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THE HUNT FOR MAGNUS

CHRIS WRAIGHT



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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.



I

They came before the old sun had risen, flying low across the plains: three Storm Eagle gunships in slate-grey, marked with Harek Ironhelm's Great Company sigil, the Wolf that Stalks the Stars. The force contained within them, twenty-one battle-brothers, was overkill for such a mission, but then it had been Rune Priest Odain Sturmhart who had given them this target, and they had learned to treat his warnings with respect.

The city they sped towards had not existed for more than a few months. It rose up from the caked dustpan like a hunched pyramid, a lopsided ziggurat heaped on top of itself, clambering awkwardly in crumbling ranks above the horizon with a lattice of scaffolding still covering its upper levels.

Some purpose had stirred on its forgotten world, rousing an indolent people from their torpor, making them suddenly march and build. That was what the Rune Priest Sturmhart had sensed in his unquiet dreams – the turning of men's minds, the inspiration of toxic thoughts. Back on Fenris, Ironhelm had listened intently, ever alert to echoes of his own visions.

'It is him, then?' the Great Wolf had asked.

'It is corruption,' Sturmhart had confirmed, glancing at his master uncertainly, knowing that the word would be enough to order the assault.

Now Ironhelm crouched in the Storm Eagle's crew bay, straining at his restraints, willing the slaughter to start. He could smell the foulness himself now, detectible to his heightened senses over the fuel-burn stink of the gunship. Fires burned on the walls of the city, and the coiling smoke of them barred the sky. Wood was being burned, intermingled with other, more mortal, matter.

‘By your will,’ Ironhelm growled to himself, invoking the primarch. He had donned his heavy Terminator plate, as had the other four warriors of his Wolf Guard. They tensed for the drop, already pushing against their harnesses like leashed hounds.

Ironhelm’s Storm Eagle shot over the city’s half-finished perimeter wall, air-braking hard and dropping sharply. The rear embarkation ramp hissed down on its pistons with the gunship still ten metres up.

‘*Fenrys!*’ thundered Ironhelm, his voice swelling as he hurled himself from the open bay.

He plummeted, crunching to earth in a bloom of kicked-up dust. A heartbeat later and his frostblade was drawn and snarling, throwing cold blue light across the pre-dawn gloom of the city.

His entourage came down after him and unfurled tools of murder – energy-coiled axes, assault cannons and glittering power swords. Ironhelm ran, ploughing up the soft dust in plumes, heading for a gaping wound in the city’s upper terraces where the walls had not yet been fully raised. He barely noticed the other two gunships disgorge their contents further down – two squads of Grey Hunters, each eight strong, fleetier of foot than the Terminators but scarcely less lethal – and hardly heard the mortal screaming break out once they got to work. It was desperate, horrified and incontinent screaming, the kind of noise an animal makes when shown the slaughterhouse. If he heard the sounds at all, it only meant that killing had started again and that he could lose himself in it – roaring out his strength, breaking the bones and tearing the flesh from them.

The first resistance came at the edge of the gaping chasm where half-built mud walls were still propped by a skeleton of wooden supports. Between their jaws was a void, drenched in shadows that were deeper than they should have been. Guards belatedly swarmed out of it, spilling from the ragged edges like insects from a kicked nest. They wore dirty, cheap robes, dyed red and stained from the dust. Their bare foreheads bore the mark of a single eye, crudely daubed in ochre. These ones did not scream, but ran at the invaders with blades whirling.

Ironhelm crashed into them, taking out four on the charge and laying into four more. He cracked their spines, throwing the broken remnants aside. The scything arc of his brothers’ assault cannon blasted more bodies apart, layering the mud with thrown blood, and in its wake came the snarling blades.

Ironhelm passed the threshold. The hair on his arms spiked. The dark around him was oily, fleeing like spilled liquid from the dull light cast by primitive brands. A high chamber opened up, carved into the heart of the city’s edge and

echoing from the dull sounds of combat outside. At the far end of it stood an altar carved from what looked like bone, over ten metres tall with a crowning canopy of interlinked ribs. Pools of fatty oils burned in ceramic bowls, though the flames rippled uneasily, guttered by a wind that had no obvious source. A wooden eye-device hung from lengths of twine, twisting gently over the altar top.

More guards ran to fight him, just as uselessly as those outside the precincts, lasting mere seconds before bolter fire or energy fields tore them apart. Ironhelm was killing absently now, his attention fixed on the altar. There were fifteen figures kneeling before it, holding daggers two-handed in front of them with their backs to the carnage. Before he could get close to them, they moved. Twisting awkwardly, they plunged the blade-tips into their own faces, digging hard, each prising out an eye. None of them so much as whimpered, but held the excised flesh in clenched fists, like trophies. Then they rose and turned, smiling as their faces streamed with blood.

Ironhelm lumbered towards them. He could feel the shake of the air, the wrongness, the twisting of reality. Slivers of luminous energy wormed across the altar's face and the chamber's walls seemed to contract, like lungs pulling in before a breath.

The fifteen supplicants dropped their weapons. They broke into a run, heading towards Ironhelm as if greeting a lord of their own. They flung their arms open.

Ironhelm swung his frostblade, severing one at the waist and another at the neck. The others pressed closer, pawing at him, their streaked faces alive with an unsettling fervour.

Ironhelm kept killing them. They died easily, just as all mortals did before a frostblade, slumping down to the mud floor in a widening slick of blood. Not one of them flinched, nor tried to protect themselves, but they did stretch out to touch him, to run withered fingers down his armour. The last one standing even managed to speak before the blade's edge found his neck.

'Thank you,' he whispered hoarsely, tears mingling with the blood on his face. 'Thank you.'

Ironhelm grunted as he hauled the frostblade across, decapitating his victim and sending the head rolling wetly across the chamber's floor. Then he stood, surrounded by butchery, his armour spattered and caked with blood. The kills gave him no pleasure. It wasn't just the weakness of his prey, but the way in which they had died.

'What did that mean?' he muttered, looking down at the still-grinning face of

his victim as it rocked gently to a halt.

By then the last of the chamber's guards were dead, cut down without so much as scratching the armour of their sanctuary's invaders. From outside the chamber came the continuing sounds of one-sided warfare, though even those were falling away now as the city began to burn in earnest.

Ironhelm's huscarl, the Wolf Guard Trask, lumbered to his side, powering down his energy-blade. 'Torch it?' he asked, nodding over towards the bone altar.

Ironhelm was unable to concentrate. 'What did that mean?' he asked again.

Trask hesitated, his face hidden behind the heavy faceplate of his Terminator suit. 'What, lord?'

Ironhelm shook himself, and let the disruptor-halo around his frostblade ripple out. 'Aye, torch it. Torch it all.'

He strode away from the altar, his boots sucking on the gore underfoot. He'd accomplished the task, and should have been enjoying the rush of completion, shaking the blood from his blade and opening his throat in triumph.

He emerged back into the open. All around him the mud-brick terraces of the ziggurat were burning, making the air bitter with drifting ash. On the far horizon, the sun was rising, throwing long shadows across an empty land beyond the walls.

He drew in a long breath. The infection had been cut out, just as they had done on a thousand other worlds. On other occasions, that had given him satisfaction, but this time, all he could see were the eyeless faces, the smiles, the outstretched hands.

Thank you.

They had been speaking Gothic, on a world that had been sundered from the Imperium for millennia. Why was that?

Thank you.

An hour later, more landers came down from the strike cruiser in orbit. They brought mortal troops to conduct mop-up operations, secure the site, make records and scan for further anomalies. The city was rendered down into a heap of drifting ashes, and the flames sheeted up, metres high, fanned by the dry winds that raced across the plains.

Every guard inside the temple had been slain, for the Wolves had learned from bitter experience that corruption of such a nature ran deep, seeping into every pore of a world, and the only cure, such as it was, was excision.

But there were many settlements on that world, scattered widely across the

continental plate. Some were scarce more than cave-swalling in the rocky bluffs; others had the rudimentary shape of towns. Orbital scans had revealed further settlements straggling out along the grimy courses of sediment-heavy river courses. Humanity had scratched out a living across a wide swath of the world, crawling out across its sun-baked flatlands, and most of them would have had no idea what was taking place in the unnatural city that had sprung up so quickly. Many would be entirely innocent. Perhaps all of them would be.

Imperial cartographers had recorded the rock as Rivel 67-4-3456t on an ancient data-scroll dating back to the earliest days of the Crusade, though the taxonomic system they had used had long since passed into obscurity and the numbers meant nothing.

The place had never been visited by the conquering fleets or taken by the forces of the Arch-Heretic. During the long years of the Scouring it had never even been used as a forward base or colonised by Mechanicus re-seeding cartels.

No one knew why humans were even there, though there were countless such backwaters dating from the forbidden eras of stellar exploration. For millennia they had endured, forgotten, degenerate, unremarked.

Only in the year 690 of the 31st millennium had the eyes of outsiders turned towards that world at last, hungrily and with the slow-burn fury of the wronged.

Alone, Ironhelm trudged across the dirt-strand leading back from the city's broken gates. His limbs felt heavy inside his armour, as if the servos had given out and the full weight of the ceramite now bore down on his genhanced frame.

There had been killing after the temple chamber – a cleansing murder, running down from the city's height to its foetid base. None of it had made him feel better. Every time he blinked he saw the eyeless face grinning up at him, thanking him for the death that he'd delivered with such casual expertise.

Harek Eireik Eireiksson had been Great Wolf of the Chapter for three centuries, and the number of warriors in the entire Imperium more powerful or more accomplished could probably be measured in low double figures. His battle-name, *Ironhelm*, was breathed across a hundred worlds with the kind of awe otherwise reserved for names from the Age of Wonder – primarchs, lord commanders, lords of Terra. Of those who dwelt in the halls of the Fang, only the Fell-Handed could claim a greater share of glory, and he slumbered now, awakened only when the need was greatest. Ironhelm had been created for greater conflict than this.

He paused in his march, looking back over his shoulder at the vast pyre his actions had created. The taste of the burning wafted across his face, now freed of

his helm's confines. Under the rising sun, it looked almost beautiful – a red-golden glow under the rush of morning.

'This was wasted effort, lord,' came a voice from close by.

Ironhelm whirled around. He had been alone out on the plains without a living creature within a hundred metres.

Before him, curled up on the dry mud, huddled a man, almost as much a part of landscape as the rocks and rubble around him. His robes blended in, as did his skin, which was the sunbaked colour of stained wood. He was old, his face deeply wrinkled in cracked valleys, his hands like claws. His eyes, shrouded under a thin, low hood, were pits of shadow. He looked up at the Space Wolf, fully four times his height, with a kind of amused defiance.

'Do not think I fear you,' the man said, and his parched lips spread into a dry smile. 'I am too old to fear anything now, unless it be a little more life, which has always been hateful here, and so an end to it from you would be a blessing.'

Ironhelm narrowed his eyes, studying the man warily. He should have *smelled* him – the stench was readily apparent now, a sour mix of sweat and mouldering fabric.

'Is that why he thanked me?' he asked, almost without realising.

'No, I don't think so.'

Ironhelm wouldn't even need his fists to finish this one – a stamp from his armoured boots, little more than his usual tread, and the man's spine would snap like porcelain.

Perhaps that was why he didn't do it. The toll of severed souls lay heavily on him that day. Now, under the sun, with the age-withered face looking up at him and the rush of combat over, it seemed suddenly and deadeningly futile.

'There will be camps,' Ironhelm told him. 'Tribunals, run by inquisitors. If you have no taint within you, you have nothing to fear.'

'That is gracious,' said the man, with little trace of sarcasm. 'You will not scrape this world of life entirely. Perhaps you have learned your lesson in that – to breed an enemy so perfectly. Tell me, does it haunt you?'

No one spoke to Ironhelm like that, not one of his warriors, certainly not a mortal. The thought of cutting the man down again flickered across his mind, but he pulled back again.

The sun beat down on the Great Wolf's bared face. The wind moaned around the two of them. The air tasted oddly thick on his fangs, as it had done in the temple.

'Haunt me?'

The man squinted up at him. ‘I know you dream of him. You don’t even know what he looks like, but you hear him in the deep of the night. The voice is enough.’

‘Guard your words, mortal,’ growled Ironhelm, though the sluggishness didn’t leave.

‘He lives, Son of Russ. He *lives*. You know it. Everywhere you go, every battle you fight – the eye is there, carved on wood, cut from iron. It will never leave you.’

‘Cease.’

‘Even now he is moving. He has compassed the world Delavia and cast it into flames. Is that place precious to you? It is warded by your Wolves? Well then, no more. It is a broken shell. It is a corpse. It is a—’

Ironhelm’s fist shot out, grabbing the man by his chicken-thin throat. The withered mortal gasped for air between the vice of ceramite fingers.

‘His Legion is dead,’ Ironhelm snarled. ‘*He* is dead.’

The man struggled to stay conscious. Blood vessels burst across his desiccated skin, trickling across the grey armour-plate in thin lines.

‘You know... that to be a lie,’ he rasped. ‘You know that... he is beyond death.’

Ironhelm felt flesh part under his grasp. Just a fraction more and the neck would be severed. He watched the man choke, and then relaxed.

The man collapsed, sucking in air greedily. Ironhelm watched him suffer. Much as he had fought against them, the words struck at him deeply. The dreams had been going on too long, the imagery was too resonant, for it to be coincidence. There were never coincidences. It was no accident that the man spoke standard Imperial Gothic, just as those in the temple had, or that he had evaded detection, or that he had known of Ironhelm’s dreams.

The man’s hood had fallen, revealing an almost hairless head, mottled with liver-spots across paper-dry skin. On closer inspection, Ironhelm saw his robes were stitched from many cuts of cloth, each one a slightly different shade, a subtly different weave, overlapping in a jumble. With a twinge of disgust, Ironhelm saw that the man only had one eye, a lone bloodshot orb. The other socket was empty, gouged out, by the look of it, long ago.

‘You wish for death, but it will not come by my hand,’ Ironhelm told him, keeping his voice steady. ‘The interrogators will keep you alive for longer than you desire. Speak your poison to them, I will have no part of it.’

The man looked up at him, his eye bloodshot. ‘These are words for you, lord. They have always been for you.’

Ironhelm shot him a mirthless smile. ‘Yes, that is how you would like it.’

He punched down, hard enough to crack the skull, and the man’s body went limp. He righted himself, just as the vox-bead in his gorget blinked into life.

‘Hunt complete, jarl,’ came Trask’s voice over the comm. ‘The city is secure. Lord Marillus has entered orbit. You wish to speak to him?’

Ironhelm had no desire to meet Marillus, no more so than the many other lords of the ordos he had come across during the centuries, but that was the price paid for engaging the scraps and remnants of Heresy – the agents of Terra would never be far behind.

‘I’ll see him on the surface,’ said Ironhelm, grabbing the unconscious man by his collar, turning back towards the burning city and dragging him in tow. ‘Tell him to expect a gift.’

Two days later, Ironhelm held his final meeting with the inquisitor before his strike force was due to break for the void. They stood under the shade of a Chapter lander, its stubby wings casting a long shadow across the blasted plain.

Marillus was young, a slim man in gold-lined battle armour. He spoke softly, and travelled with a modest entourage. Ironhelm suspected Terran aristocracy by the fine-boned face, clear eyes and contained mannerisms. This also explained the rapid ascension through the ranks.

He was hard to like.

‘I will say it again, lord.’ Marillus at least looked him in the eye when he spoke. ‘The destruction is regrettable. I can learn little from ruins.’

‘They deserved their deaths,’ Ironhelm said.

‘No doubt, but I will leave this world with few testimonies. It is better to speak to witches before they lose their heads.’

Ironhelm felt his weapon-hand itch, and closed the gauntlet tight.

‘The rite was near completion,’ he said. ‘We destroyed it. That is what we are charged with.’

Marillus held his gaze, then, with a slight gesture of regret, let it drop. ‘Then we will do what we can. You have my thanks, lord, for what was accomplished. In any case, you also have my earnest commiserations. No doubt you will visit vengeance swiftly for your loss.’

Was that sarcasm, now? Was he being mocked?

‘I do not—’

‘Ah, perhaps you have not yet heard? Then I am sorry to be the bearer of it. Delavia was one of your protectorates, yes?’

At the mention of the world's name, Ironhelm immediately saw the one-eyed face again, squinting up at him from the mud.

‘What have you heard?’

‘The signals came in an hour ago, carried from a secure source. No doubt your own people will bear you the tidings soon. It is gone, burning just as this world was burned,’ Marillus replied.

‘That is not possible.’

‘No world is—’

‘It was under our watch.’

Marillus looked at him coolly. ‘And is there nothing in the galaxy that can possibly hurt that which the Wolves of Fenris cherish?’

Ironhelm felt hatred spark in him then – for the smooth face before him, for the backwater world that had offered so little glory, for the constant, nagging dream-voice that had plagued him for decades and had now spilled over into the world of waking.

‘I sent you a subject,’ Ironhelm said. ‘A man, one-eyed, found outside the city. What did you get from him?’

‘You sent me no one. I have already complained of it.’

‘You lie!’ Ironhelm rounded on him. ‘I sent him to you – you know the one. I could have wrung the truth out of him myself, but I—’

‘Then why did you not, lord?’

Ironhelm narrowed his eyes, pulling away. The inquisitor remained calm, secure in his station despite his physical frailty.

Was he a part of this? Were they acting together, cultists and the Emperor's agent? How had Marillus received news of Delavia ahead of his own star-speakers?

‘Leave now,’ Ironhelm growled, feeling the hairs on his neck prick up. Something was wrong, wrong with everything around him.

Marillus stood his ground, looking concerned. ‘Lord, are you—’

‘Leave now. Leave before I forget the vows that ward you from harm.’

Marillus stiffened. ‘You are just as they said you would be. So be it. Hunt well, Lord of Wolves. Perhaps it is best you do so alone.’

The inquisitor turned without waiting for a reply. Ironhelm watched him go, his mind working furiously. Perhaps he should call him back. He should search for the man. He should return to the temple ruins. He should—

‘Jarl,’ came Trask's voice over the comm. ‘Tidings you should hear.’

‘From Delavia, I know. Make the strike cruiser ready – we break for the warp

within the hour.’

‘How did this happen?’

Trask’s voice was outraged, already thickening with battle-fury. Ironhelm didn’t want to hear it. The fighting would come soon enough, but that would not be the end of it. Another voice now echoed in his mind, one that he should have silenced earlier, before it could have planted the seed that would now plague him.

He lives.

‘This is but the start,’ Ironhelm told him, making for the lander’s open doors.

‘Mark now this name. It is prey for us now, just as it was in the age before.’

He reached the ladder and gripped the iron rail, feeling the metal tremble as the atmospheric drives whined into life.

‘Magnus,’ Ironhelm snarled, spitting out the hated name as if it were poison.

‘All else can perish in the fires, but *he* I shall strike from eternity.’



II

The sun burned down hard on the flanks of the mountain, making the ancient snowfields glisten with a clear brilliance. The air at the summit was painfully thin, rendering all edges sharp. The cold was well beyond mortal tolerances, for this was a realm marked for demigods, sundered from their tribal kin by barriers both physical and beyond the senses.

High on the northern edge were the chambers of Rune Priest Sturmhart, gouged into the rockface and set deep within solid walls of granite. Thick armourglass windows had been set in the steep-angled roof, capturing and filtering the hard sunlight. The walls had been polished to a high sheen and there were runes carved into them. An altar stood under the largest of the lead-lined panes, over which hung an axe from lengths of chains.

The air smelled of incense and blood. Carcasses of animals still lay on bronze salvers, ready to be taken to the furnaces now that their innards had been pulled apart for omens. Bones lay charred in ash-pits, and caged ravens glared out beadily from their iron prisons.

The Priest himself stood in the shadows, a thick grey beard spilling over a pitted breastplate. His armour was runic, festooned with the panoply of the Fenrisian warrior-cult, draped with bones and feathered totems.

The one who stood with him was a little shorter in stature, but just as broad of shoulder. He wore armour so old the grey had darkened to the shade of thunderheads, with every surface charred, scraped or encrusted with plasma-burns. His beard was white, streaked with lines of coal-black and plaited heavily, while his shaggy hair hung in matted dreadlocks across an iron collar.

‘So where is he now?’ asked Oja Arkenjaw, jarl of the Twelfth Great Company, speaking quietly. His voice was like the crack before an avalanche – low, soft, yet as heavy as the bones of mountains.

‘A forge world,’ replied Sturmhart, wearily. ‘Far from where he needs to be.’

Arkenjaw nodded sourly. He was among the oldest of the Chapter, and had his claws bloodied during the years of Scouring. Perhaps only the Wolf Priest Wyrmlade was older, and both had the scars to mark the passing of the ages.

‘How does he *find* these places?’ Arkenjaw asked.

‘Luck?’ offered Sturmhart. He attempted a grin, and failed. ‘He has learned things, over the years. He tries to read the wyrd. His own Priest helps him, and they cast the runes together.’

Arkenjaw spat on the stone. ‘That is your work.’

‘I know it, though Frei no longer listens to counsel from me. They are the same, driven, and it only grows.’

‘You could rein them in.’

Sturmhart laughed – a huge sound rising from a great chest and fuelled by lungs that could summon the storm from the heights of Asaheim. ‘Rein in Ironhelm?’ he asked, his eyes glistening with amusement. ‘Do you remember how he used to be? Bjorn reborn. I saw him fight up close on Bel Taroder, and he *slew* then. He still can. That is why they follow him.’

Arkenjaw stalked over to the altar and watched the axe-blade glint from the hard sunlight. ‘He brings them success,’ he murmured.

Sturmhart nodded. ‘Frei is no fool – I trained him. Every spoor they follow brings them a scalp. He finds witches and cults and old pits of corruption, and he cuts them out every time. He has the Chapter in his hands now, and they would follow him into the maws of Hel.’

‘Not yet, he doesn’t,’ rasped Arkenjaw. The old jarl paced around the altar-stone, shaking his head. ‘We are *wasting time*. These are old wars. They are gone, fallen into the past.’ He turned towards Sturmhart, his scarred face burning with frustration. ‘The xenos are the plague now. On every world they are spawning. We burn the growth back, and still it swells.’

Sturmhart listened carefully. He had seen the teeming hordes for himself.

‘Ironhelm can mumble about forgotten monsters as much as he likes,’

Arkenjaw went on. ‘It is the greenskin that hammers at our gates now.’

‘So you have often told me, brother.’

‘Then let us *act* on it!’ cried Arkenjaw, slamming his fist on the altar top. ‘You know what I long for. There are Chapters who would join us. We come together,

we drag the sword's edge to where it needs to be. You have read the Annals of Ullanor, and you know I speak truly. If we do not act now, the plague will never be stamped out. It has been little more than a century since the entire Imperium was...

'...nearly undone by them. You do not have to remind me.'

Sturmhart had heard the speech a dozen times, and had agreed with it a dozen times. The Imperium was larger than it ever had been – larger, according to some scribes, than it had been at the height of the Great Crusade. Every day brought word of another world being claimed for the Throne, hammered into submission by an Imperial war machine formed of trillions of men and millions of warships.

And yet, in the immense gulfs between the walled fortresses of mankind, the xenos were burgeoning again. Old caution was being forgotten as the Adeptus Astartes went their own way, led by a thousand Chapter Masters rather than the eighteen Legion primarchs of old. The eyes of the High Lords were ever directed towards their growing fortifications at Cadia, guarding against a return of nightmares, which left the greater part of humanity's vast inheritance to be governed by the mortals of the Administratum.

And all the while, out in the dark, the primordial enemies of the human species multiplied, learning new skills, remembering the dormant hatreds of millennia. They had already come close once; they might do so again.

'But if he lives...' murmured Sturmhart.

'If he lives, then he lives. His Legion is gone, his time is over. He is a broken dream – to pursue it is beyond foolish.'

The Rune Priest leaned back against the bare stone wall, feeling the coolness of the mountain. It was all around them, indomitable, impregnable, just one wonder now amid a galaxy of tarnished wonders.

'Tell me what you advise,' Sturmhart said.

'When he returns, we end this,' said Arkenjaw, looking at Sturmhart with grim certainty in his eyes. 'We call a council, sworn on the Stones. We tally the ruin he has brought on the Chapter. We speak to the jarls, one by one. They know the xenos threat. They can be brought round.'

'Kjarlskar will not. And Wyrmlade?'

'Who knows? That will be locked up, counting vials. We can carry the others – you and I.'

Sturmhart drew in a long breath, and let his eyes wander over to the carcasses, the bone-tokens, the tools of the wyrd-scryer. None of them had answered, not

on this question. Whenever the question was asked, the paths dried up, shrivelling like leaves in winter. It was as if the universe had withdrawn from the memory of the Crimson King, insulating itself against him, wrapping up the past in layers of obfuscation.

‘When does he return?’ pressed Arkenjaw.

‘When the hunt is complete. When else would he return?’

‘Then where does it take him now?’

Sturmhart remembered every name, every world. They tripped off his tongue now like a litany, each one a testament to weakness. Perhaps only Ironhelm knew the full roll of shame, though, undoubtedly, he would not see things quite the same way.

‘Arvion,’ said the Rune Priest. ‘He has taken his whole company there. No doubt that world already lies in ashes.’

From the void, Arvion glowed like a hot coal. Magma channels and promethium burn-lines for the great forges crisscrossed in flared red over a screen of darkness, spreading like geometric scars across a nightmare patchwork of metal-deep shadow. Arvion’s sun was old, a sullen worn-out ball of dull orange that gave little illumination, and so the servants of the Mechanicus lit their industrial world with vast sodium-chamber banks and plumes of flame. Robed servants of the Ommissiah shuffled amid soaring manufactory complexes, permanently locked into a lambent gloom.

Arvion was a mid-grade forge world, capable of producing every calibre of civilian transport from orbital lifters to the mind-bendingly immense Colossus and Anaconda bulk freight carriers. The void-capable starships were constructed in orbital berths which ringed and enclosed the entire globe, giving Arvion a second skin of twisted, lattice-pattern metal. Several ships were still in the process of being fitted out when the first anomalies were detected on the noospheric grid, their carcasses hanging like bloated cetaceans in a sea of flickering arc-welders and drifting scrap clusters.

No one was ever able to ascertain how infiltrators got past the orbital defences, which should have stopped anything but a fleet battlegroup from getting down the surface forges. All that was reliably recorded was the chrono-mark – 56-56-34 – when the first blasts were detected. The explosions came from six separate locations, all on the factory-level surface, all flaring across detector grids at the same precise moment.

The forge world was not undefended: it had resident battalions of skitarii, as

well as specialist-function auxiliary troops. Mechanised divisions were stationed at all major continental intersections, each one capable of being lifted to their designated location by a constant alert fleet of dedicated transports. Once the alarm was raised, the world's commander, Archmagos Intendant Nhem Georg Selvarios, activated well-rehearsed protocols and mobilised close to seven thousand battle-ready units, with three thousand more drummed from barracks and held in tactical reserve.

It was not enough, at least at the start. The main attacks were not conducted by outsiders, but by insurgents drawn from the forge world's own defence forces. Whole regiments suddenly went dark, cut their links to the planet's comms-grid, and started to turn on their uncorrupted counterparts. The strikes were numerous and well-prepared – the leaders moved quickly, going for comms stations and scanner relays, knocking them out one by one. Divisions of skitarii disappeared from planetary data-sweeps, part of a blackout pattern that swept across the northern continental mass with unnerving speed. Fractured reports came in from rapidly expanding battlefronts of sacrificial kill-teams armed with daunting levels of esoteric weaponry. Whatever had been executed on Arvion had been planned for a long time.

Selvarios enacted a second wave of emergency reaction-orders, and assistance requests were broadcast into neighbouring systems and across major astropathic channels. Heavier guns were brought to bear – even a middling forge world could call on Mechanicus specialities – and soon loyal skitarii detachments marched alongside Warhounds and lumbering battle tanks. The reserves were committed and sent into battle with orders to prevent the six ingress zones from linking up to form a united front.

Selvarios's response saw success, and the enemy was pushed back from four of the beachheads it had established. Factory complexes were regained, and vid-feeds began to slide into Arvion's command ziggurats showing heaps of the dead, all wearing the robes of menials, servitors and minor-ranking tech-priests.

At that stage, two things happened.

First, it became obvious that the four recovered zones had been surrendered by the enemy, though not without first sucking up thousands of soldiers and heavy war machines. Catastrophic explosions rippled through each area, bursting from the prone bodies of suicide troops and causing havoc where they were allowed to ignite.

Selvarios's strategos realised that the two remaining zones were the real objectives, each one now contested by greater numbers of the insurgents than the

archmagos could readily counter. One spearhead was already grinding its way towards the central command nexus, moving with a precision that perturbed even emotionless sector commanders. Another was making its way north from the ingress point, burning a path through several of the larger manufactoria and heading, seemingly, for a secondary archive complex.

Second, the orbital sensors registered intruder signals from the void, closing at dangerous velocity and ignoring automated hail-patterns. The defensive grid activated across Arvion's outer layer, causing a power drain so large that the reserve generatorium network blacked out for seven seconds. Selvarios, assuming a second wave of belligerents, ordered a full-spectrum repulsion barrage, something that if enacted would have lit up the void for over three thousand cubic kilometres.

It was only at that moment that the aural comm-network finally registered a signal, translating it to binaric and feeding it directly to the archmagos's cranial implants. Several terms remained undeciphered, though the gist of the transmission was clear enough.

'Power your [untranslated] grid down. We are the [untranslated] Wolves of [untranslated] Fenris. If you fire on us we will [untranslated] send you back to [untranslated].'

The archmagos was not a proud man. Indeed, he was hardly a man at all, being largely a distributed cluster of bio-industrial interface nodes, and pride meant as little to him as any other second-order emotion. The planet's external grid was powered down and an atmospheric descent matrix was shunted to the incoming fleet's positional cogitators. Four ash-grey starships screamed into visual range, already rolling into position for rapid dispersal of drop pods.

It was at that point, the annals of Arvion attest, that the carnage really began.

Ironhelm was roaring even as he got into battle. The drop pods whistled down from the claws of his starships, fast as torpedoes, and the living warriors within them whooped and bellowed in a mounting frenzy of battle-rage. The insides of the caskets rattled, glowing hot as Arvion's atmosphere tested the outer shields.

Ironhelm had brought his entire company, trusting as ever in the testimony of the runes: over a hundred Space Wolves, of every pack type and bearing every weapon the Fang's armouries offered, all crammed into iron shells and hurtling down through flame-lit skies.

They broke the planet's outer skin of drifting metal, punching through rusting scrap and plummeting faster. Internal descent markers whirled down, clocking

through the kilometres with dizzying speed. Ironhelm paid them no attention – his lips were already flecked with spittle, his fingers twitching on the hilt of his great blade, his limbs pressed up tight against adamantium restraint cages.

He no longer needed to ask Frei for confirmation of his beliefs. Over fifty years of constant hunting had taught him the signs, and the runes had never let him down. He knew the movements of the Eye-cult as surely as their adepts did themselves, and there was not a single place in the galaxy where they could hide from him. In this place, he would be arriving even before their contagion was established. He had *seen* it, revealed in the shifting patterns of the wyrd, the place in which there were no secrets. He would be at their throats before they had even gained a foothold. He was their very own nightmare, dragging at their heels, never giving them a fear-free breath.

‘For Russ!’ he cried, joyously, feeling the kick of the retros. It would be only seconds now.

The drop pods came in ferociously fast, slowing only just enough to prevent destruction on impact. Ironhelm’s own vessel crashed into a floor of solid metal, grinding to a halt amidst the crack and stink of melting. The outer doors slammed down, just as the cages scraped back and roof-mounted bolters burst into deafening life.

Ironhelm charged out, activating his frostblade, followed by Trask and other members of his Wolf Guard. Above them, the night sky was scored with black contrails across crimson-glow cloudbanks. Immense structures reared up on every side, vast as cliff faces yet studded with pinpricks of neon and shuddering with the workings of hidden forges.

The air ran with grit and screaming. The pod had come down in a wide valley between enormous factory units, taking down a series of walkways on its downward passage and crushing the struts into glowing metal splinters. Every surface teemed with swarms of bodies in desperate combat – robed Mechanicus menials fighting with one another, grappling with iron-clawed automata, striding through thickets of purple las-fire, launching shoulder-mounted grenades and unleashing blooms of proscribed chem-weapons. It was close-packed, claustrophobic, crammed onto every bridge, causeway, platform and gun-tower. Angular walkers clanked through the melee, their snub-nosed cockpits sweeping back and forth as they loosed plasma-rounds into the mass.

All across the battlefield more drop pods burst open, spilling their contents amid a hail of bolter shells. Grey-clad fighters tore into the multitudes, laying out with flicker-edged energy blades or letting rip with boltguns. Their strikes

looked indiscriminate amid the cries, roars and booms – a mere addition of slaughter to an already blood-soaked chasm, but soon it became apparent that the Wolves of Fenris knew their enemy.

They could *smell* them, could sense the taint that marked their metal-clad bodies, and thus struck with unerring precision. Ironhelm led the charge, forging a path along the valley's base and heading north. He laid out on either side of him with his frostblade, slicing through Mechanicus soldiery as they raced to meet him. His prey's armour was a motley mix of styles – baroque, bronzed, draped in scraps of crimson fabric that ripped away as the flamers hit – but every death was marked with same tinny shriek of machine-souls imploding.

The Wolves slipped fluidly into pack formations as they pushed out from the dropsites. Long Fang gun-squads seized high ground on either flank of the iron valley, fighting their way up to causeway intersections before hoisting heavy ordnance and letting rip. The ground shook as Thunderhawk gunships followed the drop pods down, hanging darkly in the smoggy atmosphere and cycling through ammo-drums as their atmospheric drives laboured.

Ironhelm cut his way to the end of the chasm, where the soaring walls fell away to reveal an open area ahead. It might have been a ceremonial square in the past, filled with processions of tech-priests as new machines were sanctified and given the final blessings of the Omnissiah, but now the entire landscape was racked by gunfire. Two Warhounds loped awkwardly across the teeming battlefield, crushing the hordes at their feet. Mechanicus flyers – ungainly creations with bulbous down-thrusters and compound-eye cockpits – duelled above them in the burning heavens.

The Great Wolf paused then in his slaughter, reaching the summit of a wide procession of stairs that led down to the square below. Packs of Wolf Scouts forged on ahead, seizing positions from where to hit enemy squad leaders and picking their targets. Trask and his Wolf Guard took up watch-positions around the edge of the platform.

'That's the target?' Trask asked, gesturing over to the far side of the square, five hundred metres distant.

'That's the target,' confirmed Ironhelm.

It was a colossal edifice, hewn from black iron, rising into the clouds in a series of steep-sloped, overlapping slab walls. Figures stood on its distant parapets – huge statues of the saints of the Machine Cult, some of them human-like. A hexagonal tower rose up from the centre of it, flanked by curving spars that angled high into the smog. Atop that spire was a fifteen-metre-tall representation

of the Ommissiah-as-Man – an austere, emotionless being of pure intellect, staring out across the carnage below.

A horde of insurgents had made its way towards the building's gates and fighting raged all across its outer perimeter. The twin scout Titans, controlled by the enemy, had trained weapons on the vaulted entrance, and the remaining defenders were falling back under the cover of wall-mounted lascannon batteries. As Ironhelm ran his eyes across the scene, three heavy explosions rocked the landscape and a vast pall of inky smoke rolled up from the construction's northern precincts.

'They're inside,' remarked Trask.

'They should be incorruptible,' muttered Ironhelm. 'How have so many turned?'

At long range, among the gloom and the flames, it was almost impossible to tell the difference between the insurgents and loyal Mechanicus troops – both sides had access to heavy weaponry and were fighting with clinical, cold-edged ferocity. Infantry units struggled to hold positions in the face of catastrophic damage from the war machines that strode among them. But as more Wolves entered combat, the odds began to shift in the defenders' favour. Battle-comms crackled into life as jamming stations were knocked out, allowing more than instinctual messages to pass between them.

'My lord of Fenris,' came a semi-human voice into Ironhelm's armour system. It was Selvarios, or at least one of his drone-familiars. 'Your assistance is welcome, though you have landed north of the command node. Do you require assistance to reach the correct coordinates?'

'No,' snapped Ironhelm, running a scan to see how many of his company were in position to advance. 'We're fine.'

There was a brief hiss of static, then another burst. 'Then I do not understand. Why do you—'

Ironhelm cut the link as Frei strode up to join them. The Rune Priest's staff slithered with energies, and the blood on his armour told of recent combat.

'You sense them?' Ironhelm asked.

Frei nodded. 'The edifice is what they want.'

The full force of Ironhelm's Great Company was now pouring into the square, fanning out along its edges before pushing into the centre. With the resumption of close-range vox-contact, units of loyal skitarii began to coordinate with the Wolves, cutting a swath through the melee towards the distant perimeter. One of the Warhounds turned from its assault on the building's gates and stalked back

towards them, its ornate claw-feet grinding lesser troops beneath it, though it was immediately met by a streaking mass of incoming fire from the established Long Fang packs.

‘They have moved too fast,’ murmured Ironhelm, running his finger along the trigger on his frostblade’s hilt. ‘They are the same as those they fight – the same weapons, the same armour. How have they reached the target so fast?’

Trask was eager to be fighting again. The Warhound limped closer now, half crippled by incoming missile-strikes but still on its feet. ‘We must lead them now, lord,’ he urged. ‘They need to see you at the blade’s edge.’

Ironhelm lingered a moment longer. Previous hunts had thrown up the same dross for his blades: petty sorcerers, ranting mortals with delusions of inner sight, cultists with stolen lasguns and poor training. They had all screamed of the Crimson King before they had died, but none of them could have known of what they spoke, for the Legion had been shattered and its master thrown into the living madness of the Eye. Those who remained were dabblers – half-seers and demi-witches with access to a few forbidden trinkets but no true insight.

This was different. The insurgency on Arvion was huge, far bigger than he had expected from the rune-warnings. The Mechanicus were diligent in their monitoring, so it was no small thing to subvert servants of the Machine-God.

His looked up at the distant edifice, trying to guess its function. As his eyes ran over its summit, where the faceless gods of the Martian creed stared back at him, he felt something like nausea twinge in his bowels.

There was something else in there. Something different.

He lives. Every battle you fight, the Eye is there.

‘Jarl?’ Trask was impatient now.

Ironhelm snapped back into focus. The presence was close, on the cusp, and the moment needed to be seized.

‘We move,’ he snarled, activating his blade’s energy field. With a heavy crash of ceramite on marble, he began to lumber down the stairs, into the cauldron of fire and blood below, and the slaughter began anew.

Frei had fought hard since breaking out from his drop pod, and the pace had not slackened since. Before meeting up with Ironhelm he’d been forced to summon the storm early, dragging wyrd-lightning to his skull-staff in order to clear the ground before him of enemies. Then he and his warrior escort had cut their way west down the valley’s base, working hard against a seething tide of misshapen Mechanicus constructs.

All the while, he had sensed the presence of the *other* pulsing beneath the surface. The thousands of souls in combat around him made little impression on his senses – their souls were thin and emotionless even as they died, doing little to block the pall of recondite blackness that he could detect, clotted like a tumour at the base of the world's heart.

By the time he'd reached the courtyard and joined with Ironhelm the sensations were almost overwhelming, and he had to fight to prevent them from dulling his reactions. He'd peeled away from the command group once the assault recommenced, leading a flanking charge against a battalion of tech-priests huddled around a formation of ancient Krios battle tanks. The machines vomited out eye-watering electromagnetic beams, but even under heavy return fire those units were falling back.

Frei loosed a final blast of storm-lightning in support of the racing packs, then turned to gauge how far Ironhelm had come. The Great Wolf's retinue was out in the centre of the square, more than two hundred metres away now, and had taken on the badly wounded Warhound. The Titan limped towards them, its back aflame from repeated missile-strikes. Twin furrows exploded out from its megabolter and plasma blastgun as it tried to scour the Wolves from its path.

Frei allowed himself a grim smile. The war machine was a mighty thing, and in the right hands it was capable of devastation, but it was being used poorly. Such a towering construct was a magnet for long-range fire out in the open, and already its void shields were lurid with stress-flickers. Loyal Mechanicus automata had clustered around it, sending crackling arcs of interference fire into its flanks. More missiles pounded into the Warhound's hunched shoulders, coming now from all angles, and its ventral shield coverage blew out in a shower of sparks.

Loyal skitarii swarmed around it, risking death under its pounding treads to angle las-fire up at its weakened torso. The Wolves outpaced them, leaping up to the clawed feet to hack at the power cabling. Frei watched as Grey Hunters weaved between its pistoned legs, hurling mag-locked krak grenades before pouncing clear of the rain of return plasma-bolts. Several were caught by the fire-lines, their armour blasted apart and the flesh within atomised, but they had done enough – the grenades went off in a rattling sequence, crippling the Warhound and making it stagger.

That was the turning point. More missiles slammed in, ripping up armour plate and sending the reeling structure toppling sideways. The relentless mass-reactive barrage finally cracked the shaft-housings on its left leg, and the Titan slewed to

one side, weapon arms blazing uncontrollably. It collapsed, crushing dozens of the fighters that milled around it, before rocking to a smoked-wreathed standstill. Secondary explosions radiated down its prone spine, kicked off by power-units overloading under the constant impacts of massed weapons-fire.

Inevitably, it was the Great Wolf who claimed the kill. Ironhelm was first up on the Warhound's neck. Frei saw his frostblade blaze out, a lone streak of neon-blue against a welter of red and black, and the machine's cockpit was carved open. Ironhelm plunged into the burning innards, ripping out the Titan's crew and hurling them out at the crowds below. With its mind-link severed, the Warhound's weapons fell silent, the carcass shivered, and the entire machine clanked to a halt. Ironhelm threw his head back and roared out in triumph, bringing an answering chorus of howls from the Wolves of his company.

Then they were loping off again, swerving around the fallen Titan and making for the edifice's gates. A rolling wave of skitarii came with them, driving the insurgent forces ahead of them.

Frei laughed, and turned back to the assault on the Krios formation. For all Ironhelm's maddening intensity, the Great Wolf was a peerless leader. His voice could just be made out over the roiling tumult, urging his brothers onwards, goading them to ever-greater acts of battle-glory. He was obsessive, yes; he was secretive and he was black-humoured, but he was also a colossus of war, and those who fought with him soon learned the full extent of that.

Frei's staff snarled with energy again, and he strode out in the firelit night. The structure loomed up ahead, a vast square of ebony against the crimson skies. One Titan still remained, along with countless fallen servants of the Machine-God.

'For the Great Wolf,' Frei murmured, angling his staff towards the Krios and taking aim.

They broke the gates, passing under vaults of burnished bronze with the sigils of Mars etched in gold. Ironhelm was at the forefront, driving all before him. He smashed apart the greatest of the automata that waited in the precincts – hulking creations with polished domes for heads and rotating battlecannons for arms. By then the momentum was irresistible – a crashing surge of Wolves and loyal skitarii. They pushed on, racing through halls of obsidian and marble, fighting under the eaves of vast machine-altars. The fighting spread out through radial naves, pursued down every avenue inside the tortuous interior.

Until they broke into the inner sanctum, the true purpose of the building had not been apparent. The scrying runes did not speak in specifics – they offered clues,

vague dream-states that could be chased down. Who knew what rites the Machine Cult demanded in that place, what secrets were hidden in the shadowed vaults? All that Ironhelm perceived clearly was that the enemy was desperate for something inside, and that was enough for him to follow them in.

He sensed the change before he crossed the final threshold. The atmosphere was still clogged with dust and smoke, funnelled from a thousand pipes snaking over every iron surface, but the alteration in air density was palpable. As he ran, he felt a tremor in his secondary heart – a shiver, as if in recognition of something long forgotten. A vision flitted across his helm-lenses: a world, scoured black, with glass pyramids in ruins, and the ghosts of a slain Legion shimmered amid a starless sky.

Then he was inside. A huge central chamber yawned away from him, roofless, its walls glowing as silhouetted grilles contained seething plasma energy plates. The hexagonal column he had seen from the courtyard's edge soared up from the iron-plate floor, ten metres in diameter and hundreds tall, slotted with cogitator vaults and intakes up its entire expanse. Cables were strung from the column to the walls like the strands of a demented web, some dark and segmented, and others pulsing with violent energies.

Here, at the heart of things, the fighting was the most feverish, the most frantic. Tech-priests grappled with skitarii, gun servitors, auxilia troops in crimson tabards, massive war-walkers with shoulder-mounted launchers and metal-plated power fists. Bolt-rounds, las-beams, solid shells, energy-spears – all spat and pinged across the open space, cracking and snapping into the grilled walls.

The struggle was over the pillar – whether for what it represented, its function or what it contained. Even as Ironhelm entered combat, cracking his blade into the torso of a looming automaton before barrelling into a cluster of mesh-faced skitarii, he saw the shape of the entire battle unfurl. The insurgents had staged the huge assault across the courtyard, creating havoc all across the face of Arvion's command districts, just to get in *here*.

His Wolves had already reacted. Trask led the Wolf Guard into the thick of the fighting, crunching their way into the heaviest formations of insurgent Mechanicus fighters. The Grey Hunters split their forces, some packs racing to secure the base of the pillar, others falling back to the margins and opening up ranged fire to take out heavy weapons squads. Loyal skitarii poured into the chamber in Ironhelm's wake, fresh from the fighting in the precincts and ready to take the fight to their fallen kindred.

Ironhelm hammered his way through the melee in order to get close to the

pillar. His bloodied arms swung harder, dragging the frostblade in biting arcs, taking out two, three, four enemies with every massive blow. He was almost there, almost at the end of the hunt, the prize within his grasp. It was then, half-lost in the mania of murder and the euphoria of imminent completion, that he saw them for the first time.

Space Marines stood among the ranks of the enemy. They were decked in sapphire armour-plate, rimmed with gold and bronze, bearing arcane crests and flutes across their pauldrons and helms. For an instant, Ironhelm thought they were Ultramarines, but a second glance confirmed that they were no sons of Guilliman. They were already engaged, and fought like every Space Marine he had ever encountered – fast, expert, brutal, coordinated – with one exception: they made no sound whatsoever.

The shock of discovery faded, replaced by the fury of encountering the worst of all enemies of mankind – Traitor Space Marines, the ones who had fallen furthest and from the greatest height.

‘Ótruin!’ Ironhelm cried, his voice cracking with its fervour.

Every Wolf in the chamber immediately switched from whatever combat he was engaged in – summoned by the word, the mark that had echoed down the centuries since the unimaginable had first happened and loyal Legions had turned from the Emperor’s light.

Faithless. Betrayers. Kinslayers.

Since the days of the Scouring, the Imperium had learned with pain that the Traitor Legions had never been destroyed, but merely banished into realms of madness that suffered no pursuit. Ever and anon, warbands would raid the sanctuaries of mankind, striking out from hell-fortresses before melting back into the warp. As far as the great mass of the Imperial populace were aware, those who had fought with Horus were now all destroyed and the blight of Chaos among the Chapters Astartes was no more. The Wolves, like all the loyal Chapters in the new Imperium, knew better and had fought traitors where they had emerged, slowly learning their ways, mutations and shifting allegiances. No enmity was harder, no hatred purer.

These ones, though, were new. They smelled uncanny, more like the automata they fought with than flesh and blood, and their silence was unnerving. All across the chamber, the Wolves ignored all else to meet them in combat, knowing that there would never be more lethal foes and relishing both the vengeance and the battle honour.

Ironhelm smashed aside renegade skitarii, breaking into a charge towards the

nearest of the traitors. Three of them were fighting before him, and they were already turning to meet him. Something about their movements was strange – jerky, like interference on a vid-pict.

He thundered into them, his frostblade whistling down on to the neck of the first. The traitor span away from the blow, just as his battle-brothers opened fire. The Great Wolf's Terminator-plate absorbed the impacts, but he was cracked backwards, the energy of the charge blunted.

They piled into him, switching smoothly to their blades. Ironhelm lashed out viciously, catching one in the arm, the burning sword-edge biting deep. Even as he twisted it deeper he felt the hot stab of an energy-blade punching through his battleplate, and pulled away from contact, swinging the blade defensively now, countering the blows that came in with unnerving accuracy.

Not one of them uttered a word; it was something that began to enrage him.

'Fenrys hjolda!' he bellowed into their silent faces. 'Death to the faithless!'

All across the chamber, his brothers were doing the same, hitting them hard, roaring out their fury and contempt.

There were only a few traitors in the chamber, perhaps twenty amid an enemy force over a hundred times as big, but they held the whole mass together. They were as fast as the Wolves, and just as deadly, matching them for every blow, every punch and claw-rake.

It was their endurance, though, that was truly phenomenal. Ironhelm towered over his opponents in his Tactical Dreadnought armour, but still they came at him. He smashed them with his fists and slashed out with his crackling frostblade. Their bodies became encircled in disruptor-sparks, but when they were hurled back they moved straight into the fight.

'Enough!' Ironhelm bellowed, charging into them one last time. He dragged his blade a fraction faster and harder, putting every last scrap of strength into the movements to eke out just a sliver of extra force.

At last the edge connected true, annihilating the gorget of the closest traitor. His body went rigid, impaled on the energy-blade, before falling away.

The other two struck back, one firing at close range, the other whirling a chainsword. Ironhelm was cracked aside, his left thigh punctured from bolt-impacts. A hot slick of pain swelled up from the shredded muscle, and he staggered away from the incoming sword-strike. Even as he gathered strength to hit back, something struck him about the traitor he had just downed.

No blood.

Then the swords clashed again, snarling and fizzing as their energy fields grated

up against one another. Ironhelm thrust his enemy's sword aside with a savage shove, swinging the tip around and pushing forward two-handed. The point of the frostblade punctured the traitor square in the chest, breaking the ceramite in two and driving deeper. Ironhelm tried to wrench it out again, but the edge jammed against what felt like a hollow cavity, held fast by the narrow entry aperture.

He was hit again, a bolt-round striking his left pauldron, hurling him backwards and loosening his grip on the sword-hilt. The impaled Traitor Space Marine reached out to him, locking fingers around his neck and striving to gain a grip. The enemy should have been dead – he had a gaping wound running down the length of his breastplate – but somehow he retained the strength to reach out and aim for the throttle-hold.

What keeps them on their feet?

Ironhelm prepared to release the hilt, to fall back and reach for his storm bolter, when a sudden surge of ice-cold raced across the chamber. A boom rang out, followed by the sharp snap of lightning whipping between the walls.

Frei.

The Traitor Space Marines stumbled, both of them, as if caught by invisible hands. Ironhelm seized the opportunity, hauling his blade clear of the traitor's severed breastplate. He swung again, wider this time, and connected with the second of them. The frostblade's edge clanged against the sapphire helm, gouging the ceramite in a blaze of disruptor-flare.

More storm-lightning danced across the chamber, licking up the central column and coiling around the feeder cables. Ironhelm heard Frei's voice rising over the maelstrom, summoning and augmenting the savage energies of the ice-world. Though none of his wyrd-lightning came close, the effect on the traitors did not let up – they were rigid now, barely moving, and the witchlight in their helm-lenses had dulled down to a sickly green.

'For Russ!' roared Ironhelm, smashing into them with full force. This time the sapphire armour did not protect them, and the frostblade carved itself deep into the protective shells. Ironhelm pressed the attack, poised to thrust the killing-edge deep into the flesh beneath, but then he suddenly pulled up, struck by the impossibility of what he was seeing.

Both suits of armour fell clean apart, collapsing from where the sword had severed the joints. Breastplates and pauldrons clanged to the ground, revealing a void within. Wisps of something similar to vapour rose from the hollow innards, and the heavy segments rolled to a rest on the marble.

Ironhelm stood over the remnants, his blade still raised, unable to believe what he was seeing. A moment ago, they had been fighting. They had nearly bested him. He had seen his brothers fight the rest of them, taking wounds as if from warriors their equal.

And now there was nothing – just empty segments, crusted on the inside with spiderwebs of frost.

‘Jarl!’

The voice was Trask’s, from far off and yet filled with warning. Ironhelm spun around, blocking the incoming path of a chainblade. The skitarii who bore it died swiftly, undone by two transverse slashes of the frostblade.

The shock jolted him back into combat alertness. Some witchery had been perpetrated, some deep deception, but there was no time to gawp at it. Frei was in the heart of things now, his staff spiralling, his hoarse voice calling down more vortices of ruination. The traitors were static, either hacked apart or soon to be, and the enemy troops clustered around the pillar’s base were reeling.

They could be killed. The contagion could be cut out, just as it had been on every world he had made part of the long hunt. That was the objective now, that was the focus.

‘Slay them!’ Ironhelm thundered, bursting back into the fray and laying about his enemies with all the old energy. ‘Let none live!’

And still, for all the bluster, all the martial words, the thought wouldn’t leave him – a fragment of horror, one that he already knew presaged more ahead.

There was no blood.

It took eight more hours to subdue the last of the resistance. Hard fighting remained even after the Traitor Space Marines had been downed, for the warriors of the Mechanicus had little conception of fear and mutely followed their baseline programming to the end. By the time the last echo of the last shell-strike had died away, the floor of the column chamber was thick with the contorted bodies of the dead, some still twitching rhythmically as their internal systems continued to function.

With the objective won, the tech-priests assumed command of the central column area, condoning it off and setting up gun-servitors as sentinels. Ironhelm was happy to let them work – his attention was now wholly absorbed on the silent automata. Frei and Trask joined him again, while the bulk of the surviving Wolves accompanied skitarii kill-teams into the depths of the vast edifice, hunting for insurgents that still drew breath.

The Great Wolf looked down at the armour fragments at his feet. He nudged an empty greave with his boot, and the frost-webbed shell rocked.

‘Tell me, then,’ he said to Frei.

The Rune Priest crouched down, placing his hands on the ceramite, breathing deeply. ‘For a moment, I sensed a trace, but now...’ He shook his head, and looked back up at Ironhelm. ‘Nothing, jarl.’

Ironhelm’s expression didn’t change. ‘They fought like we did. They took wounds that would have felled one of our own.’

Frei reached up for the undamaged armour’s pauldron and pulled the hollow corpse to one side, revealing the image on the curved face – a serpent devouring itself, ringed with flowing script in gold. ‘A Prosperine mark,’ he said.

‘A mockery.’

‘I do not know.’ Frei ran his finger over the seals and sigils on the stricken creature’s breastplate. ‘There was something else. I felt it when I entered the chamber.’ He paused. ‘In the past, when we have cleared out their nests, I have sensed power like mine. The magus, the witch, directing the rites. They die, just like the rest, for the art is weak, but this time...’

He trailed off. Ironhelm waited for him, giving him the time to order his thoughts.

‘One of them was here,’ said Frei. ‘The master of these hollow things. For an instant, I might have been facing him, though I never saw his physical shape. When he withdrew, the creatures fell.’

Ironhelm shook his head. The stink of magick still lay on the corpses. ‘I have fought traitors before,’ he said. ‘They died just as we do. They still had flesh to break and I tasted their blood on my fangs.’

‘These are his Legion, jarl.’

‘His Legion is destroyed.’

‘They bear his marks.’

‘Which could have been painted by any witch.’

‘You know they were not.’

‘What do the annals say?’ asked Ironhelm, unwilling to travel down that path and feeling his dormant anger rekindling. ‘His servants were like any other. They bled when we killed them. They marched in *crimson* plate, and they spoke heresy from lips that could be seen.’

Frei got up, bristling at his master’s tone. ‘These are his sons.’

‘They are hollow!’ cried Ironhelm. ‘They are ghosts! Are we to fear ghosts now?’

‘They can still kill,’ observed Trask, bleakly.

‘They are the Fifteenth,’ said Frei, quietly but firmly. ‘This is what they have become.’

‘No,’ said Ironhelm. ‘Whatever else they were, they were Legionones Astartes. That could not be changed.’

‘*There* is the mark of Prospero,’ shouted Frei, exasperated. ‘*There* are the sigils we have seen on a hundred worlds. There is the *eye*, lord.’

Ironhelm fought against it. He glared down at the fluted armour, the crests, the snake-figures and the embellishments. None of his retinue had ever seen one of the Fifteenth. There were no images in the archives, just scrolls from long-dead remembrancers closeted away in Wyrmlade’s vaults. He had witnessed mortal followers of the Eye-cult, many of whom had proudly called themselves Sons of Magnus before the end, but they had all been solidly mortal, clad in cheap approximations of power armour and with even less knowledge of the distant past than the Wolves themselves had. Such sorcerers were weak creatures, mumblers of cantrips they only half understood.

There could be no doubt about the way these things had fought. The automata had been outnumbered, cornered and outgunned and had still killed more than their own tally.

Ironhelm felt the unwelcome truth creeping up on him, slowly, submerging his doubts. ‘So can you read these signs?’ he asked Frei, gesturing towards the script running around the armour-corpse’s gorget.

‘I cannot,’ said the Rune Priest. ‘Maybe none can now, save the one who wrote them.’

Before Ironhelm could reply, a new presence entered the chamber. The Great Wolf turned to see the tech-priests prostrating themselves, placing their metal foreheads against the marble and extending ironwork fingers. Fresh squads of golden-armoured skitarii marched across the threshold and took up an honour formation, angling heavy lasguns in facing ranks.

Between them slid a huge, multi-segmented creature. It might once have been a man of mortal dimensions, but the ages had changed it: augmenting and mutating it, twisting its natural body and stretching sinews across mechanical replacement-units. It slithered across the marble on a bronze-ringed tail, the segments as thick as an ogryn’s waist. Multiple arms sprung from an armoured thorax, each one terminating in a different claw, wrench or drill-piece. Its head was cowed like all the higher ranking servants of Mars, but that didn’t hide a complex face of lenses, mandibles and coiled tubes, clustered under the fabric

like the pipework of some vast engine.

Its servants came with it – golden menials with eyeless faces, bearing ceremonial staves that smeared long trails of incense behind them. A long gong beat in rhythm, echoing through the vaults above and behind it.

The creature approached Ironhelm, rearing up to full height as it did so, its many arms snickering and clicking. Lenses under the cowl zoomed in and out, accompanied by gouts of vapour from breathing tubes studded along its flanks.

‘My lord of Fenris,’ said Archmagos Intendant Nhem Georg Selvarios. His voice emanated from several sources at once, resulting in an overlapping chorus of machine-coarse Gothic. ‘Since you would not come to me, it seems I must come instead to you.’

Ironhelm bowed curtly, barely troubling to hide his impatience at the interruption. All he could think about were the armour-corpses at his feet. ‘This was where the fighting was,’ he replied.

‘Where some of it was,’ agreed Selvarios, emotionlessly. ‘You seemed to know where you wanted to fight. You seemed to know a great deal about this difficulty. Perhaps you knew of it before it even happened.’

Ironhelm drew in a long breath. This was a forge world under the sovereign jurisdiction of the Cult of Mars – there were limits even to his authority in such a place.

‘We have been hunting this enemy for a long time,’ said Ironhelm. ‘We have learned to predict his movements. If we could have given you warning earlier—’

‘You would have done nothing, for this world’s fate means nothing to you.’ Selvarios spoke blankly, with no reproach – he was just stating facts. ‘They came here for knowledge. This is a repository of ancient things.’ He gestured with a tentacled arm towards the column. ‘The column stores our venerated templates. Some of them we use. Some of them we cannot decipher. Some of them can only be deciphered by the ones that made them, and they are either dead or dwell beyond our reach. If they had taken them that would have been...’ There was a sudden clicking from the creature’s mandibles. A laugh? Cogitation? ‘...sub-optimal.’

‘The column was not taken.’

‘I see that. But I will not thank you. I repeat: you did not come here for us.’ Selvarios angled his ocular viewers towards the armour-corpses. ‘Our enemies are fleshless. I can admire that.’

‘They are weapons of sorcery.’

‘Yes. They will be destroyed.’

‘We will take them.’

‘They will be destroyed here, on this day, in our furnaces.’

Ironhelm squared up to the metal giant. ‘My warriors bled for you here. Their threads were cut on your soil. I will take these things as weregild. I demand nothing else.’

‘You demand nothing at all.’ Selvarios’s servo-arms cycled around one another, and his thorax vented more vapours. ‘You are a lord on your own world, Son of Russ, but this is not Fenris. Your ships are within our defence grid, which remains intact. Your warriors are surrounded by thousands of mine. Your reputation for violence is great, but I assess that you do not wish to demonstrate that here.’ His serpentine neck extended, bringing the mandible-face closer to Ironhelm’s. ‘I will burn them, this day, on this world. They are sorcerer’s things, blasphemies. They have no place in the galaxy.’

Ironhelm silently gauged the forces marshalled around him. Selvarios was right – the Wolves were heavily outnumbered. Even if they could have fought their way back to the drop pods, local space was held against them.

It still might be worth the attempt. The Mechanicus would balk at taking on an entire Great Company.

+Let this one go, jarl,+ came Frei’s voice, echoing within his mind. +We have what we need.+

Ironhelm didn’t so much as glance at his Rune Priest. His amber eyes remained locked on the augmetic bio-construct before him. It was hard to back down, even when all reason demanded that he did so. Something would have to be offered in return.

‘I will observe the destruction, then,’ Ironhelm said eventually. ‘I will not leave this place until no trace of them remains. And they will not leave our sight – my warriors will guard them.’

Selvarios bowed, and the metal plates along his flanks clinked. ‘Alongside my own. Do not unsettle yourself, Space Wolf – there will be no deception here.’

Then he twisted back on himself, his long train of servo-arms and mechadendrites clanking in his wake. His menials followed him, sweeping incense-burners through the air as they went.

Once the entourage was gone, Ironhelm turned back to Frei. ‘What do you mean, we have what we need?’ he asked in a low voice.

‘The battleplate is nothing. The prize is the script. The archmagos knows it, and will take records before they are burned.’

‘Then do the same.’

Frei bowed. ‘By your will.’

The damage to Arvion’s infrastructure took many hours to stabilise. Both major incursions had gouged trails of destruction leading from the initial flare-points to the enemy’s targets. The forge world’s principal command pyramid had been badly scarred, and it had taken the intervention of two hastily awakened Reaver Titans to stem the losses at the main gate, after which Selvarios’s standing garrison had been able to drive the insurgents back into the surrounding maze of manufactoria and forge-clusters. The second objective – the repository of STC records – had been a far closer thing. Selvarios might not have admitted it, but without the intervention of the Wolves it was not inconceivable that the data might have fallen into the hands of the enemy.

Few asked what the insurgents would have done if they succeeded in taking the files of ancient cogitator wafers. There was no route off-world for them, so the only course would have been to destroy what they had won. That did not sit easily with the reputation of the thieves – the Fifteenth Legion, according to what myths of them remained, had ever been hoarders of esoterica rather than vandals, and if their servants had been the ones to inspire the uprising then it was hard to imagine that annihilation had been their goal.

Such questions, however, were deferred in the face of the need for reconstruction. Several fusion reactors had been badly damaged and needed immediate attention from the tech-priests. Over a hundred drone-habs had been torched, and seven major transit-channels were now little more than rivers of fire that licked against scorched metal.

Titans still stalked across the smouldering rubble, sweeping blunt heads across vistas of debris. If their masters permitted themselves shame, they would have had plenty of cause for it: in the space of little more than one standard day, two primary sectors of the forge world command citadel had been lost to insurrection. Those few insurgents who had been captured alive were now buried deep in the lightless vaults of the archmagos’s inner fortress, where their dormant pain-receptors were being re-connected prior to insertion into agony-tanks. At that stage it was still unclear how so many priests and skitarii battalion commanders had been persuaded to turn against their own kind. Rumours had begun to spread across the noosphere that many of them were equally clueless, as if emerging from a madness that had left them without memories of their crimes.

Ironhelm cared nothing for any of it. Once the last of the fighting was over, his

warriors returned to the dropsites, securing them against interference and signalling for mass lifters to descend from orbit for the empty drop pods. The losses had been high – twelve battle-brothers dead, thirty more destined for the Apothecary's knife – but Ironhelm scarcely registered the numbers. The losses would have been justified even if the defence of Arvion had been his only objective. As it was, the encounter had yielded far more than that.

Once the last of the overriding kill-urge had faded, he had come to see that Frei was right: the silent warriors were what remained of Magnus's once-proud Legion. The livery might have changed and the physical structure perverted, but there were no other explanations. Something beyond imagination had happened to the Thousand Sons – divine retribution for their many sins, perhaps, or maybe the outcome of some twisted act of self-harm.

There was much to learn about them. Frei was convinced that they had been guided by intelligence, perhaps one of their own kind, and that with the withdrawal of such control they had become weak and easy to slay. The guiding hand had eluded detection, and in the confusion and labour of reconstruction it was possible that it had escaped, though without visual confirmation the search was unlikely to turn up solid results.

For the remainder of his time on Arvion, Frei obsessively studied the corpses, making careful records of their markings, weaponry and dispositions. In this he was matched by Selvarios's priests, who made similarly exhaustive studies of the fallen automata. Neither side consulted the other, though their conclusions were similar – a new kind of battle engine, animated by forbidden sorcery, retaining all the strength and deadliness of the original Legiones Astartes template but with new and arcane dependencies that limited their autonomy.

The reactions of the two commanders differed. Selvarios evinced an undiluted horror for them, no doubt reacting against the pollution of raw machine and crippled soul. Ironhelm, on the other hand, could not hide his emotions even from the skitarii around him. They reported back to their masters that the Great Wolf, after the shock of discovery, seemed to have been energised by them. His eyes shone and his gestures became animated.

It was almost as if, they documented in their databursts, he had been pleased to find them.

The hour came, and Ironhelm and Selvarios stood together before the pyres. The remains of the sapphire-armoured automata were conveyed on iron tracks directly into the maws of two blast furnaces, each one operating at temperatures

sufficient to destroy adamantium. The Great Wolf and the archmagos watched silently as the ceramite crisped, bubbled, and then degenerated slowly into crackling ash. The pauldrons lasted longest, and so the icon of the coiled serpent lingered in the flames, writhing as if alive.

‘This was well met, jarl,’ said the archmagos at the end, perhaps in an attempt to salvage some element of fraternity to what had been an uneasy alliance. ‘Loss was averted. We will celebrate that.’

‘Look to yourselves,’ said Ironhelm. ‘You have been corrupted, and it is hard to bleed out such poison.’

A metallic sigh escaped through Selvario’s oxygen filters. ‘I do not believe that you will listen to any counsel from me, nor perhaps from any but your own conscience, but I will say it nonetheless. I have lived for many lifetimes and seen many minds. We are not beyond obsessions of our own, and this is worth guarding against as much as any other weakness.’ He hesitated, and the sound of micro-pistons sliding back and forth emanated from under his metal carapace. ‘There are few chances in this universe. You hunted them, and you have what you came for. Can you believe that he does not know of your quest? And can you truly believe that he does not smile to see you remain on the scent he has laid?’

Ironhelm listened impatiently. He had heard similar words from his own lords, and had grown weary of them long ago. He smiled grimly, exposing the fangs that were the most obvious marker of his Chapter’s savagery.

‘I am not blind,’ he said, his voice a low, controlled growl. ‘I know what powers wait beyond the veil, and what they hunger for. But they are not infinite. They are not without fault. They can be beaten.’

‘There is other prey.’

‘Not like this one.’

Ironhelm turned, saying nothing more, not even offering the most cursory of bows, and stalked back to the platform where his lander waited. The archmagos watched him go. The morass of lenses and tubes that passed for his face rearranged themselves into an expression that might have been resignation.

With the crew-ramps withdrawn, the lander’s atmospheric engines fired, taking the Great Wolf back into orbit. Arvion returned to being a pure Machine Cult world, albeit with deep wounds that would set production quotas back by years.

Selvarios didn’t speak for some time after Ironhelm’s departure. His menials waited silently, knowing better than to inquire. Eventually, he shook himself, waking systems that had been locked in deep cogitation cycles, and the

mechadendrites stirred.

‘They fight well,’ he murmured, rendering the words in a binaricreed that was reserved for his own cluster of internal intelligences. He was slithering again by then, heading to the capsule-train that would take him back to the command-node. ‘But they are proud. Thus, I judge, they summon their own doom.’



III

‘He returns,’ said Arkenjaw.

‘So they tell me,’ replied Kjarlskar.

‘Another den of heresy cut out.’

‘You should be glad to hear it.’

‘There will always be witches.’

‘Not if the Great Wolf has his way.’

The two of them stood in the open, buffeted by a wind that cut like knives. Fenris’s dawn sky was leaden and heavy, carrying squalls in from the west across the far passes. The encircling peaks of Asaheim crowded the horizon, their crowns streaked black and white like Arkenjaw’s own ragged mane.

Kjarlskar was different – younger, leaner, his hair as dark as oil. Though neither of them moved, the impression they gave was of circling around one another, haunches raised, fangs bared.

Both had brought their Guard with them: Kjarlskar just the one, a severe warrior in war-tarnished plate named Svart. Arkenjaw had brought both his lieutenants, still unwilling to choose between them, knowing how deadly their respective gifts made them in tandem. The show of force brought out a cynical smile from Kjarlskar.

‘You felt the need to outnumber me?’ he asked.

Arkenjaw didn’t return the smile. ‘No jesting, brother. I came to speak reason.’

Kjarlskar glanced down the steep slope, the rocks hidden by deep drifts, over to where the three subordinates leaned into the gale. ‘There is the White Wolf,’ he noted, pointing out Vaer Greyloc’s pale hide. ‘And Rossek, the Red. Which of

them has your blessing, jarl?’

Arkenjaw’s expression hardened. ‘You still support him. I would know why.’

Kjarlskar smiled, a wide grin that made his fangs glimmer in the dull light.

‘Oja. You think to wedge a blade between us, is that it? Perhaps you would have liked his position at the Annulus.’

‘I never desired it.’

Kjarlskar snorted. ‘We all desire it.’ He shuddered in the bitter cold, and new-settled snow scattered from his shoulders. ‘He slays like no other. You have seen him fight, I have seen him fight. When he orders it, we follow. We all follow.’

‘I would do so again,’ Arkenjaw said, wincing as he remembered how it had been, ‘if he showed me an enemy worth getting my blade bloody.’

‘Then what more do you *want*, brother?’ Kjarlskar demanded, his voice tightening. ‘What greater prize *is* there?’

‘He digs out magicians and the blinded, and parades them as if they are worthy of anything but our scorn. You know what more he hungers for.’

‘No, I do not. Tell me.’

Arkenjaw looked up at him blankly. Kjarlskar was like a wall – defiant, committed, the true believer.

‘He reads the runes,’ Arkenjaw said. ‘He dreams. He has told me of those dreams. He sees the great war of the past. He places himself within it.’

Kjarlskar laughed. ‘You think he—’

‘There are no enemies left worthy of his anger,’ said Arkenjaw, holding the other Wolf Lord’s gaze. ‘He delves for those of myth, and you indulge him.’

‘They are not all myths,’ said Kjarlskar, his voice dropping to a low threat-note. ‘They were not all slain. There are some of us who will not rest until they are.’

Now it was Arkenjaw’s turn to laugh, though grimly. ‘So you speak like he does. What secret knowledge do you possess to give mastery over the ancients?’

‘No secrets. The defeated will not hide forever, and when they emerge, we will have remembered our oaths.’

Arkenjaw’s old skin now ran with lines of melting slush. ‘It has been more than two thousand years. That is long enough for some oaths to sleep.’

‘Eternity would not be enough.’

‘And there are other enemies.’

‘So you weary me by saying,’ snapped Kjarlskar. ‘I hear it from other mouths – there are greenskins, there are corsairs.’ He drew closer to Arkenjaw, and his mien darkened further. ‘They are *nothing*. They are meagre prey, and I feel empty when I slay them. But *he*... He was one of us. You remember what that

means? *One of us.*'

Arkenjaw remained where he was, and soon the two of them faced one another, divided by less than a hand's breadth. Their amber eyes were locked, and their hot breath ran in steaming gout over the lip of frost-laced gorgets.

'If he lives,' said Arkenjaw. 'And in all the annals, he was never spoken of as a fool. He sees the fates more clearly than we do. He needs no runes, and needs no dreams, for he *was* a dream.'

Kjarlskar listened, though his expression did not change.

'He should remain a dream,' Arkenjaw went on. 'We can ignore the goads, the trails in the dark. We are awake, our blood is hot. They were the gods of another age, brother.'

Kjarlskar did not speak again for the space of many heartbeats. The two of them, mere specks on the shoulder of the mountains, stood like granite images.

In the end, the younger lord broke away first, shuffling away and kicking up loose snow. He snorted a laugh, and looked down across the drifts to where his shieldbearer waited. 'You never answered me, Oja,' he said. 'Which one, the White Wolf or the Red?'

Arkenjaw followed his gaze, to where Greyloc and Rossek waited. Greyloc's expression was hard to read, as ever. Rossek looked hopeful, though not for Arkenjaw's success – he wished for nothing but the success of Ironhelm's quest, though his loyalty to Arkenjaw remained solid enough.

This is driving us apart, Arkenjaw thought, seeing how the divisions opened up even within companies. The easier course would be to cease his opposition, to join in the hunt wholeheartedly. None other had the power to gainsay Ironhelm – it would restore unity, if nothing else.

Rossek was surely the better choice. He had a heart of fire, that one. He would fight until the suns burned out, and lead the company back to the heart of things, where it belonged. Being on the edge of the fire-circle had made the Twelfth's voice weaker – in time, that would have to change.

'You govern your own company,' Arkenjaw growled, pushing past Kjarlskar and heading back down the slope.

Ironhelm's flotilla broke back into real space at the Fenris System's Mandeville point. The ships were soon burning hard for the home world, escorted by dagger-prowed destroyers from the standing defence cordon, but the Great Wolf himself was not on the command bridge to receive their hails.

Down in Frei's private chambers on the lower decks, the torches had burned

down low, and runic seals had been placed on the outer doors. The Rune Priest moved around a long, low slab, on which rested ancient picter lenses and iron-bound caskets. Ironhelm stood on the other side of it, gazing intently at the collection of ephemera before them.

‘Progress?’ Ironhelm asked.

‘Some. I detect auras still, hovering over the matter.’ Frei looked thoughtful.

‘At times, when the flames are leaping, I almost hear voices.’

‘From the images?’

Frei shook his head. ‘Picters tell little. I have better.’

He reached into one of the caskets and withdrew a heavy arc of ceramite. It was a broken section of armour-gorget, chipped to the metal but still glossy with the enemy’s pale blue livery.

Ironhelm smiled. ‘How did you—’

‘The guard was watchful, but I am a subtle thief. Now look.’

He raised the fragment of armour to the flickering light, turning it to face Ironhelm. The same script was there, needle-thin, traced in gold along the rim where the helm-seals had broken.

‘Can you read it?’ asked Ironhelm.

‘Not yet. Not all. But mark the end.’

The fragment terminated in a scorched break, where a bolt-round had exploded and shattered the ceramite link. Running up to the end of the piece were numerals, in a Gothic face, clearly readable.

XVIII-XV.

‘Squad designation?’ asked Ironhelm. The style of the numerals was strangely different to others he’d seen. The figures were legible, but only just, giving away the two-thousand-year gulf between the maker of the marks and his readers.

‘Twenty-Eighth Fellowship, Fifteenth Legion,’ said Frei. He didn’t look triumphant, though the vindication was there. ‘These figures were drawn when Magnus lived. This was one of his warriors.’

Ironhelm couldn’t take his eyes off the numbers. He found himself wanting more – what had the legionary looked like? How had he spoken? What had happened to him, to banish his body and turn his armour into an empty casket of ghosts?

‘This will sway the jarls,’ Ironhelm murmured, running the threads of the future through his mind. ‘They can ignore witches, but they will not turn away from traitors of our own kind.’

Frei watched him carefully. The fires spat and smouldered, making the shadows

under his eyes split and merge. ‘The first we have seen in two millennia,’ he said. ‘Can you find more?’

Ironhelm shot him a wintry smile. ‘If they live, I will find them.’ He thought of his own chambers, hidden in the depths of the mountain, ringed by wards and stuffed with the panoply of augury. He would go back to the old paths, treading them like a beast on the scent.

The Priests did not have a monopoly on the ways of the wyrd. He knew more of it than they supposed, more even than Sturmhart guessed. The trail through possibilities would open. His scrying had led him to Arvion, and a dozen other worlds besides, and it would lead him to more.

‘And do not tell me to be watchful, Frei,’ Ironhelm warned. ‘Do not tell me that the Crimson King governs the fates, and that he lays webs around me and guides my feet towards him.’ He smiled again, just as bleakly. ‘I know he does. But fates can be bent.’

He looked down at the armour fragment, and the alien shapes of Prospero moved under the lambent light.

‘Russ broke his back,’ Ironhelm said softly. ‘I will break the rest.’

The squalls cleared, and the skies above the mountain were as clear as sapphires. More storms were predicted, though – violent ones, with the power to shake the granite foundations of the Fang itself – and so Greyloc went quickly from the great gates, out into the wastes alone, determined to hunt while the air was clear and a scent could carry.

He took his axe, Frengir, with him, its edge sharpened to a monomolecular point, its bare steel thirsting for the blood of the kill. He travelled swiftly, following ways known to the Fenryka since before the time of Russ. The snow soon became knee-deep, and he crashed through it, relying on sheer strength to shove it aside.

He reached the high passes leading to the shoulder of Asfryk, south of the Fang, and crouched down. The hairs on his arms pricked, and he focused. Ahead of him, where the land rose in steep cliffs of sleet-slicked rock, the horizon was broken by a single outline. It was waiting for him, fearless, beckoning the approach.

Greyloc smiled. This was a foe far beyond him, but he had come to hunt, and so he loped up the steep incline, leaping from crag to crag. By the time he reached the lip of the pass, his quarry was fully visible.

Arkenjaw had waited the whole time, leaning back against a pillar of rock.

‘Swift, still, then,’ the jarl observed.

Greyloc was breathing heavily from the ascent, but his axe was still bared, ready to use. ‘If you had run, I would have caught you.’

‘I have no doubt of it.’

Greyloc stowed his blade, looking around for others of the company. There were none; the two of them were alone. ‘I had hoped to find a throat to cut,’ he said.

‘You should not be out here. Rossek is not. He trains with the Claws, he keeps them sharp.’

Greyloc felt his spirits sag a little. ‘Do you order me to do the same?’

Arkenjaw shrugged. ‘I order nothing. But you and he – you care nothing for the race you are running?’

‘By my soul, no.’ Greyloc looked up at the blunt-edge peak soaring above them. Asfryk was gigantic, but still the shadow of the Fang fell across its highest pinnacle. Like all the summits of Asaheim, it was beautiful, spare, a colossus of distilled danger. If he could have remained in those places forever, relinquishing the firelit halls of the Fang itself, he would not have been sorry.

‘Then, fast as you are, he will outpace you.’ Arkenjaw started to walk, kicking through the snow and heading up through the throat of the pass. ‘Come with me.’

The two of them ascended, negotiating the treacherous terrain with the preternatural skill of those born to it. As they crested the throat of the pass, the land dropped down before them, falling into a deep cleft. Sheer valley walls plunged on either side, bare and dark, delving into a glassy lake some two hundred metres down.

They stood, gazing out at the vista. Asaheim’s southern country jagged towards the far horizon, broken and gleaming under the strong sun.

‘It will be him,’ Arkenjaw said, his scarred jaw jutting. ‘If you do not do more, it will be him.’

Greyloc laughed. For so long the contest between them had been unremarked on, so it felt absurd now to bring it out into the open. ‘He may have it.’

Arkenjaw turned to him. ‘Kjarlskar asked me which of you I favoured.’

Greyloc lost his laugh. ‘And you answered?’

‘I gave him nothing.’ Arkenjaw looked unusually troubled; normally, his face was a mask of steady concentration. ‘But it made me think what my answer would be. My thread is already long. They desired to know who I would choose to take the Twelfth when it is cut.’

‘What does it matter? They will cast their own lots.’

‘It matters. My view will become known. There will be those who will vote only for what I wanted.’

Greyloc sighed, not wishing to talk of such things. For a while, out on his own, he had been able to escape the claustrophobic talk of the Fang’s tunnels – the jealousies, rivalries, speculations. ‘Do not speak of this, jarl,’ he said. ‘It spoils my mood.’

‘Mood?’ Arkenjaw spat, irritated. ‘*Mood?* Then let me do nothing, Wolf Guard, that might ruin your delicate humours. That is, after all, why you were placed on this world – to preserve a *mood*.’

Greyloc laughed again, but said nothing. Eventually, Arkenjaw spoke again.

‘It would be Rossek,’ he said, hesitantly, ‘but for one thing. By Russ, he slays. That is all some companies wish from their lords, and he would fulfil that. But my judgement has wavered. He reminds me of–’

‘–the Great Wolf. Then that should sway you further.’

Arkenjaw nodded. ‘They even look the same, though one has flame-hair, the other black. It troubles me.’

Greyloc pushed his long mane back from the ice-wind. The brush of it against his skin was unforgiving, and he could feel even his iron constitution stiffening in the cold. Fenris would kill the most precious of its sons without missing a heartbeat.

‘Why did you bring me here, jarl?’ asked Greyloc. ‘All the Aett knows the bad blood between you – this is not news.’

Arkenjaw pursed his lips, pressed white in the cold. ‘He has called a council of war. This last hunt has brought him something he wishes to share, and I can sense the kill-urge in his every word. He will not sway them, not this time, for the weight of jarls remains against him, but with every passing year the balance moves. I cannot watch them, not all the time. We were created to wage war, not guard against each other like squabbling pups.’

‘Then you wish me to shadow his Guard.’

‘You could do it. No others in my company would do as well. Stay close to Trask, to Frei, to Wyrmlade – any in his confidence.’

‘What am I to listen for?’

Arkenjaw laughed bitterly. ‘If I knew, I would have acted already.’ His expression hardened. ‘He brings secrets home with him. You will not get close to those, but they will dictate his actions. So when he moves, be at his shoulder. All I will need are his orders, the ones he gives his shieldbearers. If nothing else, I

will know his course soon after he does. That must be enough, if there is nothing better.'

Greyloc nodded. The tasking was anathema to him – slinking around the pits of the Fang, reinforcing the reputation he already had for cold blood – but Arkenjaw was right about one thing: he could remain in the shadows like no other.

'Then it will be done, lord,' Greyloc said.

Arkenjaw nodded. The old lord's satisfaction was tempered by barely concealed irritation.

'Were Russ still here to see this,' he murmured, 'he would weep. What have we become?'

'There is one living who could tell you.'

'Ah, not yet. He will not be awoken, not for this. Will he ever be woken again, I wonder? *Can* he be?'

Greyloc drew in a long breath. 'If there is nothing else, lord...'

'Go. I have kept you long enough.' Arkenjaw looked down at him, and there was a searching look in his eyes, as if he were testing some decision he had made a long time ago. 'It is still Rossek,' he said at last. 'I will not lie to you.'

Then he started trudging back down through the heavy drifts, his body rocking as he waded.

'But that fate is not yet written,' he called out, disappearing over the crown of the pass, his voice already snatched at by the wind. 'Nothing ever is.'

Thar Hraldir, called Wyrmlblade, waited for the arrival of the Great Wolf in his fleshmaker's chambers. He had been waiting there since word came in that Ironhelm's lander had been received at the Valgard. The laboratoria had been cleared, the thralls dismissed and the auxiliary rooms powered down. All that remained lit was the central cavern, from which all the others radiated. The smells of antiseptic and fresh blood hung in the air.

The Wolf Priest looked down at the data-slate cradled in his calloused hands. A decade ago, he had been uncertain whether the idea was anything more than a diseased dream. Now, after the progress he had seen, there could be little doubt. The attempt could be made. Whether it *ought* to be, that was another question, and one over which his mind had turned fruitlessly for too long.

I will not be the one to give the order, he thought. But it will be my name in the annals: Wyrmlblade's blasphemy. Wyrmlblade's glory.

He stirred at the heavy tread of armoured boots. Ironhelm entered the inner

chamber, alone, just as he always did when they met to discuss the hidden task.

‘Welcome back, jarl,’ said Wyrmlblade, bowing.

Ironhelm looked about him, failing to hide his discomfort. Rows of glass vials lined the tiled walls, each labelled with a different series of runes. Vast banks of machinery slowly cycled, ticking over as the centrifuges did their work.

‘Tell me,’ he said.

Wyrmlblade put the data-slate down, and crossed his arms. ‘Last time you were here, you asked for proof.’

‘You have it?’

‘It was an impossible command. There will never be proof, not like you demand.’ Wyrmlblade felt the weight of fatigue on his back, shoulders and limbs. ‘But, for all that, I have seen enough.’

The Priest stalked over to a long row of cogitators, each one a twisted mosaic of valves, tubes, Mechanicus purity screeds and grimy picter lenses. He ran a clawed finger down the polished edge of the nearest one.

‘If the fates allow, I can do more work,’ he said. He had been rehearsing what he would say for two days, but now that the moment had come he still hesitated over the words. ‘I know more than ever. More than any other soul now living, save the one who made us. That has settled certain questions.’

Ironhelm listened, clearly impatient. With him, it was always a warrior’s demands: attack or retreat, advance or withdraw. He needed answers quickly, given under the barrage of shells and the onslaught of blades, but this was not warfare, at least not of a straightforward kind.

‘So,’ said Wyrmlblade finally, his eyes meeting Ironhelm’s again. ‘Give me the order and I will commence the final phase.’

‘And? What does that mean?’

‘Preparation of the therapies. Then living subjects. Aspirants.’

Ironhelm drew in a breath. They had both discussed this before. It had always been the end result, the goal. Now though, with the prospect lying before them at last, the scale of the transgression was impossible to ignore.

‘How many?’

‘I do not know, not yet. But once we start...’

Wyrmlblade trailed off. Ironhelm knew the costs, at least in outline. Some of the other Wolf Lords had the sketchiest knowledge of the task, but in the end only Wyrmlblade understood the full depths of what was planned.

When did we start talking of ‘depths’? When we began this, we spoke of heights, of immortal renown, of renewal.

Ironhelm sucked on his fangs, and limped heavily around the metal slabs. Wyrmlblade could see the fresh damage on his armour and the scabs on his exposed face. The amount of damage the Great Wolf took was exceptional even by the standards of his calling – one day it would drag him down.

‘There will be no going back,’ said Ironhelm grimly. ‘We begin it, we see it out.’

Wyrmlblade nodded.

Ironhelm drummed his fingers on the steel, pensive. His eyes were always moving, flickering from vial to vial, giving away the restlessness within. Was it more pronounced than in the past? Hard to say. There had been whispers about Ironhelm ever since he had taken command: most were motivated by rivalry, and only a few by foreboding.

They said he was like Bjorn, at the start. How many still think that? Wyrmlblade smiled inwardly. *And what will he do to recover that praise?*

‘I will think on it,’ Ironhelm said at last. ‘I am battle-weary, and this needs deliberation. You will have my answer before the next hunt.’

Wyrmlblade bowed. That, in its own small way, was a relief. He had more work to do before even his own mind was settled, and the hiatus would help clarify matters.

‘But there is something else,’ said Ironhelm, moving back towards the cogitators. He unwrapped something from a bundle of linen, and spilled it onto the metal slab-top. Wyrmlblade pushed clear of the cogitator-bank and came over to look. Ironhelm righted the armour fragment from Arvion, showing him the inscription.

‘Tell me what you make of it,’ the Great Wolf said.

Wyrmlblade lowered his face in close, studying it carefully. ‘Adeptus Astartes armour,’ he said.

‘Half right.’

Wyrmlblade frowned, and looked again. He reached out, tracing along the edge of the torn ceramite. As he did so, he noticed the strangeness of the script. When his finger touched the surface there was a faint snap, as if static electricity had discharged.

‘Can it be—’

‘Trust your senses,’ said Ironhelm.

‘*Legiones Astartes.*’

‘And not any Legion.’

Wyrmlblade ran his eyes over the strange letters, and though he could not read

the words, the shapes were unsettlingly familiar. ‘Prospero,’ he breathed. ‘Yet, not as we were told.’

‘They marched in crimson,’ agreed Ironhelm.

‘Then did you see this thing?’ asked Wyrmlade. ‘Alive?’

Ironhelm laughed – a harsh, dark sound. ‘Alive? I know not. It did not speak, but it could still wield a blade.’ He leaned on the slab’s edge. ‘Perhaps these things have existed since the Siege. Perhaps they were created in our own time. If the Inquisition knows of them, they have never told us. Whatever the truth, this much is evident: the Legion still lives. There will be more. We must root them out, slay them where they dwell. These are not just witches – they are the traitors themselves.’

Wyrmlade felt a kernel of sickness in his stomach. He let the fragment fall, and it rolled face-up. ‘Sigils may be counterfeited. Armour may be—’

‘It was *them*, Priest. I was there, as was Frei and my company. Have I not been saying this, arguing myself hoarse in councils of the Stone?’ Ironhelm’s movements became agitated. ‘They will listen now. They will have to, even Oja and his bloodless Twelfth. This is what the wyrd has been showing me.’

Wyrmlade regarded Ironhelm carefully. Too many possibilities were presenting themselves, too quickly. Often enough, he found Ironhelm’s certainties alarming. ‘So why show me this now?’ he asked. ‘The jarls—’

‘—will see reason. They will need to.’ Ironhelm’s mouth flickered in a half-smile. ‘Take it. You hold the keys to our annals. You know all the sagas. Study the script – the key to *him* is there, I am certain of it.’

Wyrmlade almost laughed out loud. ‘You wish to gift this to me? Lord, you know my mind. I have no faith in this hunt, and I have told you so before.’

Ironhelm nodded, undaunted. ‘True, brother, but you are loyal, and you are in thrall to knowledge. You will not pass up this chance.’ He reached out and nudged the fragment across the steel towards Wyrmlade. ‘There are secrets here. Voices, locked in the armour. You can sense it, and you will scry this better than any of us.’

Wyrmlade no longer looked at the armour piece, but he could feel its malign presence pulsing away below his eye-line, like a heaviness in the air.

Ironhelm shot another crooked smile, and clapped him on the arm with his gauntlet. ‘Forget the other task, for now. Do what you can with this. I need answers.’

‘There are no answers here worth knowing.’

‘You know that is not true.’

Then he turned, stalking back out of the fleshmaker's sanctum.

Wyrmlblade watched him go. Then, slowly, his gaze slipped down. The armour fragment lay where it had been left, stark under the glare of the sodium lamps.

It was malignant. Something radiated from it, as if it were hot to the touch, even though Wyrmlblade knew well enough that it was no warmer than his own flesh.

It should be burned, cast into the deepest forge-fire and forgotten about.

Ironhelm clearly cared nothing for being in servitude to mania, but a Priest could not indulge in the same lest the whole Chapter lose its way.

But then he had been given an order, and that counted for something. And, as he looked at the golden script, the faint shapes of a lost world, he felt the old emotions spike again – the desire to *know*, to recover some of what had been lost.

His first movements were awkward, almost grudging. Wyrmlblade extended a hand out to it. Once the first touch had been made, another followed. Soon he was carrying it into the deeper vaults, where the scrolls and the saga-stones were kept. If anything could be made of it, it would be done so there.

As he went, something like loathing burned through him.

It should be burned, he kept repeating, knowing that now it never would be.

They assembled in the Chamber of the Annulus. Seven Wolf Lords were present, the others being on hunts far from Fenris. Rendmar the Iron Priest was there, as was Sturmhart. Of the Priests, only Wyrmlblade was missing. He had not been seen for the two days since Ironhelm's return, and the doors to his chambers had remained barred.

The Wolves stood around the great circle carved into the granite floor. The emblems of the Great Companies were limned by the wavering light of brazier-pans, and thin coils of smoke twisted up into the darkened vaults from ritual torches.

Ironhelm stood at the place of honour, looming over the emblem of the Wolf that Stalks the Stars. The last of his wounds from Arvion had healed, testament to the power of his gene-heritage, and under the cold gaze of the stone wolves around the chamber walls, he looked as lethal as he had ever done.

'So we come to it again,' the Great Wolf said.

His voice was like a grind of metal over coals, animated with the anticipation of what was to come. His yellow eyes glistened, his hands moved restlessly at his side. All the assembled council waited, some warily, others with similar eagerness. Across the void left by the Thirteenth Stone only Arkenjaw's face –

hidden in shadows, one place away from the Great Wolf – gave nothing away.

‘All of you know my mind and my desire,’ said Ironhelm. ‘All of you know the corruption that has been ended by the hunts we have launched, and what I aim to achieve at the end of them.’ He looked darkly to the figure at his side. ‘There are those who speak against this. There are those who hold that our great enemy is dead, or beyond reach, and that his progeny have been driven from the realm of the senses and into the mirror of Hel.’

Arkenjaw did not look up. Sturmhart shifted uneasily.

‘It is only now, following the paths of fate, that I bring you the proof of all I have long believed,’ said Ironhelm. ‘The Fifteenth is restored. I have seen its warriors fight, and have cut their threads with my own blade. They are corrupted more deeply than any traitor I have seen, but they are active, and they are deadly.’

The news was received in silence. None demanded to see the evidence – Ironhelm’s word was enough, and so they absorbed the import, chewing over the implications.

‘This, then, is the time to put aside doubt,’ said Ironhelm. ‘The whole Chapter must now take up the hunt. No greater task falls to us. All our lore, all our power, must be bent towards this, for none other will take up the mantle as we can.’

There was a low murmur of agreement from several points around the circle. Salvrgrim of the Second and Kjarlskar of the Fourth were the most vocal, but there were others too.

‘No task deserves the sending of the Chapter,’ said Arkenjaw, quietly.

All eyes turned to him.

‘Say more, brother,’ invited Ironhelm, a touch sardonically. ‘Why is this the law now, to be unbroken save by your word?’

Arkenjaw looked up, and in the light of the fires his leathery skin looked as ancient as the mountain’s bones. ‘None now live, save the Revered Fallen, who walked with Russ. But I was there as the last embers of the long Scouring still glowed. I remember the wars at the gates of Hel, and the ruin of the old Legions. Even then, when the Eye had not yet been compassed and the traitors still marched under their fell lords, we did not commit all our strength to one enemy. We fought as our brothers do across a hundred worlds, for then battles were many as they are now.’

Arkenjaw’s voice was different to Ironhelm’s. Where the Great Wolf was strident, the Lord of the Twelfth was age-soured and soft-spoken. For all that, the

others heard him with as much silence as they had reserved for his master, and there were those around the circle who had always been his allies.

‘You speak of old wars,’ said Ironhelm.

‘They are *all* old wars,’ retorted Arkenjaw. ‘That is the point. Now, on this day, there are greater threats and greater duties.’

‘Did you not hear me, brother? There is no greater threat.’

‘Only because you wish it.’

The two of them were glaring at one another now, their wills striving across the Stone. Neither moved a muscle, but the aura of threat was palpable, hanging in the acrid air, curling like the smoke-lines.

It was Ironhelm who turned away first, sweeping his gaze back to the council. ‘So you say. Will no others speak?’

‘If the Fifteenth still lives, it will be slain,’ said Salvrgrim of the Second, ever an ally of the Great Wolf. ‘You speak the truth: none save we alone will do it.’

‘But in what numbers?’ asked Vrakkson of the Fifth. ‘How many have been seen?’

‘A handful, no more,’ said Ironhelm. ‘But others will follow. I have consulted the runes, and the aether now screams to me of their presence.’

‘Not by my counsel,’ said Sturmhjart, darkly.

‘Where, then?’ asked Kjarlskar, beside Salvrgrim the keenest to join the hunt.

‘I know not,’ said Ironhelm. ‘But I will do.’ He addressed the chamber again. ‘Have I ever led you awry? Every quest I have launched has blooded the enemy. I will know the place in time, and on this day, in this chamber, I need only know one thing: who will follow me?’

Salvrgrim, Kjarlskar and Oirreisson of the Seventh immediately pledged their blades. Vrakkson, Morskarl of the Third, Krakenbane of the Tenth and Arkenjaw remained unmoved. The council was divided down the middle.

Ironhelm smiled cynically, and looked over towards the jarl of the Twelfth. ‘I see you have been busy in my absence.’

Arkenjaw returned a flat look. ‘You may do with your own company what you wish. You may order the Priests and you may sway the others with argument, but we are all Lords of the Fang in this chamber and you may not compel the least of us, not in this.’

Ironhelm’s face twitched, and his hand moved by a finger’s breadth, over to where the blade hung at his belt. ‘That is not the order of this Chapter,’ he snarled, his voice like a snagging tooth through flesh. ‘If I give the command, you will follow it.’

Arkenjaw did not flinch. ‘You are the greatest of us, lord, but you have let this thing turn your mind.’ His dry voice echoed through the chamber. ‘If he lives, *if* he lives, he is laughing now. Every trinket he leaves for you, you pick it up. Every thread you grasp at. If you truly believed he could be found, if you truly wished to spite him and frustrate his purpose, you would put this aside. You would laugh at the Sign of the Eye and you would turn your shoulder to enemies of flesh and blood that even now muster in the dark.’

Ironhelm’s rage was evident now, pulsing under the surface, barely contained by the mask his face assumed. ‘Your crusade!’ he spat. ‘No doubt you would lead it? No doubt the honour would be yours?’

‘No, lord, you would lead. You will always lead. Only in this will I never follow you. I will contest you on it, I will stand against it, and only if the Fang itself falls and the earth of Asaheim is consumed by fire will I relent over it, for it is *folly*.’

At that, a deadly silence fell across the chamber. The braziers themselves seemed to burn lower, as if the coals were brushed by a chill air from beyond the mountain. Ironhelm looked as if the rage within him would spill over, his fists clenched tight, and the veins on his knotted neck jutted like wires from the skin.

Slowly, very slowly, he relaxed. To witness it was like watching some great engine of war wind down, unhooking weapons of world-ending potency one by one. At the end, he even smiled, though as ever the gesture was crooked and without warmth.

‘You say that he laughs,’ Ironhelm said. ‘Aye, he laughs. He laughs to see us divided, arguing like children. You cannot prevent this, for fate has it written. Even this has been foretold. The time will come. I will break him, just as the greatest of us once broke him.’

In the face of those words, and for the first time, Arkenjaw gave away the slightest shade of doubt. Ironhelm seemed almost as he had been in the past, before the Eye-cults had driven all else from his mind and all had looked to him for the renewal of glory on Fenris.

But the Great Wolf’s shoulders had relaxed and the light had drained from his eyes.

‘Not this day, then,’ he said, wryly. ‘I called for counsel and have been given it.’

He gazed into the heart of the Annulus, where the light of the braziers mingled.

‘Let no one say that I have forgotten to heed warning,’ he said. ‘It changes nothing – the Chapter will one day meet this threat. It will be compelled to.’

Then he gave a final smile, resigned, knowing and cold.
'But not this day.'

After the council came the storms. They came in hard, propelled by driving gales from the east. Soon the mountain was surrounded by black-hearted squalls, throwing down sleet and snow in droves that battered the rock pinnacles and ripped pines from their roots.

The impact was so severe that it prevented two Great Companies – Morskarl's and Vrakk's – from taking ship for a whole diurnal cycle, after which their orbital lifters had to fight furiously against the continent-spanning vortex before clearing the atmosphere.

Inside the heart of the fortress, only faint echoes of elemental violence penetrated to the tunnels. Thralls hurried along the ice-cold passageways just as they always did, inured to the piercing chill. The forges worked, the anvils felt the bite of the hammer, the refectories steamed with endless processions of broths and bloody meat-joints.

Throughout it all, the doors to Wyrmlade's sanctum remained barred. No news passed from within, and even the Priesthood's thralls did not dare to ask for tidings.

The doors finally slammed open the night of the sixth day since Ironhelm's return from Arvion. Wyrmlade, looking like he had neither eaten nor slept since taking on his task, strode out into the tunnels and hurried up the Great Wolf's tower without a word.

He found Ironhelm engaged in what Ironhelm was nearly always engaged in – scrying the wyrd. The Chapter Master of the Wolves stood in a circular chamber, his hands bloody from entrails, staring out at the boiling heavens. His chamber's walls opened out to the extreme edge of the mountain, and sleet swirled in through narrow windows.

Wyrmlade closed the heavy door behind him, sealing them in.

'Like grains of sand,' said Ironhelm, broodingly, his gaze still fixed on the open window. The hour was near the nadir of Fenris's nocturnal period, and the moonless dark was almost perfect.

Wyrmlade raised an eyebrow. 'You are scouring for worlds,' he said. 'There are many to choose from.'

Ironhelm turned. His face was streaked with lines of blood, and looked nightmarish in the light of half-burned torches. 'I find nothing,' he said. 'You, I hope, have had success.'

Wyrmlblade unwrapped the armour fragment, cleared a space on the stone slab before him from the remains of carcasses, and placed it on the top.

‘I tried to read the script,’ the Priest said, wearily. ‘I consulted every lexicon in our possession, but I failed. They were ever the wordsmiths – I cannot match them in that.’

Ironhelm nodded. Frei had said the same. Unless they captured one alive, they would never understand what had been written. And, of course, if all were like the mute warriors on Arvion, even taking prisoners would not help them.

‘Then the runes will guide,’ the Great Wolf said.

‘They may not need to.’ Wyrmlblade righted the gorget-fragment, angling it towards the light. ‘Look here – what do you see?’

Ironhelm found himself looking at the portion Frei had picked out earlier. ‘XVIII-XV,’ he said. ‘The Fellowship designation.’

‘I assumed that too.’ Wyrmlblade shook his head fractionally. ‘It wasted much time. Look closer.’

Ironhelm narrowed his eyes. Nothing changed. The marks terminated amid a blur of scorch-damage. ‘Priest, I am not in the mood for riddles.’

Wyrmlblade moved his finger towards the end of the sequence. ‘We do not know much of the old Legions,’ he said. ‘But I asked myself this: does any Chapter keep their squad markings in this location? Do they not belong on the pauldron? And there is also this: every other mark on this piece is in Prosperine script. Only this is in Gothic. Would not the Thousand Sons mark out their divisions in their own tongue?’

Ironhelm listened closely, saying nothing, looking at the marks with greater attention.

‘I put this portion under an ocular augments,’ said Wyrmlblade. ‘Blast damage obscures the end of the figures. The marking, in full, is XVIII-XVII.’

‘Twenty-eight, seventeen. What does that signify?’

‘In terms of the Legion, nothing I could uncover. They had a mania for numerology, but this sequence does not tally with any of their known obsessions. And remember – this mark alone uses Gothic type. That is the important factor.’ Wyrmlblade let the gorget fall to the stone again, and straightened up. ‘It is an Imperial mark, not a Legion one. It does not denote a unit. It denotes a campaign.’

As soon as the words left Wyrmlblade’s mouth, Ironhelm saw the truth in them. ‘A record of victory.’

‘A great one, or they would not have made it. But that still leaves much to do.’

The Thousand Sons fought in hundreds of engagements. We do not have the records of many – that knowledge is either on Terra or is lost.’ Wyrmlade looked at Ironhelm, a strange expression on his age-withered face. ‘Except, that is, for those we fought in together. No more than a handful – even though our masters were never allies, they did exist. I found names in the records, some now indecipherable, some probably errors, some – a handful – that were corroborated.’

Ironhelm wore a hungry expression then. With the blood on his face, the stink of it in the air, he looked like a baresark. ‘You tell this like a skjald, brother. Do you have a name?’

‘XVIII is the reference for a war-fleet of the Great Crusade, one that the Thousand Sons were a part of. The second number is a planetary reference, one that the fleet encountered as part of a compliance mission. The name was illegible in the archives, as was the position data, but we retain transcribed interpretations of astropath visions from that era. It seems that our Legions fought together on this world – the Wolves and the Thousand Sons, united for a time.’

Ironhelm let slip a hiss of exasperation. ‘The *name*.’

‘Heliosa,’ said Wyrmlade. ‘Known then as Ark Reach Secundus.’

Ironhelm frowned. ‘I do not know it.’

‘You would not. It appears in no current records. If it was part of the Imperium during the Crusade, it did not remain so after the war. It has been hidden, lost in the void, perhaps by oversight, perhaps not. I have the coordinates, though. They can still be used. The world can be found.’

Ironhelm gripped the side of the augury table, evidently trying not to grasp too greedily at the chance. ‘But what of it?’ he murmured. ‘We no longer dwell on the worlds long conquered.’

‘Perhaps so,’ agreed Wyrmlade. ‘Perhaps this is a dead world, or maybe a teeming hive. You have launched hunts on flimsier pretexts. But consider this: we know that of old the Fifteenth Legion marched in the crimson of their primarch. Now they have changed their colours, but still they record the old campaign number on the new armour. Some scribe has seen fit to retain the old marks. It may mean something, it may not. In any event, the world Twenty-Eight Seventeen has some significance for them.’

Ironhelm picked up the fragment and held it high, turning and studying it. ‘Oja would say this was intentionally placed for us to find,’ he mused. ‘He would call me a fool to chase it down.’

‘He would be right, lord.’ Wyrmlade crossed his arms. ‘I did what you asked. I made what sense of it I could, I told you the truth, but I will do no more for you.’

Ironhelm glanced up at him. ‘You would support his own crusade instead, then?’

‘Neither. I have my own work. For that, I still require the word of command.’

Preparation of the therapies. Then living subjects. Aspirants.

Ironhelm said nothing. He placed the armour fragment down, and moved back towards the window. Outside, the gales had not let up. Few worlds had storms like Fenris, and the deep howl of the winds was immense. The Great Wolf stood before them, clasping his hands behind his back, lost in thought.

Wyrmlade waited for him. The air, still bitter from spilled animal blood, hung thick between them.

‘I cannot go back to my brothers with this,’ said Ironhelm at last. ‘Not yet. They will see it, in the end, but not now.’ He put out a hand and leaned against the stone sill. In that moment, for all his massive bulk, his imposing frame, his killer’s poise, he looked utterly weary, as if everything, even the quest that drove him onwards and defined his every action, had become hateful to him. ‘Of course these things are left to be discovered. But what then? Do I leave them be, like a coward fearful of what deaths may come of it? I would deserve my nightmares then.’ He snorted a bitter laugh. ‘And he sends me plenty.’

‘Then put it aside,’ urged Wyrmlade. ‘Leave it alone. Know the truth of the trap set to snare you and withdraw your neck before it closes.’

Ironhelm made a strange sound. Only after a few moments did Wyrmlade realise that it was a throttled chuckle.

The Great Wolf sighed, and rolled his shoulders stiffly. ‘Put it aside,’ he murmured. ‘Leave it alone.’ He turned back to the Wolf Priest. ‘Do you think I fear death? Do you think any of my jarls do?’

Wyrmlade didn’t answer – he didn’t need to.

‘If it damns my soul,’ Ironhelm said, ‘if it sends me into the coldest pit of Hel, I care not. I know what they say – this is for glory. This is to rekindle the promise I showed.’ He chortled again, just as throatily. ‘They only think that because they cannot know. I have been shown things, I have seen things...’

He shook his head, as if giving up on the idea of ever explaining. Wyrmlade moved to speak, but Ironhelm cut him off with a raised hand.

‘Suppose I said to you of your quest: leave it alone, put it aside. Would you do it?’

Wyrmlade hesitated. His face betrayed a brief crisis of indecision.

‘I know you, Thar,’ said Ironhelm. ‘My order would hold you for a time, but if you willed it, if your spirit burned for it hard enough, you would find a way. That is how we are built, you and I. We are slaves to greater masters – the old oaths, the need to extract the last blood from the corpse of the past.’

Wyrmlblade eyed him warily. ‘Then what are you saying?’

‘Only this: I give you sanction. I release you to your great work. You know too much now. You cannot let it slide from your grasp, even if you wished it.’

Wyrmlblade looked as if he would protest, but then he relented. His eyes narrowed, his chin lifted. ‘You speak the truth,’ he said. ‘It will be done, then. It will be done well and it will be seen to completion.’

Ironhelm laughed – a savage bark. ‘Of course it will – I would not trust it to any shaman or trickster. But you see why I tell you this now.’

Wyrmlblade nodded, resigned. ‘I will still not support it, not in the council.’

‘The council. Aye, there are strong voices there, ones blinded by their wisdom. It matters not. I am master of my company, and there are others who will follow.’ Ironhelm glanced back at the empty window, at the maelstrom outside. A mortal would have shrunk from that temporal violence, but he seemed ready to leap into the heart of it, to become a part of it. ‘Give me the coordinates. That is the last I shall ask of you in this.’

Even then, despite all that had been said, despite his own voluntary bringing of the knowledge to the Great Wolf’s chambers, Wyrmlblade pulled back. His gaze hovered for a moment on the armour fragment, gazing at it with something like loathing.

He might have been able to leave without imparting any more. Alone of all the denizens of the Fang, a Wolf Priest could defy the order of a Lord of the Annulus and remain inviolate.

But there was something greater compelling him now – a shared trust, a conspiracy of knowledge. He shook his grizzled head, dryly amused at where he found himself.

‘They will be with you by dawn,’ Wyrmlblade said. ‘Then I will bar my doors and return to my own blasphemies. You will break your neck on this, but perhaps, just perhaps, you will break another on the way.’

‘Count on it,’ said Ironhelm.

Wyrmlblade reached for the fragment. ‘Hunt well, then, jarl,’ he said, taking it up. ‘Spring the trap. And when they come for you, as they will, make them choke on the bait.’

Arkenjaw ran hard, his armoured boots cracking against the ice-hard stone. Thralls pressed themselves back against the tunnel walls, scattered from his path like prey animals before the charge of an apex blackmane. For all his age, the old jarl still charged as he had done in his prime: experience had only hardened his sinews, not weakened them.

By the time he had reached the Rune Priest's door, his skin was lathered in sweat. He hammered on the metal, and the bolts released.

Inside, Sturmhart was being drilled into his armour by an attendant swarm of kaerl attendants. Beyond his huge bulk, the long skull-topped staff was being hoisted from its rack by more thralls, followed by other, less arcane, weapons.

At the sight of Arkenjaw's fury, announced by the hard slam of the heavy inner doors, Sturmhart seized the staff, lifting the mighty shaft as if it weighed less than a reed.

'You have heard, then,' Arkenjaw snarled.

'This will not be borne,' said Sturmhart, waiting impatiently for the last of his battleplate to be bolted into place.

'He has taken Kjarlskar.' Arkenjaw balled his fist and cracked it impotently into the stone wall. 'He listens to *nothing!*'

'It is Frei,' said Sturmhart. 'He has been taught some scrying, and now thinks himself equal to the mysteries. You are right, brother – I should have reined them both in.'

Arkenjaw paced to and fro, straining at an invisible leash. The entire Fang was roused, but too late – it took time to gird a Great Company for war. 'How long has he known?'

Sturmhart shook his grey head. 'Wyrmlblade has been hidden for days – he will have had a hand in this. I should break his lair and drag him out into the sunlight.'

'Forget Thar,' muttered Arkenjaw. 'He was not a believer – there is devilry of his own that keeps his bloody fingers busy.' The jarl spat on the ground, his eyes flashing and his skin flushed with mottled fury. 'I warned them *all* of this. If there was any counsel that must be heeded, it was never to leave this place without guard. The greatest fortress needs its sentinels, and if we leave it empty we do not deserve it.'

The last of Sturmhart's armour-plates locked into place, and he shook off the attentions of the thralls. Together, the two lords strode out from the chamber. Ahead of them, up in the Valgard, there came the sound of more running, of blast-doors clanging, of klaxons echoing.

‘Morskarl and Vrakkson are too far away to be recalled, as are those who were already hunting,’ said Sturmhart. ‘Krakenbane would come, but the standing orders—’

‘—are there for a reason,’ snapped Arkenjaw, pushing the pace. ‘He and Oirreisson must stay. Their companies are battle-wounded, their ships in refit. In any case, there must be *two* companies on the walls. No less, *ever*. He knew this. He knew all this, and he cares not.’

‘He was in good spirits,’ said Sturmhart. ‘I should have guessed the reason for the change.’

They rose through the levels quickly. Other packs were running ahead of them, arrayed hurriedly for war. All of them bore the sigil of the Twelfth Company, and were marshalled by the Guard. Arkenjaw could hear the roared commands of Rossek, of Skrieiya, even of Greyloc.

‘*Bloodmane* is prepared in orbit,’ said Arkenjaw. ‘It will carry the company, and those of your priesthood you need.’

‘Myself alone,’ said Sturmhart. ‘But tell me – how did you learn his trail?’

Arkenjaw smiled grimly. ‘I set my shadow on him. Vaer Greyloc has the coordinates, and for that he will be honoured in the annals.’

‘The name of the world?’

‘I know not. All I have is a location – that will be enough.’

They reached the hangars of the Valgard, where all was a ferment of activity. Lifters were already squatting on the hangar, dozens of them, sending gouts of steam into the frigid air. The atmosphere of the ice world was visible at the open end of the cavernous chamber, steel-grey and wracked with storms. Arkenjaw’s packs were clanking up the ramps into the crew-holds, mag-locking their blades in place and adjusting the fit of their helms.

On the edge of the rockcrete apron, Sturmhart halted. ‘And what, brother, when we catch him? You think you can bring him back?’

Arkenjaw laughed. ‘*Skítja*, no. He will take no command from me, and I am not fool enough to try.’ He looked out at the massed strength of his company, the one he had commanded for centuries. It was less than two-thirds the size of Ironhelm’s, and did not have nearly the same prestige. For all that, every warrior was true Fenris-born – a master of the murder-make, and they could hold their own. ‘I harbour no hate for Harek,’ he said. ‘He is as far above me as Russ was above us all, if only he could be made to see this sickness for what it is.’

He started walking again, out across the hangar floor to where the first lifter was ramping up its engines up for takeoff.

‘This is not about sanction,’ he said. ‘If we reach him, though, it may yet be about salvation.’



IV

Ironhelm's battle-group broke the veil, tearing into real space like a dagger's cut. Seconds after the warp-drives shuddered silent, the plasma engines roared up to full burn, hurling six starships, one line battleship and three escorts, towards the distant sun. As they went, void-shields were raised and gun-lines run out ready for immediate assault.

In the vanguard was *Russvangum*, the greatest of the warships left to the Chapter and as old as the foundations of the Imperium. Kjarlskar, Frei and Ironhelm were on the command bridge, surrounded by the company's honour guard and kaerls, when Ark Reach Secundus swam into range of the forward augurs. Streams of raw data surged through the sensor intakes, and picters all across the bridge's throne dais flickered into life.

'What do you see?' asked Ironhelm, speaking to Frei. As ever, the Rune Priest acted as the Great Wolf's senses, able to detect the ripples and eddies in the skin of the warp before they became apparent to mortal awareness.

The Rune Priest's pale skin pricked with droplets of sweat, even though the bridge was as cold as that of any Fenrisian ship. 'By Russ,' he breathed, his eyes screwed up in concentration. 'It is... burning.'

More picters filled with visual imagery, flanked by readings across all the sensorium spectra. No detailed annals remained to say what the world had looked like when the Space Wolves, Thousand Sons and Word Bearers had conquered it in the name of Unity, but it was hard to imagine that it had looked then as it looked now.

Ark Reach's skies were seething with pink, purple and blue energies. Vast

cloudbanks tore and jostled across a violent atmosphere, forever moving, forever changing. Pale white lightning slipped from hemisphere to hemisphere, flickering in tiny spurs across the face of a multi-hued troposphere. The entire orb glowed in the void like light refracted through a jewel.

‘Surface scan,’ ordered Ironhelm.

‘Initial readings,’ reported Leofgar, Master of the Sensorium. ‘The world is barren, cleared of life, save for one location.’

‘Show me.’

The closest picter lenses hissed with static, then clarified to show a landscape grid. Most of the view was composed of what looked like a turbulent ocean, though the upper section was dominated by the crown of a rocky landscape. There was nothing in between those two extreme terrains – open seas or sheer cliff-faces, the latter rising up to astonishing heights from such precarious foundations.

The larger part of the exposed rock terrain was empty, devoid of vegetation or settlement. The rocks were streaked with violent colours just as the sky was, giving the impression of some vast geode. One corner, where the highest peaks overlooked the crashing surf, emitted energy signatures – huge amounts, comparable to a whole starship formation, all confined to the minuscule scrap of land. The light from that sector was a neon blaze, testing the limits of picter reproduction. Even under the thick cloud cover the incandescence could be made out, throbbing like a beacon in the deep void.

‘Clear readings?’ demanded Kjarlskar, leaning closer to the banks of images.

‘Nothing beyond what you see,’ reported Leofgar. ‘Sensors cannot pierce the energy field around that pinnacle.’

‘Frei,’ said Ironhelm. ‘Maleficarum?’

‘Oh yes,’ answered the Rune Priest, bleakly. ‘Of a depth I have not witnessed. Perhaps if Sturmhart were—’

‘He is not, and you know well enough why,’ snapped Ironhelm, switching to the tactical viewers and watching the escorts hit their geostationary watch-points. *Russvangum* itself surged into place above the energy-pinnacle and took up high orbital anchor, its every weapon trained down at the cliffs below. ‘The journey has not been wasted – that is the place we seek.’

Kjarlskar was already reaching for his helm. ‘A city,’ the Wolf Lord observed, watching the images tighten as the augurs found their range. ‘Of a kind.’

There were buildings there, but they were of strange and impossible shapes. Many looked like vast pieces of shrapnel, caught in mid-explosion and locked in

place. Others were wider at the top than the bottom, suspended in defiance of gravity on tiny foundations. Everything shimmered in a thick haze of light, winking and flashing like scattered lenses.

‘But it is real?’ asked Ironhelm, his voice giving away his desperation for it to be something solid, something he could grasp at. ‘This is not just illusion?’

‘As real as you are,’ said Frei. ‘But there is sorcery – the place swims with it.’

‘So we expected.’ Ironhelm’s voice was firm now, growling, catching with the animal depths that made his roars shake the battlefield. ‘We will drop into its heart and tear it out.’

He moved off, going with Kjarlskar to the blast doors at the rear of the command sanctum. Behind him, the mortal crew scurried to take up tactical positions, slotting in as the Wolves left their stations to join the assault below.

All across the bridge, strategos began to calculate the ingress angles, pinpointing drop pod strikes for rapid link-up on the ground. Thunderhawk flights were coordinated, targeted to offer rapid support when resistance was encountered. While this was done, the Blood Claws were already whooping down in the muster-halls, keying themselves up for the frenzy of killing. The Hunters coolly strapped themselves into restraint cages, while the Long Fangs checked over the heavy guns a final time before committing them to the drop pods.

Two whole Great Companies, bolstered by Rune Priests and mechanised cover from Rendmar’s foundries, launched together on the single target, all at once. It was a formidable strike force.

‘The Hand of Russ!’ Ironhelm voxed, speaking over the company-wide channel and addressing every warrior in the joint vanguard. ‘Brothers, fate has led us here, and now it hangs close on your shoulder. This is a damned world, one that deserves what we shall give it. But hope too that greater prey will be caught, the one whose neck I have vowed to sever. Pray that our ancient enemy is in that city of light, and pray that his fell magick girds him well, for now *we* are on his heels!’

Massed roars came back over the comm-feed, thick with static and fury. As he spoke, Ironhelm neared his own shackled drop pod – it stood open to receive him and Trask’s honour guard, its innards glowing red like the cut-up corpse of a scrying beast. Above the pod hung the massive release claw, below it the long shaft down to *Russvangum*’s under-hull, where even now the void-doors would be priming to unlock.

‘So go with all fury, and let hunger lead your blades to prey!’

Then he was in, clamping himself into the adamantium casket just as he had done a thousand times. His comm-channel rang with the echo of the shouting warriors, until the launch strobes began to whirl and the vox cut dead.

Trask was opposite him, as always. The Wolf Guard acknowledged his master with a bow, just as the outer pod sealed tight and the release claw mechanism clanked into steaming life.

‘Is this the one, then?’ Trask asked, his voice betraying no scepticism, only hope.

Then the claw released, sending the drop pod plummeting down the shaft. Ironhelm laughed wildly, relishing as he always did the first moment of sheer physical dislocation. Soon the true fall would begin – the plunge through the void, followed by the fiery run of the atmosphere before the bone-jarring crack of terrestrial impact.

‘May it be so, brother,’ Ironhelm cried back, fervently. ‘By Russ, may it be so!’

Only once they were down did the scale of Ark Reach Secundus’s unique landscape become truly apparent. The cliffs were not just huge, they were gargantuan. Sheer and near-perfectly vertical, they shot down from the highest rock towers to the foaming shoreline. Whole cloud formations passed under the summits of those clustered towers, buoyed by warm airs wafted up from the churning ocean below.

The drop pods hit the summit in a wave of earth-cracking impacts. Even before the clamshell doors had smacked down, the Thunderhawks were wheeling among them and hovering over the dropsites like vultures over carrion.

The Wolves burst from their teardrop caskets, slaving for an enemy to engage with. Ironhelm’s force had come down to the city’s east, up where the land was highest and the rock-bridges between towers most slender. Kjarlskar was to the south, from where his company had to clamber up a steep series of switchbacks to gain the city’s lower edge. To the west and the north, beyond the narrow city’s spires and pyramids, was nothing but the gulf – a swirling miasma swelling with vapour over the seas below.

As the Wolves ran, the air screamed. Every gust of wind shrieked like a thousand voices, ripped from their authors’ throats and set loose on to the gale. Amid the screams were laughs and manic yells, whole fractured choirs of demented rage. The Wolves largely ignored them, racing across the rock-plates towards the first of the teetering buildings. Some roared back with war-cries of their own – curses from the storm-seas of Fenris, strangely at home amid the

skirling atmosphere of Ark Reach.

Ironhelm's pack was first to hit the perimeter, pushing under the shadow of the distorted edifices and making for the city's heart. Above them the clouds ripped and twisted and contorted, glowing violently as if lit from within. Shapes formed – momentary faces, or eyes, or mouths – before rippling away before the outline could be made out.

In Ironhelm's wake, the attacking formations firmed up. Sundered packs joined together as they reached the straggle of outer structures, shepherded by low runs from the Thunderhawks. Behind them, orbital lifters brought down the last of the Chapter's armoury: Predator tanks, Land Raiders and tracked artillery pieces.

Amid all of that, no enemy was sighted. The world howled at them, but the streets were empty and the avenues echoed. A fine dust coated everything – dove-grey and churned by the winds – and the Wolves became coated by it as they loped. The residue sparkled, catching the light of the glowing clouds, making the invaders glisten like an army of the diamond-clad.

Ironhelm did not push onwards heedlessly. Though he and his Guard kept up the pace, packs peeled off from the main charge to secure the ground won. Strategic points were locked down and ranged weapons set up. Augur-sweeps were run back and forth across the echoing ground, searching for something – anything – to tackle.

Soon a central cluster of spires loomed before them – a soaring collection of sheer needles, each one glass-smooth and illuminated from within by the dance of spectral aurorae. The screaming intensified, becoming deafening even over the Wolves' helm-compensators, though the faces of the towers themselves gazed down on them blankly, devoid of life and movement. They seemed then like empty monuments to the race that had built them, builders whose name had been erased from history.

Finally, Ironhelm drew to a halt. Three packs of Hunters fanned out ahead of him, running hard and keeping low. The vanguard had reached a circular open space, bordered on the far face by the first of the high needles. The ground was now ankle-thick with the dust, which skipped in the wind, whipping up into dunes and serpentine figures.

Ahead of Ironhelm the city's landscape rose sharply. Tight-knit alleyways and thoroughfares cut through a thicket of ever-higher edifices, all built atop the rising rock-towers. Drops opened up – crevasses between the greater spires, some plunging down seemingly all the way to the foam below. The Wolves were running out of solid land, and if they pushed on much further they would reach

the edge of the cliff itself.

‘You sensed them,’ snarled Ironhelm, turning on Frei. ‘Where are they?’

The Rune Priest had kept pace with his master, together with Trask and the company’s Wolf Guard. Others of his order ran with the rest of the packs, bolstering them against the sorcery they knew they would encounter.

‘The place was teeming,’ said Frei, sounding strangely disorientated. Bone-totems clattered against his breastplate, swung by the wind. ‘Teeming.’

Ironhelm flexed his Terminator gauntlets. ‘Not any more.’

‘No, these are the souls,’ Frei murmured, gesturing to the screams that ran through the air like wildfire. ‘These are the ones whose light was cut from the universe. They hate us. The hate is what keeps them alive.’

Ironhelm turned away in disgust. The screams meant nothing to him – they could not be hurt, and they could not hurt him. ‘The light, then. Where is it coming from?’

Trask pointed up ahead, past the immediate clusters of needles and to where the city’s expanse ran up to the cliff-edge. One final rock tower stood isolated from the rest, cut off by a precipitous chasm bridged by a single causeway. Atop that tower stood a wide plaza, followed by the ruins of a great pyramid, its sides mottled with verdigris and its gaping roof home to the snap and dance of lightning.

‘If the city once had a heart,’ Trask said, ‘that is it.’

Ironhelm nodded. ‘So be it. We burn it.’

He began to move off. As he did so, something in the yammering air suddenly changed. The screams picked up in pitch, and a noise like a great ceremonial gong echoed across the roofs of the misshapen city.

The dust underfoot stirred, shaken into new patterns. Flagstones in the circular courtyard erupted, pushing up like geysers. The glass edges of the buildings cracked, spilling clusters of lightning across the ground like thrown sparks from an anvil. Every facet of the crystal city turned in on itself, rearranging, reconfiguring, falling in and thrusting out. Beams of red light shot out from a thousand newly exposed emitters. Each beam found its terminus in an answering lens array, and a single image, repeated over and over, blazed out from the needles, pyramids, shards and domes.

There was the Eye, in its every form and from every world the Wolves had ever laid low. It glared at them, baleful, mournful, spiteful, expectant.

And yet Ironhelm hardly saw those emblems, nor did any of his army, for the dust had stirred up more than shafts of light. Clambering out of the shifting soils,

their armour gleaming just as in the hour when it had been recast by forbidden spells, Rubric Marines emerged. Moving as silently as they had done on Arvion, they pulled themselves clear of the shattered land, took up blades and activated ancient energy packs. Old icons were displayed as the dust slipped from the curve of pauldrons, ones that the universe had long forgotten to fear – the symbols of the corvidae, the athanaeans, the raptora and the pavoni.

Vast arcs of lightning, now cycling with all the colours of the spectrum, lashed down from the topmost pyramid. The storm raged more fiercely, whipped into cascades of turbulence by the racing winds.

For once, Ironhelm had no words. The Rubric Marines were there in hundreds, not the mere handful they had been on the forge world, all ranked in silent squads and silent companies. Aether-strands played across them, licking at the battleplate and worming across their ornate armour decoration.

Then, with no audible command, they began to move, first haltingly, then with all the fluidity of their old flesh-and-blood selves.

It was Frei who broke the vice of shock. He raised his staff, and caused the shaft to burn fiercely with the witch-light of Fenris.

‘*Fenryrs Hjolda!*’ he cried, swinging the skull-tip as wildly as a mace.

That released the flood. The Wolves, now given an enemy, charged as one, racing to engage with the automata that had risen from every sector of the storm-racked city. Claps of arcane thunder pealed out, followed by hammering rain that bounced and sprayed from the earth.

And amid it all, his voice greater even than the screams of the cursed air, Harek Ironhelm charged into battle and brought his blade among the enemy at last.

Bloodmane was a fast ship – a strike cruiser built for rapid response. It had only been hours behind Ironhelm from the start, and Arkenjaw had flayed the warp-drives to make up time. By the time the Navigator brought them out of the warp he was bleeding from his mortal eyes and his hands were shaking uncontrollably.

The ship burned hot across the Ark Reach Secundus, immediately locking on to *Russvangum*’s ident and laying in a pursuit trajectory. Even before they reached the planet, Arkenjaw’s company was battle-arrayed and ready for the drop. Down in the bowels of the strike cruiser, ranks of pods were hoisted into their dispatch-shafts, each one filled with packs of warriors eager for the hunt to commence.

The jarl himself, flanked by Sturmhjart, Rossek, Greyloc and others of the Wolf Guard, remained on the bridge until the last moment.

‘He’s already made planetfall,’ said Arkenjaw, shaking his head in disbelief. ‘Just went straight in, right for the throat.’

‘Heavy fighting all across the impact sites,’ reported Greyloc, studying the incoming augur-feeds. ‘They are outnumbered. More signals emerging all the time – where are they coming from?’

Arkenjaw reached for an angled picter lens and pulled it towards him, summoning up tactical data from the battlefield far below. Runes denoting Ironhelm’s and Kjarlskar’s deployments glowed across the schematic, flickering as positions were updated.

‘He made no attempt,’ murmured Arkenjaw. ‘No attempt to avoid encirclement.’

The tactical display exposed the full recklessness of the charge. Ironhelm’s company had broken into the heart of the city from the east and had driven almost up to the very centre. Kjarlskar’s forces were further behind, bogged down across the southern edges. The two companies had not yet joined up, and were now separated by enemy formations, who were able to use their greater numbers to outflank both invading spearheads.

Arkenjaw ran the numbers, checking them against the rate that traitor forces were appearing across the city’s expanse. Even the addition of his own company would not match up the odds, and as time went on the disparity would grow. There were many hundreds of enemy rune-signals already, and with every second another few more blinked into life.

‘He has outpaced Kjarlskar,’ observed Greyloc. ‘He must pull back.’

Arkenjaw snorted. ‘He will never pull back. Kjarlskar must get to *him*. If the companies can link up, this thing can yet be saved.’ The Wolf Lord reached for his helm and pulled it on. All the others did likewise. ‘Take us down ahead of the Fourth Company’s position,’ he ordered. ‘We will break the enemy that stands between them.’

‘There is something strange about those signals,’ said Sturmhjart, his gaze still fixed on the schematics. ‘I sense too little from them, almost as if they weren’t there at all.’

Rossek laughed. ‘They’re there,’ he growled. ‘And if they’re there, they’ll die.’

‘Be wary,’ warned Arkenjaw, turning to address all of them. ‘Ironhelm has roused forces he should have known to leave alone. These are not the rabble we are used to – they are the embers of a Legion, just as we are.’

‘And they are *foul*,’ added Sturmhjart. ‘That at least I can see clear.’

‘Then let us ease their path to oblivion,’ said Arkenjaw, striding off to the drop

pod chambers. ‘It will be a mercy for us both.’

‘For Russ!’ Ironhelm thundered, swinging his frostblade as he had done on Arvion.

The blade bit deep into the torso of the approaching Rubric Marine, cracking the ceramite from side from side. The traitor staggered, but kept its feet. Ironhelm had to hack a second time to shatter the creature’s armour-shell clean open. A snap rang out, the air shuddered, and the automaton finally slumped to the earth, its helm-lenses going dark.

Fighting had now spread to every street leading up to the causeway, and the city’s narrow spaces were clogged with hand-to-hand combat. The Rubric Marines advanced with their eerie lack of fervour, blocking every route in and out of the city sector. Most carried close-combat weapons that crackled with fell energies, but others still bore ranged weaponry, and the skies were scored with the tracks of missile fire. Shells smashed into the overhanging eaves of the crystal buildings, making them totter and bringing some down.

Progress was possible – the Rubric Marines were not invincible – but they were incredibly strong and incredibly dogged. After an hour of solid fighting the Wolves were still pinned back below the approaches to the causeway, unable to break the defensive line of sapphire guardians that barred the path. Ironhelm himself had led two charges up through the tangled streets towards the arched gate, but each one had been repulsed with losses, kicked back down the slope with the rain slamming on their backs and mingling with the blood.

Of all of the Wolves, perhaps Frei fought the hardest. The Rune Priest never ceased crying out ritual curses against the outer dark, his staff singing with raw energy and his pelts flailing. He was convinced that the infantry they faced required the guidance of a master sorcerer, and so sought it out across the crowded battlefield, desperate to find it and put it to the test.

For the rest, there was just the contest of arms, and with every passing hour Ironhelm’s frustration at not forcing the passage of the causeway swelled further.

‘One more charge!’ he roared, driving the mute enemy before him. ‘This shall crack their spine. To me! To me!’

His Wolf Guard came with him, close-ranked, loosing bolters and lashing out with axes and spears. The Grey Hunters pushed out to the left flank, trying to open up another front for the enemy, while the energy of the Blood Claws was spent in the centre. Ironhelm had long since called up all the artillery of the company, which meant surrendering swathes of territory and ceding ground at

their backs. However, it was clear that nothing else would suffice to break the deadlock. The armour was late to arrive and no comm-signal had got through. The infantry slogged on alone, unable to shatter the stalemate.

A Rubric Marine leapt in front of him, this one carrying a serpent-headed staff. Ironhelm jabbed his frostblade across hard, catching the stave on its disruptor-snarling edge. The Rubric Marine pushed back, aiming to drive him off-balance. Ironhelm released the pressure, causing the enemy to stumble by a fraction. Trusting to his more powerful armour, he let the staff find its mark before whipping the frostblade back up, catching the enemy in its stomach. The killing edge burned in deep, tearing through cables and plating, before finally slipping through to the void within.

‘And back to Hel,’ snarled Ironhelm, shoving the blade upwards and breaking the Rubric Marine in two. Once again, the air shook and an actinic crack radiated out from the stricken corpse. Then it fell, toppling emptily to the dusty earth and rolling still.

The fighting did not let up – others took the place of the fallen, just as implacable, just as hard to put down. Ironhelm heard screams of agony among the battle cries, and knew the sounds of death among his own. His battle-brothers were dying, more than he would have dreamed possible, and still the objective remained untaken.

‘Kjarlskar,’ voxed Trask to him, breathlessly. The Wolf Guard was fighting just metres away, locked in a brutal hand-to-hand struggle. ‘He is not closing. Fall back?’

Ironhelm looked up towards the final tower of rock. The broken pyramid was tantalisingly close. ‘Not again,’ he rasped, barrelling into another Rubric Marine and trading lightning-swift blows. ‘Push on.’

Trask made no acknowledgement, which sent its own message. Every metre of ground was being won at terrible cost. The Wolves were fighting as they had always done – with full commitment, hurling themselves into the faces of the enemy, aiming to overwhelm with the psychological shock just as much as the physical threat. Here, though, that weapon was denied them. The enemy seemed to feel nothing, not even anger, and the howls of the planet’s wrath outmatched even the most strident roars of the Fenryka.

Ironhelm was rocked back, bludgeoned by a sickening blow to the throat by his foe’s longsword. He withdrew, parrying hard, feeling his hearts labouring. Trask might have been right. They were making no headway. Soon what little tactical cohesion they possessed would be lost, and in a prolonged melee there was no

guarantee they would endure for long. Falling back was an option – to rendezvous with Kjarlskar, rally and form a proper defence before considering how to take on the causeway guardians.

Slowly, faced with the worsening odds ahead, Ironhelm grudgingly saw the necessity of it. Another hour of this, and there would be little left to rendezvous with.

Then a massive *boom* rocked the courtyard, and the air was lit by a sharp flare of white. Another blast followed, then another. Two enemy positions up the slope disappeared in whirling explosions as massive shells crashed into their targets.

Rendmar's armour had arrived at last – two Predators rolled into the courtyard's eastern rim, and the tell-tale grind of Land Raider engines was not far behind. With them came the last of the Long Fangs, hauling their heavy weapons and planting their boots for more ranged firing.

Ironhelm laughed. His momentary doubt left him, and he cut down the warrior before him with four brutal down-swipes, making sure to sever the neck cleanly before treading the empty cadaver into the dust. The Predators loosed again, and a wave of burgeoning fire erupted amid the ranks of sapphire infantry ahead.

Even then, they gave no reaction. Their battle-brothers were broken apart, their detachments torn open, but those in the front rank still fought on as before, with no sign that they had even registered the carnage at their backs.

'This is the moment!' bellowed Ironhelm, forcing his voice to rise above the tumult. Kjarlskar would have to do what he could – there was no time to postpone the assault on the summit. With the armour in place, it could be done. It *would* be done. 'To me, *vlka fenryka!* To the ending of all worlds! To the gates of death!'

They roared back, buoyed by the firepower now streaking overhead in their support. The Thunderhawks, busy strafing the Rubric Marines between the two companies, would be brought up too, and they were capable of delivering even more devastation.

Ironhelm fixed his eyes on the broken pyramid and grinned.

'Nothing else matters,' he snarled, then charged back into the inferno ahead.

Kjarlskar had reached a high position less than a kilometre south of the city's heart, and had drawn up all his forces around it. Two Thunderhawks continued strafing runs to the north of them, thinning out the approaching enemy vanguard, but even with that support they were hard pressed. Rubric Marines were now

coming at them from every side, alternating bolter-volleys with sudden charges of a speed that belied their ponderous appearance. Far from forcing a wedge northwards in order to join up with Ironhelm's forward positions, it was all the jarl of the Fourth could do to keep his company from being driven back.

'Fenrys!' he cried, taking up position as far up as he could and causing the company standard to be planted at the highest point. The heavy banner, depicting the Stormwolf of legend, ripped wildly in the driving rain.

He arrayed his troops as best he could, keeping the Hunters around the perimeter and forming the Claws into counter-attack spearheads. Far to the north he could see huge flashes as Ironhelm fought on alone.

Svart lumbered up to him, his armour drenched in plasma-scorched blood. The Wolf Guard had taken a horrific wound to his right arm, and now carried his axe in the left. 'You must call him back,' he said, his voice grim. 'This is not warfare, this is a brawl, and we are losing it.'

Kjarlskar shared the sentiment. Ironhelm had pushed on too far and too fast. They should have been assaulting the far spires together, with both columns having secured their own ingress routes. Now, with Ironhelm so far ahead, fighting across the city to reach the designated rendezvous points would be costly.

'He will not fall back,' Kjarlskar said. 'Even if I could reach him, he would never heed the message.'

'Then what do you command?'

Kjarlskar looked out across the battlefield. The best course, the one he knew he ought to take, was to withdraw, to shepherd the strength of his company and pull back from the full force of the onslaught. That would leave Ironhelm exposed and far from any possible aid, but then it had been the Great Wolf's fury that had driven him so far out of position.

Kjarlskar smiled grimly. He had made an oath, and that was more sacred to him than every rune-stone in the Fang.

'Muster all that remain of the Guard,' he told Svart, gauging where best to launch the fresh attack. They would have to break out, somehow trying to hit the Rubric Marines before they were able to form an insurmountable barrier. 'This will be bloody, but if we clear the path to him they will be singing our saga for a thousand years.'

Svart bowed and turned away, voxing for his battle-brothers. Just as he did so, the Thunderhawks swung round on their smog-thick columns of downdraft and powered northwards, heading over to where Ironhelm still crashed against the

distant enemy positions.

Kjarlskar's expression hardened. Those assets had been given to him to offset the support Ironhelm had drawn from the land-based armour. Without them, he was even more exposed.

'This will not—' he began, speaking out-loud, when the heavens above him suddenly ripped open amid a corona of flame.

Drop pods slammed down, cracking into the cityscape ahead. Each one was perfectly aimed, sent right into the thickest concentrations of traitors, crushing many under the furnaces of their retro-thrusters. They were steel-grey, rimmed with yellow and black chevrons and bearing the sigils of Arkenjaw's Twelfth Great Company.

One drop pod crashed to earth just below Kjarlskar's position, and immediately burst open in a riot of silver flame. Sturmhart's outraged voice boomed out from the heart of it, rivalling the arcane screams on the air, and the howl of stormwind surged in his wake.

By then Kjarlskar was moving too. 'To me, brothers!' he bellowed, leading the charge down from the heights and into the morass below. The percussive background of bolter fire became colossal, drawn from the weapons of the Space Marines as well as the turrets of the drop pods.

His company answered the summons, and surged down the slope. They hit the first rank of the Rubric Marines, crashing into them like a toppling swell of the grey seas. Caught between Arkenjaw's and Kjarlskar's forces, the sapphire lines wavered, buckled and then broke. The Rubric Marines, those not slain in the first assault, fell back steadily, managing to reap a tally even as they were forced northwards.

By the time Kjarlskar located Arkenjaw, the southern approaches to the city were finally in the hands of the Wolves and its defenders moved northwards in disarray.

'I will not deny it, brother,' said Kjarlskar, leaning on his blade and panting hard. 'That was timely.'

The jarl of the Twelfth glared back at him. Even under his helm, the old lord's anger was palpable.

'You *fool*, Arvek,' he hissed. 'Ironhelm may damn himself with this insanity, but there is no cause for you to be here with him.'

'I swore an oath,' countered Kjarlskar, as if there were no need to say more.

Ahead of them, the joint Wolf Guard packs were carving a trail northwards, hacking and blasting against a regathering wall of solid defence.

‘He has overreached himself this time,’ Arkenjaw said. ‘You can see it now – this place is drenched in sorcery, and his blades will not avail him.’

‘The pyramid is the target.’

‘And what if it is?’ demanded Arkenjaw, exasperated. ‘If we are unable to slay the servants, what chance have we against the master? Here is the only course – we fight to him, we drag him back, we salvage what we can of this Hel-spawned foolery. Then this *never happens again*. Oaths be damned – his nightmares will ruin us all.’

Kjarlskar looked for a moment as if he wished to protest. The tactical situation was still perilous – Arkenjaw had given them a chance to extract themselves, but the balance would turn again soon.

‘So be it,’ said Kjarlskar, readying himself again for battle. ‘We can still reach him.’

Arkenjaw unstrapped his weapon – a long-handled axe – and took his place beside Kjarlskar. The twin Wolf Lords together, cast under skies of madness, their rune-carved armour glinting from the swirling rain, stalked back towards the front.

‘The lifters are now summoned,’ said Arkenjaw grimly. ‘By the Allfather, let us hope they do not come too late.’

Ironhelm charged up the long causeway. He could sense the weight of sorcery concentrated ahead, swelling like a tumour within the pyramid’s open corpse. The winds shrieked down, the elements tearing his pelts from his armour, but still *that* was the greatest horror.

He knew, more certainly than he had ever known anything in his long life of war, that *he* was in there, observing, collecting himself, contemplating the shape of battle. Just as he must have done on Prospero before the end, the Master of Sorcery watched his thralls being slaughtered by the Sons of Fenris, and waited until the very end to show his true form.

The Great Wolf was slaying with abandon now. The last of his tactical awareness was long gone, consumed by the burning need to fight his way to the summit, to take on the presence that had stalked his dreams for more than a mortal lifetime.

‘I *will* break you!’ he cried, and his voice was wild, almost the voice of another. Snatches of comm-bursts snagged at him, voxed from those of his company still within range. He was leaving them behind. Even Trask and Frei – they were too slow, too mired in the grind of conquest. Only he, the heir to Bjorn, the heir

to Russ, had the physical command to shatter the final seal, to reach the pinnacle and enter the sanctum of the most damned.

Ahead of him, vast in the churning storm, loomed golden gates. Their capitals were carved with words he could not read, and the arch was broken. Beyond the gates lay the pyramid itself, still laced with raw fulguration, thrust up into the heavens like a spear shivered into the earth.

He raced on, never losing pace. He could feel the malign presence ahead loosening, shifting, preparing to slink back into whatever realm it had oozed from.

‘You will face me!’ he shouted, bursting through the remnants of the gate and breaking into the great pyramid beyond.

Instantly, as if a great shroud had been lifted, the sounds of carnage stopped. The rain no longer fell, the air no longer screamed. The skies were dark, barred by older clouds that remained static. The dust at his feet was a thick muck, clotted with blood.

He turned and saw the broken gate framing the world he had left. The violet skies were still there, as was the battle, raging as violently without him as it had done with him in it.

He looked back. The interior of the pyramid was vast, a haunt of echoes and deep occlusion. Books were strewn across the floor, whole ranks of them, torn down from the iron cases in which they had been stored. Amid the blood and the dust were long white feathers, like quills, though most were broken and all were trampled.

Ironhelm crept forward, keeping his blade in hand. His footfalls resounded from the high vaults. Above him, the dark skies brooded. He only halted when he reached the centre, where four burned spars angled up towards a shattered apex. No other soul stirred, and the residue of aeons lay about him.

Ironhelm circled warily, sensing enormous power thrumming under the flagstones. It was cold, bitterly cold, but there was no escaping it – something was there with him, watching him, observing every move he made.

‘Show yourself!’ Ironhelm roared, and the words echoed over and over before dying away.

With a cold twinge in his stomach, he guessed the truth. He was too late. The power he sensed was an echo, just as those of his own voice were echoes. The fight had taken too long, they had been forced to cut their way through too many of the silent traitors, and that had given their lord time to withdraw. If the master had once made this world his fortress, he had now abandoned it. There would be

no duel here, not as Ironhelm had dreamed of.

‘I name you *craven!*’ he accused, pointing the tip of his sword towards the pyramid’s crown. ‘I name you Lord of Cowards!’

Then, furious and frustrated, he stalked back the way he had come. For a moment, he doubted whether anything had ever been there at all, but then his eyes ran over the tumbled bookcases, and he saw the final mockeries. Every fallen book had the Eye engraved on its cover. Their titles were the names of worlds – ones he had conquered, ones he had visited on the hunt, ones he had heard tell of in his dreams.

Among the piles of books were the artefacts. He recognised them all – the jewelled dagger from Pravia he had seized from the cult-nests, the broken axe-blade from Daggaegghan which had borne the mark of Prospero. There, impossibly, was the gorget-fragment from Arvion. And there, next to it, was the old man’s cloak. It was as stained with grime as it had been fifty years ago, still stitched roughly from the same multi-coloured scraps of cloth. Now the cowl was empty, and the emaciated body that had filled it on the world with no name had long since gone.

You do not even know what he looks like, but you hear him in the deep of the night, and the voice is enough.

Ironhelm laughed. He pushed back his head, stared up at the darkness, and let slip a cynical mirth. It poured out of him, bitter as gall, rendered empty by his helm’s filters.

He kicked the robes, and they crumbled into ash beneath his boot.

‘All this, then, for nothing?’ Ironhelm demanded, addressing the shadows. ‘You bring me here, you invest in this artifice, for no reward? I am *here!* You want me, you come for me!’

A cold wind sighed through the chamber, stirring the filth that clogged the old stone floor. As the tattered books turned over, their pages rustling, something like a pale whisper picked up strength. The whisper grew until words emerged within it. The voice was like no human voice, but in it could be heard all those he had slain, overlapping, merged, choral.

What makes you think – softly, barely audible – that I brought the Wolves to Heliosa – now dying away, ebbing – for you?

Ironhelm stood rigid, struck by the words.

It had always been about him. It was he who had suffered the dreams, who had sworn the oaths. It was he who had been gifted the strength and the power to bring low the primarch. It was he who the Rune Priests had made prophecy of,

and with whom the fate of the Crimson King had been bound.

Who else could it be?

Then he was running, tearing through the ancient aisles, smashing aside the broken bookcases and making for the gate again. He could see the storm under the archway, still raging, still flared with dire magicks.

And he knew then that he was too far away. He would always be too far away. And whatever happened now, whatever deeds he was destined to accomplish in whatever future he would live to see, the knowledge of that would always be with him.

The lifters came down, their hulls crackling with chain lightning as they forged through the storm. Every atmospheric gunship in the holds of the battleships above had been dispatched, and they flew low, escorting the wide-bellied orbital craft as they came into land.

Pulling an army clear of a planet was far harder than dropping one on it, especially when it was outnumbered and outgunned and fighting hard to stay alive. Arkenjaw and Kjarlskar had crashed their way north towards the causeway in tandem, driving all before them through sheer force of will. Sturmhart had come with them, summoning the full majesty of the storm, wreathed in hurricanes of lashing energy.

It would only be a temporary respite. All they could hope to achieve was to link up with the beleaguered bulk of Ironhelm's company, secure enough of a cordon to allow the lifters to make planetfall, and then stage a fighting retreat while the silent hordes closed in on the narrowing circle.

In defiance of all expectation, they had achieved the first stage. Arkenjaw fought like a jarl of old, the weight of ages falling from his arms as he wielded his axe. Kjarlskar was similarly immense, still in the prime of his warrior's life and as fierce as the ice-rain of his home world. Frei saw them coming, and with the departure of his jarl realised at last the hopelessness of what they were attempting. He pulled the First back from the causeway, and the two battered halves of the Wolves' strike force hammered and blasted their way towards one another, aiming for the circular courtyard below the causeway's mouth.

The Rubric Marines came after them, catching the slowest and dragging them down under the massed tread of sapphire boots. Their deadliness had not diminished, and now, buried deep in whatever awareness they still possessed, they sensed victory over the hated enemy. The fighting never ceased, not for a moment. Helms were cracked, lenses were smashed, bolter-chambers were

emptied and axe-edges were worn blunt against the carcasses of broken armour. From all corners of the city, more traitors pushed themselves up from their hidden vaults, their eyes lit with a fell fire and their lips sealed by the curse that gave them their eldritch power.

By the time the courtyard had been reached, the first of the lifters was already nearing ground level. Kjarlskar took command of the southern perimeter, ordering what remained of the artillery to give what cover they could. Sturmhart, Svart and the other Wolf Guard of the Fourth held the line there, giving time for the rest of the company to make for the orbital landing craft.

Arkenjaw, Greyloc and Rossek forged north, aiming to relieve the retreating forces of the First and give them something like a defence line to pull back behind. The Twelfth were fresh to the battlefield, and charged the enemy with unmatched energy, cutting a road for the exhausted First to fall back along.

Frei was the last to withdraw from the causeway, pursued by the ever-present squads of Traitor Space Marines. He met Arkenjaw under the low contrails of missile batteries – Kjarlskar’s Long Fangs giving a final salvo to clear a fractional space before the close combat resumed again.

‘Where is he?’ cried Arkenjaw, his helm near-riven in two and his axe-handle streaked with his own blood.

‘I know not,’ rasped Frei, carrying deep wounds of his own. ‘He would not be halted. He was slaying them *alone*.’

Arkenjaw gestured for Greyloc and Rossek to push the defensive perimeter back. More lifters came down, thundering on main thrusters and sending columns of smoke tumbling over the ground below.

‘He must be recovered,’ Arkenjaw said. ‘He must be made to *see* what he has done.’

Frei staggered, falling to one knee. His staff was broken. ‘There was something here,’ he insisted. ‘We were *close*...’

Arkenjaw snorted in derision. ‘Then you too are lost.’

He strode out, heading north, flanked by the packs of his company. Behind him, lit up by the twisting beams of las-fire, the first lifters were taking off.

Thunderhawks circled them, running through drums of ammunition just to maintain something like a defence of the retreat.

The last of Ironhelm’s forces were now within the cordon, which contracted as ever more Wolves were taken up into orbit. Rubric Marines closed in, pressing every advantage, slaying all who remained in their path. Arkenjaw was soon surrounded, and had to work hard not to be overwhelmed. The passage north

became clogged, the streets full of advancing traitors.

For a moment longer, Arkenjaw held his ground, desperate to see some sign of Ironhelm coming towards him. If any one of them had the power to carve his way single-handedly through the enemy host, then it was the Great Wolf.

Eventually, though, the pressure became too great. His warriors began to fall, hurled back by the impossible numbers, and he gave the order.

‘Pull back!’ he cried, swinging his axe-blade wide to clear himself one last metre of space before the gap closed. ‘To the lifters!’

His warriors obeyed the command. Fighting all the way, never turning their backs, they ceded ground, knowing that every sacrifice they made gave precious more time for those who were destined to survive.

Arkenjaw retreated with them. His axe swung like a mighty pendulum, cracking open the shells of those who reached for him. The only blood on it was his own, from the rents and bolter-impacts that now peppered his battleplate.

His movements became sluggish. With alarm, he realised that he was falling behind – his brothers were retreating back to the last line of lifters, their passage covered by continuing waves of fire from the gunships, but he could not match the pace. It was as if his limbs were plunged into tar, and soon he was cut off entirely, ringed by enemies.

‘To me!’ he roared, trying to summon both energy for himself and to give warning to his company that they had outpaced him, but the words were blurred as they left his lips. His limbs went cold, and an icy smoke coiled up from the ground under his feet. Too late, he tasted the acrid burn of maleficarum, and sensed the presence of more than just automata around him.

He whirled, driving his muscles as fast as the crushing weight would let him, only to see a towering figure standing before him. Unlike the mute Rubric Marines, this one was clad in flowing robes that shifted and reflected the burning light of the skies. His helm was crowned with a rearing serpent, and he carried a long staff, bound with gold.

The sorcerer bowed to him, and inclined the staff by a hand’s breadth. The Rubric Marines now circled around Arkenjaw, moving as one, their blades wreathed in fresh tongues of sorcerous flame.

Arkenjaw roared out his fury, and met the charge. The deadening mass of sorcery pulled on his arms, but still he swung the axe. The traitors were smashed apart, their armour-plates flying clear as the force that knit them was ripped apart. Two were annihilated, a third was crippled. Then two more felt the cut of the axe, their helms cracked open. With every kill, Arkenjaw cried out aloud,

defying the fell cantrips that pulled him ever earthwards. More Rubric Marines were shattered, until the empty armour ringed him, heaped knee-high. Arkenjaw slew like a chieftain of old, his axe flying, his voice cracking with denunciations.

It was glorious, but it could not last. The sheer numbers told in the end – a blade broke his guard, another sliced across his back, a third jabbed in at his legs. With the first strikes landed, the end came quickly – the sapphire automata piled in, smothering him, dragging his arms down and pushing their own blades into his hearts.

With his last breath, Arkenjaw finally heard Ironhelm coming for him. The Great Wolf's voice was wild, and the sounds of combat were close by, but he had not given himself enough time.

Arkenjaw's helm was wrenched off, and his head slammed against the ground. More swords pierced his armour, shoved deep into his flesh, before the final killing blade was raised over his neck.

Arkenjaw twisted around, determined to watch it as it came in. With the foresight of those about to die, he finally realised the true folly of all that had taken place. It had not just been Ironhelm who had been blind – he had been too. The poison introduced by the Crimson King had infected them all. He should never have followed the Great Wolf – the obsession had overtaken even those who disavowed it. With his voice silenced, there would be nothing now to prevent Ironhelm mobilising the council to even greater heights of mania.

‘But even in this,’ Arkenjaw hissed, spitting blood through his broken fangs, watching the golden sword-edge whistle towards his throat, ‘even in *this*, I shall yet be avenged.’

Then the blade connected, and he knew no more.



V

‘You did not see his death?’ asked Sturmhjart.

Ironhelm did not answer at once. Outside his chamber, the clear sun of Fenris beat down on pearlescent fields of snow. The beauty of it sat ill with his mood. Since returning from the doomed raid he had been in a black slough, as had all those who had survived.

The nightmares had not gone away. Now he had another voice to add to the choir of those who damned him.

‘I saw nothing of him at all,’ said the Great Wolf eventually. ‘Neither did his brothers. He was hidden, shrouded in some deception.’ Ironhelm looked down at his hands. ‘I called for him. I called out his name. In the end, there was but one ship left. I was the last. I could not remain.’

Sturmhjart nodded. That tallied with what the others had said. Right up until the end, Greyloc, Skrieya and Rossek had all believed Arkenjaw to be with them. It was only once the retreat was over and the survivors had mustered on *Russvangum* and *Bloodhame* that the truth had become clear. Many great warriors had died, but the loss of the jarl was the cruellest blow.

Some of the lifters had never made it off the ground. Others had been brought down in midair, and no more than two-thirds made it back to the hangars. The cost in blood of the expedition already ranked with the darkest of disasters in the Chapter’s history, and the pall of it hung over the mountain like smoke from a pyre.

‘At least the city was destroyed,’ said Ironhelm.

With the ground war lost, the two battleships had sent down massive orbital

strikes. The city's energy shields had protected it at first, but eventually the dome had imploded and the needles of glass were shattered. The bombardment had continued for a long time after that, smashing the ancient cliffs and sending them cascading into the sea below. Only when *Russvangum*'s arsenal was depleted had the fury relented, leaving a huge, smoking scar open on the face of the cursed world.

Sturmhart said nothing, and Ironhelm knew why. Few of the Fang's lords believed that the Fifteenth Legion had perished in the barrage. The place had been so thoroughly soaked in sorcery that both Sturmhart and Frei were convinced a portal had been open, one through which the Rubric Marines could pass freely. Many of the mutes had died in the fighting beforehand, but who knew what rites could be enacted on those inert suits of ruined armour? Maybe they could replenish their losses, or maybe the wounds were permanent. All that could be certain was that the Thousand Sons were more than alive – they were deadly, and they had won the first significant encounter since the Battle of Prospero.

'So are they calling for my head now?' asked Ironhelm, smiling grimly, looking up at the Rune Priest.

Sturmhart shook his head. 'You are the Great Wolf. They remain loyal. But...'
He struggled for the words. 'This curse must not consume us. The wound is open – do not let it fester.'

Ironhelm gave no reply. He knew that nothing could be done now, not for many years. The Chapter's losses would take time to make good, and all the while there were other wars to fight.

But the voices would return. The yearning would return, creeping across him in the long nights. Vengeance demanded it, for Arkenjaw and the others who had died. Until now, all he had possessed were his own visions, demanding action, driving him to the extremes that had ruined him. Now the whole Chapter had seen the damnation of their ancient enemy, and that blood-debt could only be settled one way.

'I recognise my error,' said Ironhelm, bowing his head. 'I will do penance. I will suffer the judgement of the jarls.'

Sturmhart looked satisfied, for the moment. He made no more demands.

Ironhelm left unspoken the thoughts that clamoured in his mind, pushing them down, but knowing that they would return in time, and even now dreading the day when they did.

We were outnumbered. If we had travelled there as I had said, with the whole

Chapter, we would have caught him. It would have been a victory. Arkenjaw was wrong – he was wrong to restrain me. This thing cannot be done half-heartedly. We must maintain the hunt. When the spoor re-emerges, we must run it down. This is not the end. This cannot be the end.

He looked up, out of the open window, to where the eternal peaks of Asaheim crowded the horizon.

When the Crimson King is found, he thought, we must empty the Fang to bring him down.

The summits were immaculate, just as they had been for eternity. Their solidity gave him comfort – in the place, at least, was security.

No half-measures, ever again.

Greyloc walked through the tunnels of the Fang, fresh from the halls where the sounds of feasting still rang. He did not know how to feel. Grief for the jarl was still strong, tempered with anger at the manner of his passing. All of those who had returned from Ark Reach felt the same guilt, though many of his brothers hid it better than he.

For Greyloc, all he could think was that he should have been beside his lord at the end. Perhaps he would not have changed the outcome, but at least Arkenjaw would not have died alone. All that had happened since returning to Fenris had not changed that, and he knew with perfect clarity that the death would haunt him, whatever other compensations had come his way to leaven the blow.

He turned a corner, entering one of the many caverns where fire-pits were kept smouldering. Rossek was there waiting for him, crouched by the meagre flames. When he caught sight of Greyloc, he stood and saluted.

‘Jarl,’ he said, bowing.

Greyloc winced. It was still hard to get used to. ‘Not that,’ he said.

‘But you are,’ said Rossek, grinning. ‘That is the way of it.’ He rubbed his thick hands against the fire’s glow. ‘Brother, I am relieved, believe me. They made the right choice.’

Greyloc did not know if he agreed. The Twelfth could have gone with the Red Wolf and become more like the others. If Ironhelm had not led them to such a defeat on Ark Reach, perhaps the result would have been different. In the light of that, however, the company had seen how an Ironhelm could behave, and had opted for the cold-blooded choice. Perhaps they would live to regret this, perhaps not – only time would tell.

‘The jarl wished it to be you,’ said Greyloc, joining him by the fire.

‘He had not made up his mind.’

That could have been true. Even in their last discussion, up in the passes with the storm gathering to break, Arkenjaw had not seemed certain. His choice might have changed again before the end.

But it mattered little, not now. Oja was gone and there was nothing more to be gained by obsessing over his spectre.

‘I will not lead like he did,’ said Greyloc.

‘I know it.’

‘I will need you.’

‘You will.’

‘And the council will miss his voice,’ said Greyloc. ‘Ironhelm must dominate it now.’

‘Then you will have to learn to speak like a jarl,’ Rossek said. ‘You will have to sway them.’

It was hard not to smile. Greyloc would never command them as Arkenjaw had – he was young, an outsider. They were already calling him ‘the whelp’ to his face, something Oja would have cracked their bones for.

If he thought about it too hard, the weight of expectation became crushing. He was callow, and now part of an order which had once had the venerated Bjorn at its head. Arkenjaw had gone too soon, and he had been among the last of the great ones, whose eyes had witnessed the final acts of the Scouring.

‘But there is nothing for it,’ Greyloc said, speaking to himself as much as Rossek. ‘The burden must be carried. They can have my service, my blade, my life if they demand.’

He smiled wryly.

‘Let us hope that is enough.’

The world of Qavelon was a poor imitation of Fenris, but it had mountains, and it had the cold. For the thousands of mortal troops who trained across their heights, it would approximate. It might not prepare them for the punishing terror of the elements there, but at least they would go somewhat prepared.

From a distance, Temekh watched the Ninth battalion of newly raised Spireguard being put through their paces. They were doing well enough, but there was still a long way to go. Thousands more would need to be raised, equipped, trained. The Rubricae were a precious resource, and there were no longer the numbers left for them to shoulder the assault alone. The mortals would be their shield, at least at the start.

Temekh found that thought depressing. Everything about this enterprise he found depressing. At times it was only duty that kept him shackled to the great cause, but that did not explain the whole of it. He was not immune to hatreds – no part of the Legion was.

The Wolves would suffer. All of them would suffer. The baser part of him could not help revelling in that.

+They are not yet ready,+ came the mind-voice of Aphael. The *pyrae* was a long way away, busy with the fleet commanders on preparations for the armada, but he was adept at knowing all that passed on Qavelon.

+They will be ready,+ sent Temekh. +Look to your ships – I will look to the armies.+

+And you know the tidings from Heliosa? They are still singing of it in the Eye.+

Of course he knew. Heliosa had been years in the preparation, and had expended the entire strength of the Legion to accomplish. Even then, so many had died – not all had been able to escape at the end, and losing Rubricae was always a bitter blow.

+Do not let it make you confident yet, brother,+ Temekh sent. +It was but the first step on a long road.+

Aphael laughed. +I will enjoy it, though,+ he sent. +And I will enjoy it when we bring the fire to them again. Tell me, do you not find it humorous, that they expend so much energy on hunting that which cannot be found? Even we cannot bring him into the universe without much labour, and yet they believe so easily that they can meet him in battle, to be slain just as any beast may be slain.+

Temekh sighed. That, of all things, was the aspect that grieved him the most. To fight, to slay, that was one thing. To offer these shams and trails, that was another.

+It will not always be this way,+ he said.

+Indeed not.+ Aphael was still euphoric. +But we will be there when he comes. We will give them everything they wish for.+

Temekh nodded. Ahead of him, the vanguard of his new army was struggling to scale a rockface fast enough. The Wolves would have done it in moments.

+He will be there,+ he said. +They may hunt as much as they like, but in the end he will only return to one world.+

Temekh tasted the air of the peaks on his tongue, and wondered how closely Fenris would resemble it. It was hard not to let that thought dominate all else – the home of their enemy, ringed by fire, its walls laid low and its treasures

scattered.

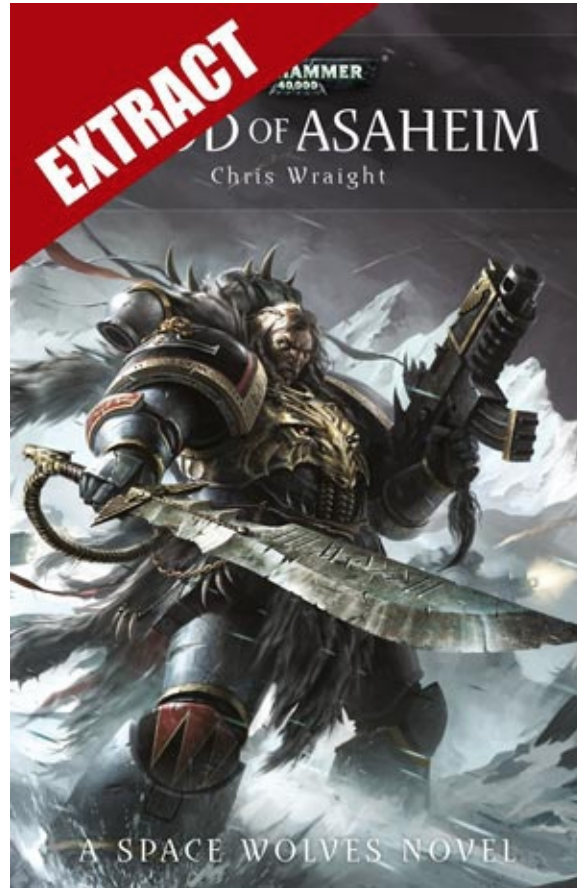
+May the day come soon,+ sent Aphael, ever-eager.

+So you say, brother,+ replied Temekh, and cut the link.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Scars*, the novella *Brotherhood of the Storm* and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *Battle of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

[An extract from *Blood of Asaheim*.](#)



Blood rose in his gorge, foaming and flecked with bone, spilling from split lips and over cracked fangs. He stumbled down the walkway, feeling metal struts flex and snap under his limping tread. Gunfire, tinny and echoing, rang down from the airways above him. The noise was an irrelevance by then – a cluttered fury that signified nothing but the slow death of the drifting Arjute-class heavy troop conveyer. The Imperium would not miss it; it could spare a million of them and never notice.

He coughed up more blood, feeling the flesh of his throat constrict. He tried to smile, and the corner of his mouth ripped where the burns latticed against softer flesh.

It would miss him. The Imperium would miss Hjortur Ageir Hvat Bloodfang, Wolf Guard of Fenris, *vaerangi* of Berek Thunderfist: blood-shedder, beast-slayer, tale-teller. Sagas would mark his passing, declaimed in the icy vaults of home by skjalds who had feared and loved him, just as all in the Rout had feared and loved him.

He started to chuckle as he limped, and blood bubbled down his chin and into his clumped and matted beard.

He'd caused hell. He'd done some damage. He'd do some more before they brought him down, too. Blood of Russ, he'd make them all bleed a little more.

He stumbled, falling to his knees and feeling the mesh of the metal floor grate against his fractured poleyn-guard. He heard his breathing scrape and wheeze within the flickering mess of his helm's interior.

Above him the roof was a jumbled mass of burned-out pipelines, hanging like vines from the darkness. Somewhere up ahead a red light rotated in rhythm with a superfluous warning klaxon. He heard crashes from further back, further down: the resounding clang of iron-edged boots against metal, the hard clunk of magazines being loaded.

Hjortur pushed himself back to his feet. The enclosed corridor ran away from

him, plunging down steeply, winding into the bowels of the conveyer's engine room. The metal around him was hot. He staggered along it, reeling from the walls, breaking off shards of steel as his armour snagged against them. He felt enclosed, hemmed in, cornered.

He sensed a movement – twenty metres behind, stealthy like the others had been.

Not stealthy enough.

Hjortur twisted at the waist and squeezed a round away, watching the projectile streak off into the dark through blood-screened eyes. He couldn't make out his victim but heard the sounds of his death: the crack of breaking armour, the wet *schlick* of flesh parting, the stifled boom of detonation.

No screams. The hunters that closed on him didn't scream. He didn't know what they were. Human, perhaps. If so, they were heavily augmented and stuffed with bionics, for they moved like he did and hit almost as hard. That was worrying. It shouldn't have been possible.

He started to limp off again, and the bestial phlegm-growl of his broken breathing hummed in his ears. His retinal display screamed at him, detailing pedantically just how badly he'd been torn up: two lungs gone, chest cavity flooded, seventy minor fractures and six big ones. His skin was a mess of partly-clotted plasma and slowly knitting tissue, all seething with a contradictory mix of stimulants and pain suppressors.

Pretty bad. He was breaking up, just like the ship around him.

He heard more footsteps clattering down the corridor, then silence as the hunters crouched down into firing positions. He broke into a sprint, wincing as lances of white-hot pain shot up his shattered shins.

A second later and the corridor filled with solid rounds, crashing and cracking from the walls and filling the narrow space with spinning clouds of metal. He felt the heavy bang of projectiles thudding into his back, tearing fresh gouges in the weakened ceramite and burrowing down towards the flesh beneath.

He reached a T-junction and threw himself around the corner into cover, clanking against the floor and panting, waiting for the hail of fire to break off.

The junction was dark. The air tasted of engine oil and ship-bilge. He could hardly see five paces into the murk. When he blinked, blood cascaded down his cheeks.

The gunfire ceased. He waited two more seconds, enough for the first of them to get up and run down the corridor after him. He could smell them coming, sense their unfamiliar odour even over the stinking melange of the lower decks.

What are you? What kind of creatures are you?

As the first one approached he burst back to his feet, powering his huge, ravaged body into motion, swinging round into the corridor he'd just run down and flexing his claw-hand to gouge.

His pursuer skidded to a halt, suddenly confronted by a vast armoured behemoth rearing up out of the oily shadows. The hunter tried to scramble backwards, but his momentum carried him into lethal range.

Hjortur lashed out with his claws. Their disruptor field had long since burned out, but the dented blades still punched through the hunter's armour, skewering him. Hjortur lashed out, churning up the hunter's ribcage and flinging him hard against the nearside wall. The hunter's torso broke open into a flailing ball of skin-scrap and sinew.

Another one was too close. The hunter scrambled back out of claw-range, his black limbs skittering on the metal like an insect's.

Hjortur pounced, slicing his claw down and dragging the hunter back. The impaled warrior tried to turn, tried to get a weapon hand into position, but it was all far too slow.

Hjortur crashed his other fist down, mashing the hunter's helm, visor and skull into a glass-flecked soup of pulp. Blood splashed up along Hjortur's forearms, adding to the riot of streaks and stains already there.

He felt solid rounds crack against his armour again – one, two, three direct hits, rocking him backwards. A shot slammed between the gaping cracks in his breastplate, punching through flesh, grinding into the bone beneath.

Hjortur growled as he swung round, searching for a target in the dark, blinking to clear his vision of blood.

The first he knew of the frag grenade was a gentle *tink-tink-tink* as it bounced down the corridor.

If his senses hadn't been crushed, he'd have spotted it sooner. If his muscles hadn't been ripped apart, he'd have been able to leap clear in time. If his armour hadn't been carved open, he'd have withstood the blast.

It exploded. The blast-wave hurled him backwards, throwing him onto his back and sending him skidding into the far wall of the junction.

Hjortur's head bounced back savagely, prompting fresh spikes of pain from his twisted neck. He felt more sharp pops from within, the hot flush of fluids sluicing across his organs. A wave of sickly dizziness swept over him, and his hands went cold. He felt his bolter drop from numb fingers.

Blinded, reeling, he tried to push himself up. He dimly made out the silhouettes

of more figures standing above him. He swung his fist clumsily at the nearest. A blade shot out from over to his left, severing his arm at the wrist. Hjortur felt the metal slide under his splintered forearm-guard, slicing agonisingly through what remained of his claw-hand.

More blades flashed in the gloom, plunging into his body, pinioning him to the metal deck. His back arched as they stabbed him, and a ragged, throaty gurgle of pain escaped his mouth.

The hunters kept up the assault. They worked as a team, moving sword-edges quickly, as if panicked by the thought that he might – *still* – get up. They locked his ankles down. They ran gouges along his torso, exposing glistening viscera. They threw chains across his legs and throat, yanking his head back against the floor.

By the time they had finished, Hjortur Ageir Hvat Bloodfang, Wolf Guard of Fenris, *vaerangi* of Berek Thunderfist, lay impaled on the lower decks of the Arjute-class heavy troop conveyer like an insect pinned to a collector's card. Twelve short swords held him in place, six adamantium-link chain-lengths held him down, seven barbed gouges were lodged in his chest, each one standing at the head of the gushing fountain of thick, semi-clotted blood.

That was what it took to subdue him. Hjortur coughed up a wet, grim snort of satisfaction. He'd extracted his tally of pain.

How many hunters had he killed? Maybe a hundred. This had been a serious operation. They had come prepared.

The blurred black-clad figures withdrew. Hjortur tried to raise his head, but the chains pulled tight. His breath came in tight, short gasps. He could feel his armour systems gutter and fizz out. He could feel his body getting colder, shutting down, giving up the ghost.

Giving up the ghost. Hjortur felt delirious. *Giving up the ghost.*

A single hunter remained, hanging over his face like a vision in smoke. He could make out the fuzzy outline of a closed-face helm. He saw a cherubic device printed on the forehead – golden, spike-crowned against a sable ground. He saw plates of armour glinting, matt-black and rimmed with silver. He smelled the sooty aroma of a cooling weapon muzzle, and heard the faint whine of a power-pack winding down.

The world around him began to melt away. He concentrated, determined to look at his killer, right up to the end.

Fenrys.

The thought swam into his mind unbidden. He saw an image of the peaks of

Asaheim, vast and snow-streaked, picked out in hard lines of frosty clarity. He knew then that he would never go back to them, never feel their knife-sharp air sting on his tongue. That knowledge pained him more than his hundred wounds.

The blurred figure swung closer, kneeling beside Hjortur and peering down at him. Hjortur saw his own face reflected darkly in a glassy visor, and barely recognised himself.

They will replace me, he thought. The pack needs a leader.

The hunter withdrew a tapered gun. It was a strange-looking thing – curved and sweeping and sculptural. Hjortur struggled to maintain focus.

I should have appointed a successor. Gyrfalkon? Gunnlaugur?

The hunter placed the muzzle's tip at Hjortur's fractured temple and pressed it through the flesh. Amid his cacophony of serried pain, Hjortur barely winced.

'Do you know who we are?'

The voice was heavily altered, filtered through a crackling vox-distorter. It might have been human; it might not.

Hjortur tried to answer, but the blood in his throat and mouth made him gag. He shook his head fractionally, making the needle in his temple tear at the flesh.

The hunter reached up with his free hand and depressed a switch at the side of his helm. His visor snapped up, revealing a gaunt face within, lit up by angry red internal illumination. Hjortur's killer leaned closer.

'Do you know who sent us?'

I could never choose between them. I should have chosen. What will Berek rule?

Hjortur tried to focus. It was difficult. The world had narrowed down to a gauze of pale mist, like ghost-frost spreading over glass.

The hunter opened his left palm. A little golden cherub's head nestled against the black synleather, surrounded by a spiked halo.

'Do you know who sent us?'

I should have chosen.

One more surge of effort, one final attempt to drag his faltering vision back into some form of clarity.

Then realisation dawned, as cold and sick as breaking fever.

'Yes,' said Hjortur, choking as he spoke.

The killer above him smiled – a thin movement of thin lips, perfunctory, frigid with wintry satisfaction.

'Good. It is good that you know.'

The hunter pressed the trigger, and the bolt slipped into Hjortur's brain. It was a

theatrical gesture, an unnecessary accelerant to the death that was already overtaking him. The mercy stroke, it might have been called in another age; the assassin's courtesy.

Hjortur hung on for a few seconds more, trying to speak, his residual features rigid with shock.

Then, his body racked with starbursts of pain, his lone working heart swollen and weeping, his broken jaw lined with blood-thick drool, he died.

[Click here to buy *Blood of Asaheim*.](#)

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