could see nothing.

‘Here, two points north-west,’ called Ingvarr. His sub-screen view zoomed towards a breach in one of the pyramid walls, magnifying rapidly. A cerulean glimmer shone from the interior.

A second later, light burst from each pyramid, their crystal flanks glowing from within, rays of azure, gold, scarlet and purple flickering from their broken carcasses.

A ripple of hisses announced Ulfar’s pre-emptive burst of fire, the salvo of cyclone missiles snaking down towards the entrance of the closest temple, just in time to meet a horde of robed figures dashing from within. The fragmentation warheads blossomed in their midst, shredding gold-stitched cloth, turning flesh to bloody rags.

Ruby-beams burst from vantage points in the upper storeys. Lasfire skittered across the roadways and walls, zipping away from the armour of the Space Wolves. The whine of bullets and crack of more energy weapons joined a background crackle like the hum of a monstrously powerful generator.

The foes that spilled suddenly from hiding were garbed alike, gilded grotesque masks and flowing red crests, their robes embroidered with flame designs and sigils in the shape of an eye with a spiral for a pupil. Arjac recognised the device immediately, still fresh in the memory from the battle for Fenris.

‘Cultists of Magnus,’ he snarled, fighting the urge to counter-charge towards the massing mobs of degenerates pouring along the roads. Among them came bounding, jittering things more avian than human – mutants wyrd-touched by the power of the eternal change. Their hooting calls and gibbering cries carried along with the snap of rifles and bark of the Space Marines’ return fire.

Above, two Stormwolf gunships screamed down from the skies, their helfrost cannons unleashing pale blasts into the swarming cultists. Where the ravening strikes landed, ice-rimmed blackness exploded, sucking all heat from the detonation zone. Frozen bodies fell to the cracked ground and shattered. Hair and robes, flesh and bone turned to fragile powder.

Heavy bolters punished those that had eluded the opening blasts, slashing a ruinous swathe through a horde of acolytes boiling forth from the Pyramid of Photep itself. Their assault ramps yawning open like the mouths of deathwolves, the gunships each spat forth a squad of Stormrider skyclaws, their jump packs flaring as they fell like bolts of vengeance into the morass of debased humanity. Volleys of fire and scorching plasma blasts from the thrall platoons met the surging cultists, as fighting rippled across the precincts of the Great Library and Pyramid of Photep.

‘Push on to the objective,’ declared the hearthegn. ‘Kill everything in our path.’

The road took Njal and Majula over secondary canals and under broken viaducts. The signs of battle were everywhere upon road and wall and stanchion, except for the normal detritus of massed combat. Not a single tank carcass, piece of armour or shell casing remained. The corpse of Tizca had been repeatedly targeted by scavengers for ten millennia so that nothing was left. Rogue traders and treasure hunters had plundered the deepest vaults, daring ancient Prosperine curses and automated defences for the chance at archeotech riches. Inquisitorial cleanse teams had razed libraries and swept away the contents of vast data storage systems, so that even cogitator memories and crystal repositories were emptied. And those that hid from the light of the Emperor also. The xenos and cultists that hoped to glean some dark knowledge in the shadows now ruled Magnus’ kingdom.

Njal's othersenses sparked into life, a formless but significant disquiet that had him activating the remote storm bolters a few seconds before a mass of mutated cultists burst from the ruins ahead, yelling unholy praises as their wild las-blasts and bullets sprayed from the Rhino's armoured shell.

Thumbing the firing stud, he unleashed a trail of rounds from the storm bolter, the short bursts ripping apart robed bodies, punching through flak armour and ornately styled carapaces and helmets. The Tzeentchian rabble had clearly not expected to run into foes as powerful as the Space Wolves.

He fired again, grinning as cultists fell to the hail of bolts.

Majula's panicked shrieking cut through the pound of blood in his ears. Njal realised she had been screaming for several seconds. He wanted to shout at her to stop but denied the instinct at the last moment, forcing himself to think through the surge of combat stimulants his armour had poured into his system at the first sign of action.

'We're safe,' he told her, loud enough to be heard over the zing of projectiles and energy bolts against ceramite, soft enough not to overwhelm. He fired again, felling another trio of cultists without thought. 'They have nothing that can penetrate this armour.'

She didn't respond, nor had he really expected her to. Rational thought was not her present companion. The best course of action was to drive through the mob, now nearly fifty strong, and continue on towards the inner precincts. His hand reached for the Rhino's long-range vox-caster to warn the others at the landing field to expect resistance but before he could flick the switch three swiftly consecutive events occurred.

His prescience howled a warning. An incoming threat alert blinked on the Rhino's tactical panel. His sensorium whined to draw his attention to the right.

Njal slammed the Rhino into a skidding turn, one track locked as it bounced over the rockrete while the other churned debris and dust.

The anti-tank missile hit the transport midway along the left side, almost square on the maintenance hatch. The detonation was oddly muted inside, a thud rather than a crack, but the spinning chunks of ceramite plate and explosion of warning lights betrayed a considerable hit. Something high-pitched outdid Majula's shriek as road wheels burned

against exposed gears, sparks flying down the road as the Rhino scraped to a halt, shedding its track links.

'Stay here!' the Stormcaller barked at Majula. His command was redundant. Her hoarse shouting had almost abated and she sat in stark terror, hands pale with tension as she clutched the safety harness in thin fists, eyes staring but not seeing the bulkhead opposite. Awkwardly, Njal turned, ripped out the armoured panel above him and wedged it into the transport compartment, effectively creating another barrier between the Navigator and the onrushing cultists.

He glanced out of the viewing port. Foes thronged the street, closing quickly on the Rhino. He saw another missile launcher in the centre of the mob. There was no time to disembark properly, he had to act immediately.

Partway through an eighth improvised verse of *Magnagaldr*, Lukas stopped, thoughts tuning to the vox-feed he had been subconsciously monitoring. He flicked the receiver to open speaker.

'*…gunfire from the western district. Moving platoon Grimbladr to stem the ingress.*'

He recognised Valgarthr's terse commands and filtered the channel back to his personal feed.

'Boost the power to the augur array,' he told Gudbrand. 'Let's check what's happening down there.'

The co-pilot hesitated, hands hovering over the controls. He glanced at Lukas with an apologetic expression, the request unvoiced.

'Those ones,' Lukas told him, jabbing a finger towards the augur controls. 'Dial down the focus and increase the range.'

Lukas unlocked the control column and deactivated the gunship's spirit-guided system. He pointed the nose down steeply, taking them through the banks of clouds over Tizca. The Stormfang juddered through a sudden pool of turbulence.

'Augurs at full range, pack leader,' said Gudbrand.

'Call me Lukas,' the Trickster replied on reflex, and not for the first time. 'Pack leader sounds like someone who knows what they're doing.'

He studied the fuzzy schematic of the gunship's sensor suite, decoding the streams of blotches and numerals that scrolled across a monochrome green sub-screen in front of the co-pilot.

‘Heat signals, lots of them,’ he told the others. ‘And plasma discharge. All across the…’

No further commentary was needed when they broke the cloud cover, bursting into view over the city of the Thousand Sons. It stretched along the coast of a dried sea bed, the bright of glass and crystal dazzling against the greys and browns of the infertile ground around it. Though they were still more than a dozen kilometres away the flash of gunfire and the shapes of armoured vehicles and gunships told Lukas that the conflict was spread across several hectares of the city centre, and the read-outs from the augur warned that other enemies were massing on the outskirts.

‘Decision time,’ he told his companions. ‘The objective is the Pyramid of Photep, that large one right in the middle there. Looks to me like Valgarthr and Arjac are pushing on to secure it. To the east, as I recall, is the Silver Bastion. That large keep-tower on the boundary wall. Significant enemy signals coming from there. Or, north-west, we have the port facilities. Heat signatures betray growing presence there too. Where do you want to go?’

The Blood Claws looked back at him dumbfounded. It was Artyn that voiced their concern.

‘You want us to decide, pack leader?’

‘We don’t have a pack leader,’ he replied, getting annoyed by the insinuation that he was somehow in charge. ‘We decide together. Call me Lukas.’

They looked at each other, growing bolder by the second.

‘The Silver Bastion…?’ Artyn ventured quietly.

‘We should put down at the Orbital Yards with the general muster,’ said Bahrd. ‘Await fresh orders.’

‘Await fresh…’ Lukas scowled. ‘You and I are going to have disagreements if you keep this up, Bahrd. Come on, we have to select a course!’

‘The docks,’ said Gudbrand, more forcefully than perhaps he had intended judging by the surprise he showed a second later.

‘I knew there was a reason you were co-pilot,’ Lukas said with a grin. ‘Remember, pup warriors, always look confident in everything you do.’

‘Even when you are not?’ asked Herlief.

‘Especially then,’ said Lukas. He shifted the control column and adjusted the attitude jets, setting them towards the north-west of the city. ‘We’ll head off the reinforcements at the port.’

‘Just us?’ It was Bahrd again. Lukas scratched his ear, resisting the retort that wanted to slip from his tongue. He mastered his frustration and smiled warmly.

‘Do you see anybody else?’

‘No, pack…’ Bahrd trailed off as Lukas’ scowl returned. ‘No, Lukas.’

‘Then it’s just us.’

This logic did not seem to reassure the newly promoted Space Wolf, and his doubts were in danger of infecting the others. As much as he was carefree of authority and only a passing acquaintance of duty, Lukas was still a Son of Russ.

‘You are Space Wolves. The bloody claws of the Allfather. What do you face? Deluded cultists of Magnus and deranged mutant renegades. Foes you have beaten before. This is why you have the gift of the Allfather, why you were elevated to the ranks of the Sky Warriors. The seven of you are a power greater than your number. You are not only Space Marines of the Imperium, you are Sons of Fenris, and that makes you magnificent!’

‘For Russ!’ Herlief lifted a fist as he shouted. ‘For the Allfather!’

‘For Russ. For the Allfather,’ the rest of the pack chorused after.

Lukas rubbed his nose and turned his attention back to the controls. Just a couple of kilometres from the city and he could see sprawling firefights breaking out everywhere. As yet there was no action towards the port environs, but the augurs were clear that a significant number of foes were somehow materialising in the north-west sector of the city.

Seven Blood Claws, he told himself. *The equal of a company of lesser warriors*.

Such was the stuff of saga.

Snatching up his staff, Njal ascended like a vengeful storm giant. The driver’s hatch and roof erupted above him in a cloud of shards and jags. He reached out a hand and blue-grey swirls of power flowed. He closed his fist as though snatching something out of the air. Flying shrapnel slowed and then stopped.

Throwing his hand towards the snarling mob of depraved mutants, Njal let fly with his improvised missiles. The air was misted with blood droplets. Horrified squeals and terrified shouts of the dying and near-dead sounded distant in the open air.

Njal hauled himself out of the broken Rhino, staff held before him. The skull-clad tip burned with the flame of his wrath, as he dropped down to the roadway. The hard surface crumbled under the impact of his heavy armour.

The foe with the missile launcher had survived the shrapnel storm and opened fire. The projectile hissed over the piles of corpses, trailing vapour and blue fire. The Stormcaller swept his staff aside without thought, a barrier of azure energy leaping into existence a few metres ahead. The missile clattered against the shimmering wall and fell to the floor where it jittered for several seconds before exploding ineffectually.

Njal splayed the fingers of his free hand, expanding the shield as a welter of bullets and las-bolts screamed down the roadway from sniping positions in the ruins to either side. From the immobilised Rhino, Nightwing ascended on black feathers and a dancing shadow of psychic power. The psyber-raven darted away, heading for one of the distant marksmen while Njal concentrated on the enemy that remained to his front. Through the eyes of his familiar, he saw the first sniper desperately trying to track the approach of the bird, unable to get a shot at the small target. The marksman rose and threw his arms up to defend himself, but it was too late. Nightwing's claws ripped out his throat. Its beak plucked free the eye that had moments before peered down the long optic sight.

Lightning leapt from Njal's staff. Charred bones clattered in heaps upon the ground, wisps of blood vapour steaming from empty sockets and splayed ribcages.

Still the cultists came on, driven by the madness of Chaos.

'Abominations,' growled Njal. He unleashed another storm of fury. Cascading blasts set fire to the masks and robes of his assailants. Wailing and thrashing, the cultists burned and writhed.

+What brutality. What scorn. Though I did like the trick with the shrapnel. That shows some promise.+

The sorcerer's words tapped into a well of frustration that had been filling within Njal since Izzakar had become trapped inside his thoughts.

The Rune Priest's eyes were blazes of golden fire and he threw his head back to let free a howl. Pent-up emotion burst free from the depths, rising up around him in the form of a monstrous wolf clad in starlight and lightning. The storm-beast leapt from Njal, fangs bared and claws of flashing death. It fell upon the last cultists in a frenzy, tearing limbs from bodies, tossing the carcasses aside, an inchoate manifestation of the Allfather's retribution. Panting and snarling, Njal willed the stormwolf to attack again and again, while about the street, Nightwing flew with loud caws having dispatched the last of the enemy snipers.

Unnoticed, the pinnacles of obelisks lining the street burned with dark red flame, lodestones for the psychic power channelling through the enraged Space Wolf. He felt it only as an influx of spirit, the strength of the mountain, the hunting instinct of the wolf. Icicles formed in his beard and upon the edges of his armour plates, glittering with psychic energy.

The wolf thrived, feeding on the tiny flickers of spirit that left the dying cultists. Their blood was a miasma in the air, their scattered body parts becoming a fleshy carpet underfoot. Njal's conjuration swelled in victory, engorged by the power that flooded him through the now-imperfectly arranged psycho-conductive patterns of Tizca.

'Stormcaller!'

He only dimly heard Majula's cry of alarm. The wolf's snarls were far louder, his ears near deaf to all else.

+Njal!+

The shock of hearing his name in the tone of the Thousand Sons sorcerer gave him a moment of pause; a moment in which he saw the *wyrdsign* crawling across the ground around him, cutting the air about his staff.

Gulping down bitter draughts of air, the Stormcaller released his hold upon the wyrd-beast, letting it drift away on a cold wind with a last plaintive howl.

The patter of feet turned him, staff raised ready for another attack. It was Majula. He checked the power that simmered through his veins. She held her eyeguard in place as she ran, robes flapping about her. The Navigator stopped a few strides away, her eyes wide with fear.

'All is well, I am in control,' he told her.

+You call that control? One might as well say that the leaf in the hurricane controls the winds. Even after so long, the genius of Magnus remains. You stand on ground steeped in psychomancy, rune-thrower. The city courses with untapped potential, but like the Portal Maze, it has become misaligned. One rogue thought could bring about cataclysm once more.+

'Look, look there,' gasped Majula, thrusting a finger past Njal, towards the immense pyramids of Tizca.

Njal directed his attention to the city centre. About the highest sun-sparkled peak the clouds had been driven away. In their place burned a greenish-blue fire that cut hideous sigil-shapes upon the air.

+Photep's Phyre! What menace has your meddling unleashed?+

The Stormcaller said nothing as the rune-flames curled and criss-crossed to create ever more complex weavings. Njal could not look away as an image emerged from their seemingly random intersections. A vision burned into his thoughts. A terrible memory given life again as he looked upon a monstrous face with a single eye.

+The Crimson King returns to Tizca!+

CHAPTER 10
THE PYRAMID OF PHOTEP

Njal looked at the Rhino and knew instantly that it would be going nowhere until it had been tended by the Iron Priests. In the distance, he could see the gunships moving back and forth against the blaze of psychic light. Whatever was happening in central Tizca was more important than his predicament and he held off voxing one of the pilots to collect him.

+The Pyramid of Photep is several miles away.+

'I have run the ice fields of Fenris for days at a time. It will take a few minutes, that is all.'

His gaze fell upon Majula and his confidence waned a little. She could not hope to keep pace.

'Leave me here, I will rejoin you when I can,' she told him, guessing his thoughts. Though her eyes flitted to the mounds of corpses and the shadows in the ruined buildings. 'I will find my own way to your brothers.'

'It is not safe.' Njal considered the problem and then took a step towards the Navigator, his empty hand held out. 'If you do not mind your dignity being a little bruised, I will carry you.'

'I do not wish to slow you down, Lord of Runes. Something fell occurs in Tizca and you must be quick to counter it.'

'You shall be no burden at all,' he assured her, gesturing for Majula to approach. 'We shall run as swift as the hunting wolves.'

'I am young but I am not a child. I do not think this paternal attitude is appropriate.'

‘You misunderstand,’ said Njal. ‘You are the Navigator and if I wish to return to Fenris I have to keep you alive.’

+Well done, wolf-son! Finally you show some perspective.+

‘I see.’ She pressed against the wolf pelt that hung from his waist and he lifted gently, holding her to his chest. More carefully than when he had attacked the cultists, he allowed the warp to trickle into his thoughts, to flow gently through his veins. His hearts stirred at the power, his blood coursed, and a sweat stood out on his skin.

‘Like the wolf,’ he told her again and broke into a run.

+It is hard to believe that a people famed for their sagas make such repeated use of trite metaphors.+

His first strides were slow and lumbering, the Terminator armour so suited to close-quarters combat not ideal for quick acceleration. Four strides later, Njal and his armour had reached a rhythm that started to eat away at the distance. Forcing psychic power into his muscles and the fibre bundles of his suit, Njal continued to accelerate. Ignoring Izzakar’s taunt, he pictured a sleek wolf chasing deer across a glacier, tongue lolling, snow on its pelt.

Leaving an ice-shadow behind him, they leapt a dozen metres at the next stride, momentarily sliding aside from reality. Majula gasped and he held her tight but careful not to crush her with the powered limb.

+Remarkable!+

Six more strides and he wyrd-slipped again, the next jump covering twenty metres in an instant. His sensorium bleated warnings of the fleeting exposure to warp energy, while threat readings from the ruins whined in his ears. He ignored them and looked up to the glowering Cyclopean image of Magnus the Red floating above the mountain-pyramid of his ancient home.

Onwards they sped.

+No, no, no! What are those fools doing? Make them stop!+

The area around the great Pyramid of Photep was a scene of anarchy. The cracking Portal Maze network had unleashed hundreds of Magnus’ waiting cultists and beast-mutants into the precincts. Knots of grey-armoured Space Wolves controlled the junctions and areas of high ground, holding the defensive lines of the thralls around them like towers

anchoring a wall. Guided by Aldacrel and his acolytes, gun servitors stalked among the living, the crackle of their arcane weapons distinct amid the bolter fire. The roar of gunship engines and heavy bolters throbbed from circling Stormwolf attack craft, while Thunderhawks volleyed fire into the buildings surrounding the beset Stormriders.

Njal skidded to a stop about half a kilometre from the base of the incredibly vast mirror-plated pyramid, on the edge of the growing firefight. Warp power surged back and forth, flashing as lightning from the great pyramid to the peaks of its lesser cousins, coruscating down their broken surfaces in bolts of red, black and pale green. He set Majula down onto the naked ferrocrete and unconsciously pushed her back, sheltering her from potential attack with the bulk of his Terminator suit. Fed by the leaking energy, the staff in his hand crackled and the runes of his armour pulsed arrhythmically.

'We must defend ourselves,' Njal said, pulling his pistol from its holster.

+No, the gunships! Their fire is causing even more damage to the node system of the Portal Maze. Everything is so taut even the slightest further imbalance could break open the entire warpway.+

'So?'

+Think of a smaller Eye of Terror engulfing the whole planet. With you still on it.+

'I see.' Njal activated his company-address channel on the vox to speak to the other Space Wolves as he marched along the street. 'Target only visible foes. Avoid all further structural attack. Valgarthr, stabilise the situation. Arjac, do you have me on sensorium?'

'Aye, Stormcaller. About three-quarters of a kilometre from our position.'

'Can you come to me?'

'It would be better if you came to us.' There was a break and a burst of interference static that betrayed heavy fire before Arjac continued, grunting between words. 'We are at the great pyramid.'

'Hold your position, I will be there imminently.'

Njal cast his gaze about, aware of the unarmoured Navigator just a pace behind him. Tracer fire and the flicker of bolts lit every surface while the

red beams of lascannons and the trails of missiles cut the dark blue evening sky.

‘Izzakar, how much of the city is within the Portal Maze?’

+All of it. Portals are placed throughout Tizca and across Prospero. These… degenerates could potentially break out of the maze from anywhere.+

‘These degenerates are followers of your primarch, allies of the Thousand Sons. What more do you need to see to believe that your Legion is anything but a paragon of virtue?’

+You take a cruel delight in heaping insult upon misery, Fenrisian. A better man would mourn the loss of the Thousand Sons’ wisdom, not relish it.+

This counter troubled Njal as he continued deeper into the city’s heart, Majula close on his heel. Bird-faced abominations charged from the broken buildings towards a squad of Stormriders a little way ahead. Creatures with metallic wings dropped from the upper floors onto the Space Wolves that moved to counter the attack. Each assault was accompanied by fresh bursts of las-fire and sprays of bullets from the upper storeys of the grand pyramid. The Space Marines responded with drilled bolter fire and the promethium rage of their flamer while thralls near at hand tracked their weapons to suppress the attack from the higher levels.

The air itself tasted rank with mutating energy, shimmering like a mirage.

+This is all very disturbing.+

‘The part of you within the Portal Maze, can it sense anything from the inside? Any clue as to what we must do?’

+Battle rages afresh. I smell blood in the vortex, hate and fear washed down the maelstrom of the maze’s heart. The stasis is broken.+

‘So it was not in idle curiosity that my slumbering thoughts delved into the maze, but Magnus’ servants attempting to break free that drew my wyrd-gaze. The Portal Maze was cracking open and that is why your spirit leaked out.’

+I am forced to agree with your assessment, Stormcaller. The opening of the Portal Maze was no accident.+

Njal gestured up with his staff, to the apparition of Magnus high above like a malevolent crimson stormcloud.

‘The architect does not try to hide his involvement.’

+It makes no sense to me.+

‘What is to understand?’ said Njal. ‘Dark Powers whispered in your lord’s ear and he listened. All else after that is plain to see.’

+I… The evidence suggests that you are right. The Thousand Sons appear to have fallen from glory. But it was not of that I speak. It makes no sense to me for Magnus to reclaim Prospero. If what you tell me of this Planet of the Sorcerers is true the Crimson King has no need of this world.+

The Stormcaller had no argument, and was not of a mind to debate whilst battle still raged. He fixed his thoughts on a more tangible subject.

‘You said that battle continues inside the Portal Maze. It is not this fighting you sense?’

+There is most definitely conflict inside the maze’s boundaries. I believe it is the warriors you seek, embattled on the other side of the portals.+

‘It is testament to Bulveye’s spirit that he fights on after ten thousand years of entrapment.’

+It will not have seemed as such to him. The Portal Maze is not the warp but it is built around similar principles. You might say it is *of* the warp. One cannot step across a thousand light years with a stride whilst physical and temporal laws remain. The Old Guard might think only days or even just hours have passed since that oaf Bulveye killed me.+

A series of explosions rocked the main pyramid high above. Among glass shards falling like rain, Arjac’s Wolf Guard had formed a perimeter around a towering portico. Cracked crystal panes and hole-riddled columns framed a dark entrance within. The ground before it was heaped with the mangled remains of blue-and-yellow-clad cultists, their bodies torn by bolter shells, cut and mauled by the close-combat weapons of the Terminators.

Rockfist raised his hammer in greeting, head moving left and right as he kept watch for fresh attack. Njal returned the gesture with his staff and stopped just out of hearing.

‘You claimed to possess the means to free our brothers. We are in Tizca now. It is time to fulfil your part of the bargain. Tell me what we must do next, sorcerer. Can Bulveye escape without us entering the Portal Maze?’

+Do you think I would tell you, saga-spitter? If he could simply leave, it renders my continued existence pointless to you.+

‘I suppose not.’

+But I shall indulge you, because every instance of your ignorance offends me and the Thousand Sons were raised as students and tutors if nothing else.+ Izzakar paused for a second, probably enjoying Njal’s moment of need. +I do not think the Old Guard have the means to escape on their own, they must be guided free of the maze. If you wish to rid yourself of my presence, you must enter the labyrinth between worlds.+

Njal had suspected as much and accepted this without comment. He started forward again, eager to achieve his goal. The sooner he was able to breach the Portal Maze, the swifter the whole bizarre episode would end.

Arjac watched Njal carefully. The Rune Priest, shielding the Navigator behind him, advanced down the rubble-strewn street casting glances up towards the monstrous apparition that had materialised above, his staff leaving crackling marks on the chipped flags, a pistol in his other hand.

He certainly carried himself like the Stormcaller. As hearthegn, Arjac had made a point of studying the Great Wolf and his closest counsellors; their tone, movements and mannerisms in situations both peaceful and belligerent. He knew Logan’s *hearthjarls* and his Wolf Guard better than his own reflection, all the better to foresee any potential threat. A slight change in behaviour was like an alarm in his thoughts, betraying treasonous thought or potential misdeed, but looking at Njal, he sensed nothing amiss.

‘It isn’t the Crimson King, is it?’ said Arjac, swinging his hammer towards the cyclopean visage that glowered down at Tizca.

‘No,’ Njal replied. ‘It’s not an intrusion or manifestation. Merely a projection. It’s probably not even from Magnus, but some kind of psychic idol generated by his cultists.’

They fell into step with each other, the sensorium melding so that Arjac’s multi-view display adjusted, bringing up a new sweep of auspex data from the battleplate of the Rune Priest. The suit’s systems confirmed

what Rockfist had seen with his eye – that Njal had been involved in combat before his arrival at the city centre.

'So, the cultists are not just in the central precincts,' the hearthegn said while the two of them joined his squad before the great portico. 'How fares the force at the landing grounds?'

'The area is still secure, at last report,' Njal assured him, gaze fixed on the large doors of the pyramid. 'But the second column will have to break through to the centre.'

An unexpected movement on the sensorium caused half of the Wolf Guard to turn with weapons raised. The vox traffic that Arjac had been ignoring suddenly spiked with warnings.

'Hold your fire,' Arjac called out to his warriors as he saw the gleam of gold armour emerging from the dust and gloom.

'My troops,' said Navigator Majula, moving out of the Rune Priest's shadow. Her face was grimed, streaked through with the lines of tears, eyes tired and red. Despite her recent experiences and bedraggled appearance, she spoke with confidence. 'I have a transmitter, they will be moving on my location.'

The Navis Guard had lost a few of their number and the scorch marks and dints upon their carapaces and vambraces stood testament to the closeness of their encounters with the enemy. Their weapons buzzed with power, a silver shimmer in the dust kicked up by battle.

'Navigator!' Dorria's call was part relief and part remonstration. The gold-clad warriors formed up protectively around their charge, subtly but purposefully detaching her from the looming presence of Njal. 'We received no confirmation of your landing. Is your vox intact?'

'I… I forgot,' Majula admitted in a whisper. She seemed embarrassed, looking down at the cracked roadway. She squared her shoulders and addressed her troop leader. 'Remain at my side until I command otherwise.'

'Yes, Navigator,' Dorria said, displaying considerable patience at being told her duty by the young woman under her guard.

'What next, Stormcaller?' asked Arjac. He did not like staying in one place, especially with the glowering face of Magnus looking down at him. 'We have cleared the surrounds of the Pyramid of Photep, but we both

know that these cultists and mutants were not just hiding in cellars… They've been using the Portal Maze somehow.'

Njal did not answer immediately. Another observer might have thought he was simply in thought, but Arjac knew what the slight tilt of the head and the way he held himself signified. He was listening, and as there was no second-hand vox static, the hearthegn assumed it was to a voice inside Njal's head.

There was another explanation, which gave Arjac some concern. Was another doing Njal's thinking for him?

He adjusted his grip on Foehammer and took a nonchalant step to his right, opening himself up for a better swing towards the Rune Priest's skull. There was nothing suggesting threat in the Rune Priest's behaviour but Arjac had fought psykers before, though never one as powerful as the *runejarl* of the Chapter. He would only get one chance to slay the possessed psyker and then the opportunity would be gone.

'Yes, the maze. I can feel the apertures around us,' said Njal, oblivious to Arjac's train of thought. The Rune Priest stopped and looked around, inadvertently putting his pauldron between himself and Arjac. The Wolf Guard mentally adjusted, preparing for an overhand swing that would strike the top of the psyker's head. 'They are erratic, uncontrolled. The cultists do not understand how to harness its full power. But you're right, there are likely more still lurking within. There's certainly a strong residue of *wyrdstok*.'

Thralls arrived along with a Grey Hunters squad of Valgarthr's Stormriders, securing the area around the Wolf Guard. Arjac watched them moving into position, quick and deliberate like dagger thrusts, despite the sporadic volleys that continued to whine down from the neighbouring buildings.

Njal pressed on towards the doors, striding across the bodies of the slain without thought, pulping torsos and limbs, and cracking skulls beneath his tread with no more distraction than trampling uneven rocks. The skulled tip of his staff brightened, its auric glow reflected from the armour of the Wolf Guard. Behind, Arjac could hear the Navis Guard and their charge keeping close.

The Rune Priest lifted a hand and the doors opened outwards. Light spilled forth as though released from captivity and washed across blood-

spattered paving and piled corpses, dancing over the armour of the Wolf Guard. Arjac heard a couple of his brothers muttering protective *skaldvers,* thinking the light itself might be wyrd-tainted.

'It's just light,' said Njal dismissively, advancing into the embrace of the gleam, becoming a thinning silhouette. 'Let us see what these disciples of Magnus are up to.'

The surveyor sweep put the size of the enemy force moving towards the port gates between one hundred and one-hundred-and-fifty strong. Lukas reckoned it closer to the higher number. Under his guidance, the Stormfang swooped down across a landscape broken by pits and trenches where fuel lines and promethium vats had once stood. The spilling crowd merged from two buildings within the port compound – one on the dockside itself, another closer to the wall that separated the zone from the rest of Tizca.

Most were cultists, dressed in ceremonial robes or tabards, armed with blades, mauls and pistols, a few with lasguns or autoguns. Among them, Lukas identified the magistae, some with icons of their new lord – a monstrous eye with a spiral-wrought pupil, fashioned in gold and silver and bronze. Others carried staves with heads of intertwined serpents, rendered flames or scowling moon-faces. One caught the eye in particular, with a rod-tip fashioned in the likeness of a broad-winged two-headed bird with a single gleaming eye, a disgusting parody of the Imperial Aquila.

Rangier figures with avian faces or bestial heads crowned with curling horns ran alongside. With them, the most degenerate loped on all fours, more hound than human, their scaled flanks shining, and whip-tails tipped with curled stingers.

And something larger too. Gudbrand spotted it first out of his side-pane and called attention with a hoarse shout.

The monstrosity that pushed its way between two warehouses stripped to bare ferrocrete was neither living nor machine but a wyrd-cursed amalgam. Its six many-jointed legs carried a flattened body from which protruded long growths with puckered openings at the top. Metallic plates grew from unnatural flesh, glinting with heretical runework. Warpfire flickered from the body-tubes, leaving trails of multicoloured exhaust fume. Its head was like that of a giant beetle, many-pronged antlers of

black and red like a phalanx of spears thrust from the top. Behind the creature, a quartet of bird-headed mutants goaded the monster forward with sparking rods, their half-feathered bodies partly concealed within open-fronted blue robes hung with golden garlands.

Sporadic bursts of fire from the ground announced that the cultists had spied the approach of the gunship. Lukas glanced again at the infamous, daemonic face that glared down at the city from the Pyramid of Photep and knew there was no doubt to whom they pledged their fealty.

'It might be wise to man the guns,' he suggested, flicking the arming switches that brought the helfrost destructor, missiles and heavy bolters on-line. Control displays powered up across the console, bathing the cockpit with green.

'There, and here,' said Lukas, jabbing a finger towards the main gun's augur display and then the control column in front of Gudbrand. 'You need to prime with the thumb rune for five seconds and then, without moving your thumb, activate the forefinger trigger. Aim for clusters of targets.'

'Yes, Lukas,' said Gudbrand, earnestly staring at the display.

Lukas banked the gunship towards a mass of cultists that were converging on one of the wall gates, giving his companion a perfect target. Behind him came the clatter of the heavy bolters arming as Elof manned the starboard gunnery system and Jerrik the port side. A second later, the hum of the helfrost generator filled the confined space, trembling along the massive breech of the cannon that ran the length of the gunship.

The roar of the heavy bolters was sudden – a drumbeat that set Lukas' remaining heart racing. On the ground, explosive fire stitched across the gangs of heretics flowing across the square. Like a filleting pike along the gut blubber of a kraken, the deadly fire of the gunship sliced a line through the suddenly panicked mass.

'Quick, before they disperse,' Lukas told his co-pilot.

Gudbrand pulled the trigger and the whole Stormfang throbbed with the release of energy. Even through the thermal shielding they felt the cold pulse, their breath forming fog at the instant of fire. A sphere of blackness spewed from the cannon, as fast as a lightning bolt. It struck the square in the midst of the cultists, throwing out arcs of negative energy. Warp-based, the helfrost discharge inverted the physical laws of the mortal realm,

ripping open a sphere of pure void that reduced the temperature to absolute zero in an instant. The sphere imploded a second later.

The desiccated remains of a dozen cultists exploded upwards as the surrounding warmer air crashed back into the vacuum pocket with a thunderous crack. The strike left an almost perfect crater, the edges rimmed with frost, frozen particulates drifting away on the breeze.

Gudbrand shouted in triumph, echoed by his pack-brothers in the compartment behind. More heavy bolter rounds chewed through the rapidly dissipating cultists, tearing open bodies and skulls, explosively removing limbs with their mass-reactive detonations.

A warning flared across the augur panel along with a piercing shriek. Lukas turned his head just in time to see the blast of ravening fire shrieking up towards them from the daemonic scarab beast. He wrenched the controls, rolling the Stormfang hard into the attack, trying to dive beneath it. The inferno roared past the canopy, splashing across the exposed topside of the gunship. Molten ceramite sprayed away from the blast while the Stormfang's heat warnings buzzed its machine-spirit's grievances.

The evasive manoeuvre had taken them into a tight dive, heading groundwards. Lukas adjusted, reversing the throttle power and pulling back, just as a second conflagration erupted out of the maw-spines of the cultists's living engine. The warpfire passed beneath the ascending gunship to smash into the containing wall, cracking ferrocrete and raining rubble down on the streaming cultists attempting to find shelter in its shadow.

'I can't get a lock,' growled Gudbrand, wrenching at the helfrost controls while Lukas weaved the gunship between bursts of groundfire. 'I need a steady course.'

The Trickster ignored the complaint, flicking open the thumb-triggers on his control column to activate the pair of stormstrike missiles set either side of the armoured canopy. Rivulets of setting ceramite slipped across the long prow of the craft as he turned again, bringing the scarab-machine into view.

The enthusiastic whine of the missiles' spirits chorused in his ears even as he saw the bloom of another burst of warpfire billow from the dorsal exhaust-cannons of the warp-atrocity. He pressed both firing studs. Twin

tails of white fire engulfed the cockpit for a moment, a wash of plasma jet fogging the view. On instinct, Lukas pulled up and starboard, dragging the gunship out of the path of the rising warpflame.

More machine-spirit moaning filled the gunship as the starboard engines and flight wing took the brunt of the hit. Dirty smoke poured from the turbofans, accompanied by a worrying rattle as cooling ceramite droplets crackled through the intakes. Lukas felt the eyes of his co-pilot on him and risked looking away for a moment, winking to allay the other's apprehension.

'I've been in worse situations,' Lukas assured the others.

A solid crack and screech of torn metal signalled one of the engines parting company from its holding strut, whirling away in streamers of fractured ceramite.

'Not much worse,' the Trickster admitted.

The missile link grew to a fever pitch of machine-spirit excitement in the moments before impact. Lukas threw a glance back towards the scarab-cannon in time to see the two missiles strike the head and carapace of the monstrous beetle, covering it with flame and shrapnel. A couple of seconds later, the double concussive boom of their detonations rattled the armourplas canopy.

They circled, dropping lower to rake more fire across the emboldened heretics of Magnus. Yet even as Jerrik fired his heavy bolter again a fresh eruption of warpfire flared across the dockworks. It dropped short, falling explosively into the square by the gate, sending out a shock-wave that hurled cultists across the plaza and buffeted the gunship. Through the dissipating smoke of the stormstrike attack, he saw the creature virtually unharmed, just a few ichor-leaking cracks across its broad exoskeleton.

'This beast is livelier than a kraken's eleventh tentacle,' growled Lukas. He tried to align the gunship to the beast so that Gudbrand could have a shot with the helfrost destructor but a fresh burst of warp-conjured flame forced him to abort the attack run, narrowly avoiding losing the engine on the other side. 'Hang on, I have an idea.'

He pulled the Stormfang into a twisting climb, away from the port facilities. When he felt that they were comfortably out of range he circled back south, picking his course carefully. Ahead, nearly two kilometres away, the scarab-machine stalked out onto one of the main access roads

towards the wall. Lukas punched in coordinates for the machine-spirit, setting a beacon point for the animus of the gunship to follow. Pushing the engines to full – ignoring the shrieks and clatters of protest from the starboard side – he angled the gunship on a swooping trajectory.

'Shall I power up, pack… Lukas?' asked Gudbrand.

'No.' Lukas hit the release of his harness and stood up. 'Emergency disembarkation.'

To their credit, the Blood Claws followed suit without question, releasing themselves from the reinforced belts of their seats. Lukas activated the rear ramp, which whined down to reveal the city's outskirts and the inferno-scoured wasteland beyond. Wind whistled past, a trail of dark smoke from the damaged engines dragged out across the sky.

'Get ready.' Lukas moved to the ramp, legs braced against the gentle buffeting of their descent. He looked over his shoulder, through the front canopy, judging his moment. A few seconds later, the gunship was almost above the storehouse roof he had been aiming for.

'Now!'

Lukas jumped, trusting that the others would follow.

The wind tugged at his hair and tousled the pelts of his armour as he fell. A heartbeat and ten metres later, he hit the storehouse roof hard. Actuators in his leg armour snarled in protest and he buckled and swayed, turning his impact into a forward roll. His momentum carried him crashing over several metres of dusty ferrocrete before he skidded to a halt. The others thudded down in front of him, spilling out of the gunship like poorly fastened cargo from the deck of a storm-stricken ship. On his feet an instant later, Lukas ran towards the front of the building.

He reached the edge of the storehouse in time to see the Stormfang hit, already engulfed prow to stern by warpfire from the creature's final defensive blast. The reactor detonated first, white hot plasma erupting into a miniature sun. In the following split second the helfrost core cracked, unleashing its void potential. The sudden, conflicting extremes of temperature exploded outwards, ripping the beast and its handlers into disintegrating atoms. The shockwave smashed into the nearby buildings, demolishing storage halls and tithehouses, their foundations torn out by the detonation.

Lukas stared at his handiwork while the others gathered around him. He did not have long to enjoy his triumph. Angry shouts and sporadic lasfire spewed up from the concourse in front of the storehouse. Cultists streamed towards their position from every direction, more determined to meet the enemy in their midst than to reinforce the attack in the city centre.

‘There must be a hundred or more of them,’ said Artyn.

‘They seem eager to meet the Sons of Russ.’ Lukas pulled his plasma pistol free and held up his wolf claw, cerulean power licking along the blades. He flashed his fangs in a grin.

‘Let’s introduce ourselves properly.’

CHAPTER 11
A BROKEN BRIDGE

The warplight thickened, if such was possible. Like a living organism, it slicked across the armour of the advancing Space Marines. The sensorium registered it simultaneously as light and a physical object, though it seemed to be no impediment to the Terminators as they pushed into the hall beyond the doors. Sketchy readings described a broad space adjoined by many rooms and conveyor gates, with flanking archways beyond which long corridors speared into the heart of the Pyramid of Photep. The sensors detected a ceiling more than a hundred metres above, criss-crossed by arcing spans and horizontal conveyor bridges and the slightly tapering outer wall of the pyramid was lined with galleries and mezzanines.

But there was no agreement on exactly where these features were.

Ulfar's suit placed the squad somewhere near the centre of the chamber while Arjac's own armour had them to the right. Ingvarr's autosenses detected a stairway a few metres ahead, yet Berda's datalink transmitted a broad set of steps sweeping down into a space reminiscent of an amphitheatre.

And all around, as suddenly as the cultists had first attacked, life signs sprang into being. Red blotches appeared against the greenish tinge of the auspex sweeps. Tracer fire and las-bursts rippled out of the permeating light, striking sparks from the war-plate of the Wolf Guard and searing burns across their ceramite.

The veterans returned fire as best they could, their storm bolters and assault cannon hurling a torrent of projectiles at the surrounding

ambushers. Balconies gave way under the impact of cyclone krak warheads, toppling dozens of Magnus' insane disciples, crushing more beneath the fall of broken masonry. Detonations rippled along galleries, obliterating bodies and bricks. The screams of the slain were lost in the crash of splintering blocks and pummelled ferrocrete. Glass and crystal shattered, plunging as lethal hail onto Magnus' followers below.

'Where? Where are they?' Jorn pivoted left and then right, storm bolter tracking the hundreds of signals that appeared and disappeared across the sensorium. Scouring laser blasts attested that the augur returns were not simply phantasms, but swathed within the concealing, distracting miasma, the enemy might as well have been ghosts.

A figure of white fire moved beside them. Arjac was about to open fire when he realised it was the Navigator. Rays of darkness cut through the light as she directed the stare of her third eye against the cultists.

Arjac raised his shield, Sven likewise on the other side, providing cover for his companions while they reloaded.

'*Detecting your… Moving forward to sec… Do you need…*' Valgarthr's question was lost in a welter of vox static edged with spectral whispering.

'Do not enter the Pyramid of Photep!' Njal commanded, advancing quickly, oblivious to the raking fire that cascaded down around him. He stopped about ten metres in front of Arjac, head turning first one way and then the other as he looked for something. Again, he had the distracted appearance of a man in communion with another. Rockfist thought he saw the Rune Priest's lips moving ever so slightly. The Rune Priest started forward again, his gait somewhat shorter than usual.

Arjac's instincts blazed. Not all was as it seemed. Someone else walked in the Stormcaller's body. Someone who was not used to the Rune Priest's exact length of stride and, judging by a slight hesitancy in each step, was also unfamiliar with the particular properties of advancing in Terminator armour. Tiny details, but enough to send the hearthegn after the fading outline of the Rune Priest.

'With me,' he told his pack, grimacing at the prospect of forging further into the teeth of enemy fire without any clear indication where they were or what his objective was meant to be.

Njal walked quickly now, forcing Arjac to advance after him. He needed to stay close but was not willing to break completely with his pack as fresh

fusillades ripped through the disorientating light cloud. There seemed to be a brightness ahead, beyond what the sensorium said was a thick wall, but discernibly different to the shimmering diffusion that swirled liquid-like at their passage.

'It's moving,' warned Ingvarr.

'What is moving? Give me clear reports!' Arjac growled back, trying to balance the unfolding tactical nightmare with his oath to protect or execute the Runelord if necessary. Half of him wanted to withdraw, take stock and launch a more considered attack. The other half compelled him to follow in the wake of the compromised psyker, trying to get within hammer's reach without betraying his intent to whatever sentience currently inhabited Njal Stormcaller's mortal frame.

'The *wyrdlit*, pack leader,' Ingvarr said, a hint of surprise that he needed to explain himself.

Arjac tore his gaze away from the Stormcaller to see that there was indeed a current stirring in the cerulean glare to his right. He turned his attention to the other side and realised that the motion was cyclic, and moving around their position.

'Is that your doing, Stormcaller?' Berda asked the Rune Priest, his voice quiet with uncharacteristic doubt.

'I am trying to concentrate. Cease your prattle,' the Rune Priest replied. The voice was his in timbre and depth, but the manner was not. He was sometimes curt, but never casually admonishing.

The cyclonic movement of the warplight was increasing, swirling around the Rune Priest, moving with them as they neared the brighter shaft within the azure gleam. Arjac broke into a run, power flooding his suit while targeting runes danced over Njal's armoured outline. The psyker had stopped, staff held high, other hand forming complex shapes with his fingers.

It felt like diving into a maelstrom, light whirling faster and faster though it left no physical touch upon Arjac's armour. He heard Ulfar call his name in surprise but ignored his companion. The sorcerer – or whatever being had been masquerading as such – was opening the portal, Arjac was certain of it. The Rune Priest had been duped; his psychic potential hijacked by a warp entity to rip open barriers weakened already by the machinations of the cultists.

Rockfist's hammer snaked white fronds of power through the swirling warp energy. He was three steps from Njal and drew back his arm, the corrupted Space Marine unaware, it seemed.

Something banged into his arm from behind, knocking him off his stride.

It was one of Magnus' disciples, somersaulting through the warplight, tossed about while the energy dragged at his robes and pulled at his long greasy hair. The man, eyes wild inside the visor of his beak-faced mask, stretched impossibly as he touched the column of white light.

He disappeared.

Arjac took another step, momentum faltering with confusion. Another cultist whirled past, her screams only just audible above the roaring of blood in his ears. More of them funnelled down into the light as though flung by a godly hand, limbs snapping, backs breaking and contorting as the unearthly torrent slammed and twisted their bodies within buffeting currents of otherworldly power.

'Arjac?'

Sven was at his shoulder, the rest of the pack close behind. Njal could see nothing of the Wolf Guard's face but Sven's stance and tone betrayed intense confusion.

Rockfist realised he could see the others clearly, no hint of flowing sapphire power. He saw the last of the warplight flecked with the still-flailing bodies of the cultists, swirling down into the blazing central column like water down a drain hole. His attention returned quickly to the Stormcaller.

The Rune Priest faced the portal column with staff outstretched between both hands, the last flickers of golden energy dancing along its length, drifting across the gap between him and the rapidly diminishing warp-slash. He convulsed lightly, once, a wordless choking noise sounding across the vox-link.

With eyes narrowed, his grip relaxed but firm on Foehammer, Arjac took another step. Njal – his body, at least – turned slowly, bringing the staff down in one hand, the other moving to clutch something at his chest but the fingers finding the embossed plate of his armour instead. They locked gazes and for an instant Rockfist knew he looked into the stare of another even though the eyes were so familiar. A hint of a smirk played

about the Rune Priest's lips, revealing a sliver of fang, and then it was gone.

Njal straightened just a little, his eyes quickly focusing on Arjac and then flicking to the hammer in his hand. The gaze, knowing and wise, met Arjac's again, and he saw understanding – an acceptance of what had just happened. There was almost gratitude in the Stormcaller's expression.

Arjac waited a heartsbeat longer, assuring himself that the Stormcaller was fully present. There had been wild talk of a daemon-creature that had sowed discord and conflict across the Imperium by taking the guise of others. Rumour in the Fang even implicated this changeling in the terrible events that had set the Dark Angels against the Space Wolves, weakening both before the invasion of Magnus. It was quite possible the daemon was continuing its mission to destroy the Sons of Fenris.

Was it simply the threat of discovery that had forced it to relinquish its hold?

Arjac had to trust himself, to believe what he had seen in Njal's face. Had there been cause for Arjac to act, he had no doubt the Stormcaller would have ordered him to strike the blow there and then, willing to sacrifice himself if he thought the expedition was compromised.

The sensorium rippled around the crack in realities but the rest of the hall swirled into recognition, amalgamating the disparate viewpoints. The hall had a high ceiling. The walls were broken by platforms and walkways and the space between criss-crossed by transitways and gantries. Beams of plasteel held up crystal sub-ceilings that refracted the dying daylight into a gentle luminescence that filled the vast chamber. Most importantly, there were no unaccountable life signs within the Pyramid.

Still, Arjac could not relax.

He looked at the change wrought upon the interior of the Pyramid of Photep and knew that his worries were far from over.

The cavernous space looked as though it extended forever but the wyrdsenses of Njal felt a massive pressure pushing in from every direction, as though he had been crammed into a space far too small. The split in reality filled everything with its pulsating energy, lapping at the broken containment runes. Far above – impossibly far above even given the Pyramid of Photep's immensity – serpent-like silhouettes writhed

against a bright sun. Other shapes, hints of flame and face, of fang and claw, moved through the curtain of power.

Where the column of light had been was now occupied by a towering stele of jet black. Its edges rippled with power, but the flat surfaces absorbed everything like a negative light, darker than even the void between stars.

+Incredible.+

'What is it?' asked Arjac.

'Our objective. An entrance to the Portal Maze.'

'It is a bridge between the realms,' said Majula, placing the shield over her mutant eye. 'I have not read of anything like it. Not a warp rift, far more precisely engineered.'

'We need to muster our strength before we continue.' The hearthegn sent his squad to watch points around the hall, guarding the corridors and archways. 'We can hold the temple grounds for a while if need be.'

Njal was eager to be rid of Izzakar, but he could see the sense in Arjac's caution. He nodded his assent and activated the vox. 'Valgarthr, form a collapsing cordon to my position and unite with the Wolf Guard. Have the force from the landing field maintain the corridor. We'll call them when we need them, no sense in everyone getting surrounded in the central district.'

'*Aye, Lord of Runes. As you say*.'

Majula glared at the undulating fog of power, near rigid, fists clenched at her sides. There was no reaction from her when Njal stepped up by her side.

'Navigator?'

Majula either ignored him or did not hear. She slipped a hand up to the band across her forehead. The Stormcaller halted her as gently as possible, a finger on her wrist.

'Let me see, Lord of Runes,' she said quietly, not turning her head. 'I cannot feel the light of the Emperor within. It swallows the echoes of Terra. Let me look into the Portal Maze.'

+I do not think that wise.+

'Tell me what you see,' said Njal, lifting his hand.

Majula pulled the silver eyeguard away and looked up. Njal steadfastly refused to look at her, instead fixing on the broken tiles of the floor. Still

he felt the lap of her third eye's stare fluttering on the cusp of his wyrdsense.

'I see nothing,' Majula whispered. She took a step, head level to look directly into the strange cleft where the magistae had been.

'Never mind. You tried.'

'No… I see *nothing*. Not the sworl of warp space, nor the reality of our universe. The maze is empty.'

+That cannot be so. The Portal Maze is built around strands of the immaterial. Even refracted and distorted, the reflection of the mortal realm should be there. Maybe some power is deliberately blinding her.+

Njal positioned himself so that only the Navigator could see his face. 'My passenger thinks that you do not see what is there.'

Majula shook her head and crossed her arms.

'It is empty. A forced void, as though it was gutted, and its heart torn from within by incredible power.'

'The Planet of the Sorcerers…' Njal pictured the tearing of the barrier as the wyrd-born daemonworld ripped through the fabric of reality. 'Magnus used the Portal Maze, or part of it, to assist in bringing forth his world from the warp.'

+Why would he do such a thing? The Portal Maze was one of our greatest creations. The invasion of your predecessors caused damage, but what you claim would be a wanton act of destruction.+ Izzakar's disbelief touched on Njal's thoughts, tendrils of doubt that the Rune Priest had to force back with effort before they infected his own thinking. +Unless there was no other way.+

'Magnus cares nothing for what was wrought in his time as a mortal. He has been damned, taken by the Dark Powers as one of their princes, to rule the physical world in their stead. He would sacrifice every last warrior of the Thousand Sons for that cause.'

'Something is coming,' warned Majula. She pointed, still fixated upon the semi-functioning portal gate.

Njal let his wyrdself break free and approached the crackling boundary plane that separated the juxtaposed realities of his universe and the Portal Maze. He dared not let his thoughts settle in its static-flecked perimeter but from their fluctuations he could detect the disturbance that had alerted the Navigator.

‘They are marching,’ she whispered. ‘They are marching forth.’

‘Who?’ demanded Njal. He signalled to Arjac. ‘Wolf Guard, bear your weapons upon the breach.’

A grind of pneumatics and thunderous tread announced the approach of Bjorn the Fell-Handed and his two Dreadnought brothers. The Ancient One’s assault cannon lifted towards the warp-swirl.

‘Trust nothing that comes from this place, Stormcaller,’ the Dreadnought intoned.

‘What if it is the Old Guard?’ asked Arjac. ‘Our lost kin returned?’

‘It is not, Son of Fenris,’ Majula said sharply, taking a heaving breath. ‘I see them more clearly now. Crimson-clad they are, beneath the moon and stars. Lightning-born, warriors of Prospero.’

‘Crimson-clad?’ Arjac raised his shield, hammer drawn back as though he expected a monstrous beast to erupt from the pulsating gateway. ‘What foe is this?’

A buzz of excitement itched at Njal, but it was not his own.

+Can it be? Of course, why would we assume that only I survived of my company and cabal?+

‘Weapons ready!’ called Njal. ‘She speaks of the Thousand Sons in their Prosperine livery. Only since their fall did they change their colours to the azure and gold of their new allegiance. These warriors have been trapped in the Portal Maze since our fore-brothers razed this city.’

Desperation throbbed through the Rune Priest’s mind.

+Hold your fire! They know nothing of what has passed since the Wolf King’s wrath fell upon Tizca.+

‘Why would that stay our hands?’ Njal replied, barely breathing the words, his face averted from the others. ‘We are here to finish the task the Old Guard began.’

+Folly! We can seek alliance. They will answer to my command.+

‘Your corpse lies somewhere in the Portal Maze.’ Around Njal, the Wolf Guard levelled their weapons at the othergate. ‘I do not think they will listen to our demands.’

In the ebb and flow, it was possible to see a shadow growing – a body of warriors approaching as though from a distance. They carried icons of moons and stars above them, as Majula had said, and banners hung still against their poles. The red and gold armour of the Thousand Sons

resolved into more detail, squads of time-lost legionaries advancing in step, their marks of armour ancient by the standards of the 41st millennium.

‘What are your orders, Stormcaller?’ asked Arjac. ‘Do we open fire?’

‘Not yet,’ the Rune Priest replied. ‘Our fire might not pass the portal boundary and we don’t have unlimited supplies. Better to conserve what ammunition we have for when it is most needed.’

‘Be wary of sorcery,’ warned Bjorn. ‘The wyrd-gift ran through their Legion like the gene-seed of Magnus himself.’

The red-armoured host, perhaps two hundred strong, seemed only a few dozen metres away. They made no manoeuvres that suggested they were even aware of the Space Wolves outside the breach, though their formation was one of preparedness.

‘Return fire immediately against any hostile act,’ Njal told his warriors. He eased his spirit into Nightwing and sent the psyber-raven flying above the tear through realities. From that angle he could see no more of the Thousand Sons than on the ground, the image oddly flattened as though painted on the floor rather than something three-dimensional.

+I beseech you, Son of Fenris, do nothing rash. Do not allow long millennia of dogma to turn opportunity to tragedy. These are my brothers. They know nothing of Magnus’ fall from Enlightenment.+

‘So you admit the treachery of your primarch?’ whispered Njal.

+I cannot ignore the evidence. But I do not share in Magnus’ crime and nor do my warriors. They will be as appalled as I am by the fate that has befallen the Thousand Sons.+

‘Not befallen, sorcerer. Chosen. Never forget that your brothers sided with Horus against the Emperor. They picked the path of damnation.’

If the sorcerer was going to debate the point his argument was cut off when the portal tear fluctuated wildly. Arcs of purple flared to the ground from the edges, their flashes casting impossible shadows from the advancing column within.

The lead squad of Thousand Sons stepped out of the breach surrounded by an aura of azure power, the vexillor at their head holding high the icon of his company. The portal’s crackle was lost in the crash of boots striding in unison.

The order to open fire was on Njal's lips, the staff in his hand gleaming with psychic power as he readied bolts of vengeance.

The vexillor faltered in his next step and the legionary to his right stumbled also, the creak of armour and the steady step replaced with a clutter of banging ceramite as one warrior tottered into another. As though suddenly finding the footing unstable, the whole squad staggered, their perfect coordination lost within two strides. The icon crashed against the tiles from the standard bearer's fingers even as his legs buckled and he plunged face first to the floor.

The rest of the squad collapsed likewise, not with any great flailing or drama, simply lowering to their knees and then falling face down.

One of the legionaries' helmet lenses caught the edge of a dropped bolter and cracked open. White dust spilled from the gash, sparkling for a moment with wyrd power before the escaping soul dissipated, leaving only a drift of ash-like residue.

Njal laughed hoarsely. 'Dust. All is dust!'

In Njal's head, Izzakar was a knot of wordless anguish that burned like acid.

Unknowing or uncaring of what had befallen their advance guard, the rest of the Thousand Sons continued their deliberate advance. Each squad stumbled over the remnants of those that preceded them, armour clattering into a heap of lifeless ceramite. Not a word of surprise was uttered, the only sound was an accumulating noise of piled armour and the scratch of dislodged plates sliding across each other.

+What is happening? What curse is this?+

Njal watched the unfolding scene with contempt, but as suits of armour piled by the score across the portal entrance the confusion and pain of Izzakar was real and raw in his mind, impossible to shut out entirely.

'The price of treachery,' said the Stormcaller. 'They join their Legion brothers in lifelessness.'

+I… What does that mean?+ The sorcerer's distraught tone became accusing. +What have you hidden from me, Fenrisian dog?+

The attention of the others was fixed on the spectacle of the collapsing legionaries. Njal spoke softly and quickly, masking words by rubbing a hand across his face.

‘I neither know nor care how or why, but the same curse was laid upon all of your brothers save a few. They are nothing but dust and unknowing spirit trapped inside their armour. Your whole Legion, those that survived the treacherous attack on the Emperor, are empty vessels for the powers of the abyss.’

The last squads of Thousand Sons emerged from the undulating energy curtain and clattered to ruin among the remains of their Legion brothers. Silence descended and within the Portal Maze the emptiness returned.

Several of the Space Wolves moved closer, weapons trained on the lifeless armour.

‘What do we do with these, Lord of Runes?’ asked Arjac, gesturing with his hammer towards the immobile Thousand Sons. ‘They are not dead. Not really.’

‘Hammer and fist, my brother,’ said Njal. ‘Conserve your ammunition. Break open these shells so that the tainted spirits within shall never be roused again. Then we shall be rid of the enemy for good.’

+You tricked me, Stormcaller. You let me believe my Legion survived.+

With obvious relish, the Wolf Guard pack leader waved his warriors forwards. Seconds later, the crackle of energy fields and thud of pounding power fists preceded the noise of shattering ceramite. Methodical and brutal, the Wolf Guard smashed the mounds of Thousand Sons detritus. Arjac chanted a *war-skelt* as he did so, swinging his hammer in rhythm to the words. Bjorn joined them, his lightning fist wreathed with bolts of power, each strike slashing a gaping wound through the carapace or helm of a cursed legionary.

Around them, the air writhed with half-seen souls, a passing psychic breeze hinting at desultory moans of sadness.

‘It does survive, in a fashion,’ Njal told Izzakar, away from the others while they continued their brutal work. ‘You believed whatever you wanted to believe, Prosperine traitor. I told you that Magnus had turned, but you would not have it. Look upon his works and know the truth’.

With the last rays of the day touching the Pyramid of Photep’s broken flanks, its long shadow eclipsing the lesser precincts and libraries about it, the column from the landing grounds met with the perimeter protecting the portal breach. Dozens of thralls and three more makeshift packs of

Stormriders reinforced the patrols and guard points on the approaches to the colossal edifice.

Njal checked with Valgarthr by vox on the situation outside the Pyramid of Photep.

'*The area has been secured, Lord of Runes*,' the veteran pack leader reported. '*The enemy are scattered. I have not pursued, in favour of keeping guard on your location*.'

'Yes, you were right. There's no way to know how many of these damned traitors lurk behind the veil. When we have freed Bulveye and his brothers we might have the strength to purge these ruins. If not, then Tizca can wait for the final wrath of the Space Wolves.'

The cultists' attacks had all but evaporated. Here and there in the darkness, a lasgun sparked and a bolt shell would bark out in reply. With their all-spectrum autosenses and motion-tracking targeters, the Space Marines were more than capable of fighting nocturnally as well as in the daytime. The cultists were not, and restricted their sporadic assaults to areas lit by the warp-gleam that shone through breaks in the walls of the pyramids and tome-shrines.

Valgarthr joined Njal and Arjac at the main breach with a squad of Stormriders. Their armour was pocked with recent battle scars, and stained with blood from close combat. They looked even more ragged than when they had departed Fenris, some with fresh wounds, others with old injuries exacerbated by the fighting. Even so, they were in high spirits, invigorated by the conflict, their hearts lifted by the chance to fight again for the Allfather and Russ.

'The perimeter has settled, Stormcaller,' the senior pack leader told Njal.

The broken armour of the Raptora cult Thousand Sons had been cleared away, parts of it set aside by the tech-priests for later reclamation. Some of the suits were sealed together with quick-setting plastek foam to make improvised barricades across the temple entrances – an ignoble end that served as warning to the Tzeentchian cultists.

Valgarthr cocked his good eye towards the undulating miasma of the breach. 'We have to enter there.'

Njal knew that they were at the point of decision. He had not realised it, but he had been delaying this moment, busying himself with the details of

securing the site and marshalling the Stormriders. His psychic sight and sweeps with Nightwing had provided invaluable information on the massing cultists and the layout of the broken buildings surrounding their position.

But now was a step into the unknown. He thought of what had happened to the Thousand Sons that had emerged, trapped for ten thousand years, and of the Old Guard still within. If the Stormriders entered, would they ever return?

+I can guide you. Just as I opened this gateway, I will aid you in finding your lost brothers. You need to trust me, Stormcaller.+

Izzakar's sudden enthusiasm was suspicious. Njal was sure he could not trust the sorcerer, but was equally certain he had no other option. Whatever Izzakar intended, the Space Wolves had come to Prospero for this purpose, and the only way to proceed was beyond the fluctuating barrier-ward.

'We go in,' he declared to his companions.

'I shall enter first, Stormcaller,' insisted Valgarthr. His pack moved close to their leader, silently adding their weight and assent to his statement. 'We are the least loss should it go poorly.'

'No loss is minor, pack leader,' said Bjorn, thudding up behind the Stormriders. 'And any warrior whose valiant service matches yours is worth ten times their number.'

+Send in your thralls,+ suggested Izzakar. +They are your most expendable asset.+

Njal ignored the sorcerer's callous opinion and lifted his staff. Nightwing flapped from his shoulder to the skull tip, cawing loudly.

'I have eyes that can see beyond the veil. None need risk their lives in experiment.'

With Lukas most definitely not leading from the front, despite being a step ahead of his companions at any given time, the Blood Claws kept moving. They hacked into the knots of cultists that gathered, avoiding potential ambushes by the simple expedient of moving too fast for their enemies to lie in wait. Lukas and his pack-brothers bounded through fusillades of bullets and las-bolts with pistols blazing. They raced up stairwells and leapt from mezzanines and galleries to reach marksmen and fire teams

trying to pin them down at range. They dodged down alleyways to avoid heavy weapons crossfire and sped through underpasses to come upon flanking mobs unawares. Back and forth, seemingly at random, the pack cut a bloody path through the harbourside, until the clash of arms fell silent. They stopped only when the streets were deserted of foes but for those that groaned their last under the uncaring stars of Prospero's night.

Cultist blood slicked their armour and weapons, and they had used up almost half of their ammunition. At Lukas' suggestion, they secured a cellar beneath a worker tenement close to the deep harbour front where the largest vessels had once docked.

The quays had been stripped of every crane and loader, and even securing bolts had been taken. The deep holes and emptied tramways were evidence of the massive industry that had once thrived here.

Here the Blood Claws took stock of their situation.

'They must be using the Portal Maze,' said Bahrd.

It was from a fortification across the artificial bay that Lukas had seen the bulk of the cultists and mutants spill forth.

'Thank you for keeping up,' replied Lukas. 'Of course they're using the Portal Maze. The tall building over there was once the hub for the port command. There must be a gate inside.'

'How do you know that?' asked Jerrik.

'I may have looked at some charts while we were aboard the *Longclaw*,' replied Lukas. 'Nobody said they were secret.'

'Memorised them?'

'It's a delight what our enhanced brains can do when we try.' Lukas tapped the side of his head with the tip of his deactivated claw, pretending to burrow it into his temple. 'Did you know that throughout the tribes of Fenris there are at least forty-eight variations on the *Thegn's Rusty Harpoon*?'

'We need to go in there and try to deactivate that portal,' said Gudbrand.

'Wisdom worthy of the Allfather.' Lukas clapped the Blood Claw on the back.

'Um, Lukas…?' The interruption came from Agthei, who was scrolling a finger across the screen of the auspex Lukas had given him – a device the Trickster had purloined from one of Valgarthr's Grey Hunter squads on the assumption that it would come in useful at some point.

‘Yes, Agthei?’

‘I’ve just locked in our positional status, and it has marked out the route we took to get here.’

‘Standard positional data capture,’ Lukas said with an air of innocence. ‘What of it?’

‘Well…’ Agthei turned the scanner sideways. ‘If I do this it looks like our route forms Fenrisian runes, sort of.’

‘Saying what?’ asked Artyn.

‘It’s the symbols for elk sha–’

‘What a coincidence,’ Lukas said quickly, striding back to the threshold of the cellar’s external doorway from where he could see the whole expanse of the dockside. ‘Come along, put that thing to better use and get some readings from that building.’

He clapped a hand to Agthei’s shoulder and thrust him out into the street. The Blood Claw adjusted the settings of the auspex, muttering conciliatory phrases to its spirit to apologise for Lukas’ blasphemies. The rest of the pack watched the surrounding buildings and what had been the waterfront, now just an expanse of dead earth that stretched to the horizon, baked and cracked by the sun.

‘No readings,’ reported Agthei. ‘Nothing at all.’

Lukas peered over the younger Space Marine’s shoulder, confident that the Blood Claw had been properly trained in auspex use but confused all the same. The reading was correct; not a single signature emanated from the port headquarters. Lukas looked across the divide, trying to see into the shadowed interior through the large openings where once plate glassite had been. He thought he saw a flicker of blue on an interior wall.

‘There’s only one way to check,’ he declared. He turned a lopsided smile on Gudbrand. ‘Still think we need to investigate?’

‘Yes,’ the Blood Claw said with an emphatic nod.

‘Good. It’s too quiet around here. Let’s find some trouble.’

CHAPTER 12
THE PROSPERINE MAZE

Through the eyes of the psyber-raven Njal looked at the coruscating veil that stood between them and the unknown worlds of the Portal Maze. He took a settling breath and let more of his power ebb into the familiar, imbuing it with his thought and will.

+Let me see.+

'You cannot?'

+Only with the eyes in your head. Your thoughts are barred again. Let me see as you do and I will aid you.+

The sorcerer had been true to his word in reversing the portal to destroy the cultists. Compared to giving up momentary control of his voice and limbs, Njal was confident no harm could come from allowing a tiny portion of Izzakar's psychic splinter to connect with Nightwing.

He gathered his thoughts, singling out the small partition that housed the soul fragment of Izzakar, as he had done during the portal opening. He let just the tiniest mote of awareness pass through the wall he had erected, siphoning it with his own psychic power into the nervous system of the psyber-raven.

+How remarkable. My brothers of the Corvidae sect would be…+ The thought trailed away. +They are dead. Or corrupted.+

With a minute exertion of energy Njal set Nightwing into motion. The psyber-raven flew back and forth across the gaping hole in reality, passing twice before the breach, eyes and psychic augurs seeking any sign of what lay beyond.

‘What do you see, Navigator?’ Njal asked.

Majula removed her eyeguard, which she had restored while the Space Wolves had gone about their labours. Taking a few strides closer, she gazed into the depths. At Njal’s urging Nightwing circled higher, keeping clear of any accidental sight of her sanity-shredding third eye. Even so, the projection of power was a warm wind that ruffled the psyber-familiar’s feathers.

‘Nothing, as before, Lord of Runes,’ Majula told him. ‘Darkness eternal. A chasm between realms.’

‘Very well. We forge onwards.’

With another deep breath, Njal swerved Nightwing towards the breach. What little remained of the natural bird shirked at the wall of quietly crackling energy. The Stormcaller pushed through its base instincts and the raven flew into the breach.

Passing the veil was a momentary sensation, not at all what Njal had expected. After a lifetime of warp transitions he had thought to experience dislocation, perhaps sickness and disembodiment. Through the senses of Nightwing, he felt… nothing. No more than when stepping into a neighbouring chamber. Simply a change of perspective. A dip in temperature. A slight dimming of the light.

‘Are we actually inside?’

+Yes, on the boundary curve.+

The hall appeared as it did from the outside, except when he looked back at the Space Wolves, Njal saw their wyrdlit gleaming from within. For most it was little more than a dusting of colour, their souls weak and kept caged behind walls of ritual discipline. The Dreadnoughts glowed from the wolf pelts and bone-talismans, powered by *ulfwyrd* – respect and admiration of millennia that had accumulated within the frames of their war machine bodies and their totemic decorations.

He saw Majula, a star of blinding brightness in her forehead, though thankfully dulled by the intervening barrier.

And next to her, himself. He was used to glimpsing his own body, dwarfing her in its armour, red hair wild and unkempt. What took him aback was the golden apparition that hovered over his shoulder. Indistinct, but gaining clarity as he focused, the unmistakably monochrome outline of

a Thousand Sons Librarian. Not some horn-helmed sorcerer or mutant heretic, but a sombre-faced Space Marine with a rune-embroidered tabard over his armour, with neat rows of sigils etched into the battleplate.

+Remarkable.+

The image was at odds with Njal's impression.

Not impression, he realised. His preconception. All he pictured of Izzakar had been created by the sagas of Prospero and ten thousand years of enmity.

An enmity that had been earned by the Thousand Sons, he reminded himself, recalling the devastation brought to Fenris by Magnus and his warriors. His mood soured.

'What do you mean by "boundary curve"?'

+The Portal Maze works on a gradient. Rather than dropping into the abyss, one goes deeper in stages. It is not so simple as one gate leading to another gate like a teleport link, although that can also be true. Each transportation can be used to navigate further into the maze, or out of it. Like a door that leads onto a landing with two flights of steps, giving you the choice to head up or down. Deeper means further, so that the third or fourth portal can take you light-decades from where you began. That is why the Old Guard caused so much damage with their rampaging. The more they blundered, the deeper they went, until they reached the heart of the Portal Maze.+

Njal steered Nightwing around the hall and his view rippled and inverted as though moving through a reflection in a disturbed pool. He saw a plinth, about half a metre high, reached by two steps, on which burned three silver symbols. He remembered the stele that Izzakar had activated and decided the raised stone had to be its analogue within the Portal Maze.

The psyber-raven flew laps about the plinth but Njal was careful not to pass over it.

'The heart is where we will find my lost brothers?'

+That is where you will find my body. And where they were last. They are near, as much as such concepts of proximity count whilst in the maze. Though it is but a fraction of the ten thousand years in their awareness, they have not stayed idle in such time as they experienced.+

'So we must go deep? Far along the curve?'

+Yes. To reach the heart requires at least eight gates. I should say that it did require that many. Who can say what additional ruin the continuing trespasses of your warriors has caused?+

Now that he was becoming attuned to the nascent rhythm of the maze, Njal could make out more of the landscape within the boundary of the broken gateway. He saw another chamber, much like the one they had occupied but smaller, with inverted triangle windows that looked out on precincts beyond.

'The cultists did not blindly throw themselves through the gates. They knew something of what they were doing. Guided, I would think.'

+Indubitably. Only Magnus truly understood the full extent of the Portal Maze. If he has imbued them with a portion of his power, the secrets are theirs to learn. If the ruptures are as severe as I think they will be, there may be other foes too.'

'More Thousand Sons?'

+I was thinking more in the nature of those that assailed you through the Geller field.+

'Daemons?'

+Yes. *Daemons*.+

Izzakar said the word as though testing it out and Njal was reminded that even for the Thousand Sons the terminology of Chaos and the dark minions of the warp was something that had come into use after the defeat of Horus. The Stormcaller was well aware that even at his lofty position his ignorance of such things was more than his knowledge, but in the time of the Wolf King even the concept of daemons had not been recognised.

'Then tell me, this Portal Maze, is it real or is it wyrd-make?'

+I do not understand the question.+

'Here, where Nightwing flies on the other side of the veil. Are we real or immaterial? Will the daemons be within the warp or must they manifest physical bodies that we can destroy?'

+I see…+ Izzakar considered the point for a few seconds. +Real. For the most part. The Portal Maze is like the Geller field in some respects. It creates corridors of reality. Think of the links as pockets of material physics. Though broken in many places, it is not of the warp itself.+

'That makes our task a little easier.' Njal transferred focus from Nightwing back to his body, as simply as a normal person might shift

weight from one foot to the other. ‘Valgarthr, Arjac, Bjorn. Prepare your warriors. The Portal Maze is dangerous, and not just because of the foes it hides. We must stay close together. Any that wander will be lost. Our mission is simple. We locate Bulveye and the Old Guard and we leave with them. Everything else, any foe we meet, is secondary to that objective.’

Arjac signalled his assent with a raised hammer and Valgarthr voxed an affirmative.

‘We stand ready,’ said Bjorn. ‘I will go where I could not before.’

The Stormcaller turned to Majula as she slipped on her headband.

‘I hope you will join us. We venture into a land that is as much immaterial as real, and your gifts will be valuable to us. I place no bond upon you and if you wish to stay here, my warriors as well as yours will see to your protection.’

The Navigator looked at the cerulean cascade. She took a breath and Njal noticed her hands tremble within the cuffs of her long sleeves.

‘Stay here,’ he said. ‘None will think worse of you for it.’

‘No.’ Majula set her jaw, darkened lips pursed tight.

Njal activated his vox-link and broadcast on the command channel. ‘Aldacrel, we are about to enter the Portal Maze. You are the ranking warrior in Tizca. You have command.’

‘Understood, Stormcaller. We will hold the city centre until you return.’

Njal paused, not quite sure how to phrase what he wanted to say next.

‘We may not come back,’ he told the Iron Priest. ‘I do not know how long we shall be gone, and I leave it to your judgement whether to remain or not. We came to Prospero seeking to bolster our strength, not to expend it.’

‘By the Allfather, we will fight as long as we can.’

‘If you think your position is untenable, you must withdraw. You must keep the route to the landing field open, you cannot allow yourself to be trapped here. This is a rescue mission, not a last stand. That is my command. Am I clear?’

‘*Aye, Stormcaller*. *No foolish heroics from us, I swear.’*

‘Fight well for the Allfather.’

‘*May He guide you through the dark places you must go,’* the Iron Priest replied before the link went dead.

‘Stormriders!’ Njal surveyed his warriors, proud to be in their company. ‘We venture into unknown seas, with only our wit and the wisdom of the Allfather to steer by. Whatever hardship besets us next, we are the equal to it. Now comes the hour when our saga truly begins.’

Valgarthr’s squad hurried to be the first across the divide, though with the eyes of Nightwing, Njal could detect no threat beyond. As the outer reaches of energy lapped at the armour of the Stormriders, Arjac had a question.

‘Speaking of hardships, has anyone heard from that duty-shy Lukas?’

‘Probably skulking somewhere, Rockfist,’ replied Sven Halfhelm. ‘You know the Jackalwolf – never where anybody needs him.’

The port command centre looked like an inverted cone atop a huge pillar, taller than anything else in the docklands. Its uppermost levels were little more than a skeleton of ferrocrete pillars and spars, the large windows that had allowed the controllers to see across the harbour taken millennia before – if they had even survived the wrath of the Wolf King’s attack.

The main pillar, nearly two thirds of its height, was broken only by narrow apertures. The interior was dark as the Blood Claws stepped over the threshold where once broad doors had barred entry. There were signs of fresh disturbance in the ash and dust, clawed and toed footprints on the floor, but Agthei’s auspex continued to buzz with negative readings. The centre of the column was another pillar, hollowed out with four shafts that had once held conveyors. All trace of gear and chain, cage and brake had been removed. Holes in the walls showed where metal rungs had once been embedded.

‘There are stairwells, this way,’ said Agthei, consulting the flickering schematic of his scanner. He pointed through an opening behind the conveyor column, which had the look of a maintenance area. Bare ferrocrete steps led up, wide enough for them to advance only in single file, though a sibling staircase was located on the opposite side of the hallway.

‘Split up?’ said Bahrd.

‘We should stick together,’ said Agthei. He looked at Lukas for support, or perhaps affirmation. The Trickster gifted him only a nonchalant shrug.

‘Together,’ echoed Gudbrand.

There were a few seconds while the others internally debated, but consensus was reached when Lukas stepped towards the stair and the others followed. He pointed a claw at Agthei. ‘The merest squeak from that and you tell me.’

‘Yes, pack… uh, Lukas.’

The Trickster started up the steps, plasma pistol raised, claw ready to strike. He passed small landings on the spiralling stairway with doorways that led to corridors flanked by small chambers, probably clerical cells in the heyday of Tizca.

They reached the first floor of the broader storeys at the summit and immediately Lukas could feel a change, a frisson of tension in the air. Like static in his braids, he could feel the unnatural discharge of the portal gate before he could see it. Stepping off the landing space he came upon a passageway that led towards the front of the building.

The ping of the auspex sounded loud in the confines of the stairwell.

‘Lukas!’ snapped Agthei at the same instant.

The Trickster froze, plasma pistol moving slightly as he eyed the doorways branching off the corridor directly in front of him.

‘Heat and movement. One source,’ Agthei reported, pushing past Gudbrand to stand at Lukas’ shoulder. The Blood Claw panned his scanning device, seeking a more accurate reading.

‘The signature is changing… No, it’s settled. Movement twenty metres ahead. I’d say power armour.’

‘If you see any hint of blue, open fire,’ Lukas whispered, meaning the livery of the traitor Thousand Sons.

The click of the auspex quickened as the signature approached. Agthei moved his pistol to his other hand, and on Lukas’ left, Gudbrand readied his weapon also. Behind, the remaining Blood Claws secured the stairs and a doorway on the opposite side of the landing.

Lukas could see the faint suffusing gleam of portal light through the far archway. A shadow moved across it. The thud of boots echoed down the corridor.

The figure that appeared at the far end was clad in blue-grey. He had the blazon of the Space Wolves upon one shoulder, and the symbol of the Stormriders on the other. Half his face was a mess of makeshift bionics, staples and plastek dressing.

Valgarthr.

The veteran's lips twisted into an approximation of a smile.

'Ah, it's you, brother.' He half turned, tilting his head back the way he had come. 'The others are this way. Come on.'

The pack leader disappeared into the far hall. Lukas hurried after, while Gudbrand assembled the pack and followed behind.

Valgarthr had called them into a chamber that ran for the width of the storey, about forty metres across, which might have once been highly adorned but was now devoid of any decoration or purpose.

Except for the portal.

A golden plinth was set to one side, Prosperine runes carved into its side. Above it fluctuated an aura of light and dark – not black and white, but a distant brightening and dimming like sunlight dappled through a canopy in the wind.

Valgarthr stood before the portal, one foot on the plinth. He waved for Lukas to approach.

'Quickly.'

Lukas stopped a few paces away, listening for the arrival of the others. His eyes never left Valgarthr, and as the pack leader turned to acknowledge the rest of the Blood Claws Lukas raised his plasma pistol and opened fire.

The azure blast struck Valgarthr in the head, blossoming against the wounded skull. Explosive forces ripped open the Space Marine, flinging him across the chamber from the portal.

The accusing shouts of the Blood Claws erupted around Lukas as he dashed forward, claw at the ready. Where Valgarthr had fallen lay a writhing, misshapen thing. It appeared clad in grey power armour, but the open wound caused by the plasma bolt was a seething mass of blue and pink and green, rippling against itself.

An eye popped into existence through the wolfshead symbol on the ruined chest plastron, regarding Lukas with a baleful red pupil. The Trickster took another step and the thing convulsed, sprouting tentacle limbs from its back that carried it scuttling away.

Lukas gave pursuit, cursing the recharge of his pistol. Bolts from the Blood Claws flickered past, exploding across fake armour and unveiled

daemonflesh. Each detonation tore open the disguise a little further, the mechanical becoming seething organic.

All of a sudden the daemon-changer altered course, springing back at Lukas, dagger-blades forming out of broken slivers of not-ceramite. He swiped out his claw just in time, catching the creature where Valgarthr's abdomen would have been. Daemon matter splashed against the Trickster, sliding across his claws and up his arm, folding and bulging and flowing around him. He slashed again, ducking and twisting as more stilettos and barbs hissed into existence, wrenching at his armour, scratching at his exposed face.

The growl of a chainsword painfully close warned him of Bahrd's attack and he ducked just as the Blood Claw's weapon lashed into the creature, hewing deep into its chest with a fountain of immaterial gobbets. It released its grip, tearing chunks from Lukas' neck as it leapt away, limping on gangly tendrils, the withered remnants of legs and arms dragging and flopping like an empty overall as more bolter impacts chewed into its mutating torso and limbs.

It floundered, pursued by the Blood Claws, swaying one way and then the other as it tried to find shelter in the featureless hall. Tatters of blue cloak streamed from its unnatural form while flickers of warpfire played about its wounds.

'Save ammunition,' Lukas suggested, leaping forward with his claw, followed by the revving of chainsword motors as the others piled in after.

It took only seconds to finish off the daemon, scattering parts across the bare ferrocrete. Herlief eradicated the rest with a burst of promethium from his flamer. They watched the burning scraps melting away, nobody quite sure what to say.

Bahrd broke the silence. 'How did you know it was daemonspawn? Did you smell it, see something, taste its otherworldly nature?'

'You all saw his smile the same as I did,' Lukas replied. He spun away, concerned that nobody was watching the portal. It throbbed as before but seemed dormant. 'Nobody ever looks pleased to see me.'

There was no arguing with this immutable truth and they followed Lukas back to the plinth.

'How do we destroy it?' asked Gudbrand, looking at the pulsating gate. 'Melta bombs?'

‘If it survived the scouring of the Rout, I very much doubt we have the means to break it,’ said Lukas.

The rest of the Blood Claws gathered, prowling about the portal stone like a pack closing on its prey. Lukas could feel their eagerness, their battle-lust roused by the fight with the daemon. It was the same feeling that quickened his own pulse.

Lukas set a foot upon the plinth.

‘That… thing tried to lure us into the portal,’ warned Agthei. ‘It has to be a trap.’

‘Of course it is,’ Lukas replied, taking another step, just centimetres from the ill-defined aura that marked the boundary of the portal. ‘Want to find out what’s waiting inside?’

‘All of us together, rapid assault,’ said Herlief. He moved next to Lukas, the flamer dribbling a few sparks from its igniter arm. The others drew closer, weapons ready like bared fangs.

‘For Russ!’ they shouted, and plunged into the swirling gate.

+I know what I am doing. You do not.+

Reluctantly, Njal allowed Izzakar to once again take control of his body, just enough to speak out loud and move his arms and hands. He hated the feeling of impotence when he allowed the sorcerer this freedom. But Njal detested his continued presence more, which was why he allowed the traitor these brief episodes as puppetmaster. It was regrettably the only way to progress through the maze.

The Thousand Sons Librarian placed splayed fingers into the light of the wyrdgate, letting the shimmering white play between them. One digit then another twitched, carefully rather than in spasm, and with each movement one of the runes upon the stone altered shape. The Stormcaller felt the resistance of the wyrdpower building as Izzakar tuned the gate to a new destination.

‘Ahmet aton ahmet utuhl ared autah eitas aret ahmet,’ Njal intoned, the speech his own but the words unintelligible. His lips and tongue felt clumsy around the unfamiliar syllables.

As alien as it felt to him, he knew it was more so for the others around. He caught Arjac looking at him sharply, hammer raised. The Wolf Guard approached a little closer at some command the Stormcaller did not hear.

Combined with his behaviour earlier, it was obvious that Rockfist had been dispatched by the Great Wolf not just to protect Njal but to keep watch on him. If Ulrik's reaction was anything to judge by, any act even slightly out of the ordinary might be deemed against the Chapter's honour and duty. Njal had to remember that in case such reflexive suspicion became an impediment, as much as he sympathised with Logan Grimnar's order and Arjac's concerns.

Izzakar completed his manipulations with a flourish of the hand. The symbols had all changed, and burned with a green cast upon the stone. There was a moment of hesitation, just an instant before the Librarian withdrew his influence, returning to the pocket of Njal's mind he had made his own like a trap-spider withdrawing into its lair after striking.

'Nya fjel wyrd alt, *Arjac sleip neva,'* Njal said to his companions, speaking Fenrisian to reassure them that he was in control. Rockfist did not relax, but turned to the jade gleam of the portalway.

'Where does it go?' the Wolf Guard asked.

+Familiar territory. Somewhere I know well to allow me to get my bearings. The Pyramid of Ahtep-Luxanhtep, temple-arcology of the Raptora cult.+

'One of the other pyramids,' Njal told the others. 'Follow me.'

He stepped up to the plinth and into the shimmering light.

The hall into which the Space Wolves had been transported was open to the sky, its triangular arrangement of windows empty – the fallen glass crunched underfoot, turning to powder beneath their tread. Njal's wyrdsense detected nothing amiss and he concluded that they were somewhere within the material universe as Izzakar had asserted; the view through the broken panes showed the Pyramid of Photep in the distance, the first starlight sparkling on its flank.

'Are we not within the maze?' he whispered.

+There is no maze to be within, you savage. The portals exist in our world. The maze is simply the link between there and here.+

'But you said that time flows awry within the maze, where you and Bulveye were trapped.'

+Yes. Some of the places that might be here or there are within the fringes of warp space, and some portals have broken, allowing anti-

materium to leak in. But the maze is a physical construct except for the heart.+

The thud of more arrivals behind Njal caused him to turn. The plinth he had crossed was no more. Instead a curved archway four metres high and three wide, moulded like two upraised eagle wings, formed the portal through which Valgarthr and his pack emerged, flickers of green energy playing about their armour. Next, the bulky mass of Bjorn moved impossibly through the space, the war machine suddenly filling the empty hall with his presence.

Njal returned his attention to their surroundings while the other two Dreadnoughts pushed through from the Pyramid of Photep, ornate tiles cracking under their weight. The hall was filled with avenues of stone shelves, their highest reaches a dozen metres from the floor. He saw no ladder or stairs and the shelves themselves were empty.

+All gone,+ moaned Izzakar. +This was the *hierographica raptorae*, centuries of accumulated research of our sect. Destroyed!+

'Heretical,' said Njal as he moved away from the others. 'Corrupted. Cleansed to protect others.'

+Wisdom is not an infection. Knowledge lies beyond creed, you barbarian. There is no heresy, only free-thinking and the will to explore. Heresy requires a faith against which to be antithetical! You bandy around these terms without understanding their true meaning. It is an indictment of the Imperium's decline. Orthodoxy and dogma have quashed Enlightenment and the Imperial Truth.+

Njal sent Nightwing ascending towards the shattered slope of the pyramid wall that formed the ceiling. From on high, he could see the archives were arranged in concentric squares, broken through with avenues to three doorways in the other walls.

'I don't see any steps to the upper levels,' said the Rune Priest.

+How prosaic of you, hovel-born. We Raptorae are masters of psykaphysical interaction. Telekinesis. We could bring the crystals and books to us with a whim, or raise and lower floating platforms with the power of our minds.+

'Where is the next portal?' Through the psyber-raven's eyes he searched for something else that might be a gateway into the Portal Maze, but saw nothing.

+The next? We must use this one, idiot! Let me recalibrate the destination. Each portal takes us forward, down the rings of the maze, like stepping stones.+

With the former Librarian's insults still chafing his pride, Njal gestured for his companions to make way and returned to the winged arch. He noticed Arjac's expression of concern and tried to give a reassuring nod. The Rockfist looked unconvinced. Njal pushed his unease aside to focus on the portal mechanism.

Darker symbols marked the tips of the three longest feathers, mirrored to either side. They matched those that Izzakar had arranged on the other side of the portal, back in the Pyramid of Photep.

'So we just step through to get back to where we began?' asked Arjac.

+No! The portals are directional and contextual. I would need to key in the coordinates for the great temple to take us back. But that is not where we need to go, is it? Just let me do my work and stop interfering.+

Njal shook his head in reply to Rockfist, stifling a retort to the sorcerer. He held his hand out towards the arch and set free Izzakar's spirit once more.

The next two portals took them to other locations across Tizca. Each time, Arjac stayed on the heels of the Rune Priest, a shadow not only ready to strike but serving as a reminder to whatever entity shared the Stormcaller's brain.

From the summit of a hexagonal tower north of the Pyramid of Photep, Rockfist and Njal watched the unfolding battle. Much was hidden, but the main conflict around the great temple was visible along one of the great avenues.

Led by a Predator battle tank and three Rhinos, the remainder of the Stormriders had scattered the cultists that had attempted to cut off their access to the inner city. More thralls advanced along the corridor held by the Space Wolves, the patrols of gunships a further deterrent to the followers of Magnus for the time being.

A firefight still raged on the south-eastern corner of the approaches, but it seemed as though the situation was well in hand.

'By harnessing the portal of Photep and anchoring it properly, we've disrupted the local network for the cultists,' said Njal. The terms were

unfamiliar in context but Arjac believed it was the Rune Priest speaking. He guessed Njal had picked up the phrases from the sorcerer. ‘Some of them are trapped inside the maze. The others will find it hard to coordinate until they can re-establish control.’

Rockfist said nothing, stepping aside to allow the Stormcaller to attend to the realignment of the portal gate through which they had entered.

The chamber inside the tower was cramped and the battle force had spread into adjoining hallways and rooms. Space was especially scarce with Bjorn and his two Dreadnought brothers present, their exhaust stacks scraping plaster from the ceiling every time they moved.

‘I don’t like how we can always fit through, no matter what size the doorway is,’ said Berda.

‘You should know that size isn’t everything,’ replied Ingvarr, raising his storm bolter next to Berda’s assault cannon.

The others sighed at the bad joke. It was a good sign, their bond returning after the exceptional events of the past few hours. Arjac left them to their chatter and stepped up beside Majula, who stood by a cracked plate-glassite window, looking towards the distant landing fields. Her guards stood close at hand, but respectfully turned their gaze away.

Only a few tell-tale plasma lights betrayed the last drop runs descending towards Tizca. Night was creeping closer, the terminus clearly visible from the kilometre-high vantage point. Majula stared intently at the scene beyond, barely registering the activity around her. The Navigator had said hardly a word since they had left the Pyramid of Photep and was clearly under some strain.

‘I can still summon you a transport,’ Arjac told her. ‘A Rhino and a combat pack could be spared to take you all back to the dropzone.’

Dorria stepped closer. The guard captain said nothing, gaze directed out of the window, but it was clear from her body language that she was listening to what passed between them.

‘No, thank you, sergeant,’ said Majula. The use of Arjac’s formal Adeptus Astartes rank was alien to his ears. She spoke quietly but he sensed no weakness in her voice. ‘I serve the Guiding Light best by remaining with the Lord of Runes.’

‘That may be so, but it is not the safest place to be.’

‘I disagree,’ said Majula, turning her head within her hood to look at him out of the corner of her eye. In the reflection the silver band that shielded her oracular glinted in the sunset. Arjac suppressed a flinch at the thought of what lay beneath the plain headband, uncomfortable with being so close to the representative of House Belisarius. ‘The *Longclaw* has been emptied of crew save those to fly the ships and man the essential systems. Were I aboard and your expedition fails, I would be stranded here. Without the Lord of Runes, we lack anyone that can conduct astrotelepathy to summon aid. Any foe that could best the Space Wolves would make short work of Dorria and her companions, though I value their loyalty and attendance to what must be an arduous duty.’

Arjac saw Dorria smile slightly under her visor but she did not look round.

‘This could be the last chance to make that choice,’ said Arjac, indicating the portal with inclined head. ‘After this, we may not be anywhere near Tizca.’

‘Or Prospero, sergeant,’ added Majula. Apparently she was more at ease with that thought than Arjac. Given her nature and role in the Imperium he supposed it was not strange that travel to otherworldly places did not vex her.

He said nothing else, and headed back to the others just as the golden hue beneath the archway darkened, signalling that they would shortly be moving again.

CHAPTER 13
INTO DARK PLACES

Arjac's mood worsened when the next jump indeed took them away from Prospero, to a moonlit clifftop among ancient menhirs. The entire stone circle was bathed in a *wyrdglimr* that itched the inside of the skin and prickled the nape of the neck. Njal – or his passenger – examined the runes carved a metre high into the huge stones, tracing them with a fingertip while the rest of the force gazed up at the unfamiliar sky or down at a sea crashing against a harsh shore mottled purple in the light of twin moons.

After that was a cavern, lit only by the suit lamps of the Terminators, though the sensorium sweep detected a sprawl of descending passages curling away from their point of entry. The portal itself seemed to be painted on solid wall, Arjac's suit sensors detecting trace amounts of human blood. The glyphs that formed the gateway bulged and distorted as more warriors passed through. The dark brown scrawl rippled into an outline of an emerging figure before returning to its native shape when each Space Wolf entered.

Njal moved away. Arjac's glare searched the rest of the cavern, following the glitter of lumen beams across crystal deposits and stark striations in the rock. Pairs of Valgarthr's warriors departed to watch the cracks and tunnels while Arjac and the Wolf Guard moved to the broad mouth of the cave. The rows of stalactites and stalagmites looked suspiciously like ossified fangs.

A dead landscape stretched as far as the eye could see, of desolate greys and light browns like ash. The sky was devoid of stars and moon, the land

itself without rise or dip, the horizon oddly flat against natural perspective. There was almost no atmosphere at all, and what little there was contained no oxygen.

'What in the Allfather's name did the Thousand Sons want with this place?' said Ulfar.

'In the Allfather's name is correct,' said Njal, coming up on them from inside the cave. The Rune Priest had his helm in place, making it even harder for Arjac to tell who was commanding the Terminator suit, but it seemed as though the sorcerer was not trying to mask his presence any more. His words were dismissive, if not outright hostile, and the nature of the information imparted was impossible. 'A watch post created during the Great Crusade. A staging ground, you might call it, to places further afield.'

The Rune Priest paused for a moment and his next words were quiet, perhaps not intended for Arjac. 'We have a problem. I cannot rewrite the marks upon the cave wall, the destination is set.'

'So?' Arjac fought back his suspicions, but it was hard not to think that this was manipulation by the Stormcaller's possessing spirit. A manufactured inconvenience. 'What does that mean?'

'It means we have to go out there,' said the sorcerer, startled by Rockfist's question. He thrust Njal's staff out towards the stark landscape. 'To the other portal. Or we go back through this gate to somewhere even less welcoming.'

'I don't think that's a decision you should be taking,' Arjac said quietly, letting the Thousand Sons traitor know that he was watchful.

A second passed, a moment of immobility that signified the transition of consciousness, before the Rune Priest replied.

'We head out,' Njal announced to the task force. 'Our only way forward is across these wastes.'

They began making preparations, organising for the foray into the unknown, when Majula called out to them, her voice filtered through the void mask she wore beneath her hood.

'I can see the Light of Heavens, Lord of Runes,' she told them, lifting a gloved finger to the sky beyond the cave mouth. 'It burns bright. We are close to Terra!'

She took a step between two of the jutting stalagmites but then retreated with a gasp, recoiling as if struck. She whirled around, panicked.

'It's gone!' she cried, stumbling towards Njal, hand held out to the Rune Priest, the other raised in instinct to keep her oracular guard in place. 'There is no veil!'

The Navis Guard clustered about Majula while the Stormcaller eluded her grasp and stepped towards the boundary stones of the cavern. He stood on the threshold looking up, a golden gleam playing about his helm and staff. Arjac joined him, feeling a frisson of energy along his nerves as he passed the line demarked by the cave mouth.

'What does she mean?' Arjac asked. 'What veil?'

'Like the Geller field breach, this place stands between realities,' the Stormcaller replied, not looking around. 'It is not in the Othersea but not within the world of mortals. It is a bridge, trapped between.'

The Stormcaller took another step and Arjac followed without thought.

'What do you see?' asked Njal.

'Nothing…' Rockfist scanned the featureless plain and empty sky. 'What do *you* see, Stormcaller?'

'A golden eye turning towards us.' The words came as a whisper. The next were a hasty shout. 'Quickly now, we have to find the other portal. Our presence is drawing unwanted attention.'

The darkness was all-encompassing, deadening the suit lamps of the Space Marines and the Dreadnoughts' searchlights after a few metres. Only a glimmer on the ashen ground was visible, as flat as planed ship's timber. Nothingness pressed down upon them all, the unremitting closeness of everything like a great weight.

They had advanced only a few hundred metres when a stricken shout from Majula had Arjac darting a look up as she raised a hand skywards.

Ribbons of purple streaked the blackness. Their after-image remained like yellow cracks upon a glass dome. The colours shifted, as though a light roved beyond these fissures, its ochre hue falling upon the agitated Stormriders.

The ground throbbed, trembling grit into disturbing organic shapes that melted into one another.

Thunder rumbled. The ground bucked in response. Around Arjac the Space Wolves gripped their totems and talismans, calling on the Allfather.

They also muttered *skaldwyrdfeyn* which they had learnt as children, the old warding words never quite expunged by the efforts of the Wolf Priests.

'Quit your yowling,' growled Valgarthr, breaking formation to thrust his axe at his warriors. He lifted the weapon, its blade a sickly yellow in the wyrd-glow. 'There is nothing beneath this sky that can't be slain. We are the Allfather's claws, sons of the Wolf King. Now act like it!'

The tempestuous display continued as they pressed on. The tremors intensified, opening welts in the grey ground. A pale light from within mirrored the cracking of the sky.

Arjac ran a calibration in the sensorium, but the system detected nothing except the earth movements. No life signs, no heat, no air pressure change.

By unspoken agreement the force moved quickly, at a pace with the lumbering run of the Dreadnoughts. Ahead, Njal led the way, his staff tip blazing with golden light – a gleam not dissimilar to the wyrdlit that crept in from the tracery of warp power around them. Nightwing emerged, disappeared into the darkness and appeared moments later, sweeping in and out of sight as the Stormcaller used his psyber-familiar to scout the best route through the widening chasms that split across their path.

Just over half a kilometre from the cavern the otherlight exploded into intense activity, falling in a cascade from the sky and erupting like a raging aurora from below. From the dazzling display swept a cavalcade of daemonic creatures, their wails, shrieks and squawks heard in the mind rather than the ear. Overhead appeared many-armed, squat horrors with mouths lined with needle-teeth, trailed by shoals of barb-finned skysharks whose tails lashed streams of falling sparks. Creatures devoid of human shape leapt and bounded from the fissures with cackling, wild-eyed faces in their torsos, propelled by squid-like undulations and cavorting, acrobatic jumps.

'Support fire!' yelled Arjac, determined to regain the initiative against the amassing *wyrdkin* horde. 'Counter-charge now!'

He headed directly for a gaping chasm just paces away, trusting that his Wolf Guard and the Dreadnoughts would follow. Shield held before him, he smashed bodily into the first wave of shifting daemons, scattering them like *skitlbad* pins hit full-on by the tossed stone of a player. Foehammer

swept the legs from another three, sending them toppling. He crushed them beneath his boots as he waded to the brim of the precipice.

His sensorium shared the view of the others, his bulky armour set upon the edge bathed in ochre otherlight, his shadow weaving crazily behind him over the scattered remnants of the daemons. He heard the Dreadnoughts closing, their guns hurling lethal rebuke into the fresh surge of daemons pushing up further along the belching fissure.

Against all sense and the advice of his nagging instincts, Arjac looked down.

The abyss seemed bottomless. The walls quickly absorbed into the haze. A sea of formless energy lapped like a coursing river against the sides. It bubbled like hot tar, painting grotesque faces on its surface. Clusters of eyes glared back at him from the immaterial flow.

A fountain of power exploded towards Arjac, forcing him back several steps to avoid being caught in its spray. The discharge towered over Rockfist, more grimacing faces sketched within its coruscation. Falling droplets formed into daemons that set upon the hearthegn with fiery blasts from their fingers, scowling and laughing as they capered around him.

He raised his shield, letting warpfire lap against the power field. A few stray spatters were left burning on his armour. He looked on in amazement as the sparks, each with a tiny fanged face, started to gnaw and scratch at the paint of his battleplate, as though they might burrow into the ceramite.

At Arjac's side, Berda grunted in pain. Rockfist swung towards his companion and saw that he was almost lost beneath a welter of daemons. Infernal fire seared through Berda's armour like an Iron Priest's lascutter, while the Wolf Guard batted away any assailants he could reach. Arjac swept his weapon through the mass of daemons but Berda fell to one knee, his leg armour flowing into a pool around him.

A shadow even bigger than Arjac swathed the daemonpack, moments before Grímr Fellfist waded into view, clawed feet stomping the daemons underfoot, heavy bolters barking death. The Dreadnought's ruby-gleaming fist snatched up one of the horrors. He squeezed it into a shower of falling sparks, scattering the remnants as though tossing the embers of a fire. Grímr spun at the waist, backhanding another apparition into the chasm from which it had been spawned.

Standing behind the bulk of Grímr, Arjac reviewed the situation. The daemons were all around and falling from above like snarling rain. The guns of the Stormriders met this descending mass with a constant flare, so that Valgarthr and the others stood in the midst of a multicoloured cloud burst. Elsewhere, like he and Grímr, the company was embattled hand-to-hand, hewing and slashing their blades, slamming blazing fists into the steady stream of otherworldly beings sprouting from the crevasses.

The veterans fought hard but many still laboured under wounds of previous battle and fresh injuries. Pledges of valour and cries for vengeance spat across the vox. Arjac snarled as he spied unmoving grey-armoured figures among the press of combat – brothers beyond the care of an apothecary.

He turned his attention back to the gorge at hand. An explosion of power from his hammer greeted the next daemon to jump from the depths.

The din of Bjorn's assault cannon thundered in Njal's ears, drowning out the daemons' screeching and the storm bolter fire. Njal left his pistol in its holster. The blasts of lightning from his staff were a more effective weapon against the apparitions that continued to pour down from the crack across the sky. Unending monstrosities clawed up from the rents that the continuing tremors tore in the ground.

Psychic flare and propellant flash lit the scene, creating a series of staccato tableaux, each image fractionally different from the last. Through Nightwing's augmented eye he saw a new crevasse open between the Space Wolves and the portal-cave behind them, wyrdglimr streaming from within.

He turned and hurled an excoriating blast of power at the serpent with many heads that eased up from the chasm, turning its ruddy-plumed body to golden ash.

While Njal fought in silence, the vox was alive with Valgarthr's terse commands and the spat curses of the Stormriders. On occasion, the channel rumbled to a wounded bellow, part anger and part pain. Njal felt a stab of the injury himself each time, sharing the wounds of his brothers. At his side, Majula panted, every breath accompanied by a quiet moan of dread. Yet even in the grip of her fear, she fought hard. The Navigator grimaced with effort as her lethal third gaze fell upon a cluster of daemons

gambolling towards the packs from the shadow of a rocky upthrust. Chittering, they split and split again, diminishing under the unblinking stare of the Navigator until they flitted out of existence in a cloud of azure vapour.

A sudden knot of tension dragged at Njal's thoughts.

+Something else is coming.+

Unoccupied with the physical necessity of action, the sorcerer first sensed that which burned across Njal's othersense a second later. It was a tide below them, seething through the ground like a swelling pool beneath an icy surface. The Stormcaller could feel the growing presence moving first one way and then another, as if trying to centre upon something. The heat and crackle in the psyker's veins intensified.

+It is using you as a lode-point!+

'Speak plainly. What does that mean?'

+Your powers are giving it a fixed point in reality. A physical node on which to anchor its assembling energy.+

Njal held back his next bolt of lightning, leaving the power to wreath about the tip of his staff. Whatever approached was stronger than anything they had yet encountered. The revelation required all of his psychodoctrination to remain calm.

'A greater daemon…' he muttered. The vox caught his words, transmitting them to the rest of the company.

The reaction was immediate and stark. Though the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes were physically inured to panic, the tactical threat posed by Njal's pronouncement altered their behaviour. They gave ground rather than gained it, drawing back towards each other out of drilled behaviour.

Njal's gaze flashed back to the portal cave.

+No!+ Izzakar seemed to guess his thoughts, though in this place it was possible he simply heard them. +That portal cannot aid us. We must press on.+

Njal lashed out his staff as a flame-skinned ghoul hurled itself past Valgarthr, its claws of blackness raking at the Librarian's face. The apparition detonated at the weapon's touch and far below the incoming greater daemon twitched in response to the release of psychic energy.

'We go back and find another course,' Njal said, half turning.

+*You will fail!*+ Izzakar's words rang across the psyker's synapses.

The greater daemon gained speed, or more accurately it accumulated a material incarnation more rapidly. Distance was an illusion of the physical senses, but to Njal it felt like the beast raced ever closer. It would be upon them within minutes.

The choice was stark: press on and risk everything or go back and abandon any hope of reaching Bulveye and his Old Guard.

'How far?'

+At most, two portals, after this one. No more, I assure you. We are so close!+

A pained roar filled the vox-cast. One of Valgarthr's Grey Hunters disappeared under a welter of fanged smog, flame burning through the joints of his armour. Njal pushed back against the psychic sympathetic ache that welled up in his flesh. The battle-brothers counter-attacked, slashing with whirring combat attachments and long knives. Beyond them, Bjorn ignored the general withdrawal, thrashing his lightning claw through a horde of daemons, standing firm against the tide of manifestations.

Seeing the other Space Wolves fight on without relent, Njal felt a pang of shame that he had considered retreat. Nothing worthwhile was ever accomplished without shedding blood, one's own as well as the enemy's.

'All squads, full assault!' Njal rasped. 'Bjorn, form the speartip. Valgarthr, your warriors are the strong haft. Arjac, your pack shall be our shield.'

The Space Wolves responded without hesitation. Valgarthr and his surviving veterans split into two packs, Bjorn between them, the Thrice-Slain and Fellfist like towers anchoring the flanks. Njal motioned for Majula to follow and slipped in close to the pack leader. Arjac's Wolf Guard faced back towards the cave, firing sporadic bursts as daemons emerged from the ether.

'Tear a path,' Valgarthr growled to his packs, his axe signalling the flowing sea of Chaos beasts to the front. '*Fyrstrom.* Drilled fire, five-pace interval, fast advance.'

The Stormriders hefted their bolters and bolt pistols, their weapons falling silent as they awaited the command. Njal lifted free his bolt pistol, willingly subservient to the discipline of the pack. He dropped the psychic shield he had projected, breaking his connection to the warp – the psychic equivalent of running silent. Only the barest glimmer of his wyrdsense

remained, but it was enough to tell him that the swelling daemonpower paused, tendrils of awareness probing at the boundaries of reality as it sought its target.

The whine of Dreadnought servos and thud of their tread seemed oddly loud in the brief respite.

'Fire!'

Spurred to act, Njal pulled the trigger alongside his battle-brothers, two shots, one second apart. The trajectory of the pack's bolts was almost perfectly synchronised, two fanning lines that erupted against the shifting pink and blue bodies of the oncoming warpspawn. Each found its mark, tearing apart a foe. The Space Wolves broke into a run, keeping pace with each other for five long strides before they halted again.

They fired, two rounds apiece, slashing a path through the enemy. The Dreadnoughts added their firepower, the storm of assault cannon, missile launcher and heavy bolters deepening the wound inflicted. Arjac's Wolf Guard withdrew at their backs as though drawn into a slipstream, remaining exactly at their allotted position behind the advance. In between the salvoes of Valgarthr's pack the Terminators' weapons roared their own defiance.

Five strides, two shots, over and over. Uncaring of the daemons' numbers, the relentless Stormriders advanced into the heart of the host.

The ferocity of the Space Wolves' assault, focused by the discipline of their training, took them far, deep into the morass of Chaos energy. The flowing warp power was not able to keep pace with their bolter drill and speedy advance so that the daemonic horde scattered like mist before a polar gale.

Njal called for the company to make haste, and they pressed on at the speed of the Dreadnoughts and Terminators, who had considerable pace once they had picked up momentum.

The landscape was not as featureless as it first appeared. Undulations and crevices marked the wastelands, so that sometimes the Space Wolves' advance took them into near-lightless gorges or atop the crest of a rising mound. Njal kept his wyrdsense in check, hiding their progress from the stalking presence of the greater daemon. He could feel it still, prowling the warp shadows. It gnawed at his senses, a hunger that could never be sated, a malice that would never be thwarted.

It was not difficult to find the second gate that Izzakar had mentioned. A golden shaft of light rose like a beacon, no more than a couple of miles distant.

'Onwards,' Njal told his brothers with grim relief. 'Soon we shall be with the Old Guard and our mission almost done.'

A thought then occurred to him that caused his smile to falter, though he hid it quickly from his companions. He whispered to Izzakar, beneath even the superhuman hearing of his Stormriders.

'When we find Bulveye, will we have to fight free again of these circles of madness?'

+If they remain in the heart I will be able to open a pathway directly back to the Pyramid of Photep.+

'And if they have moved on?'

+We had better hope that they have not.+

Njal sped on with his pack-brothers, feeling more hopeful of success than he had since breaching the Portal Maze.

The closer they came to the next gate the more the Stormcaller felt it throbbing in the depths of his thoughts, resonating in his gut with each pulse of power. What he had taken to be a column of light was in fact countless tiny motes rising up from a circular pool at the centre of a deep caldera. He signalled his warriors to move into the crater, wary of the warp energy that still swirled about the barren landscape ready to manifest again. The sooner they were free of this tainted realm the better for all.

Descending into the circular depression, the Sons of Russ broke their line, spreading out to form a defensive perimeter around the gate-pool. Njal approached closer, Majula at his side, and inspected the light-dappled water. The ripples on its surface were oddly uniform, each tiny wavelet made of a sequence of interlocked runic swirls eddying out of the centre.

Majula lowered to one knee and reached out a hand towards the water.

'Wait!' snapped Njal. 'Do not touch the portal.'

Majula looked up at him with a glare.

'The pool is harmless. It is just a metaphysical interface. The light is the gate itself, Lord of Runes.'

She plunged her hand into the undulating liquid without waiting for his reply. The golden rune-shapes drifted up the skin of her hand and wrist and

then along the sleeve of her robe, losing brightness until they faded into the fabric.

+Now comes the most dangerous stage. The hostile simulacrum is still loitering at the boundary edge. When I access the gate, I shall create a flare of power that will draw every gaze far and wide.+

'You're talking about the greater daemon, aren't you? Are you telling me that opening the gate will summon it?'

+The portal smooths away the warp incline. Normally it does so within closely controlled parameters. Here, I cannot vouch for the safe activation. It is possible that opening the disjunction will also form an immaterial breach for the entity to usurp.+

'What can I do to stop it manifesting?'

+Nothing. I suggest we work swiftly and leave quickly.+

Njal had nothing to add to the discussion and was about to relinquish control to the sorcerer when the retort of a bolt detonation snatched his attention. More of Valgarthr's Stormriders opened fire against shadowy apparitions at the caldera's edge. Tentacled and flame-born bodies grew out of the raw ether and launched a fresh assault.

A twitch of recognition thrummed from the roaming entity.

'Reform on my position!' Njal called to his warriors. 'Be ready to enter the portal immediately on my command.'

The Space Wolves drew back amidst intense bolter fire against the returning host of daemon assailants.

'Quickly now,' Njal said to Izzakar, letting free the spirit of the Thousand Sons Librarian.

The instant he reached a hand towards the pulsating portal light the roving daemon-presence ceased its directionless wandering and arrowed towards them like a spear cast by one of the dark gods.

Njal wanted to urge on his stowaway but Izzakar had control of his lips. Njal watched in detached suspense while his own fingers splayed and crooked, wove and danced at the end of his arms, as though looking at someone else – which in a sense, he was. The ascending runeshapes in the column of light changed and with them their unearthly reflection in the pool.

For all Izzakar's supposed precision and art, vibrations shimmered out into the immaterial void. Like a frost shark latching onto the tiniest

particles of blood in the water, the greater daemon's essence sped towards the warp detritus of the Librarian's ritual.

'*Sumat aton sumat utuhl nakon autah eras pheton sumat.*' The words came in the familiar tempo, no faster or slower than any of the other incantations, but Njal shared the urgency with which Izzakar spoke.

In all directions, the bolter fire was growing in vigour with each passing second in response to the swelling crowd of lesser daemons and beasts raging down the sides of the caldera. The boom of the assault cannon and snarl of fragmentation missiles added to the din. Njal fumed, powerless to aid his brothers. He longed to have his pistol in hand, to smite the coming foes with the Allfather's wrath, but Izzakar was still occupied with the gate.

The toxic presence of the greater daemon merged with the reflection of the portal, becoming one with its energy. It fed on the flow of immaterial effluent like a thunderwolf with a great elk carcass, voracious and unceasing. The Stormcaller recoiled when he felt it on the furthest extent of his wyrdsense. A burning touch permeated his skin, flowing along his nerves like a swarm of biting ants. He wanted to retch and shout but he raged in silent immobility, enduring the suffering, so that Izzakar was free from distraction while he continued his delicate work.

+It is almost ready,+ the Thousand Sons Librarian declared.

A flare of blue fire burst past Njal from across the caldera, splashing across the slab-armour of Olaf the Thrice-Slain. Ceramite melted beneath the blast, sloughing away from the adamantium skeleton beneath. Warpflame and bolt shells spewed across the crater.

The pool bubbled violently and the ground shuddered with the approach of the greater daemon.

Silver threads wove up into the gold, forming artery-like structures within.

+It is done!+ announced Izzakar, curling Njal's lips in a triumphant grin.

The golden column exploded, engulfing the Stormcaller with immaterial shards. He staggered back, wrenching control of his body from Izzakar with a painful throb at the base of his skull.

'Into the portal!' he bellowed, but his command came too late.

Something majestic and terrifying reared up through the split wound of the portal, detonating into material space with the force of a demolisher shell. Wings of feathered gold and cerulean beauty sighed open, the wind of their movement washing through Njal's thoughts more than across his armour. A vulture-like face stared down at him from within the coalescing motes of psychic power, twin black orbs for eyes either side of its crooked beak.

A wordless howl ripped from Njal, a reflexive response triggered not by conscious thought but centuries of psychodoctrination. Psychic power burst from his staff. A storm of white flares and razor-ice slammed into the manifesting entity, hurling its coagulating material form out of the portal gate. Ripped feathers and scattered scales turned to glittering dust.

'Into the breach!' Njal called again, stepping around the pool to throw more wrathful blasts at the reeling greater daemon.

Valgarthr waved forward Majula and her Navis Guard. As they entered the silver light of the portal, the Navigator and warriors faded from sight. Squads of Stormriders splashed into the strange pool after them while Njal hurled lightning at his enemy.

Njal panted. His head ached as though the crystal-latticed psychic hood upon his scalp squeezed his skull. Inside the torrent of skyfire, the Tzeentchian daemon writhed, long beak opening and closing with curses lost in the fury of crackling blasts. It forced itself up to a crouch, its scaled, bird-like legs bent beneath it, while its long neck twisted left and right as it tried to raise a clawed hand against the flow.

Arjac's Wolf Guard fired a last salvo into the swarming ring of daemons and then thrashed through the pool after Valgarthr's warriors. Olaf and Grímr plunged after them.

With a triumphant screech that rebounded oddly from the open skies, the Lord of Change threw out a wing, its battered feathers forming a shield against the assault of the Stormcaller. Njal stumbled as a counter-pulse snaked along his own lightning strike, bathing his staff in a red nimbus. Burning pain flared through his fingers and arm and he staggered back. Izzakar snarled, sympathetically wounded by the attack.

The greater daemon straightened to its full height and glared down at the Space Wolf. It drew forth a skull-tipped rod from a slit in the sky. The

eyes of the wand-head were as empty as those in its own face. Twin pits of darkness sucked at Njal's soul.

+Into the portal, Stormcaller.+

He tried to respond but the soul-leeching effect of the greater daemon drained his limbs of any strength. The gibbering of the daemon horde was scant metres away, the scrabble of claws and hiss of flames loud to his boosted senses. He could feel the psychic static pinging from the tips of his beard-hairs, every fibre of his nervous system taut as it tried to fight off the malign influence spilling from the daemon.

The bright flare and thunder of Bjorn's assault cannon was like an eruption beside his head, both deafening and blinding. Njal blinked through a stream of tears as a hail of shells slammed into the Lord of Change, raking across its feathered breast, tearing immaterial flesh from its face.

The venerable Dreadnought's claw swung back, slamming into Njal's chest. The blow hurled him across the pool, and into the warm embrace of the portal-beacon. The Rune Priest's last sight was of Bjorn turning. Daemons clambered upon his back, prising away the plates with flame-tipped fingers. Cascades of purple sparks cut like lascannon beams through melting ceramite, exposing tangles of lubricant-spewing pipelines that swayed like viscera. The ancient warrior yelled his defiance.

'For the Allfather!'

CHAPTER 14
AFTER THE OLD GUARD

The crash of war-plate on hard ground shuddered through Njal, the pressure dampeners of his Terminator armour doing their best to absorb the impact. He slid a short distance and came to a halt. Lying on his back, he could see the portal and was surprised to see a large gateway of plasteel and crystal. Within the square arch, an insubstantial curtain undulated through shades of blue and green, its light dappling on the gilded interior surfaces.

He sat up and saw a darker shadow in the energy veil. Around him, Arjac's pack levelled their storm bolters and heavy weapons. The shadow almost filled the space within the gate, eclipsing its light. The shade grew deeper, thickening as something approached through the gateway.

Trailing sparks and with his claw wreathed with white lightning, Bjorn erupted from the portal. The veil brightened in his wake. But only for a moment. More dark shapes quickly clustered into the energy field.

'Sever the crossing!'

The Dreadnought's metallic bellow spurred Njal into action. He pushed himself to his feet and let Izzakar's soul bleed into his nervous system. The Thousand Sons Librarian extended his will through Njal's outstretched fingers, motes of power dancing between the tips of the gauntlet. Runeshapes in the crystal structure of the gateway cracked and reformed. A second later, the miasma within the arch exploded, showering Njal and the others with a storm of glass-like shards. A pulsating darkness filled the space, obscuring all that lay beyond.

Njal retreated and eyed the portal warily while Izzakar slipped back into dormancy. The Stormcaller thought he could feel pressure on the far side of the gap, as if something pushed at the air, but there was no reaction from the portal itself.

+I have severed the link completely,+ Izzakar informed him. +Nothing can pass through.+

'Including us.'

+We shall not be going back that way,+ admitted the sorcerer.

'If I was a suspicious man I would think that an easy way to trap us here.' He took stock of his surroundings. 'Wherever *here* is…'

The portal jump had brought them into a hall not dissimilar from the one where their odyssey had begun. It had the appearance of something that was yet to be completed, a grand work unfinished.

The walls were bare ferrocrete blocks set upon each other, banded with plasteel reinforcing. Vaults of the same held up a ruddy, semi-transparent ceiling, and high windows gave a glimpse of cloudy sky above mountainous terrain. Large flagstones of pale blue covered the floor, each inset with a symbol.

Njal examined them in more detail. The sigil was a stylised hollow sun with eight flame-like ejections, similar to the cardinal points of a compass.

+The mark of my Legion, but in a place I have never seen before.+

'Look closer.'

Njal could see that at the centre was a faint design of a serpent eating its own tail.

+What does that signify? It is not part of any lore I have read.+

'I think there is your answer,' said Njal, turning his attention to the two grand doors at the far end of the hall. They dominated the short wall, almost filling it, of naked plasteel obviously awaiting further decoration. The moulding depicted a giant figure of a man in baroque armour, horns upon his brow and shoulders, half-opened wings of dripping fire behind him. An expression of aloof contempt stared back, a hole as a setting for a gem in place of a single eye.

'The Crimson King,'

+Magnus cloaks himself in many guises. His form is as fluid as thought, but I am unfamiliar with this appearance.+

‘It is Magnus the daemon prince, commander of the traitor Legion you belonged to. That is the face of your master.’

+This chamber…+ A gush of doubt welled up inside Njal, unfamiliar and chilling, seeping from the knot of psychic potential that was his unwilling passenger. +A throne hall, perhaps.+

‘Guard the doors,’ snapped Njal, turning to his battle-brothers. He waved his staff towards the smaller entrances at the other end of the hall. ‘Secure this whole area now.’

+I sense a terrible purpose to all of this, a pattern within the anarchy.+

‘So do I.’ Caught up in the discussion, Njal spoke quietly but openly. Arjac looked on with distaste and the others cast him strange glances. The Stormcaller no longer cared. His need to share his thoughts with Izzakar to unravel the mystery around Prospero outweighed other concerns. ‘The emergence of the Planet of the Sorcerers, the breaking of the Portal Maze, the armies of dedicants and daemons… It is all related.’

‘Is all well, Stormcaller?’ asked Valgarthr. He stalked back across the hall. ‘You are acting strangely. How is it that you know so much of the traitors’ maze?’

Njal ignored the question and was about to continue his musing when Arjac interrupted.

‘Our Lord of Runes communes with spirits of the past,’ he said, to the Rune Priest’s surprise. ‘I do not think it is wise to interfere in wyrd matters.’

The warning halted Valgarthr. Though he did not seem wholly satisfied by the explanation, he said nothing else. Arjac stepped closer.

‘You need to be cautious, Stormcaller,’ he warned softly.

‘I cannot spare more effort to worry about the sensibilities of our brothers’ Njal replied.

‘That’s not what I meant,’ said Arjac. ‘You are becoming overly dependent upon this traitorous shade.’

‘We came for the Old Guard, but have uncovered something far more important,’ he said, hoping explanation would quell Arjac’s doubts. ‘Magnus has brought forth his daemonworld with plans to infiltrate the old portal network.’

‘And if he succeeds?’

‘How far did the Portal Maze extend?’ The question was for Izzakar, who took a few seconds to respond.

+One cannot measure the interdimensional in distance, nor time. But vast, in theory. Where we conquered in the Emperor’s name, we laid foundations for the Portal Maze. It was but a fraction complete when the Emperor sent your predecessors to Tizca.+

‘And if Magnus the daemon gains control of it?’

+He will have stable warp paths for his immaterial allies across a large part of the Imperium.+

‘But the warp is everywhere, what difference does that make?’

+What you call daemons, I studied as intersectional formulae. They are eddies in the warp, tiny fragments of fluid consciousness birthed from larger swells and storms. Even when they manifest in the material universe, their greater part must remain within the confines of warp space. The Portal Maze bridges that distance. Brings it closer, if you will.+

‘Meaning daemons would be more powerful.’

Njal heard Arjac growl as he pieced together the conversation from the half he could hear.

+Yes. New manifestations. More powerful representations of existing formulae. And if Magnus himself has become warp-bound by his transition it would also mean less of a drain on his own inherent energy to maintain physical form.+

‘We cannot allow that to happen.’

‘I agree,’ said Arjac. ‘How are we going to stop Magnus?’

Njal did not have an answer for the hearthegn.

+I do not think you have either the information or the warriors to intervene. Even if you reunite with Bulveye, if the Crimson King succeeds, you will face the untapped power of the Empyrean and an unending host of warpspawn.+

‘We will find a way,’ said the Stormcaller, addressing both Izzakar and Arjac.

Njal thudded down the hall to where Rockfist’s pack guarded the main doors flanked by the Dreadnoughts. It struck him as odd to see the Wolf Guard in this place, the throne room of Magnus, so similar to their role as door wardens in the Fang. He chased away the distracting thought. His mission, highly tenuous even at the outset, now verged on the impossible.

The threat posed by Magnus' plan was more important than rescuing Bulveye's warriors.

Arjac followed close, his voice a taut whisper.

'We may lack the might to intervene ourselves but we can ensure that a warning reaches Fenris.'

Njal followed up on this fresh thought, 'Or even further… to Lord Guilliman and perhaps Terra itself. Magnus' quest for dominion over the Portal Maze threatens even Ultramar and the Throneworld.'

Before Arjac could respond, a flash of light passed overhead. An instant later, a thunderous boom shook the hall from ceiling to floor. Something winged – artificial and blocky rather than daemonic or organic – swept after, flickers of brightness at its bow. Across the throne room, warriors turned in surprise.

'Is that a Thunderhawk gunship?' said Arjac, head craned up to look at the shadow passing over.

'Bigger,' replied one of the Long Fangs.

+Do your companions not know a Stormbird when they see one?+

'It was grey,' said Ulfar, voicing Arjac's thought.

'One of Bulveye's?' the hearthegn said, looking at Njal. The psyker had a look of intense concentration, staring up towards the glassite where the gunship had passed. Gold frost coloured his brow, a sign of psychic activity. He blinked and turned his otherworldly gaze to the Wolf Guard. Focus returned to his eyes.

'Yes,' said Njal. He strode towards the main doors, staff hammering on the floor, Nightwing weaving around the warriors ahead. 'This way.'

The Wolf Guard, Dreadnoughts and Stormriders assembled quickly, breaking away from their watch positions to fall back towards the Stormcaller. He thrust his staff and the doors flew open at his will, slamming outwards into a corridor. The passageway was lined on each side with gated arches, their bare metal wrought in designs that interlocked about an eye symbol with triangular and hexagrammic shapes. Beyond them lay more chambers bereft of ornament and furniture.

The far end was sealed by a large armoured portal, lock bars clearly visible, its controlling gears half-protruding from the flanking pillars of the wall. Generators buzzed into life at their approach, a shimmer of a

golden nimbus about the gate's mechanism, an extension of the force that enveloped Njal's outstretched hand. Ratchets clanked and gears whined into life, pulling apart the two slab doors. Bright sunlight poured in, and with it came the sharp retorts of weapons.

The opening gate revealed a distant mountainside wreathed in smoke and haze. The flicker of weapons fire sparked across Arjac's sensorium even at this distance – twelve hundred metres according to its augury. As the company hurried forward the reason for the brightness became evident, two pale stars midway between horizon and zenith, one to each side. Beyond the gate stretched a bridge – or causeway, more rightly – that ran as straight as a bolter shot towards the mountain.

About halfway along the causeway, a thick swathe of blue-armoured warriors held against attack, taking cover in rocky outcrops that jutted from the wall, several suits of broken armour lying upon the hard stone already. The robed corpses of scores of cultists littered the bridge. Against them ranged a company of Space Marines bearing the mark of Russ upon grey armour, though its shade was slightly different from that of those that hailed Logan Grimnar as their commander.

Above circled a gunship vaster than a Thunderhawk, its prow fashioned as a snarling wolfshead, hull sheathed in gilded lightning strikes. Plasma gleam lit the armour of the combatants and the polished stone, joined by the flicker of lascannon fire and stream of bolt propellant. More heavy weapons fire slashed along the bridge from the far end, its source obscured by the firefights and melees raging for control of the causeway.

Advancing out into the light, Arjac felt a strange sense of dislocation. While Valgarthr and the surviving Stormriders hurried on, their weapons trained upon the knots of Thousand Sons holding against Bulveye's warriors, the hearthegn moved to the low boundary wall to the right. The sensorium data made no sense, suggesting there was nothing below the citadel. Arjac leaned over the parapet and looked back.

The fortress was not much larger than what they had seen, the greater part of it taken up with the main hall and entranceway, flanked by smaller towers and turrets. Three narrow pilasters rose from the centre, piercing the sky like crooked fingers. The citadel was fashioned of smooth stone, polished marble veined with violet and sky blue and from red-tiled roofs

rose dozens of flagpoles. Upon them flew blue standards, each carrying the warp-pupil eye of Magnus, symbol of his cultists.

'This was not built by Magnus, but *for* him,' said Arjac as Berda joined him.

'Sorcery,' muttered the Wolf Guard, a pointed finger directing the pack leader's attention to the base of the citadel.

Arjac had thought to see a foothill, but instead looked at the ground so far below. Birds startled by the fighting circled and swooped in the gulf beneath the fortress, which hung out in the open air held only by the strength of the causeway. His gaze moved to the threshold, and to either side where wall met bridge. Something seemed amiss, as though one was not quite built upon the other.

Answer came with a warning shout from Valgarthr, turning all eyes skywards above the mountain battlefield. Floating in mid-air came two pinnacles of stone and ferrocrete, carried against the wind by a sorcerous gleam that pulsed from their rocky foundations. Catching the light of the two suns, the towers, ramparts and flying buttresses that were improbably heaped upon each other gleamed with a silver aura.

Magnifying the view, Arjac saw a shimmer of energy playing about the impossible keeps, and upon the walls he spied blue-armoured figures, dozens of them crowded beneath the self-eating serpent banners of the Thousand Sons.

Screeching fire blazed from the descending twin towers, erupting along the causeway in a series of cerulean blasts. Grey-armoured warriors were flung in all directions by the convocation, hurled into the air and over the rampart into the impossible depths.

Tank-sized blocks of masonry rained down and Njal threw forward a screen of wyrdforce, sheltering Majula and her guards, and several of Valgarthr's squad. A ragged boulder slammed into the bridge a little further ahead, crushing Ingvarr Thunderbrow into the rockrete. The debris rolled away, broken into three pieces, leaving the Terminator supine among the rubble.

'*I'm fine,'* Ingvarr wheezed across the vox, breathing laboured as he pushed to one knee, dust and shards cascading from the pitted plates of his Tactical Dreadnought suit. '*Just give me a minute.'*

Counter-fire scorched up from anti-air lasers mounted on the Old Guard's transports. Strobes of ruby energy dashed against the psychic shields of the Tzeentchian drifting citadels. Lascannon beams and krak missiles followed from the Old Guard packs, along with the heavy weapons fire of Arjac's wolves. The Stormrider Dreadnoughts turned their armaments on the Thousand Sons' war engines too, so that within seconds the pair of citadels was at the centre of a firestorm converging from the length of the viaduct. Blossoms of energy engulfed the closest silver tower, lighting it like a beacon as bright as the twin stars above. The other citadel veered higher, eluding the worst of the Space Wolves' ire.

From ramparts and platforms, a company of Thousand Sons poured down salvoes of bolter fire, each round a flickering sorcery-charged projectile of red and green fire. Where they struck they slashed effortlessly through the plate of the Space Wolves, punching through flesh and bone with equal ease. The vox and air filled with the cries of the wounded.

+That is a kine shield,+ declared Izzakar.

'And?' demanded Njal. He swept his staff sideways, turning and stretching his psychic screen to deflect a volley of inferno bolts descending like lethal hail. 'What does that mean?'

+It is Raptorae-craft, the work of my cult-brothers. I know how to counter it.+

'These are not cultists of Magnus. They are your Legion brothers.'

+I share no allegiance with them, Stormcaller, and they stand between me and my resurrection.+

'Then tell me, how do we stop them?' The Stormcaller advanced, turning the shield into a ball of lightning. With a snarl, he hurled the crackling projectile towards the lower tower but it simply scattered harmlessly against the psychic defences. 'How do we breach the shield?'

+Give me your body. It will recognise me as one of Magnus' sons and allow us to pass.+

The higher tower drifted across the causeway, its shadow passing over the packs of the Stormriders and Old Guard. Looking up, Njal saw the underside scored by hundreds of maleficent runes that burned with flickering fire. The Thousand Sons upon the closer citadel directed the scouring blasts of their engine towards the Dreadnoughts, actinic sparks

spraying at each impact on their armoured sarcophagi. Even the thick plates of Bjorn and his brothers-in-arms would not fare long against the assault, while their return fire was useless against the kine shield.

Was this the ploy that Izzakar had been working towards? To deliver Njal into the grasp of Magnus' warriors? It made terrible sense, to be spared death at the hands of the daemon primarch, a prize or something more sinister instead.

Suspicion wracked Njal but he had to act now or all would be lost.

'Very well, sorcerer…'

He opened up his mind's fortress, giving Izzakar full access to his powers and body.

To surrender everything to the Thousand Sons psyker was to become a passenger in his own body. Izzakar shunted the Space Wolf's thoughts aside, growing into the space left by the retreating psyche of the Stormcaller. Njal looked left and right but not under his own volition, and felt himself break into a run, a swell of psychic energy lapping up around him.

The sensation of Izzakar's warpcraft was different to his own wyrdlore. To Njal it always felt as though tapping into the warp was an elemental act, syphoning away its power as though channelling a storm into the narrow defile of his mind. The Thousand Sons Librarian did not channel, but flexed, opening his thoughts into the nimbus of the warp, allowing tendrils of his mind to spread like a rapidly growing crystal, forming geometric patterns among the immaterial swirl.

Light burned around the Rune Priest as he ascended. He felt the moment his weight was no longer carried by the ground, effortlessly accelerating upwards with staff held before him, its skull tip aglow. He wanted to laugh at the freedom of it, but lacked lungs and mouth to do so.

Inferno bolts scorched a changing line of fire towards him as the traitors responded to his approach. Nightwing slashed past, a streak of black and gold, faster than he had ever seen the psyber-raven travel. The familiar turned loops and arcs ahead, the blaze of its trail leaving Prosperine runeshapes marked in the air. Crimson-wreathed bolts bounced from the glittering sigils as though hitting a solid wall, falling to the ground like dying fireflies.

The psyber-raven powered on. Energy buzzed from its wings as it passed through the kine shield. Cawing madly, it set upon the traitor legionaries at the rail of a balcony overlooking their approach, creating a gap in their fire. Into the space flew the Rune Priest.

Static passed over his armour, dancing along his beard at the touch of the kine shield. Then it was gone, the tower just a dozen metres ahead. His bolt pistol spat rounds into the Thousand Sons, the salvo designed to suppress rather than kill, the armour of the traitors a match for the explosive bolts.

Between the pistol fire and the dives of Nightwing, the volleys lessened from directly ahead.

Izzakar cast a glance to either side and in the corner of his eye Njal glimpsed tenebrous wings stretching from his back. They folded, falling into shimmering nothingness as the Librarian guided the huge Terminator war-plate over an ornate rail and into the midst of the defenders.

Lashing out with the staff tip, a fiery blast tore open the mask of the closest foe. Izzakar waded bodily into the enemy squad, shouldering them aside with the bulk of the Terminator armour. Around him telekinetic appendages whipped and writhed, their touch ripping weapons from hands, prising apart armour joints and tearing metal and stone from the fabric of the tower itself to dash against the warriors pressing towards the intruder. Shadowy limbs tripped a warrior coming at them from behind, his sword pulled from his grasp by another psy-tentacle before being plunged into his eye lens.

Escaping soul-stuff formed wisps of red, grey and black that drifted away, the emptied suits clattering to the stone floor. Half a dozen foes lay broken on the balcony within seconds of their arrival, though that number again stood between the Rune Priest and the door.

+Find the sorcerer,+ Njal urged Izzakar. His voice rebounded inside his own head, unlike anything he had experienced before, dizzying and yet distant.

The Space Wolf advanced without hesitation while the Thousand Sons formed a line against him. Inferno shells exploded in mid-air, detonating against an invisible wall of force around the Rune Priest.

Izzakar exerted his will, pulling apart the outer wall of the tower to reassemble the blocks as a more substantial barrier against their fire;

Nightwing darted into the ragged doorway thus created and they followed close behind.

A perimeter passageway curved around the level of the tower, lit by pale yellow psyluminescence. Ahead, Thousand Sons legionaries arrived through a gateway, seeking the interloper.

'Time to bring down this monstrosity,' declared Izzakar.

Njal could not sense wholly what the Librarian did next, witnessing it only from inside his own thoughts, a step removed. He tracked part of Izzakar's soul-power flooding out into the substance of the tower beneath them. Another portion of the psyker's mind whipped up through the walls and past the ceiling, seeking… Njal did not know, he could not follow its rapid course.

'Just a slight adjustment…' Izzakar muttered in Njal's voice.

The silver tower lurched, heeling rapidly to a forty-five-degree angle. Expecting this, Izzakar was already braced, but the traitors were not. They stumbled and fell into the wall, landing heavily upon each other. Njal could imagine similar anarchy across the edifice – warriors tossed from balconies and windows, traitors within tipped down stairwells or sent reeling into each other.

The light through the breached wall shifted and Njal felt the weightlessness of rapid descent, as though he was in a drop pod. Izzakar pushed them up the sloping floor and out to the balcony, bolts flaring after them as the Thousand Sons recovered their equilibrium, figuratively and literally.

From outside it was plain that they were plunging down towards the edge of the causeway. White tatters of fire fled past from below, streaming in the gale of descent. Izzakar strode to the rail and looked down. On the bridge, he watched the Space Wolves scatter from the falling tower.

They were barely twenty metres from impact when Izzakar launched skywards, unfurling kine wings to carry them free of the stricken tower.

The listing citadel crashed into the causeway wall, shattering stone. A cloud of shards and dust swallowed the crippled engine as it toppled further and further, spilling more warriors from crenelated turrets as its summit descended past the base. Still turning, it disappeared into the fog, leaving a trail of falling armoured bodies and sorcerous fire like a comet's tail.

The other silver tower lifted away, as though shying from the loss of its companion. Overhead the Stormbird and other gunships circled back, emboldened by the destruction of the tower. Lascannon blasts and missiles raked across the kine shield, forcing the tower higher still.

Izzakar brought them back to the causeway, a short distance from the broken section. A few Thousand Sons lay upon the cracked stone where they had fallen or jumped, some of them unmoving, others trying to get to their feet, slow and disjointed. The Space Wolves levelled their weapons at the leaderless spirit-shells, cracking open the armour of the hapless warriors with a continuous fusillade.

Njal tried to reassert himself so that he could join the fight. His body did not respond, dominated by the mind of Izzakar.

+Let me fight.+

'Your brothers have the situation in hand, Stormcaller.'

Njal let his anger seep into Izzakar's consciousness but the Librarian paid it no heed. The psyker made sparks of wyrd dance across the head of the staff, each mote a tiny symbol of the Thousand Sons Legion.

'So much power, wielded with so little precision.'

Njal looked on impotently while the Thousand Sons fell to the combined wrath of the Stormriders and Old Guard. As the last of them perished, the fighters of the Thirteenth Company drew back, their weapons aimed at the newcomers. Suddenly surrounded, Valgarthr and Arjac signalled for their warriors to lower their weapons.

+Give me back my body.+

For a few seconds, Njal thought Izzakar would refuse. His gaze moved between the Space Wolves and the half-built fortress behind them, as though weighing his options. There was nobody between them and the gate by which they had come to the bridge and all other eyes were turned on the Old Guard. Njal guessed Izzakar's thoughts, perhaps wondering if he had the power to command such a tower himself.

With reluctance, the Librarian shucked away his control of Njal's body, easing himself out of the nervous system and muscles like a serpent shedding its skin. Njal swept into the vacuum, eager to be master of his own flesh once more.

He hurried across the debris-littered causeway, revelling in the sensation of physical flesh again. It had been a couple of minutes at most since he

had relinquished himself to the Thousand Sons Librarian but every second had been fraught with frustration and the nagging doubt that he would not regain control. It gave him pause to think how Izzakar had experienced the last few weeks since the sorry episode had begun. He pushed aside any sympathy to concentrate on the escalating situation between the two factions of Space Wolves.

'Who's in charge here?' The demand came from a Greybeard, his Terminator armour archaic in design. The paint and ceramite was much-chipped, and the gilding scratched away in many places, but still recognisable as an *aettgard* of the 13th company. His language was similarly archaic but decipherable. 'Your *aettmark* is not known to me, utlander. Make plain your *geldfut* or my *fyrbrod* will be your ruin.'

'I am Njal Stormcaller,' the Rune Priest called out. 'Of the Space Wolves.'

The Old Guard veteran's keen gaze appraised his runic armour and psychic hood in a glance and his eyes narrowed.

'*Wyrdskaldr*?'

'Yes. There's a lot to be explained but we haven't the time for it now. I am looking for Bulveye, your Wolf Lord.'

The legionary did not take his stare from Njal. He spoke carefully, shaping the sounds of Low Gothic with precision rather than natural deftness. It was as though he spoke to a child, Njal realised, not out of ignorance of the language.

'What news of the Wolf King? Does Tizca still resist? Have you brought the Silent Sisters and Custodians? We could use their help.'

'Hard questions, and harder answers,' Njal replied. 'Know that we have come to bring you out of the Portal Maze. We must meet with Bulveye. Where is your Wolf Lord?'

The Old Guard took a step back, relenting in his questioning. Servos hissed as he waved his combi-bolter to the far side of the causeway where the flicker and boom of battle still raged. Contrails of gunships and the swooping winged shapes of semi-daemonic attack craft crossed the skies above the mountainside. Though it was some distance, Njal could see the flash of battle among the scattered rocks and pillars where grey-armoured figures were pitted against splashes of blue.

‘Over there, rune-wielder. Right where you’d expect him. In the thick of it.’

CHAPTER 15
LAST OF THE GREYBEARDS

The tense stand-off lasted a little longer, the two companies of Space Wolves separated by ten metres and ten thousand years. The Old Guard clearly had the advantage of numbers and firepower, but Njal and his Stormriders refused to back down, a knot of resistance in the midst of the 13th Company.

'I know you,' boomed Bjorn. The Dreadnought took a step, claw raised to point to the battle-leader of the Old Guard. 'I see your markings. Halvar Trystven, *husjarl* of Bulveye.'

'I cannot say the same, dread-clad,' Halvar replied. He continued in a stream of Old Fenrisian too fast for Njal to follow precisely, but Bjorn responded in kind. The exchange went on for some time and ended with Halvar taking a step back, relenting slightly.

'It is not possible to believe, but believe it I must,' the husjarl declared, returning his attention to Njal. 'Your warrior, Bjorn, speaks of matters only one of the Wolf King's aett would know. A hundred centuries! Allfather's spirit, that is harder to take in than a kraken carcass on a rowboat. You are right, this is beyond me, you need Bulveye. Head along and find him, we still have our orders to secure this citadel.'

'It is empty,' said Arjac. 'You saw us leave it. There is no foe within. Your arms are better used assisting your Wolf Lord yonder.'

Halvar half turned to his companions and Njal heard the hiss of a vox exchange.

+Say nothing of me,+ insisted Izzakar.

‘I wasn’t planning to,’ Njal murmured in answer.

The husjarl turned back to them and nodded.

‘Seems that circumstances have outpaced my orders. We’ll take you to the Old Wolf.’

It did not take long to organise the force. Though a divide of ten thousand years sat between them, the culture and battle drill of the Space Wolves had changed little and the Stormriders found themselves falling into place without too much thought, behind the Greybeards’ vanguard and next to Halvar’s Terminators.

They advanced back across the causeway, wary of the silver tower returning or some other fresh threat. By the broken gatehouse at the far end several transports waited. Njal recognised the three Rhinos, a ubiquitous transport design still in use after ten millennia. Several other vehicles were not so familiar – variants of the Predators he knew well, but also a slab-sided larger cousin to the Land Raider. Triple-mounted lascannons hung on its sponsons, its elongated assault compartment jutting like a hound’s muzzle.

+That is a Spartan,+ explained Izzakar. +And that tank destroyer behind is known as a Sicaran Venator. Your ignorance is astounding. How does one forget how to build a tank?+

The Stormcaller did not know. Such things were secrets of the Adeptus Mechanicus, a creed steeped in even greater ritual than the holy teachings of the Adeptus Ministorum. He fixed his attention on Halvar, wary of any slip that might betray to the husjarl that all was not as it seemed with the rescue force.

‘You have been fighting the Thousand Sons long?’ Njal asked his escort.

‘On and off,’ said Halvar. ‘It is… This place makes it hard to keep track. I thought perhaps days, maybe two weeks since we entered. We put the bolt and blade to the curs of the sorcerer that trapped us, and we searched for a way out or another foe. Nothing. This last day, the Thousand Sons returned, but clad not as we had known them. As you see them, with strange wyrd-folk as companions. Their armour is empty yet lives on, but for a few of their leaders. A conjuration of Magnus.’

+He freely boasts of wiping out my company! It was not I that trapped them, but their rock-brained Old Wolf.+

‘I have the means to get us all out of here, but we must be swift. Ten thousand years has not brought the defeat of Magnus, and he plots a new diabolic plan using the Portal Maze. We must warn the Imperium.’

‘Aye, Bjorn said as much. To think a whelp of the Blood Claws is now your most ancient and revered warrior. What will you make of the Old Wolf, eh?’

+Yes, what indeed will you make of the barbarous murderer that chose to doom his men to this rather than strike a bargain with me?+

They reached the gatehouse, picking their way through the rubble that was strewn across the entrance, droplets of metal from the destroyed gate spattered over the mounds of rockrete.

The bark of the Space Wolves’ weapons and hiss of sorcerous inferno bolts were closer. Turbojets thrummed overhead as gunships swept through the clouds. The screeching cries of daemon drakes answered the challenge. The mountain wind carried the scent of spilled blood and the tainted odour of sorcery.

‘You ride with me, wyrdskaldr.’ Halvar gestured to Rockfist’s Terminators and then to the Spartan. ‘You too. We have plenty of space inside.’

‘Stormcaller?’ Just the single word from Valgarthr conveyed his disappointment, a protest that he would be left behind.

‘I cannot divide my command, husjarl,’ Njal said.

‘Then I hope you don’t mind riding on top,’ the Old Guard leader said to Valgarthr, slapping his gauntlet against the armoured carrier. ‘I can’t spare you a Rhino.’

Valgarthr waved forward the surviving Stormriders of his pack and they clambered up the sides of the mechanical monster, seating themselves around the command cupola and clear of the exposed tracks. Halvar led the rest of them up the ramp and then turned and shouted something in Old Fenrisian to Bjorn, who acknowledged with a raised claw. The Dreadnoughts, taking Bjorn’s lead, lumbered away to the right, heading down the ramp of the causeway to the mountainside.

‘I told your *aett-vater* to meet us by that gully.’ The Terminator pointed to a welt in the side of the mountain about a kilometre away. ‘I’ll signal Bulveye when we are moving.’

They settled into their positions inside the compartment, about twice the size of a standard Land Raider. Njal ushered Majula aboard, guiding her to one of the seats close to the front. The battle harness was too big so he sat beside her, one hand held against her chest, the joints of his armour locking as surely as any restraint. Dorria and the handful of Navis guards hunkered down just inside the boarding ramp.

'Shame none of these survived, they would be a big help,' said Arjac appreciatively, stepping into one of the restraining alcoves. He laughed at the thought. 'Fifteen Wolf Guard all deployed together! A fist the equal of the Wolf King's!'

'You are easily impressed,' said Halvar, striding towards the command console behind the driving position. 'We'd better not show you the Mastodon…'

The Spartan and its escorts powered up the slope, slewing around boulders and drifts of shale. The growl of the engines was a comfort to Njal, the steady throb of the power conduits like a heartbeat. The thrum of the lascannon discharge, the rustle of the ammunition feed belts as the combi-bolter on the roof chewed along its length, the creak and purr of battleplate were like a soothing verse.

It occurred to him that he had no idea how long it had been since they had passed through the portal in the Pyramid of Photep. His armour's chronometer had clocked a little over seventeen hours, but due to the warp effect of the maze ten times as long might have passed in Tizca.

Thinking about the old capital, his sense of security evaporated as swiftly as it arrived. Nightwing hopped in agitation from his shoulder to his forearm, pecking at the armour. The forces left defending the pyramid might have been overrun. The Crimson King himself could have ascended through the Portal Maze and even now led a new invasion of the Imperium.

This last he dismissed. He was within the Portal Maze; he was sure he would feel anything so significant. And if not, then Izzakar would certainly remark on such an event. The former, however, was a much more likely threat. Thralls and veterans might become legends, but they could equally become unremembered sacrifices to vanity. The longer his force

stayed inside the maze, the greater the chance that none of them would make it back to Fenris.

'We will be at the gorge in a minute,' Halvar called out, turning away from the command panel. He uncoupled his combi-bolter from where it had been mag-locked to his thigh. 'This deployment zone is filthier than the Cyclops' vapours. I hope the Sons of Russ have not forgotten how to fight.'

'We will not be shamed, trust me,' Arjac replied.

Shrapnel clanged off the armour of the Spartan and Njal remembered the Stormriders atop the mechanical beast.

'Valgarthr, how do you fare?'

'I've been better, Stormcaller.' A terse reply that was more worrying for the fact that the pack leader had the experience of losing half his skull in battle. *'It's madness out here.*'

'Keep your heads down, we'll be at the objective in thirty seconds,' he told his pack leader. 'Ready your squad for combat deployment.'

A harsh laugh rang back across the vox.

'*It must be nice to ride inside one of these things, Stormcaller. We've been firing at the enemy for several minutes!*'

Njal felt a flush of shame and a suitable reply eluded him.

'Old Guard first,' said Halvar. The Terminators stepped out of their niches, forming a wedge of warriors at the assault ramp to the front. Arjac darted a look at Njal and the vox buzzed on a secure channel.

'Are we to take orders from this lieutenant, Stormcaller?'

'He knows more about what's happening than either of us,' replied Njal. 'So, yes, we'll follow the husjarl for now.'

'Understood.'

'Wait here,' Njal said out loud, turning his head to Majula as he stood up. She pulled her knees up where his hand had been, looking like a child in the seat of an adult, arms wrapped around her robed legs, eyes stark against her dark flesh, tinted by the ruddy lighting of the combat compartment. She nodded meekly, her reserves of courage sapped by all that had happened since her bravado in entering the maze. 'You are doing fine, Navigator. House Belisarius will laud your name on our return.'

She forced a grim smile, fooling neither of them.

'Ramp open in five… four…' declared Halvar. 'Three…'

The words droned as Njal's body and armour stepped up his stimulation levels in preparation. Boots clattered above as Valgarthr's warriors readied to deploy from the slowing transport. The armour of the Wolf Guard pressed in tight behind him, closing about him like another layer of war-plate, sandwiching him against the Old Guard in front. Far from claustrophobic, the sensation was of togetherness. Brothers in front and behind. An inseparable bond of brotherhood across generations.

With a screech the assault ramps slammed open and light flooded the compartment.

Halvar stepped onto the metal slope, combi-bolter raised.

'For the All-'

A blast of white-and-azure fire ripped into the interior through the open ramp. Halvar's head exploded into ruddy mist and the Terminator behind him fell backwards, chest torn open by the blast.

Anarchy reigned.

Instinct threw Arjac aside as another scintillating blast burned into the open rampway. Behind him, amid much swearing, Old Guard and Wolf Guard alike activated the flank hatches, explosive bolts hurling out the plates onto a field of withered grass. From above, Valgarthr's warriors spilled down, scattering from the enemy fire, thudding onto the hard dirt.

'*Turning!*' warned the Spartan's driver. Tracks churned and the large transport wheeled on the spot, taking the next sorcerous burst on its upper armour. More power-armoured Space Wolves leapt over the whirring tracks, clattering onto their Terminator brethren emerging from within. Arjac was caught between turning for the flank hatch and heading directly out of the ramp – the front was closer, but into the teeth of the enemy fire.

His decision was made an instant later as Njal pushed onto the assault ramp, a nimbus of psychic energy flowing through the gap like fog. Advancing, the Stormcaller thrust the shield outwards, covering the Spartan and its disordered cargo, leaving room for Arjac and Ingvarr, and a couple of Old Guard, to pound down the ramp.

The gunners had located the source of the ambush, a wealth of stunted trees two hundred metres further up the slope. Robed cultists manned a contraption of crystal and steel mounted upon four articulated legs. The bizarre cannon had a muzzle shaped like a flared crow's mouth, a tongue

of crystal glinting with warp energy. Coils of glassy tubing bathed the gunners' masks as they sheltered behind a guard plate sculpted in the shape of outspread wings. Around them dozens more cultists raised lasguns and automatic weapons, targeting the Space Marines forced from their armoured vehicle. The crack of breaking bullets on ceramite rattled in Arjac's ear while flecks of paint kicked from the Spartan's thick hull drifted across his field of vision.

Arjac's autosenses dimmed as triple-linked lascannons spat vengeance past him, slicing the arcane cannon and its crew with ruby beams. The Space Wolves took only seconds to organise themselves, splitting into fire teams to lay down suppressing bursts against the trees while the Old Guard lumbered forward, their combi-bolters raking death beneath the straggly grey leaves. The sensorium whirled for a moment, struggling to meld with the archaic augur units of the other Terminators, forcing Arjac and his pack to disable their links. Regular autosenses restored, his magnified view took in the battle across the slope.

Experience told him in a glance what had happened. The Old Guard had secured one end of the causeway in force, before sending Halvar's packs through the gate. At some point the Thousand Sons and their allies had attacked between the two forces. Some form of wyrd power had perhaps allowed them to attack in strength at a single part of the line, possibly directly teleporting into the assault.

Arjac watched the gunships rove at will, their weapons scattering the cultists where they massed for attack, sending them scurrying into the shadows like vermin scattering in a stores hall. Half-machine drakes swept down from dark clouds to fall upon the gunships, chasing them back into the skies with belched blasts of lightning and bursts from rotary cannons in their maws.

Pockets of Space Wolves and Thousand Sons continued to skirmish around defensive features, caught in firefights along the folds of the ridges and around boulders where the terrain formed natural flanking channels or defilades. These skirmishes painted another picture, of an indistinct line stretching across and around the mountain, to where the slope met the shoulder of its neighbour.

A short distance further up the slope, Arjac noted the broken ground that formed the entrance to a steep-sided gorge. Magnifying his view, the

hearthegn spied a sizable contingent of ancient-armoured Space Wolves guarding the approach, flanked by several tanks of both known and unknown pattern.

The only explanation for this disposition of forces was to protect the route from the causeway to the canyon. He assumed that the Space Wolves had launched their attack from out of the ravine.

Further thoughts were curtailed by the need for action. The Spartan had led the charge from the causeway but other Old Guard packs and war engines were following in its wake, gathering together into a coherent force as they withdrew up the mountain. Arjac could have been looking at his own battle-brothers, so familiar were the drills and formations of the Old Guard. Overlapping fire spread and covering support allowed each pack to join with its neighbour and then, in turn, they moved to their transports or mustered with another squad. All of this was done while targeted by a storm of inferno bolts and wyrd blasts, as well as heavy weapons and lighter fire from the cultists.

'Quit being *skald-wisht*, lad,' one of the Old Guard snapped at him. He jabbed a claw-tipped power glove up the mountain where others of his pack had set up two converging streams of combi-bolter fire on the enemies hiding in the trees. 'Break a sweat, eh?'

Arjac knew the words were not meant harshly but his honour was pricked by them.

'Skald-wisht is it, greyhair?' Arjac turned and waved with his hammer, signalling his warriors to join him. He noted with a pang of loss that Ulfar had not emerged from the Spartan. 'I am Arjac Rockfist, hammer of the wolf, *hearthegn* to Logan Grimnar. Some call me the Man-Mountain. Others know me as the Anvil of Fenris. In the aett I am Grimnar's Champion. Wolf Guard of the Nightwolves, earn your honour marks this day!'

With the pack leader at their head, the Terminators forged up the hill, passing between the two Old Guard packs pinning down the cultists. The ancient Space Wolves pushed out from their positions alongside the Wolf Guard, their weapons joining the fusillade that hammered at the foes sheltering in the shadows of the trees. Inferno bolts screeched across Arjac's armour, red warning icons flashing across the display of his helm. He felt blood trickling from a graze across his shoulder and something had

punched into his right thigh. Plasma blasts flared down into the charging Terminators, hammering against the raised storm shield of Sven.

Arjac tossed Foehammer. Its blazing head crushed the chest of a cultist, sending the pulped corpse slamming into a tree. The hammer reappeared in his grasp and he threw it again as he ran, four more Tzeentchian devotees succumbing to its indelicate touch before he reached the treeline.

The Wolf Guard bellowed war cries of the Fenrisian tribes as they plunged into the woods. Arjac laid into the automaton-like legionaries of the Thousand Sons, cracking open helms and chest-plates, fracturing limbs with controlled, purposeful strikes. Bolts flared from the anvil shield and las-blasts scorched black across the grey of his war-plate, cutting scars across the crux Terminatus on his pauldron, scorching the pelts of his many wolf totems.

Beside him the others of his pack were no less relentless. With power fist and hammer they battered and crushed, the speartip of an attack that dragged the Old Guard into the melee with their rapid advance.

From the gloom beneath the trees loomed a shadow twice the height of the hearthegn. Arjac thought it a Dreadnought at first, but emerging into the sunlight it resolved into a creature, not a machine. The mutant ogryn was as broad as it was tall, two elaborately curling black horns swept from its head, its naked skin pitted with bony plates. Curls of fire licked from the clawed hands. It bared teeth fashioned from sharpened crystal, reflecting the flares of combi-bolter fire and the warpflame that burned in its veins.

‘This one’s mine,’ grunted a warrior behind Arjac.

Three bright flares of missile tails flashed past, detonating across the face and chest of the ogryn. Shrapnel tore open its ribs, razor-edged shards intended to pierce tank armour lacerated flesh and skull, ripping open its upper half. Spurts of actinic energy spewed from the wound as the headless beast reeled back, gouts of fire spewing randomly from outstretched hands. It crashed into a tree, immolated slowly by its own wyrdfyr, the flames catching on the dark brown bark.

Arjac turned in surprise, coming face to face with Ulfar, helm discarded. His armour was heavily cracked, the reinforced armature beneath buckled in several places. The Wolf Guard slapped a hand against the breastplate.

‘Best armour the forges can make!’ he declared with a grin.

‘I thought you were dead…’ exclaimed the hearthegn.

‘For once, I am happy to disappoint you, Man-Mountain,’ the other Wolf Guard said. He held up a fist, Arjac banging the haft of Foehammer against it in salute.

‘Sweating yet, hammer of the wolves?’ The warrior that had chastened Arjac earlier stomped through the trees, combi-bolter snarling rounds at foes fleeing into the deeper woods. ‘It’s a good name, well-earned.’

‘And your name, greyhair?’

‘Vigga Deathblow. And we are the Greybeards, not greyhairs.’

‘Vigga Deathblow…’ Arjac barely breathed the name. ‘The first hearthegn? The warrior that stood at the Wolf King’s side on Marthrax, killing a hundred orks in a single night?’

‘Aye. One hundred-and-four, to be precise. It would have been more if Russ hadn’t kept finishing off the ones I wounded. Ask any of the other Brothers. Russ is a notorious kill-thief.’

Vigga managed to hold his laughter for about five seconds before he let loose with a mighty guffaw. Arjac had witnessed sights both horrific and awe-inspiring across his long life, but nothing left him as speechless as standing before the first warrior to have borne the title of champion. He flinched as Deathblow banged a fist against Arjac’s pauldron.

‘Stick with me, hammer of the wolves. Let’s kill more faithless dog-sons of Prospero.’

Battle-cries fading from their lips, Lukas and the Blood Claws stumbled to a halt, which was just as well because the outcrop on which they found themselves came to a precipitous end just in front of them, dropping down into… somewhere.

The scene beyond the portal put Lukas in mind of his worst moments experimenting with a cocktail of *skaldroot* and *wyrshrum* to overload his Space Marine physiology in an attempt to recreate the occasional psychotropic journeys of his youth. At first, it was impossible to process what his senses were trying to tell him and, judging by their gasps and expletives, the other Blood Claws experienced the same.

What he had taken to be an outcrop was in fact a landing made of pale stone, with a set of steps leading down steeply to the right. And another up

to the left. Except that up and down didn't quite work as directions. The chamber was immense – infinite, perhaps – suffused with a pale green and yellow glimmer. Everything was of the same stone that was underfoot. He could see countless other stairways, ramps, galleries and walkways at angles that would have been, in any sane place, on the walls and ceiling, and through the spaces between.

The inhabitants were as astounding as their surroundings. Daemons by the score, from pink-hued creatures almost as big as Lukas, to cerulean horrors half their size and dozens of smaller entities that scurried and dashed through the legs of their larger cousins. They all had rotund, squat bodies on bow legs, with clawed feet that slapped with constant, maddening overlapping echoes from the stone. Some had tails, barbed or spined or ending in fronds of fingers, or… Lukas shuddered, unable to process much of what he saw. Most had two arms, ending in splayed tube-like fingers, a wyrdglimr emanating from within. Their faces were set within their torsos – grimacing, grinning and scowling, and the air a cacophony of yammering and whistling as the daemons capered about.

Some did not walk but rode upon living daemon-discs that soared between the inter-layered paths and stairways. Lukas tried to follow their passage, to see the moment when they inverted or turned about to align with the broken geometry of their destination. He never caught the instant of transition, a blink or distraction masking it each time.

Beyond the distant walls – walls that might have been mirrors or pools or glass – delved long tunnels like the innards of an immeasurable beast, their pulsing sides veined with darkness. Auric flickers travelled these passages, flitting into existence as daemons upon entering, or disappearing into the haze of distance when a daemon departed.

Just looking at the far edges of the hall made him dizzy despite his enhanced senses. The unnatural vertigo threatened to topple him, to send him tottering towards the chasm-like drop just a few steps away. Around him the Blood Claws reached out to support each other, deliberately staring at the ground beneath them to steady their turbulent perception.

And nothing seemed permanent. The daemons morphed and mutated and shifted as his gaze roamed over them, like glitching hololiths that flickered between different projections. The chamber itself was like a trick of the eye, stairs and landings disappearing on the periphery of vision,

replaced with long corridors or high alcoves when he turned back. Nowhere was the same view twice.

'We should go back,' said Bahrd, voice hoarse. He retreated towards the portal behind them. Energy licked out across his armour, distorting the view of him, sucking the Blood Claw towards the portal's embrace.

'No!' Lukas leapt, grabbing Bahrd's wrist. The hand came away, trailing dissipating sparks of red and blue, still clutching the chainsword in its grip.

Lukas' shout rang around the huge hall, reverberating back from strange directions, growing in volume rather than softening.

'No!' the echoes called, but in different tones of shock and awe and delighted surprise, and then in wholly changed voices. The voices of Grimnar and Valgarthr, Njal and Bjorn, all shouted back at him. They merged together, becoming a wordless noise that resolved into a howl.

'Lukas!' hissed Gudbrand. The Trickster's face stung as the Blood Claw struck him again. Clarity returned. Lukas found himself crouched with one hand to the stone, head thrown back, teeth bared, his claw raised over his head. Startled, he stood quickly.

'That's not good,' said Elof, staring outwards.

All about the hall the daemons had stopped, their gazes moving towards the interlopers. All fell silent and still for several seconds, the tension palpable.

Ascending the ridge, the Stormcaller saw that the gorge was even longer and deeper than he had thought, rapidly engulfed by darkness, a crack of shadow that cut into the mountainside. Trampling over dead cultists, Njal and several Stormriders met with a pack of Old Guard close by the gorge entrance. More Space Wolves pounded up the slope behind him while an encircling blue host advanced in their wake, wary of counter-attack.

Majula followed, barely visible within a protective circle of her Navis Guard. They stopped just a short distance away and the Navigator met Njal's gaze. Though he could see the strain writ in her features, he saw strength too. Dorria and the remains of the squad trained their weapons up and down the mountainside, alert for danger.

One of the Old Guard broke away from his pack, his face as craggy as the bedrock of the Fang, beard and hair flowing in unkempt waves. The

axe in his hand smouldered as blood steamed from its blade.

'Wolf Lord Bulveye?' the Rune Priest called out.

'You must be Njal Stormcaller,' he replied, voice touched with hoarseness. 'The one Halvar told me about. From the future. A strange saga – one that I still find hard to believe.'

+Technically, it is this oaf who is from the past…+

'I am Njal,' replied the Stormcaller. 'We are here to take you back to the mortal universe.'

+We are in the mortal universe, rune-thrower. Merely a place of which you have never heard.+

'A messenger of the Allfather come to pluck me from the field of battle like a Stormrider of legend?'

'Strange that you should say that,' said Valgarthr, coming up past Njal. The pack leader banged his bolter against his pauldron emblazoned with the company's symbol. 'That's who we have taken as our *weregost*.'

Bulveye did not look amused, his glare a calculating one as it ran across Njal's dwindling command.

'Tell me, Njal, how will we get out of here?'

+We must return to the heart, to where I died. I can heal my mortal body and open the gateway back to Tizca. The one this brute denied when he sought to slay me.+

'We need a portal to the centre of the maze,' said Njal. 'In the heart we can breach the barriers back to Tizca where, Allfather willing, my warriors still hold the gateway. I have gunships waiting to take us away the moment we are free.'

'Then we are fortunate,' replied Bulveye, thrusting his axe towards the forbidding gorge. 'A portal lies within this cleft. These lackeys of Magnus tried to take it from us. I thought that if they wanted to get in, my duty was to keep them out.'

+What of the Crimson King? If he desires entry to the heart, he might yet come himself.+

'Have you seen anything of Magnus, Old Wolf? He will not be far from his minions.'

'Nothing of him, not since we entered the maze. That he still lives is bad enough news.'

‘His absence is perhaps *good* news,‘ said Arjac. ‘We should go before the Crimson King decides to show himself.’

‘I cannot abandon a battle not yet won.’ Bulveye’s axe swept out, encompassing the ongoing struggle across the mountainside. ‘My warriors have shed blood for this cause.’

‘We really must leave now, Wolf Lord,’ insisted Njal. ‘This battle is only a small part of a far grander war. The fight against the Thousand Sons will not be won here, not at this time. Trust me. For ten thousand years the Space Wolves have waged this war. If it could be so easily ended, I would snatch the chance.’

‘I swore an oath to the Wolf King and the Allfather that I would let no son of Prospero escape the Rout.’

+I told you! Stubborn and stupid, the worst possible combination. He chose to be trapped in the maze rather than let some of my brothers escape. You will not convince him.+

‘Russ is gone,’ snapped Arjac, stepping forward. ‘The Allfather… The universe you knew died a hundred centuries ago, Old Wolf. Your oath means nothing now.’

‘It means *everything*,’ growled Bulveye. He bared long fangs and shook his head. ‘If what you say is true, all I have left is that oath.’

+I warned you. He is not just intractable, he is insane. Get me to my body and we can be rid of his cursed stubbornness.+

‘You are trapped in this labyrinth,’ said Njal, picking his words with the same care he would negotiate an icy mountain ledge. One slip could prove disastrous. ‘The Thousand Sons are not. If you really want to see your oath fulfilled it is only possible if you come with us. Inside the maze you will achieve nothing.’

The statement sobered the Old Wolf, who sagged slightly, dejection written across his features. He gazed sullenly at Njal, but nodded in acceptance of the Stormcaller’s assertion. Njal resisted a sigh of relief.

‘All together?’ said Bulveye.

‘Together.’

CHAPTER 16
OF MORTALS AND DAEMONS

A cacophony of laughs, screams, jeers and shrieks resounded through the hall, bouncing back from the impossible spaces above and below. The daemon horde burst into frenetic activity, bounding and capering along the walkways, ladders, stairs and walls, cavorting impossibly as they wreathed themselves in daemonflame and cackled with delight. In the space between, disc-riders slashed up towards the pack, swerving and curving, leaving unnatural vortices in the glittering ochre fog.

The Blood Claws hurled fragmentation grenades into the coming masses and then opened fire with their pistols. Bolt pistol rounds spat across the impossible depths as blossoms of fire tossed daemon-limbs and spattered gore into the void-space. Lukas ran to the steps on the right, just in time to meet a flurry of knee-high prismatic daemons streaming up towards him… or was it down… or inwards?

He shook his head and fired his plasma pistol, entirely incinerating the first foe. His claw met the second and third and he bounded forward, stamping on a fourth to pierce the face-chest of a fifth. He smashed the pistol into the flank of the next, sending it spinning from the inverted stair.

Lukas did not dare glance back, knowing that having stepped from the portal stone he was undoubtedly at some strange angle to the rest of the Blood Claws, and to acknowledge it might prove unwise. Instead he hacked his wolf claw through the stream of minions dashing along the stair, stepping back carefully until he regained the promontory.

The others had formed a tight group back to back, pistols and chainswords barking and snarling as daemons leapt from above and swept in on their discs with gouts of wyrdfyr streaming from their fingertips. Gudbrand stumbled back, falling to one knee as his arm burned amid mystical flame, the paint and ceramite sloughing off in a stream. Jerrik leapt to defend the discommoded Space Wolf, hacking his chainsword through the body of a disc as it swept overhead, splitting it from grinning face to whipping tail.

Through the maelstrom Lukas spied something odd – or rather something that seemed odd amongst the bizarreness, a pattern of normality. The daemons pressed in close, throwing themselves ceaselessly into the weapons of the Blood Claws, uncaring of their immediate demise. Yet he knew that though they were inhuman in morals and ambition, they craved existence as much as any mortal creature. They rarely sacrificed themselves except when driven by a higher daemonic power, and the tide of unreal apparitions were dying in droves to protect something.

He sidestepped, swiping the legs from a pink horror, and blasted the next assailant with plasma to open a brief window of opportunity. Stepping into the morass of fluttering daemonflesh, Lukas searched the chamber, a hunter's instincts chiming along his nerves.

Lukas spied what he sought some distance below. A disc slightly larger than the others, piles of books and scrolls upon it, floating next to a crack in the wall. On the ledge beside it were two blue-bodied horrors. The twinned daemons heaved at something, dragging it out of the warp-lit aperture towards their grotesque mount.

'No time to waste, or this place will be our death,' Lukas snapped at the others, clubbing aside a pink-fleshed incarnation of insanity, his claw parting three of its four arms as it whirled away into the gleaming mist. 'Follow me without regret!'

He shouldered aside two blue-hued creatures where a pink horror had been split by bolt fire a second earlier, kicking a smaller daemon out of the way as he leapt from the outcrop. Lukas landed on a disc that had been rising up towards the ledge, bundling its rider off the edge. He jumped again, sideways, landing impossibly on a stair that had been at a right angle to him just moments before. Lukas started up the stairwell, to

discover that in fact he headed down towards the disc he had spied. He heard the thump of his pack-brothers landing behind him.

The next jump, downwards this time, took him onto another disc, the daemon on its back flattened into bone-studded flesh by his impact. Lukas crouched, cast a glance towards the daemons with the chest, and pounced again, landing in a roll along a stone walkway just above where they laboured. He tried to track their progress with his pistol, seeking a shot as he ran along the bridgeway, but they passed directly under, out of sight.

A Blood Claw plummeted past, shouting, bolt pistol still flaring vengeance into the tumble of daemonic bodies that followed.

'*Elof!'* Gudbrand's shout of dismay spurred Lukas on and he vaulted around the edge of the walkway, landing on the underside so that the daemons he pursued were above him. He fired up, but the weird perspective affected his aim and plasma scorched across the ledge just behind them.

Shrieking, the daemons doubled their efforts, bodily picking up their trunk to throw it onto the disc.

Lukas jumped.

It improved Arjac's mood considerably to see gunships of the Old Guard sweep low over the slopes, their shadows passing over the assembling Space Wolves forces. They dared intense ground fire to unleash a storm of ordnance and energy blasts that raked bloody lines through the host gathering about the hearthegn's position. While the rest of the Old Guard withdrew towards the gorge, Terminators and Dreadnoughts from both companies formed strongpoints in the line, their covering fire holding back a resurgence from the Thousand Sons and their cultist allies. Arjac lumbered forward, anvil shield alight with incoming fire as he guarded his power-armoured cousins.

Pack by pack, the host of the Rout shrank back upon itself. Fierce pride burned in Arjac's chest at their faultless performance of the plan, even though ten millennia separated him from them. It pleased him deeply that he and his brothers kept alive the finest warrior traditions of the Wolf King's sons.

The steady withdrawal was as tempered as every shot and blow struck in its execution, putting to the lie the notion that the Space Wolves were an

unthinking, ragged horde. As meticulously as it had been assembled the battleline retreated until just a few packs of the heaviest warriors held the approaches – and Bulveye, who refused to move down into the gorge until the bulk of his host was safely back at the gate, within. The few remaining armoured vehicles escorted the others as they fell back, their heavy weapons deterring any enemies from venturing to the clifftops.

'Now comes the difficult part,' Arjac said, hurling Foehammer at a squad of Thousand Sons moving across the mountainside in the wake of the withdrawal. Heavier fire from his companions scythed through mobs of cultists pressing in from the other flank. 'The moment we move into that defile we'll be targeted from in front and above.'

'Not so hard as you think, young wolf,' said Bulveye. 'Perhaps it is my age finally telling, but I avoid walking anywhere if I can.'

His plan became obvious when intense fire burst across the mountainside, accompanied by the roar of plasma jets. Two Thunderhawks crossed each other, heavy bolters and battlecannons hurling death. In their wake, the Stormbird descended, adding the ire of its weapons to the downpour of firepower. Tatters of smoke, drifting ash and a sprawl of craters were all that remained of the enemy front line when the massive gunship touched down. The cloud of its landing billowed over the Space Wolves and coated their armour with a layer of dull brown.

'*Clawrend*, my chariot,' declared Bulveye.

A cavernous space opened up, more than enough to accommodate the remaining warriors of the Old Guard and Stormriders. The rampway was so broad that Bjorn and one of his venerable brothers could enter side by side. As before, Bulveye insisted that he would remain last, so Njal ushered Majula up into the interior with Dorria and the rest of her bodyguards, the whine of jets building outside as the pilot prepared to lift off.

Bulveye stood defiant, immobile at the bottom of the ramp while his command pack ascended, his axe raised in challenge to the Thousand Sons and their cultist allies – enemies now only vague shapes in the smog and dust. Honour contented, or perhaps pride sated, he turned and strode up the gangway while a Thunderhawk made one last attack run.

Through the closing ramp Njal saw the enemy as the Stormbird turned, a half-seen sea of robe-clad heretics led by knots of armoured legionaries.

The nose of the Stormbird dipped towards the gorge, the snarl of its engines ringing back from the steep canyon sides as it descended into the darkness.

While the others secured themselves, Njal joined Bulveye heading for the main command deck. Through the canopy ahead, above a bank of servitor-pilots overseen by a lone Iron Priest, he saw the gorge walls sliding past in the glare of the main lumens. Blue sparks from the engines of the Thunderhawks flashed ahead, still accelerating hard.

He held his breath as the half-mechanical command crew steered the huge aircraft along the winding path of the gorge, at times the vast wings no more than a few metres from each cliff side. Readouts spewed surveyor returns but the servitors were wired directly into the augur system, the living mind of the Stormbird itself.

'I hope you have appeased your craft's spirit well, I would not wish it to have a surly moment now,' said Njal.

Bulveye gave him an odd look.

'You sound like a Mechanicum Priest, wyrdskaldr.'

Njal's retort was forgotten as the lights of the preceding gunships lit up portions of a huge edifice. The end of the gorge had been cut flat and a massive relief carved into the bare stone. It was impossible to tell its full extent from the glimpses in the lantern beams but the erratic circles of light crossed a huge, lidless eye staring directly at them.

'Let's leave him a scar,' growled Bulveye.

The Iron Priest nodded and passed a command to the gunnery servitors wired into the Stormbird's lascannon array. Red stabs of energy pulsed out, scorching three clefts across the pupil of the massive cyclops.

The pilots took the gunship deeper, past the nose towards a yawning mouth lined with fangs that rivalled the columns of the King's Hall. Brighter than the plasma flare, the portal within gleamed red and gold like a fire within the primarch's throat. The Stormbird banked, lining up a perpendicular approach. Sparks fell like a waterfall of pure ruby within the throat of the monument, and branches of power lashed out to snare the Thunderhawks while other tendrils latched onto the Stormbird. Alerts screamed and banks of lights gleamed in warning as the portal wrenched the huge gunship into the gap between realities.

+Into the Crimson King's gut.+

The symbolism was not lost on Njal.

Lukas landed amidst a flurry of tomes, ink pots and parchments. The disc bucked, trying to throw off the Space Wolf as it dipped and accelerated down into the vastness of the hall's inner space, arrowing towards a pulsating opening.

'Kick it and split it, poke it and hit it!' snarled one of the blue horrors, jabbing a finger towards Lukas.

'Burn it and harm it, hex it and charm it!' the other spat back, psychic motes dancing about its hollow fingertips.

Lukas drew back his claw to strike but the disc rolled suddenly. Instinct forced Lukas to grab something to stop himself falling, plunging his claw into the flesh of the mount while the daemons cackled at him, oblivious to the fact that they were upside down. He saw that they were not quite as similar as he thought – one had three arms and the other two. This extra-limbed daemon opened the chest they had recovered, revealing a single parchment within.

'Looked and found, safe and sound,' declared the grimacing creature, snatching the page from the chest's iron-lined interior. It kicked the trunk away, the box whirling upwards – according to Lukas' senses – as it slipped off the disc.

'We found it in the secret box…' sneered the two-armed daemon.

'…a pretty gift for the Cyclops!' the other finished.

As much as Lukas knew he could stand up – the evidence of his eyes testified that the daemons did so without hindrance – his unreasoning brain told him that he was clinging to the inverted disc, about to plunge into a bottomless depth, if he should let go. He risked a glance sideways, enough to see that the rest of the Blood Claws – four of them now – had regrouped on a balcony-ledge, their backs to a wall, chainswords a blur amid the tangle of daemon bodies that pressed in towards them.

Gritting his teeth, Lukas closed his eyes. His discomfort quickly subsided, and he was able to get to one knee, somewhat unsteady as the disc yawed and pitched seemingly at random. He felt a wind whistling past his ears, snatching at his hair, but there was no other sensation of movement.

With a triumphant grin he pushed himself upright and opened his eyes. Crackling energy flared along his wolf claw and the two horrors glared at him, the blaze of his weapon reflected in their immortal eyes.

Before he could strike, they plunged into a gullet-tunnel. Ruddiness suffused his sight, a sudden closeness constricting around him after the impossible vastness of the cavern. At the instance of his distraction, the two-armed daemon lashed out, a mouth opening in the palm of its hand to spew glittering vapour into his face.

Lukas stumbled, equilibrium whirling while small fire-sprites danced across his vision and a chorus of grating angel voices snarled and rejoiced in his ears.

His foot slipped on a pile of scrolls, pitching him towards the edge of the disc. Recovering, he stepped towards the horrors, in time to be met by the three-armed daemon smashing the spine of an over-sized grimoire into his face. The blow was not strong but, already unbalanced, Lukas staggered again and his foot missed the disc's rim.

Scrabbling instinctively to grab hold of something, Lukas snatched wildly at the daemon, scattering parchments, scrolls and tomes as he pitched off the disc. His efforts to right himself failed and he cartwheeled off the daemon mount and plunged into the daemon-maw, a scrap of paper clutched in his grasp.

As darkness consumed him, two voices drifted after.

'***He did his best, uninvited guest. I'm unimpressed at his jest.'***

'Our foe addressed, his mood distressed, into the Cyclops' nest…'

CHAPTER 17
PROSPERO'S HEART

Whiteness.

Silence.

The double-beat of Njal's hearts grew louder, the rush of blood through arteries and veins a hiss to fill the gulf. The ruddiness of the blood in his eyes.

External sensation returned to Njal in a sudden welter of colour and noise as the Stormbird erupted into the heart of the Portal Maze. The sight through the broad canopy took his breath away. A domed hall, impossibly vast. He was aware of an interior and exterior and the size of the former enclosed within the latter. Normal dimensions were stretched to breaking. Even the greatest *aetthalle* of the Fang would have fitted into the artificial cavern several times over.

Yes, it was definitely a physical space. Wisps of cloud formed and distance hazed his view. There was curvature, more pronounced than Fenris' horizon, possibly a moon or artificial station.

And then it struck him why everything seemed so odd. It was inverted. The curve was up, not down, delineating the inside of a vast sphere. The heart was contained within a pocket space of angular crystal panes and icicle-like columns of shimmering diamond.

+The heart.+ The reverence in Izzakar's thoughts was understandable, though it seemed that his awe was not from first experience but something deeper. +Such majesty of construction. Such purpose given form. The most incredible feat of the Cult Prosperine, all working together under the

guidance of the Crimson King. A perfection even Fulgrim would appreciate. The Magnus Opus.+

Njal moved away from Bulveye and barely breathed his next words.

‘Where are we? I mean, where is this heart set? We are not within the warp, that much I can feel. This is a real place, with dimension and time.’ The Stormcaller stopped on the threshold of the main compartment, one hand raised to cover the slight tremor of his lips. ‘Fulgrim also turned on the Emperor. He’s another daemon prince like Magnus.’

+That surprises me less… But to your question. Where else would we build the heart of the Prosperine empire? We stand within the centre of Prospero itself, hollowed out, peeled open by the craft of the Cyclopean Wonder.+

Through one of the armoured windows the Stormcaller saw the portal they had exited as the Stormbird’s pilot brought it into a steep turning dive towards whatever lay below. There was no grand mask of Magnus, not even a hint of regular architecture. Instead, only a pillar of crystal towering up from the distant cavern floor, faceted innumerable times so that it appeared almost as a spiral of pure light.

‘That… seems unlikely. What of your world’s core? Is this excavation not destabilising in some way?’

+The space it occupies is less than a few metres across, but wound very tightly about itself so that much can fit within.+

‘I find that even less believable, though I cannot think why you would lie to me about it.’

Njal looked back into the cockpit and saw that they were moments from landing upon a dark grey floor, marked with intersecting lines of golden etching in an impossibly complex and bewilderingly vast pattern of hexametric design and psychic containment, much like the wyrdwards upon his own chamber back on Fenris yet far superior in precision and size.

Glancing back, he saw the portal-pillar shrinking, becoming a shadow against the bright arc of the impossible horizon. On the other side, not far from where the Thunderhawks were about to land, he spied a circle of semi-transparent iridescence. The scene on the far side was of smoke-shrouded Tizca, a twilight sky lit by streaks of gunfire and the flare of starshells.

+Think of it this way, son of hut-dwellers. Flattened out, your lungs would cover an area of roughly seventy-five square metres, yet they are contained easily within your chest cavity. By flattening out the spatial plane of the heart we were able to create a vastly more efficient use of space-time. It is rather amazing, now I think of it, but dimensional warping was something that just existed if you grew up in Prospero.+

Something occurred to Njal and he stepped back into the command deck to approach Bulveye.

'You were defending the portal we just used.'

'Aye,' said the Old Wolf, not turning, focusing on the unfolding scene below, face set with concentration. 'It seems that routes out of here always lead back, not like the other portals. If we leave, we can return, although where we go to changes each time. I have been able to muster scattered packs and warriors over the last few… Well, since we pursued the Thousand Sons into this mess. I made this our *war-aett*.'

The Thunderhawks disgorged the last of the Old Guard among waiting tanks and packs. Njal had not seen them all together before and realised there were nearly two hundred Space Marines and several armoured vehicles assembled under Bulveye's command. Among them were larger tanks and transports that Njal did not recognise, as well as various weapon systems and even armoured walkers that had been lost to history. The Old Wolf saw his amazement.

'It's not just been the Old Guard that has been lost in ten thousand years, yes?' He sighed, obviously pained by a thought. 'Your wolf champion, Rockfist, said that the Imperium I knew had died. What happened?'

Njal's answer was postponed by the moment of touchdown, a thud and scrape of landing gear on the flat ground followed by the whine of the ramp opening and the hiss of restraining harnesses releasing the Terminators and embarked Dreadnoughts. Cold air drifted in, bringing with it a clinical scent of cleanser and ozone, tainted by the oil and exhaust fumes.

'Horus. Horus happened,' said the Stormcaller.

'What has the Warmaster to do with Magnus' treachery?'

'Horus turned on the Allfather, Old Wolf.' It knotted Njal's gut to think of the terrible treason unleashed upon the Imperium in the years of its

greatest conquests. ‘He tried to destroy the Lord of Mankind and become ruler of the Imperium.’

‘The Warmaster?’ The colour drained from Bulveye’s face, his expression aghast, something Njal had never seen before in another Space Marine.

Bulveye held a hand to a nearby console, physically rocked by the revelation. He shook his head, opened his mouth to speak and then shut it without word. Another shake of the head, as though clearing away the thoughts that crowded in.

‘There is much we need to learn.’ The Wolf Lord’s voice nearly cracked with strain but he gritted his teeth and mastered his emotions. ‘Now is not the time.’

‘I see Tizca,’ said Njal, pointing his staff at the portal visible through the main windshield. ‘Why did you not just leave?’

‘Two reasons,’ Bulveye replied. ‘Look closer.’

Njal moved towards the glassite plate, focusing through his vague reflection. He recognised the pyramid peaks of the fallen city, summits against the orange sky. Explosions silently blossomed above them.

But they did not move. It was the same scene he had looked at a minute earlier – it was like a pict-capture projected onto a mirror, not quite right.

+It is stasis-locked. When this savage killed me the portal I had opened slipped into dormancy. My partial resurrection must have restored the link I had created, but it needs to be properly aligned and calibrated to account for the temporal shift of ten thousand years.+

‘The army of foes we just left, it can come through?’ It seemed as though Njal asked the question of Bulveye but his words were for the Librarian inside his thoughts.

‘Yes, though we have shown them the error of trying,’ replied the Old Wolf.

+Of course. If there are any among them that still remember such things, they could bring in forces from other gates. And, of course, more daemons.+

‘We must be swift if we are to leave,’ said Njal, jabbing towards Tizca and then swinging his finger to point at the other gate. ‘We cannot be caught using one portal while they attack through the other.’

‘Leave? Why would I leave?’ Bulveye signalled for the pilot to depart and then fixed Njal with a stare. ‘I brought you here so that you do not have to share my fate. My oath remains. I must cleanse the Portal Maze of the sworn enemy. It does not matter to me if a route to Tizca is opened, I won’t go with you.’

‘And your warriors? You condemn them to this fate too?’

Bulveye hesitated and then moved out into the compartment, now empty of occupants.

‘They swore brotherhood to me, feal-oaths to the Old Guard and others. Where I lead, they follow.’

He set off to the ramp, gleaming axe in hand, where he bellowed orders to the waiting packs. Njal followed, gaze roaming across the muster. Some of the Old Guard were arranged in a defensive cordon around the portal to the Thousand Sons’ citadel. Among them were a few warriors with other markings, survivors from different companies swept up by Bulveye during his forays from the heart. Others were being attended to by a pair of apothecary legionaries and a trio of Iron Priests, re-arming for another mission.

He found Majula looking up in awe at the insubstantial ceiling. At his approach, she dragged her gaze to him, a faint smile playing on her lips.

‘I have never seen the like,’ she said excitedly, tapping her fingers together as though clapping to herself. ‘I feel the beacon of Terra but it feels amplified, echoing back inside my head. It is beautiful…’

Before Njal could reply, he felt a spike of anxiety.

+My body… It should be here. I cannot see it.+

The Stormcaller called out to Bulveye before he vanished into the press of his Greybeards.

‘Old Wolf, what became of the Librarian you slew?’

Bulveye cocked his head to one side, eyes narrowing. ‘How could you know of this?’

‘*Wyrdknak*,’ Njal said hurriedly, tapping the side of his head. ‘A vision brought me here.’

‘I see.’ Bulveye waved his axe towards the smaller portal. ‘We tossed the bodies of the traitors over there.’

+Quick, we do not have long before Magnus’ host follows through to the heart.+

Njal left Bulveye to his preparations and strode towards the portal. His Stormriders followed without command, casting looks at the outlandish warriors and machines around them.

A few metres from the portal disc, Njal stopped and looked through. He could see that the pyramids were more intact, the aircraft frozen as they crossed the dusk skies, the war engines that stormed along the streets of designs that had not been seen for millennia.

'The Wolf King,' he murmured and reached out a hand towards the portal. 'Is it possible to step back to that time?'

+Perhaps, but I do not have the skill nor the inclination to save Russ for you. I have led you to your lost company, but that murderous beast is best confined to distant history.+

Njal's own uncertainty about the Wolf King's fate tempered the anger he felt at Izzakar's insults against his primarch. The Rune Priest moved on, though Valgarthr and several others halted and stared, drawn by the historic war unfolding beyond the gate. Njal found a heap of corpses armoured in the pre-Heresy livery of Magnus' Legion. A twinge of anger pulsed through him from his psychic stowaway.

'You opened the portals without your body,' said Njal, pulling aside some of the dead Space Marines. 'Why do you need it now?'

+I do not. But I demand it, as the price for saving you. I will be restored.+

Njal continued to drag aside the broken remains, their bodies and armour stiff, banging and clattering on the unyielding floor.

+That one!+

A thrum of excitement jerked Njal's arm a little to the right, a momentary spasm powered by the urgency of Izzakar's demand. He withdrew it, shocked by the loss of control. The Librarian's hunger to be returned to his mortal shell nagged at him like a false instinct.

'Which one?'

+That one with the robes and a hole in its chest, you Fenrisian fool.+

Njal located the body, a sleeveless coat of deep blue hung off the armour, scorched in places. Its torso and plastron had been punched through by the blast that had slain the Librarian. He remembered the plasma pistol at Bulveye's hip.

‘How am I to do this? That body is not much of a state for anyone, never mind a dispossessed soul. You will die again the moment you return to it.’

+I can heal myself. Do not trouble yourself on that account.+

‘And then? You’ll go to Magnus?’ The thought perturbed Njal, and not just the notion of letting an enemy escape. It seemed an unfitting way to part with Izzakar who, despite his barbed remarks and insults, had proved not only true to his original promise but a capable ally beyond simple necessity.

+My Legion is lost to me, Stormcaller.+ Seeping sadness chilled Njal’s heart. +But perhaps not all of my company. Like your forebrothers, many were scattered in the Portal Maze by the blundering of this wretch and his companions. Some might still exist that remain loyal to the Prosperine ideals. I do not like what has become of the Crimson King, and I might endeavour to thwart his corrupted ways if I can.+

Njal knelt, the shadow of his war-plate falling upon the plasma-ravaged corpse of Izzakar Orr. He laid his staff upon the fatally wounded breast and his hand on the brow of the helmed head. Opening his mind, he allowed the spirits to pass into him, letting them fall upon his thoughts like snow, a little at a time but their accumulation strong enough to bury a man and flatten trees. He nurtured that power, becoming the warming sun of Fenris, instilling the life of his world into the broken physical shell before him.

Cells regrew, ushered into renewed life by Njal’s coaxing. Bone and flesh and organs reformed, though the black carapace that had once shielded them within the epidermis was synthetic and did not heal, leaving a pale splash across the knitted tissue of pectoral muscles and abdomen. The plate, too, could not be fused; its molten edge surrounded the returned flesh with an almost perfect circle.

Sighing, Njal stood, leaving the body mended but still empty.

+You did not need to do that.+

Njal said nothing but opened up his thoughts, unbarring a tiny portion of his mind-fortress, a postern gate in his defences for the Librarian to exit. A spark emerged from within his thoughts, invisible to all but the Stormcaller’s wyrdsense. It travelled down his arm and ejected from the tip of his staff. Nightwing cawed, shuffling on his pauldron, heralding the spirit of the dead.

Like an ember, the fragment of Izzakar fell upon his inanimate remains.

The corpse twitched twice, its limbs jerking with the sudden infusion of mortal energy.

A gloved hand quivered across the corpse-pile until the fingers found purchase and pulled the Librarian to a sitting position. A wheeze of effort escaped the masked helm and ochre eye lenses turned towards Njal.

'What passes here?'

The shout from one of the Old Guard echoed across the divide even as Njal helped Izzakar to his feet. A sudden commotion behind the Stormcaller warned of warriors turning in his direction with more shouts of disbelief and calls for the Old Wolf. The Thousand Sons Librarian ignored the disturbance and bent to pluck an undamaged chestplate from a corpse, the hiss of its detachment drowned among a growing chorus of accusing shouts.

Orr laughed softly.

'Do you mock me?' demanded Njal, grip tight on his staff. Nightwing poised on his arm, ready to lunge at the Librarian.

'I was just trying to speak to you in my head.' Izzakar's voice was harsher than his thoughts had sounded, grating and low. 'I had become unaccustomed to using my actual voice. I wanted to thank you.'

Valgarthr and the rest of the Stormriders formed a line between Njal and several packs of Old Guard. The veterans cast looks at Orr but it was clear their loyalty was first to their Lord of Runes whom they trusted without doubt. The weapons of Bulveye's warriors were trained on the strangers in their midst. The Old Wolf approached, several of his veterans with him. Njal heard the whine of motors and a heavy tread, sensing the weight of the Dreadnoughts at his back.

The Stormcaller caught Majula eyeing the sorcerer. Her expression told of curiosity rather than anger now that she could finally see that which she had only dimly sensed previously. Dorria stepped in front of the Navigator, trying to usher her away from the advancing Old Guard. Majula sidestepped, eluding Dorria's outstretched hand to stand with the Stormriders.

Njal saw her shaking as she stopped in front of one of the Greybeards and folded her arms, a diminutive picture of defiance against the towering presence of the Space Marine. The Space Wolf stepped back, his uncertain glance towards his pack leader answered with a shrug.

‘Say nothing,’ Njal snapped at Izzakar, knowing that a stray word of offence from the Librarian could trigger a regrettable incident.

‘What Space Wolf lifts his weapon against another with murderous intent?’ demanded Arjac, his Terminators joining Valgarthr’s pack as a physical barrier to the legionaries.

‘What Space Wolf resorts to necromancy of a defeated foe?’ demanded Bulveye, pushing through his warriors to confront Njal. He levelled his axe at the Rune Priest. ‘I thought you a brother and you repay me by sharing the treachery of this cur?’

‘His name is Izzakar Orr,’ Njal said firmly, his staff held to his side. ‘Without his knowledge we are all doomed to die in this cursed place.’

‘So be it,’ declared the Old Wolf. His hand moved to the plasma pistol at his belt. ‘I expect he’ll die a second time as easily as the first.’

He dragged the weapon free and lifted it. Njal saw the glimmer of the energy discharge for a split second before it was eclipsed by a massive form. The crackle of the shot seemed loud in the moment, the flare of it bright behind the silhouette of the Terminator that had moved.

The sound of the impact screeched along Njal’s nerves, a shout ripped from his throat as the ball of plasma splashed across the warrior that had intervened.

Rocked by the discharge, the Terminator half turned and the Stormcaller saw Arjac’s face screwed up in shock, his plastron almost disintegrated by the plasma bolt, droplets of cooling ceramite spattered across his face and tattooed scalp.

A surge of psychic energy and fizz of static alerted Njal to the reaction from Izzakar and he acted in instinct, swinging his staff blindly. The skull connected with the face of the Librarian as he lifted hands sheathed in arcing bolts of green. The blow spun Izzakkar to the ground, psychic lightning earthed harmlessly through the floor. Njal stepped forward, both shielding the Thousand Sons legionary from further attack and blocking Izzakar’s view of Bulveye.

‘Enough!’ roared the Old Wolf, taking a stride, axe brought back for a blow.

One of his veterans leapt at him, ensnaring Bulveye’s arm with his own, dragging the Wolf Lord down and sideways. The two Old Guard tumbled

in a crash of armour, the interloper rolling to straddle his superior, one foot on the Old Wolf's wrist, pinning his axe-hand down.

'No more!' barked the 13th Company veteran. 'We are done here, Bulveye.'

'You defy me also, Jurgen?' Bulveye sounded more hurt than angry and he made no attempt to unseat his assailant, the fight knocked out of him by the sudden intervention of his companion.

'By the Allfather's mighty gusts, I do,' said Jurgen. 'I just stopped you making another terrible mistake.'

The Old Guard parted as one of their number moved to attend to Arjac. The Wolf Guard waved him away, pushing to his feet with a wince.

'It's fine, my armour took the brunt of it.' Rockfist darted a look at the floored Wolf Lord. 'Fortunate that you're such a bloody poor shot.'

'Our oaths… The Allfather's command…'

'We were betrayed already, Old Wolf.' Jurgen stood, foot still in place on Bulveye's wrist. 'I overheard what the *runekast* said. Horus turned on the Allfather. Think about that, Bulveye. *Horus turned on the Allfather.'*

'We did nothing wrong,' snarled Izzakar. 'I told you before, imbecile, that your censure was misplaced. You would not listen. You forced us to defend ourselves.'

'What of it? We do the Allfather's bidding here. He determined your…' The Old Wolf's voice trailed away with realisation and his face twisted with consternation.

The one called Jurgen explained as he stepped away and helped Bulveye to his feet.

'That's right, Old Wolf. Our orders, they came from Horus. The Wolf King did not speak with the Allfather directly, the execute command was passed on by the Warmaster.'

A knot of coldness gripped Njal's gut, knowing the details of the terrible saga that followed. Nightwing took flight with a shriek of dismay, circling above the gathered battle-packs.

'It was all a lie,' whispered the Stormcaller. 'The Allfather never ordered the death of Prospero. The thrice-cursed Warmaster had already turned and sought to pave the way to his treachery by turning the Sons of Russ upon Magnus' Legion.'

Stunned silence followed the announcement as Stormrider, Old Guard and even Izzakar absorbed the monumental consequences of that simple but most heinous of deceptions.

The Old Wolf looked broken, axe limp in his grasp, head hung with shame. Njal assisted Izzakar in standing up. The two foes, who just days and yet ten thousand years ago were intent upon each other's destruction, faced each other, united by the sudden revelation.

'You were not wrong,' the Thousand Sons Librarian said quietly, the words barely heard. 'You were tricked, and we see now the path that Magnus took my people.'

'Nor you,' admitted Bulveye, lips barely moving. 'Had the Rout not destroyed Prospero, might we have had an ally? Surely that was the gambit of Horus.'

They looked at each other in mutual understanding.

A sudden chiming noise rang about the impossibly vast hall, distant yet strong. Izzakar's helmed face turned towards the other portal.

'Magnus is coming,' he told them, voice touched with awe. He returned his attention to Bulveye. 'I feel his presence burrowing into the portal. As before, I control the means of your departure.'

They turned towards the white pillar as though expecting the renegade primarch to burst through right then.

'Or you can stay and fight,' the Librarian continued, his tone conveying contempt for such a plan.

'We need you, Old Wolf,' said Arjac. He gestured at the host assembled under Bulveye's command. 'Out there, the heirs of the Warmaster look to topple what their master couldn't, a war that has raged for ten thousand years. Don't tell us about oaths. The Sons of Russ have been fulfilling such feal-words for a hundred centuries. You wish to destroy Magnus? Come with us. Join your brothers who we have already found.'

A fresh interest brightened Bulveye's eye.

'Already found? Warriors of the Thirteenth?'

'Yes,' said Njal, cutting short the conversation before too much detail was revealed. Bulveye did not need to know yet that the majority of those 13th Company legionaries recovered from the warp had succumbed to the mutating curse of the Wulfen. 'They will need a leader.'

‘Do it,’ Bulveye told Izzakar. ‘Send us to Tizca as you would have done if not for my boar-headed pride.’

The Librarian approached the portal, arms raised, the words of the calculae-incantation already spilling from his lips. The sheen within the circle of energy fractured, jolting forward through an age, lifetimes passing in moments until the temporal distortion between the maze and Tizca was aligned. The sky was of a deeper night, not dissimilar to what the Stormriders had left. A few more words and the gate broadened, revealing a vista of the Pyramid of Photep. On the opposite side, squads of thralls and scattered Space Wolves turned in surprise at the sudden activity.

‘Do you still desire my surrender?’ asked Orr.

‘I think I do not.’ Bulveye turned to his host and lifted his axe high. ‘We march again for Tizca, the sharp teeth of Fenris about the throat of Magnus once more!’

CHAPTER 18
THE CYCLOPS AND THE JACKALWOLF

Swallowed by the daemon gullet, Lukas lost all sense of motion. He crossed some kind of boundary point, a nullspace without dimension or velocity, though he was somehow still aware of movement. Or rather it was transition, a state of transformation from one place to another.

He really was in the belly of a beast, he decided. A daemonic entity so vast that it could not be comprehended, and in some way linked to the Portal Maze into which his forebrothers had unwisely ventured. Its guts, limbs, nerves and arteries were the hidden links between the gates, concealed in rational warp-science that had eschewed the existence of the daemonic.

This state of graceful intuition passed quickly as he was spat forth from the monstrous internal dimensions, falling hard upon unyielding ground. Battle stench of blood, sweat and smoke stung his nostrils. All was black.

He realised that the darkness was his eyes closed and slowly opened them, not sure he wanted to see where he had been deposited.

Vision cemented that thought as focus returned, revealing blue giants standing about him. Their armour was chased with gold, banded about chest plates and greaves, their masked helms ornately fashioned with gilded flares and crests. The Rubricae – for such he knew well from the fighting on Fenris – acted simultaneously, their bolters aimed at his face, the glimmer of inferno hex playing about the weapons' muzzles.

Another figure pushed past, more ornamented still, wearing a tabard-robe of blue and white that was embroidered with Prosperine sigils and the

mark of the Changer of Ways. In the eye lenses of the sorcerer's helm Lukas could see the portal through which he had fallen, and his own stricken expression.

The Tzeentchian sorcerer pushed the butt of his staff into Lukas' chest, a lambent flame pinning him to the ground.

'What is this?' The traitor's voice was heavily accented and distorted by the helm's vocaliser. 'A scout sent to find us? A spy of Fenris? I think you are a little lost, my wolf-tainted friend.'

It took some time for the Space Wolves to pass out of the Portal Maze, during which Njal joined minds with Izzakar once more, this time to deflect the energies of the opposing portal. Tendrils of warping power crept into the arcane circuitry seeking to rip open that which the cultists could not part by design. Hot sweat stood out on Njal's brow as he fixated his powers on keeping the gateway shut. Beside him, the Thousand Sons Librarian constantly chanted psychebraic commands, keeping the portal slightly misaligned despite the efforts of those beyond.

Just a few packs remained of the Old Guard – and Arjac's Wolf Guard who had refused to leave without the Stormcaller – when a new presence imparted upon the plane between the Tzeentchian citadel and the heartworld. At first, Njal thought it was a greater daemon, its power evident even from afar, like the first gleam of a raging inferno beyond the crest of a hill.

The being on the other side of the warp bridge flexed its power and a ripple of consternation passed through the Stormcaller.

'I cannot hold for much longer,' Njal said with a grimace. 'Magnus is too powerful.'

'I am also near spent,' confessed Orr. Rivulets of sparks rolled from his armour as he exterted himself, and in Njal's wyrdsight he could see the darkening aura around the Librarian as his connection to the warp waned with effort.

'Just a few more minutes,' said Njal, checking the progress of the evacuation. He knew that they did not have enough time. Another determined assault would see the gateway formed and Magnus would lead his host through the breach.

As suddenly as it had arrived, the presence dissipated.

‘Perhaps we were wrong,’ said Njal.

‘It was him,’ insisted Izzakar. ‘The Crimson King is coming for us.’

‘I’m not the expert, but you said Magnus built this maze. I don’t think we can hold against him if he desires to enter.’

‘No, we cannot,’ said Izzakar, his words touched by the hint of a hidden smile. ‘I advise a rapid retreat before the primarch returns.’

They broke away in unison, heaving one last psychic push into the portal to send its alignment spinning. Nightwing raced ahead of Njal, cawing madly at the last warriors, pulsing his desire for them to depart. They heeded his intent and all but the Rune Priest and Librarian pushed into the other portal.

Nightwing dived through and Njal hit the shimmering circle at full speed, leaping into the veil with a gasp.

Show me the intruder.

The words trembled through the ground and the limbs of Lukas, bypassing his ears altogether. A rage of stimulants coursed into his arteries as his modified limbic system and armour did their best to dampen the wave of apprehension that rose up in his gut. The mix of hormones and artificial enhancers made him slightly light-headed, which for one of his carefree disposition was not an improvement.

At an unspoken command from the sorcerer, the Rubricae parted, revealing the approach of the Cyclops, Magnus the Red, a towering apparition of immortal power and infernal sorcery. The sorcerer knelt, giving obeisance to his lord, and in doing so removed his staff from Lukas’ body. The Trickster stood quickly, gaze fixed upon the daemon primarch. It was impossible to take in the majesty and unnatural aura of Magnus, leaving Lukas with just vague impressions and shifting after-images.

Awe threatened to choke all thought from the Trickster but he would not allow himself to be cowed by the primarch and managed to smile weakly.

‘Hello.’

What is your mission, Son of Russ?

Lukas glanced around and saw that he was in some kind of citadel hall, banners upon the walls, vast enough to be thronged with sorcerers, Rubricae, cultists and mutants, a thousand-strong and more. Though

Magnus' presence was still like a battering ram against his skull, Lukas' confidence could not be long depleted. The fact the Cyclops clearly did not know everything lessened his aura of infallibility.

'I don't really do things on purpose,' he explained. 'I'm more the type that just makes things happen and then improvises.'

The Stormcaller did not despatch you? I sense his spoor. He is close now.

The primarch's aura was overpowering, blotting out thought and sensation. It took all of Lukas' will to form a sentence.

'Njal? He didn't send me. I mean, I was with him, for a while, on the ship. But I haven't seen him since we landed in Tizca.'

The apparition solidified as Magnus bent closer, forming a body of deep red clad in golden armour. A grimacing face regarded Lukas with its single eye, the other socket a bottomless vortex of swirling darkness. Even so, there seemed something wrong with the daemon prince, like a misaligned vid-projector. Fragmented parts of Magnus flittered and faded, struggling to maintain coherency.

You will tell me what the Stormcaller intends. You will reveal all to me.

'I know nothing,' Lukas insisted. He shrugged. 'I really have no idea where the Stormcaller is or what he wants to do. I'm not the sort of person he confides in.'

You will not thwart my elevation, child of Fenris. I will align the omnimatrix and ascend fully to my place as a godhead. Worlds will burn at my arrival. Stars shall weep in horror.

In contrast to moments before, Lukas desperately wanted to stay silent. Every rational part of him screamed to say nothing, to not dare the wrath of this demigod. Magnus had the power to snuff out his life in an instant. Yet… Such power had to be challenged. It was Lukas' self-appointed mission to thwart highhandedness and the tyranny of authority.

He could never keep his mouth shut even when it was best for him.

A nonchalant grin spread across Lukas' face. 'Everyone must have goals.'

You mock me?

'I mock everyone.'

I can slay you with a thought. Turn your body inside out. Rip your mind from the tethers of your brain and feed it to daemon-hounds for eternity. You–

'No, you can't,' said Lukas. Magnus' assumed visage became a picture of rage and the Trickster quickly lifted his hand, the torn piece of parchment in his fist. 'Not if you want this.'

Magnus recoiled, scattering Rubricae with his anger.

How did you get that? The Spell of Unlocking belongs to me! The primarch gathered himself and loomed again, a clawed finger pointed at Lukas. ***I will claim it from your dead grip while I torture your soul for this insult.***

'No, you won't,' replied Lukas. 'You are said to have foresight beyond imagining. Look now, look into the future to see what happens next.'

The single eye of Magnus narrowed, becoming a golden orb in which the fleshless skull of Lukas was reflected. He felt a connection, the daemon primarch's mind thrusting into his own. All of his adaptation and mental training as a Space Marine was of no more defence against the psychic might of the Crimson King than a wall of paper against a powersword.

A beam of black power erupted from Magnus' outstretched hand, striking Lukas, flaying skin and muscle in an instant. His heart – his one remaining heart – stopped, incinerated by the blast. In that same moment, the device in place of the heart that had been stolen activated.

The stasis bomb exploded about the collapsing corpse of the Trickster, sealing his eternal moment of death. The stacked cell at the heart of the stasis generator would last a thousand years, impregnable even to the wiles of the warp-spawned and the greatest minds of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

And in his fist, the scrap of parchment, stolen for a millennium.

Magnus retreated again, wary of Lukas.

Give it to me and I will see your desires fulfilled.

'Anything?'

Anything within my power.

'What would you suggest?'

The primarch smiled, the expression sending shivers of discomfort through Lukas. The Crimson King gently stretched forth a massive talon, its black tip barely touching Lukas' plastron. The Trickster's heart beat like a demented drummer as he expected the claw to plunge further despite his gambit. Instead, it lightly tapped against the flame-scarred ceramite.

I am no stranger to change. I see what lies inside of you, the same as hides in the souls of all Sons of Russ. I know your name for it. Wulfen.

Magnus withdrew his hand and crossed his arms, an expression of beneficent mercy on his face.

I can rid you of that curse. Set you free from the fate that stalks you.

'Tempting,' said Lukas.

It really was. He knew the beast that stalked him, the curse that he couldn't trick or outrun. Others thought the stasis bomb was just a trick, but it was far more than that. It was protection, the last chance to avoid becoming what he despised in himself.

You have bested the changeling, anointed of my patron. You have stolen one of the nine inward-flexing incantations from the Blue Scribes, archivists of the Changer of Ways. I see your spirit, the desire that drives you. All is flux. Your stasis bomb, a final laugh, is deliberate irony. Stasis, the antithesis of all you seek.

I see your thoughts well. Trickster, you call yourself, but you have another name – the one the others speak in sour tones. Jackalwolf. The scavenger of their honour. The lesser creature. They despise you, even though you are better than them.

Swear yourself to me, pledge your soul to the Architect of Fate and you shall know immortality. You will spend eternity with your tricks, bringing low lords of worlds, an incarnation of hubris returned, of pride revisited. My patron lures in those that would be powerful, ignorant of the knowledge that all ambition is meaningless and no legacy lasts beyond death.

But you… Lukas… You have no ambition but to twist the ambitions of others – to remind the universe that everything is without meaning.

I can give you that.

'My brothers, do they still live?' asked Lukas.

Magnus considered this, supernal gaze not moving from Lukas.

They do, but my allies are poised to crush them.

‘Spare them.’

A vision sketched upon the air, showing Lukas the Blood Claws in the impossible hall. The ground warped around them, tumbling daemons into the abyss, shifting stone bringing them back before the portal by which they had entered. The glimmer of the veil in the gateway cleared, revealing the empty chamber of the port command centre. Lukas could hear nothing but it was plain from the scene that the Blood Claws were not certain.

‘Go back, you idiots,’ growled Lukas.

They looked up, as if hearing his voice.

‘Go back!’

The survivors of the pack hurried into the portal and stumbled out into the ruins of Tizca, unmolested. Behind them the gateway froze, becoming a solid wall of black marble.

They are free.

‘And if I still say no?’

Lukas sensed a change in the primarch, a look of cunning on his face. The Trickster raised his claw in response, a crackling blade pointed beneath his plastron, aimed for his surviving heart.

Magnus paused, fearing Lukas would kill himself and set off the stasis bomb.

I am immortal. Time does not flow for me as you. If need be, I can wait a thousand years.

‘Stop! If you try to use any of your powers, I swear on the Allfather’s throne I will end myself first.’ Lukas spoke quickly but surely, summoning all of his will to match the immortal stare of the demigod. He let out a short laugh, his apprehension escaping as contempt. ‘I think you bluff poorly, Magnus. The galaxy is being torn asunder and you have moved your daemonworld into the realm of mortals, but there is something else you need. The Portal Maze is part of it, and this *wyrdhex* I hold is the key, isn’t it? You cannot wait a thousand years. Your fallen brothers will have carved out their mortal domains, taken their fill from the carcass of the Imperium and you will be left with scraps. You will have *failed*, Magnus.’

You cannot resist!

Lukas felt tendrils of foreign thought piercing his mind. He tried to plunge the claw into his chest but his arm would not respond. Gritting his

teeth, he stared up as the Lord of the Thousand Sons reached out a hand, ready to pluck the parchment from Lukas' unresisting fingertips.

The Trickster laughed, throwing the spell-piece into the air.

Magnus' whole focus moved to the incantation he desired, freeing Lukas from the grip of his enchantment. The Trickster dived towards the portal behind him. He rolled to his feet in front of the curtain of power and glanced back. The torn parchment floated on a cerulean breeze towards the outstretched hand of the Cyclops. It landed in his palm and his fingers gripped it tight, lifting up the scrap. One eye scanned the page in an instant, brow furrowing deep. The single eye of Magnus turned on Lukas, confusion writ across his features.

This is not the Spell of Unlocking…

'I never said it was,' laughed Lukas. 'That was *your* assumption.'

The Trickster leapt. The crackle of a sorcerous blast and a deafening bellow of rage followed as the portal gate enveloped him.

Arjac kept guard with the survivors of his pack, ordering forward squads of thralls to provide escort to the Space Wolves that dashed through the whirling maw of the open portalway. Majula emerged in their midst, just four of her Navis Guard with her. They peeled away from the general movement along the avenue. The Navigator looked exhausted, held onto the shoulder of Dorria, but she straightened as they approached Rockfist. She smoothed her gown and tidied the pendants around her neck, but there was no affectation any longer. Her proud bearing carried to the look in her eyes.

'Your deeds for the Space Wolves will be sung in saga,' said the hearthegn looking at the representatives of House Belisarius. 'And now we must ask another task, that you steer us safely home through the storms.'

'After that…' Majula glared back towards the Portal Maze aperture. 'Sailing upon the sea of the warp will be a welcome familiarity, Champion of Grimnar.'

Dorria gently gave care of Majula to one of the others and remained while they moved away.

'I saw what happened with the sorcerer,' said the guard captain. 'You could have been killed, protecting a traitor.'

‘We would have all been trapped in the maze if he had died. And really, we owe greater thanks to Greybeard Jurgen for not letting Bulveye get a second stab at the kraken.’

She absorbed this in silence, nodded in respect and followed quickly after the others.

Arjac drew in a long breath, brow knotted as he watched her go. Did the others think as she did, that he had risked his life for the Thousand Sons Librarian? The thought vexed him, unsure which of two possible stories was the better. The lie – that he had saved the Librarian to protect them all. The truth – that he had thought the shot aimed for Njal and all else had been unintended.

A scrape of boots on the wall of a cloister above him had him turning quickly, the dilemma forgotten, hammer at the ready.

An indistinct aura parted, revealing a smiling face framed by a bright shock of braided red hair, gauntleted fingers tugging at a slender beard. The Space Marine’s expression, the knowing smile, made Arjac suspicious, that somehow the newcomer could know his thoughts, the perplexity that he had been thinking about moments before. Irritation replaced self-consciousness.

‘What do you want, Jackalwolf? Where did you sneak off to when there was real fighting to be done?’

‘Here and there,’ said Lukas. The Trickster airily waved a wolf claw towards the pyramids. ‘Around and about.’

Arjac grunted. ‘And what did you get up to, scourge of honour?’

‘Sneaking,’ said the Trickster with a sly look. He pulled his doppelgangrel cloak about himself, blending once more with the shadows, a last hint of a starlit grin before only his voice remained. ‘Just sneaking, like you said.’

The Stormcaller landed on the cracked paving of Tizca, the sporadic bark of bolters and a drone of strafing gunships stark and unreal, though it was actually reality that crowded upon him after the dimensional flatness of the maze-heart. He skidded to a stop and turned, expecting Izzakar to follow.

Njal could see back through the circle, as clear as though it were a hole in a wall. Izzakar stood at the breach while, behind him, the companion

gate across the heart glowed hotter and brighter.

It was hard to make sense of his feelings, torn between the oaths he had sworn to slay Magnus' sons and his experience with Izzakar. It was a fool's hope that they might forge a common cause. Before he could say anything, Izzakar spoke from the other side of the gateway.

'I will break the seal,' declared the Librarian. 'It will take time even for Magnus to correlate the correct metrics to follow and you will be far away from Prospero before then.'

'You can close the portal from this side,' said Njal, remembering how Orr had severed the link from the grey wastes. 'You don't have to trap yourself.'

'My world died ten thousand years ago, Son of Russ. I do not belong in yours. I would prefer to see if any of my brothers remain untouched by this dust-curse. Warn your masters of Magnus' plan.'

The portal shut, a blackness cutting across the Thousand Sons Librarian which mingled with the smog of battle that hung upon the lacklustre Tizcan breeze.

Njal stood looking at the empty portal plinth for several seconds longer, unable to process the recent events beyond the most basic level.

He shunted his concerns and doubts aside, pushing them to a place where they stopped interfering, paused for later examination. There were more important matters to be dealt with than his confusion.

He voxed a signal to Aldacrel.

'Praise the Allfather, I thought you lost to us, Stormcaller,' the Iron Priest replied. *'I was only minutes from ordering our return to orbit*.'

'General withdrawal to the landing zone, brother. Signal the *Longclaw* and have them target all ordnance at this site. Strike in five minutes.' He looked at the Pyramid of Photep and the glow of broken dimensions from within. The image of the Cyclops was gone, but he knew that on the far side of the maze gates Magnus still sought entry, reclaiming Prospero for his dire scheme.

'Leave nothing but ashes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Primarchs novel *Lorgar: Bearer of the Word*, the Horus Heresy novels *Deliverance Lost*, *Angels of Caliban* and *Corax*, as well as the novella *The Lion*, which formed part of the New York Times bestselling collection *The Primarchs*, as well as several audio dramas including the bestselling *Raven's Flight* and *The Thirteenth Wolf*. He has written many novels for Warhammer 40,000, including *Rise of the Ynnari: Ghost Warrior*, *Jain Zar: The Storm of Silence* and *Asurmen: Hand of Asuryan*. He also wrote the *Path of the Eldar* and *Legacy of Caliban* trilogies, and two volumes in The Beast Arises series. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*, and much more besides. In 2017, Gav was awarded the David Gemmell Legend award for his Age of Sigmar novel *Warbeast*. He lives and works in Nottingham.

An extract from *Lukas the Trickster*.

Wolves howled.

Pack leaders crashed together. Avalanches of muscle and fur, sweeping together from opposite sides. Inevitable as death. Their shadows spun and fought across the walls of the *Aettergeld*, a narrow chamber of rock with high sloping walls and a massive nave set between the two halves of an immense horseshoe-shaped table.

The chamber was lit only by the glow of the firepits that ran down its centre, lambent shadows crowding the edges as if trying to creep away from those of the combatants. Ancient battle-banners hung from the ceiling, rippling in the intense heat. Weapons and other, less obvious trophies marked the roughly carved walls. Cheers and whistles pierced the air. The benches were packed and *mjod* flowed freely.

Naturally, there was an audience. Wolves didn't have secrets from each other. At least, not that they would admit.

Lukas the Trickster sat well back from all the excitement, near the largest of the firepits that dotted the chamber. He leaned on a massive wolf, idly scratching it between the ears. 'Who do you think it'll be, then?' He glanced down at the wolf. The great beast grunted and made to roll over, uninterested in conversation. Lukas chuckled and set his legs across the back of another wolf.

He leaned back amid the massive hairy bodies that lay about him in untidy piles. The smell of wet fur and animal musk enveloped him. In the close environs of the chamber, that smell wasn't unpleasant, but it was impossible to ignore. There were a dozen or more sleeping wolves around him, a full pack. The brutes often sought the warmth of the Aett in the colder seasons, where meat and water were freely available as well. Wolves were opportunists at heart – it was one of the reasons Lukas enjoyed their company.

'You are most hospitable companions, for all that you smell awful,' he said, turning to study the ancient banners and battle-worn trophies hanging from the walls. Since the setting of the Fang's roots, the Aettergeld had been used as a place of judgement and sentencing. Sven Ironhand had declared his exile here, and Garn Felltooth had bared his throat to the

Great Wolf's axe. Disputes were weighed, blood-prices paid and the guilty condemned. It was a place of debts owed and restitutions made.

Lukas had been in this chamber a hundred times before, and would be a hundred times more before his thread was at last severed by Morkai's jaws. That was his wyrd, and he was content in it. He was a sour note in the song of heroes, a fact he prided himself on. Of what possible interest was a perfect song? Better to be interesting than perfect.

Lukas knew he was many things – lazy, disrespectful, often unhygienic – but never boring. He was the only man living who had killed a doppelgangrel by hand, and the only warrior to ever have taken a punch from Berek Thunderfist and remain standing.

He was the Jackalwolf. The Strifeson. The Laughing One. The Trickster. The warriors of the Rout collected names the way a child might collect shells. Each name came with a story, a saga of heroism or foolishness. Sometimes both. Every warrior was a collection of stories, with the same beginning and only one end.

A roar went up from the gathered Wolf Guard as one of the combatants was sent rolling through a firepit. The warrior leapt to his feet and tore his burning shirt from his frame. Even un-armoured, the strength of the fighters was such that they could burst stone and warp metal. One ill-timed blow and a Great Company would be electing a new Wolf Lord before the day was out.

Benches had been upended in the struggle. Braziers spilled crackling embers across the floor, and a rug made from the slick pelt of a sea troll was burning. In the centre of the chamber, the two mighty figures came together again, snarling and cursing. The gathered huscarls stomped their feet, adding thunder to the storm.

Helwinter had come round at last, and it was time for the Jackalwolf to find a new pack. Or, rather, for a new pack to be burdened with the Jackalwolf. The jarls drew sticks until only two remained. Then, as was tradition, those two would beat each other bloody until one yielded. A simple procedure, and an entertaining one.

Lukas felt a faint vibration as the storm outside lashed at the mountain. The few lumens in the hall flickered. No one noticed, preoccupied as they were by the sight of two Wolf Lords pummelling each other into bloody surrender. The two warriors were of a similar size and bulk, giants among

giants. Leathery faces tanned by glare and hardened by age rippled in savage snarls. Distended jaw lines bulged as fangs snapped. Yellow eyes glared with kill-lust. The other jarls circled the combatants, shouting encouragement.

Not all of them were in attendance on this momentous occasion. He knocked on a wolf's head with his knuckle. 'No sign of my old sparring partners, Hrothgar Ironblade or Berek Thunderfist. Gunnar Red Moon is in hiding. And Egil Iron-Wolf is nowhere in sight, which is something of a relief, if I'm being honest.' Part of Lukas dreaded the day he would be foisted on that pack. The smell of machine oil alone would kill him.

'No sign of the Great Wolf either. Of course, while Grimnar often boasts of sharing the burdens of duty with his subordinates, he has ever avoided this one.' Lukas snorted and ran his hand through the crimson tangles of his beard. 'Given that he was the one who made it a tradition, maybe he's exempt – or maybe he has simply had a bellyful of me.'

The absences left only a few familiar faces. Engir Krakendoom, obviously. Lukas paid little attention to his current jarl. Despite his best efforts, he looked like a condemned man on the cusp of reprieve, something Lukas took as a compliment.

From where he sat, he could hear the wagers that flew fast between the huscarls, weighing the merits of both warriors. Kjarl Grimblood was the older, his slate grey hair and beard whipping about as he drove a crushing blow against the side of his opponent's skull. Bran Redmaw staggered, but replied in kind almost instantly. His mane of hair stood up stiff on his scalp, and his veins bulged like tension cables. He champed his teeth spasmodically as he struck Grimblood again and again, pummelling him.

'You are the one who can see the future, Grimblood,' Redmaw roared, his words echoing through the chamber. 'You know how this ends.'

'The future the fire showed me wasn't this one,' Grimblood snarled. His big fists, scarred and gnarled, struck like pistons, matching his opponent blow for blow. 'He isn't my wyrd, not this season. Take him and be damned!'

'If I were not used to it, I might be insulted,' Lukas murmured to one of the wolves. The beast yawned at him, and he scratched it behind the ears. 'Still, that too is tradition, and who am I to gainsay it, eh?' The wolf didn't reply. Then, they never did. Another reason he preferred their company to

that of his brothers. Lukas chuckled as Grimblood struck Redmaw a resounding blow. ‘Another hit like that, and the decision is made.’

Lukas was interested to see who would win this time. Who would he be this season? ‘Not all Wolf Lords need a Jackalwolf,’ he said, idly stroking one of the wolves. ‘Some are in want of a Laughing One. Others need the Strifeson. Different faces for different places.’ The wolf passed gas and kicked gently, showing what it thought of that. Lukas waved a hand in front of him, trying to disperse the smell. ‘You still smell better than Iron-Wolf.’

Lukas was many stories tangled together, and the one he told depended on the audience. For Krakendoom, he had played the part of instigator and agitator, shaking his self-satisfied warriors out of a long complacency. What part he would play in the coming season depended on who lost the fight.

Redmaw snatched up a bench, scattering those members of the Wolf Guard who had been sitting on it. He struck Grimblood with it, hurling him to the floor in a cloud of splinters. Grimblood groaned and rolled over, spitting blood. He sat up and waved Redmaw away as the other jarl stalked towards him. ‘Enough, brother. Enough. I can feel my brains sloshing in my skull from that last hit.’

‘Do you yield, then?’ Redmaw demanded.

‘Aye, I do. Give me a moment – the world is spinning.’ Grimblood accepted a helping hand from one of the other jarls and was hauled to his feet. He tenderly probed his jaw. ‘I yield,’ he said more formally.

Redmaw thrust his fist up, and those warriors loyal to him began to cheer louder still and slam their fists on the table. Redmaw looked at the other Wolf Lords. ‘You heard him. I win. The Jackalwolf is his burden for the coming season.’ Lukas frowned, resolving to stick something unpleasant in Redmaw’s mjod when next the opportunity presented itself.

‘It is done, then,’ Engir Krakendoom said. Dark of skin and temperament alike, the Krakendoom had a voice as deep as the seas. ‘He is your burden now, the way he has been mine, and Goresson’s before me.’ He gestured to Finn Goresson. The other Wolf Lord was tattooed from head to toe and stank of bear grease and weapon oil. He tugged on the crimson braid of his beard and narrowed his amber eyes.

‘Aye, and you’re welcome to the bastard.’

‘My thanks, brother,’ Grimblood spat. Lukas almost laughed to see his expression. He restrained himself, though. Best to let tempers cool.

‘We all agreed to share this… responsibility,’ Krakendoom rumbled. He glanced back towards Lukas. Lukas waved cheerily, and the jarl looked away. ‘We swore an oath before the Lord of Runes and the Great Wolf.’

‘I remember,’ Grimblood growled.

‘Of course you do. You’re just being petulant.’ Redmaw grinned, and Grimblood started for him again. Krakendoom stepped between them, his dark features stern.

‘Stop it, the pair of you. Bickering like Blood Claws. Is this so onerous a duty that you take it as an insult?’ It was, and they did, whatever Krakendoom liked to pretend. Lukas took no offence. Such was his wyrd, and theirs by extension.

‘Ask Hrothgar,’ Grimblood said. ‘Wait, you can’t, because he isn’t here, and so has managed to avoid this whole farce. And for the second time in a row. Just like that fat bear, Gunnar, or that cog-toothed brute, Egil.’

‘They have their duties, as we have ours.’ Krakendoom crossed his arms. ‘Will you yield to your wyrd, Kjarl Grimblood? Or will you force another to take your place?’

Grimblood let loose a snarl of frustration. His shoulders slumped. ‘No. No, the burden is mine, and bestowed fairly, as I said. I will take responsibility for the Jackalwolf until the next Helwinter. But not a day longer!’ He glared about him. ‘And I’ll damn well make sure each and every one of you is here to take your own chances with it.’

Redmaw laughed harshly. ‘You’ll have to catch me first.’

Lukas threw back his head and laughed at that. All eyes turned towards him. One of the wolves whined, and Lukas thumped the beast cheerfully. ‘Finally,’ he called out. ‘I was getting bored, waiting for you to come to a decision, brothers.’

He wondered which mask Grimblood warranted. Looking at that sour face, he thought he knew. Grimblood was a warrior of ominous mien. It was said by those deep in their cups that he could read the future in flames. He saw portents and carved the future to his liking, with blade and whisper alike. Seers always took themselves too seriously.

‘On your feet, Blood Claw,’ Grimblood rumbled as he stalked towards the newest member of his pack. His beard was stiff with drying blood, and

his gaze was hot with barely restrained fury. ‘You could stand, at least, when your fate is being decided.’

Lukas’ smile widened. He made no move to stand. ‘No, I am comfortable here.’

Grimblood grunted and looked down at the wolves. ‘I wonder why they haven’t eaten you yet.’ He glared at Lukas. ‘Perhaps you are too venomous, even for them.’

Lukas grinned. ‘Maybe they just appreciate my jokes.’

‘I suppose someone must.’

Lukas rose. ‘Oh, I have some fine jokes in mind for you, Grimblood, never fear,’ he said softly. ‘We’ll have such fun, you and I.’

‘No. We will not.’

Lukas peered at him. ‘You know better than that, Grimblood.’ The close air was thick with the stink of fading violence mingling with filter-engine lubricant and the harsh tang of promethium that clung stubbornly to Grimblood. It was said that the warriors of Kjarl Grimblood’s Great Company exulted in the smell of roasting flesh. Lukas thought that perhaps they had simply grown so used to it they no longer noticed it.

‘You will not. Not this time.’ Grimblood glowered at him. ‘No more of your pranks.’

Lukas cocked his head. ‘And who will stop me, brother? Not you, I think. Not unless the flames say otherwise.’ He laughed again and bent towards the fire. ‘Well? How about it, eh? What do you think?’ He cupped his ear and made a show of listening. He frowned and straightened. ‘They say I’ll keep you chasing your tail for months.’

Grimblood lunged and caught Lukas by his beard. He jerked the Blood Claw forward and drove a punch into his face. Lukas flopped back onto his backside with a strangled yelp. Several of the wolves heaved themselves upright, snarling. Grimblood snarled back, silencing the beasts.

‘I am your jarl. You will respect me, fool.’

The chamber had fallen silent. Lukas laughed thickly. ‘You are easier to provoke than Krakendoom, jarl. That bodes well for one of us.’ The blood from his shattered nose had already ceased its flow, and as he sat up he twisted his snout back into place in a flurry of popping cartilage. He grinned up at the Wolf Lord, and Grimblood’s hands curled into fists, ready to strike again.

Lukas rose smoothly and dragged the back of his hand across his face, smearing more blood than he removed. Idly, he reached out and wiped his hand on Grimblood's furs, never taking his eyes from their owner's face. 'Respect,' he said finally. 'Respect is only earned, jarl. Never given. Now come. There is a tradition to be upheld. Let us get it over with.'

For a moment, he thought Grimblood would strike him again. Instead, the jarl turned away. 'You are not here to give orders, Strifeson,' he growled dismissively. 'You are here to follow them.'

'Then command me, oh seer.' Lukas bowed low, eliciting a chuckle from several of the Wolf Lords and the gathered huscarls. Krakendoom silenced them all with a sharp gesture.

'Bare your throat and be silent until asked to speak, Laughing One.' Lukas inclined his head, not quite respectfully, and waited. Krakendoom cleared his throat. Around the chamber, huscarls and thegns began to strike the tables with their flagons, setting the rhythm of the saga to come. 'Before us stands the accused. I shall speak his list of crimes.'

And so it began, another tradition. A slow recitation of his every misdeed committed during his time with the Krakendoom, accompanied by the crashing of flagons and the stamping of feet. There was some laughter, for even the most humourless of jarls could see the comical joy of rerouting waste pipes into private chambers, or shearing the locks of a sleeping warrior so that his proud mane was reduced to stubble. Fewer laughed at the hiding of hard-won battle trophies, or the vulgar altering of the deep-scored runes on a boastful warrior's battle-plate. None voiced any support of the dousing of an unlucky Long Fang in troll pheromones and the unfortunate occurrences that followed.

Through it all, Lukas smiled. He bared his fangs in a joyous grin. A challenging grin. It was always the same, this ceremony. A mock court, condemnation without punishment. It was up to his jarl to punish him, when and if he saw fit. Krakendoom had once tied him hand and foot to a length of tow cable and kicked him out the back of a Stormfang gunship. He had been left to dangle above storm-tossed seas as the ship completed its patrol of the skies around Asaheim. Others had done worse. Some didn't bother.

When Krakendoom had finished his recitation, he said, 'You have heard the list of your crimes. What say you?'

‘Only that I am sorry I couldn’t do more with the time allotted to me.’ At Krakendoom’s snarl of rage, Lukas threw back his head and gave a howl of laughter. Huscarls stomped and clapped, or jeered mockingly. Their jarls roared for silence. Lukas raised his voice to be heard over the clamour. ‘But our time will come again, my jarl. Like Fenris itself, my orbit is set, and endless.’

‘Keep laughing and it won’t be,’ Redmaw growled. ‘Perhaps we should end this useless farce once and for all, and you with it.’ He looked around, seeking support from the others. ‘I cannot be the only one wondering why we must endure this madness. He should have been dealt with long ago, and we all know it.’

Lukas laughed harder. ‘And what will you do, Redmaw? Gobble me up?’ He clapped his hands and whistled. ‘I’d like to see you try, Cursed One. I’d cut my way out of your overstretched gullet before the next cycle.’

Redmaw started to reach for Lukas, but the sharp sound of an iron ferrule striking stone stopped him. Lukas’ laughter trailed off as the sound was repeated. His hackles stiffened and he glanced at the doors, knowing what he would see even before he did so.

A tall figure stood at the end of the hall, and the fires there dimmed as if something had drawn the strength from them. A murmur ran along the tables. The Rune Priest was clad in full battle-plate, as if for war. Runes had been hammered into the grey ceramite, and savage totems hung from the recesses of his armour. He held a staff topped with a wolf’s skull, its surface marked with twisting sigils. His beard was like frost, spilling down his chest-plate, and his face sagged with ritual scars where it wasn’t hidden beneath faded tribal tattoos. ‘Has the choice been made, jarls?’

Grimblood cleared his throat. ‘You honour us with your presence, Hrek Galerunner.’ Lukas could smell the magic clinging to the newcomer. It caused the air to twist and stalk itself in confusing ways, the firepits dimming as the Rune Priest passed them and flaring anew in his wake.

‘Has a choice been made?’ Galerunner growled again.

Grimblood nodded. ‘Aye, for better or worse.’ He shot a glance at Lukas. ‘He is my burden this season. My responsibility.’

‘Good. All is well, then.’ The Rune Priest thumped the floor with the ferrule of his heavy staff once more, and the stones rang like bells. The air stank of ozone. He drove the staff down a final time, hard enough to crack

the stone beneath. ‘The thread is spun. The runes cast. And this farce is ended. I come to escort him to his new pack, as tradition dictates.’

Grimblood bowed his head. ‘As it has always been, so will it be.’ He turned to Lukas. ‘Go. And if you are wise, I will not see your face until the next Helwinter.’

Click here to buy *Lukas the Trickster*.

THE BLACK LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

Sign up today for regular updates on the latest Black Library news and releases

SIGN UP NOW

For Josh. One of the kindest and most hard-working people I know. May you find your path and never give up on your dreams. With love, Ellie.

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2018 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.
Cover illustration by Neil Roberts.

Ashes of Prospero © Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2018. Ashes of Prospero, GW, Games Workshop, Black Library, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy Eye logo, Space Marine, 40K, Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000, the 'Aquila' Double-headed Eagle logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world.
All Rights Reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78572-875-4

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

See Black Library on the internet at
blacklibrary.com

Find out more about Games Workshop's world of Warhammer and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at
games-workshop.com

eBook license

This license is made between:

Games Workshop Limited t/a Black Library, Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, United Kingdom ("Black Library"); and

(2) the purchaser of an e-book product from Black Library website ("You/you/Your/your")

(jointly, "the parties")

These are the terms and conditions that apply when you purchase an e-book ("e-book") from Black Library. The parties agree that in consideration of the fee paid by you, Black Library grants you a license to use the e-book on the following terms:

* 1. Black Library grants to you a personal, non-exclusive, non-transferable, royalty-free license to use the e-book in the following ways:

o 1.1 to store the e-book on any number of electronic devices and/or storage media (including, by way of example only, personal computers, e-book readers, mobile phones, portable hard drives, USB flash drives, CDs or DVDs) which are personally owned by you;

o 1.2 to access the e-book using an appropriate electronic device and/or through any appropriate storage media; and

* 2. For the avoidance of doubt, you are ONLY licensed to use the e-book as described in paragraph 1 above. You may NOT use or store the e-book in any other way. If you do, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license.

* 3. Further to the general restriction at paragraph 2, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license in the event that you use or store the e-book (or any part of it) in any way not expressly licensed. This includes (but is by no means limited to) the following circumstances:

o 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.2 you make the e-book available on bit-torrent sites, or are otherwise complicit in 'seeding' or sharing the e-book with any

company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.3 you print and distribute hard copies of the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.4 you attempt to reverse engineer, bypass, alter, amend, remove or otherwise make any change to any copy protection technology which may be applied to the e-book.

* 4. By purchasing an e-book, you agree for the purposes of the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 that Black Library may commence the service (of provision of the e-book to you) prior to your ordinary cancellation period coming to an end, and that by purchasing an e-book, your cancellation rights shall end immediately upon receipt of the e-book.

* 5. You acknowledge that all copyright, trademark and other intellectual property rights in the e-book are, shall remain, the sole property of Black Library.

* 6. On termination of this license, howsoever effected, you shall immediately and permanently delete all copies of the e-book from your computers and storage media, and shall destroy all hard copies of the e-book which you have derived from the e-book.

* 7. Black Library shall be entitled to amend these terms and conditions from time to time by written notice to you.

* 8. These terms and conditions shall be governed by English law, and shall be subject only to the jurisdiction of the Courts in England and Wales.

* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.

Table of Contents

Cover
Backlist
Title Page
Warhammer 40,000
- Prologue
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18

About the Author
An Extract from ‘Lukas the Trickster’
A Black Library Publication
eBook license

Table of Contents

Cover
Backlist
Title Page
Warhammer 40,000
- Prologue
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18

About the Author
An Extract from ‘Lukas the Trickster’
A Black Library Publication
eBook license